

# **PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS OF HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS**

**By**

**D. Donald C. Grant**

**A Thesis**

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in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of**

**MASTER OF EDUCATION**

**Department of Educational Administration and Foundations  
Faculty of Education  
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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate high school principals' perceptions of school dropouts in order to add to the understanding of how schools may play a role in a student's decision to drop out. High school principals are in a position of influence. How they perceive a situation may play a significant role in how it will be addressed and what action will be taken. The study adds to the understanding of how schools have responded to both, the increased public concern about this issue, and the significant amount of research literature that has been directed to this subject. Gaining a more indepth understanding of principals' perceptions could possibly lead to insights as to how to proceed in the future and perhaps keep more students in school until graduation. The participants were high school principals in the English public school system from the city of Winnipeg, Manitoba. Seven randomly chosen principals, representing seven different school divisions, agreed to be interviewed for the study using a semi-structured open-ended schedule.

Principals in the study had sincere concerns about the phenomenon of dropouts but were reluctant to accept responsibility due to a host of external factors which collectively diffused principals' motivation to invoke change. Analysis of the data found that most principals in this study do not have well thought out views regarding dropouts, had a tendency to use stereotypes, did not actively collect dropout data, and were not familiar with current research findings. Most principals studied had not introduced any specific strategy to retain students and there was a general lack of imagination in considering possible alternatives. The issue of dropouts competes with other issues in terms of a principal's priority. Judging from their comments, the dropout phenomenon was important but the absence of strategies imposed by the schools left questions about what priority the issue actually had. If actions speak louder than words, then the data

would suggest dropouts, while important, are **not** as high a priority as some of the dialogue might suggest.

The study found that schools have not responded to the dropout literature and public concern which suggests that these principals have not been influenced by these pressures to affect school policy. In fact principals are continuing to influence school policy based on their own experience and predispositions. The lack of change by schools indicates a need to consider alternative means, or reinforced attempts, to convince school principals of the merits of addressing the needs of these students. By not responding to the needs of at risk students as potential dropouts from school, and possibly society, schools are perpetuating the alienation and disengagement forces that are contributing to the phenomenon now, and will likely do so in the future if left unchecked. These principals' perspectives indicate the need to act now to regenerate the drive to improve the chances for all students.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Anyone who has considered dropping out of school at some point in their life but was persuaded to continue in school until graduation has a personal empathy with those less fortunate and for whom the consequences of dropping out have become a reality. As I read the literature I was aware of a resounding echo of "it could just have easily been me". The greatest significance of the at risk literature was the degree to which the majority of youth are at risk at some time in their lives and how by an almost arbitrary selection process some stay in and some drop out. This does not in any way diminish the many serious impediments to schooling that some students face. Most individuals face, and need to overcome, challenges which impede learning. I have been blessed by numerous interventions which collectively have given me the confidence to continue. I am grateful to those sources, too numerous to mention individually, but who share some credit for this work.

Specifically I would like to acknowledge my parents, Joy and Guthrie Grant, for their unfailing support during my developmental years, and especially for the insight and sacrifice of providing the opportunity for me to attend Lakefield College School. I owe everlasting gratitude to various mentors in this school for instilling in me, a love of life, and, a love of learning that I can only try to emulate as an educator. The support of my parents then, now, and always is deeply appreciated.

I also wish to acknowledge the contribution of my now deceased uncle, Derek Bedson, who in his own subtle way encouraged me "not to let my life begin to drift...".

I would like to express my thanks the members of my thesis committee. To Dr. J. Anthony (Tony) Riffel for providing feedback on my drafts so quickly and with such

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To Dr. Benjamin Levin who contributed to my learning in so many ways. Initially for the incentive to attend the AERA conference in Chicago which provided an introduction to the potential and variety of educational research. As Chair for the thesis committee, he provided just the right blend of support, encouragement, and direction that made this task transcend from overbearing, into attainable increments, and eventually a finished product. I have learned as much from the process as from the actual research and I sincerely thank the all the members of the committee for their efforts.

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To my wife Marsha Grant for her support and belief in me, and for her patience in what appeared as endless editorial revisions. Beyond the classroom I have learned more than I have ever imagined thanks to our daughters Rachel and Rebekah. Perhaps the greatest significance of this paper will be how as these two grow up and face their own at risk periods in their personal and educational lives that I may be better equipped to recognize their condition, help them through these inevitable challenges and allow them the opportunity to develop wherever this may take them. I therefore dedicate this thesis to their future.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### Background Information

There has been more than a decade of intense concern in government, in educational research, and in schools about the number of students who leave school before graduating. Claims as to the gravity of the situation, the devastating impact on the future of society, and the penetration of the problem into all geographic and socioeconomic areas of Canada have indicated a need for action to address this concern. Some of the attention has focused on changes in the educational process and schooling system that would keep more students in school until graduation.

Discrepancies in defining a 'dropout' have added confusion to an already elusive concept. Many of the research studies use correlation methodology to identify contributory factors to dropping out that often originate beyond the scope of the school's influence. In fact the myriad of influential factors that interplay and affect an individual's decision to stay in school or drop out are as varied as the individual students who must make the final decision. Each student must grapple with his or her unique circumstances and corresponding pressures. Students however, should not be expected to act in isolation from social services of which Canada's educational system is one. To acknowledge the external influences on, and individuality of, the dropout decision does not allow the school system to duck the responsibility of reducing any contributions it may add to student alienation or disengagement.

Across North America estimates of the student dropout rate range between 25-30%. Wide variations in the percentage of student dropouts occur among schools. The Canadian

Federal Government 1990 *Stay-in-School Initiative* estimates 30% of students drop out of school (Canada, 1990, p. 5). According to Statistics Canada, the national secondary school dropout rate was over 34% in the 1988-1989 academic year (Lafleur, 1992, p. 4). Different provincial reports also show variation in estimating the dropout problem. Newfoundland indicates a rate of between 33-44% depending on how a dropout is defined (Newfoundland, 1989). Sullivan (1988) reported a rate of 31% when studying students dropping out in Ontario. For the academic year of 1988-1989 Statistics Canada reported the Manitoba secondary school dropout rate to be 28.6% (Lafleur, 1992, p. 4). Historically, these figures represent a substantial decrease in the number of students who fail to complete high school. Part of the recent concern over dropouts stems from a projection of the skills and education that will be required in the labour market that will increasingly marginalize individuals without the proper credentials.

A critical link exists between the level of educational attainment and the level of employment with the unemployment rate decreasing with higher education levels (Lafleur, 1992, p. 1). According to Statistics Canada, individuals not completing secondary school had the highest probability of permanent layoff (Canada, 1986). A study of future trends indicated that of all the new jobs to be created by the year 2000, it was anticipated that those requiring at least secondary school graduation will increase from 53.3% to 64.5% (Canada, 1991). The prospect of excluding over 30% of Canadian youth from having access to these jobs could have significant consequences for individuals and society. In an extensive study into the cost of school dropouts to Canada, The Conference Board of Canada forecasts that:

The bottom line is that the problems [of a national 30% dropout rate] now facing the educational system threaten to reduce the national standard of living, heighten demands on social safety nets, and increase the economic burden of individual and corporate taxpayers. . . . Given the kind of future that is anticipated for Canada, one

in which education will play an increasingly important role in emerging technologies, international competitiveness and economic productivity, action on the secondary school dropout problem is imperative. (Lafleur, 1992, p. 18)

The vast diversity of variables that may contribute to the dropout phenomenon means that studying dropouts is a difficult task. This research study examines a single aspect of the wider phenomenon. Examining how principals perceive the dropout phenomenon, reveals how schools have responded to the dropout literature and to public concern. This study makes the assumption that principals, having a mandate to manage the personnel and resources of a school and to deliver a quality service, are in a strategic position to understand what **should** be going on in schools, and what **is** going on in terms of school policy to deal with dropouts. The perceptions and ideas of the principals are therefore significant as indicators of the effects of previous research and public concern at the school level. Understanding the principals' perspective in determining which changes have or have not been made in particular schools, helps to understand how the dropout phenomenon is affecting the schooling system. If appropriate changes have been adopted or considered in accordance with the available literature, it suggests a positive interaction between theory and practice. If, however, no actions have been taken, have been taken for inappropriate reasons, or the perceptions persist that schools do not contribute to the problem, indicates a need to consider alternatives and will be important in determining future developments regarding school dropouts.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate high school principals' perspectives on student dropouts. Specifically, the study attempts to determine how principals understand the phenomenon of school dropouts; the extent to which school principals perceive dropouts as a problem of their school; what causes students to drop out of their school;

what strategies, if any, school principals have implemented in their schools to deal with this perceived problem; and why they have implemented these strategies.

### Research Questions

1. What are high school principals' perceptions of school dropouts?
2. What are the perceived causes of school dropouts?
- 3a. What strategies are in place in this school for retaining students?
- 3b. Why have these strategies been implemented?

### The Significance of the Study

The position of principal is highly influential within a school setting. The way in which school dropouts are perceived by these individuals will often be reflected in the school's policy and practice. Solutions being recommended in research are only useful if they are translated into practical use in the schools. The failure of schools to implement significant changes relegates the rhetoric and political hype of wanting to help more students acquire high school education to 'lip service' and deflects ownership of the problem away from the school to the individual student and society.

This study uses as its litmus test, a principal's conceptualization of students and the school. Central to a principal's understanding of the dropout phenomenon is a conception of what an ideal dropout rate should be and how a particular school compares to this ideal. In addition it is critical to examine a principals' knowledge of the interplay of factors that combine in order for a student to make a decision about staying or leaving school. Does a

principal believe that a certain percentage of students will inevitably drop out of school or that all students should be expected to graduate from high school? If students inevitably drop out of school what does a principal perceive to be the cause, or causes, of dropping out. Further, what has contributed to a principal's understanding of the phenomenon. The complex network of variables that are associated with dropping out of school is as distinctive as the individual students and includes combinations of family, personal and school related factors. In turn, a principal's personal experience, knowledge of the dropout literature, and understanding of the sociological complexion of the specific student and school clientele also interact to mold how this person, in a leadership position, may influence school policy.

This study contributes to understanding the complex network of influences affecting high school dropouts. By examining the perceptions of principals, a greater understanding of how this school leadership position may affect dropout policy and practice is obtained. The study adds to the body of knowledge that probes why students drop out of school and, in particular, exposes ways in which the schools may exacerbate the situation.

Any factor that acts as an inhibitor to students who desire to further their education is worthy of study in order to find ways to increase school success rates. Many of the barriers are beyond the scope of a school's influence. If, however, the school is responsible for contributing to students dropping out, schools have an obligation to correct the situation and strive for equal opportunity for all students. The position of principalship in any school is an influential one and is worthy of investigation in understanding the school's approach to student dropouts. In the words of Greenfield:

I would argue for research that attempts to look at social reality from a variety of perspectives and particularly from the perspective of different actors in a given

social situation. In this approach, the researchers become interpreters of social reality, whose task is to explain the human condition to their fellow man (1979, p. 179).

The ramifications of helping a student stay in school in terms of economic gains or quality of life are largely hypothetical. In real terms any effort that contributes, even in a minor way, to improving an individual's quality of life is justification enough to pursue this study. Research results are rarely powerful enough to dictate policies and practices but the intention is to contribute to what Cohen and Garet (1975) have termed the dialogue of policy making, and so to inform practitioners.

### Organization of Thesis

This thesis contains six chapters. The first chapter introduces the phenomenon of students dropping out of school and discusses the background of the issue. Included in this chapter are the impact on the individual, the influence and responsibility of the school organization, and in particular the influence of the school principal. This chapter also details the purpose of the study, the potential significance of the study and more specifically the research questions studied. The second chapter reviews the literature on school dropouts and the position of school principals. This chapter contains six sections: 1) The dropout phenomenon, 2) Dropout factors, 3) Strategies to combat the dropout problem, 4) The role of the principal, 5) The construction of perceptions, and 6) Summary of the research. Each of these sections reviews a pertinent literature and highlights information with respect to the research questions and methodology to ensure a link with previous research. The third chapter outlines the methodology used. Included is the design of the study and interview instrument, the procedure used, the method of data analysis, the participants interviewed and the context of the data. The fourth chapter presents a summary of the interview data for each principal. The fifth chapter summarizes the themes found in

the data and is organized to respond to the research questions. The sixth chapter offers a conclusion to the research study and each of the research questions, recommendations emerging from the study and suggestions for further study. Following this last chapter there is a list of references cited and a series of appendices including copies of letters, interview instrument and consent forms.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### Introduction

In order to understand the phenomenon of dropouts and the perceptions of principals on the issue, it was necessary to review the pertinent literature. This review is divided into six sections. First the review introduces the phenomenon of dropouts and explores the meaning of the problem. The second section examines the factors that may contribute to a student dropping out of school. This section has been subdivided into dealing with individual student characteristics, a student's environmental factors, a school's environment factors and the interplay between all of the potential contributory influences. The third section reviews some of the problems in developing a strategy to reduce the number of dropouts, some examples of strategies that have been implemented and the importance of matching the approach to the unique situation of the student. A fourth section reviews the role of the principal in the school to understand the influence of this position in terms of its potential to alter school policies and practise. The fifth section reviews how individuals construct their perceptions of reality, in this case, a school principal, and how he or she comes to understand school dropouts. A final section will summarize the literature review as it pertains to the research questions.

#### The Phenomenon of Dropouts

##### Overview

In general terms any student who leaves school before secondary school graduation is considered an early school leaver or a dropout. The definition includes students who leave school for unavoidable reasons such as personal illness, or for apparently legitimate

and opportunistic reasons such as full-time employment. Many of these students will resume their education when conditions are more favorable. It is important to clarify that the Statistics Canada calculation of a dropout rate of over 34% for the 1988-1989 academic year does not include the drop-back-in factor. However, a survey conducted for the Ontario Ministry of Education reported that the success of "dropbacks" was extremely low (Karp, 1988, p. 194). The term 'dropouts' focuses more on students who leave school before graduating as a result of alienation from the schooling process for a variety of reasons including frustration, disinterest, failure or distraction by other alternatives. The concern over this group is based on a correlation between not graduating from secondary school and becoming a burden in terms of social costs and lost revenue to society. Levin (1972) identified some of the social consequences of not graduating from high school such as: (a) foregone national income; (b) foregone tax revenues for the support of government services; (c) increased demand for social services; (d) increased crime; (e) reduced political participation; (f) reduced intergenerational mobility; and (g) poorer levels of health. A study by Catterall (1985) estimated the lost income of dropouts from the class of 1981 in the United States at \$228 billion and the lost government revenues at more than \$68 billion. A Canadian study estimated that "Canada will lose more than \$4 billion in present-value terms over the working lifetimes of the nearly 137,000 youths who dropped out of secondary school instead of graduating with the class of 1989" (Lafleur, 1992, p. 7). This study further predicted that Canada could save \$26 billion if the dropout rate were reduced from 34% to 10% by the year 2000 (Lafleur, 1992, p. 18). On an individual level the Canadian study calculates that "each individual male dropout will lose nearly \$129,000 in today's dollars over his working lifetime, while the female dropout forfeits \$107,000" (Lafleur, 1992, p. 10). There is a decreased chance that a dropout will be able to obtain employment and the corresponding self-esteem that comes with being self-sufficient. Some dropouts do develop into very successful citizens but the majority face a difficult challenge.

Previous efforts to identify potential dropouts have not been very successful. Many students who are identified as being "at risk" of dropping out do not drop out, while students not identified as "at risk" do drop out. Studies have failed to identify a simple cause and effect relationship. This inability to label students accurately has led to alternative approaches to that of considering the dropout as purely an individual problem. One of these different perspectives has been to examine the part played by the school in alienating students to the point where they withdraw. This study explores the relationship between a dropout and the school organization from the perspective of a principal.

### Measurement

There are two general approaches used to measure dropouts. The first involves the measurement of rates by surveying individuals or households. Examples of this are census surveys and the High School and Beyond data used for the studies of Wehlage and Rutter (1986) and by Ekstrom, Goetz, Pollack and Rock (1986). The second approach used to collect dropout data is the organizational method of calculating statistics based on attrition data from attendance and enrollment figures in schools, districts, or larger bodies.

The variation in how measurements are obtained is the cause of some confusion. A lack of standards causes problems in making comparisons between groups if one group uses a count of formal voluntary withdrawals and another uses the difference between entrance enrollment and graduation rate. Technical and practical problems at the school level also interfere with an accurate calculation of school dropouts. Political implications are a powerful influence in distorting dropout statistics when interests are biased toward minimizing or maximizing dropout statistics. The variation in results between the individual and organizational methods is cause for concern because it makes it difficult to

measure on-going changes in the rate and possible improvements due to intervention strategies. Unless measurements mean the same thing, comparisons are futile.

An example of the individual definition of a dropout is used by the U.S. Census Bureau, ". . . a dropout is a person who is of high school age, who is not enrolled in school and is not a high school graduate" (Gage, 1990). An organizational definition was used in Ontario ". . . a dropout is any person who left secondary school for whatever reason prior to graduating" (Sullivan 1988, p. 1). A slightly different organizational definition was used by Hamilton (1986): "Students who choose to leave school before graduation although they are intellectually capable of doing the work required for graduation" (p. 411). Other official documents such as the National Stay-in-School Initiative avoid using a succinct definition and only implicitly suggest ". . . a national dropout rate of something like 30 percent" (Canada, 1990, p.5). Generalizations made about dropouts on a national scale do not provide information about the variations that exist. Some schools claim to have a 0% dropout rate while others suffer from a 75% or higher rate.

### Dropout Factors

Research literature is replete with studies that examine the nature of students considered to be at risk of dropping out of school. The result is an increased awareness of the characteristics of a potential dropout. In order to appreciate the diversity and complexity of the dropout phenomenon or to devise strategies that can combat the problem, it is important to understand what the research literature reveals as some of the factors associated with students who drop out. The listing of factors is not intended to be complete but is only representative of the literature. Barber and McClellan (1987b) identified 33 reasons given by students for dropping out of school (see Table 1). Many of these reasons extend well beyond a school's accountability. Other reasons given by students for

dropping out do relate directly or indirectly to either real or perceived barriers that are potentially within a school's capacity to change.

**Table 1: Reasons Given for Students Dropping Out of School \***

- Student had attendance problems
- Student lacked interest in school
- Student was bored with school
- Student had academic problems or poor grades
- Student had problems with teachers
- Student had family problems or responsibilities
- Student had problems with assigned school
- Student disliked a particular course
- Student had problems with school administration
- Student disliked everything
- Student had problems with counsellors
- Student had problems with other students
- Student had discipline problems and was suspended
- Student felt too old for school
- Student had financial problems
- Student was ill
- Student lacked desired program or course
- Student was pregnant
- Student had conflicts with employment
- Student got married
- Student had enough education to work with
- Illness in students family
- Student disliked discipline or rules
- Student had transportation problems
- Student entered military service
- Student moved and went to another school
- Student had achieved educational goals
- Parents demanded that student leave school
- Couldn't speak English
- Student disliked some feature of the school
- Don't know
- Miscellaneous reasons
- Student left the school because of racial or gang problems

\* Copied from Barber & McClellan, 1987.

For the purpose of this review, the literature has been separated into four sub-sections. The first sub-section reviews the student characteristic factors; the second, the student environment factors; the third the school environment factors; and the fourth, the interrelationship among factors.

### Student Characteristic Factors

Gender. Research studies indicated that males have a lower graduation rate than females (Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack & Rock, 1986; Hess and Greer, 1986; Gambert & Shore, 1988). According to a study by Hess and Greer (1986), almost half of all male students in the Chicago public school system of the class of 1982 dropped out. Rumberger (1987) suggested that males are more likely to cite school related reasons such as disliking school or being expelled, than females who are more likely to cite personal reasons such as pregnancy for dropping out of school. Ekstrom et. al. (1986) found that "White and Hispanic males were more likely to drop out than females; black females more likely to drop out than black males" (p. 366).

Age. In Canada provincial law has made schooling compulsory until the age of 16. While some students do drop out before this age studies indicate that the majority drop out after the age of 16 and when they would normally be attending high school. Morris, Pawlovich and McCall reported that the most commonly reported median school leaving age in Canadian studies was 17+, with a range of 16-18 (1991, p. 19).

Ethnicity and race. According to Wehlage (1987) ethnicity and race are primary indicators for dropping out but this is due to the relationship to minority status, poverty and family factors as well. Also closely linked to these factors are what Steinberg, Blinde and Chan (1986) refer to as language minority students who were found to be more likely to drop out. Rumberger noted that "there may be less economic incentive for minorities to stay in school than whites, especially when black high school graduates still experience an unemployment rate of over 50%" (1987, p. 113). Ekstrom et. al. (1986) found that "other things being equal, whites and Hispanics were more likely to drop out of school than Blacks" (p. 366). Eitzen advises that "We must understand the socio-cultural context of

social problems to understand problem students and how to help them" (1992, p. 586). Most of the American studies that examine correlations involving ethnicity and race, identify groups of students that are also victims of other factors such as low SES and minority status. There have been fewer Canadian studies done but there are examples among some Aboriginal reserves with annual dropout rates of up to 100%

Self-concept. Several studies indicated a lower self-esteem among dropouts than their graduating counterparts (Ekstrom et al., 1986; Fine, 1986; Rumberger, 1983; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986; Wehlage, 1987). Finn (1989) suggested a "Frustration-Self-Esteem" model where ". . . poor school performance is hypothesized to lead to an impaired self-view and, in turn, to the youngsters opposing the context that is responsible" (p. 119). Low self-esteem is often associated with a variety of problem behaviours both in and out of school. Ekstrom et al. (1986) suggested that an externalized locus of control, or the feeling that one can do little to control one's destiny, is related to dropping out and ". . . that having behaviour problems and having low grades are the major determinants of dropout" (p. 367). In contrast Wehlage and Rutter (1986) in their analysis of the High School and Beyond data, found no significant differences in self-concept for college bound graduates and high school dropouts. In fact Wehlage (1987) reported that self-esteem of dropouts actually rises after leaving school. This may be due, in part, to a dropout's relief at having made a decision to leave, especially if the dropout has found a job or gone on to do something meaningful. There is no indication of whether this positive self-concept will be maintained over an extended period of time.

Personal problems. Students experience a great number of personal problems while at school, in part through the natural maturation process of adolescence. Other contributing elements may be in the form of family problems or complications with a part

time job. The manifestation of these problems emerges in various forms such as substance abuse, aggression, legal infractions, sexual or financial concerns. In attempts to conform to peer pressure and to relieve the depression and hopelessness that they perceive to exist in the world, students often turn to alcohol and drugs (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko & Fernandez, 1989). Students who have a low concept of themselves often have low aspirations. This in turn may lead to poor academic performance, discipline problems, truancy and eventual dropout. Frustration in one aspect of life may be the cause of a change in behaviour in a different part of that student's life.

School involvement. Participation rates in school activities have been found to be lower in dropouts (Ekstrom, et al., 1986; McDill, Natriello & Pallus, 1985; Newmann, 1989; Finn, 1989; Wehlage et al., 1989). In the classroom, ". . . active participation is the minimal essential condition for formal learning to occur . . . [and] performance in class is a direct outcome of student participation" (Finn, 1989, p. 127). Dropouts have been found to participate less in extracurricular activities and sports than non dropout peers (Ekstrom et al., 1986). According to Finn (1989), it may be this lack of participation on the part of dropouts that hinders a concomitant feeling of identification with the school. Or it may be the inverse whereby the lack of identification with school values and activities retards participation levels. One of the distractions from school involvement may be the time spent in part time jobs. Newmann cautions that "Students simply cannot meet the proper cognitive demands of secondary education through passive listening and reading" (1989, p. 34).

Attitudes, work habits and aspirations. How a student perceives the schooling process in relation to other aspects of his or her life will affect the priority of effort accorded to schooling. Generally, students who dropped out of school reported poorer work habits than high school graduates (Ekstrom, et. al., 1986; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986;

Rumberger, 1986). A national study using follow-up data from the High School and Beyond Study by Vanfossen, Jones & Spade (1987) found general and vocational track students, as compared to those in the academic curriculum, were less committed to academic goals, had poorer classroom discipline, and received more negative treatment by teachers. These authors concluded, ". . . students in nonacademic tracks are not given an environment that encourages them to increase their performance and their educational and occupational aspirations" (p. 116). Alderman (1990) studied the motivation factor of at risk students and concluded: "'Helpless" students need to learn to link their successes and failures to their own efforts. . . . When we help students take responsibility for their learning, we have taken a giant step in promoting motivational equality in the classroom" (p. 27).

Pregnancy. Pregnancy was the leading reason for females to drop out of high school (Rumberger, 1983, 1987; Ekstrom et al., 1986; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986; Dryfoos, 1990). Rumberger (1987, p. 109) reported that 41% of black females cited pregnancy as a reason for dropping out. Wehlage and Rutter (1986) suggested that about half of all females who leave school do so because of marriage and/or pregnancy. Dryfoos (1990) reports 1983 data showing that 74% of females and 83% of males are sexually active by age 19 (p. 67). These statistics are not intended to suggest a correlation between sexual activity and dropouts but to indicate the extent of sexual activity amongst this age group and the corresponding influence of this preoccupation for students. For students who are sexually active there are additional pressures and influences that may distract from schooling. Clearly, whether pregnancy leads to an abortion or giving birth, there are physical, emotional, financial and image strains for high school girls that may seriously affect schooling performance. Fine (1986) articulates the perspective of a teen mother when she writes:

With a realistic and dismal vision of the future, an un compelling present, poor educational skills and experiences, and no job training the drudgery of staying in school seems barely worth the hassle. The range of possibilities for these young women is, in fact, materially and psychologically quite limited. Having a baby at least offers a full time job and a sense of purpose and competence. (p. 405)

The events of a student's life that occur beyond the scope of a school's responsibility are still influential in how a particular individual will react in a school setting. Wehlage and Rutter (1986) pointed out that more research on student characteristics will not in itself solve the dropout problem but Natriello, Pallus and McDill (1986) also suggested that there is some evidence to indicate that the dropout phenomenon may be changing and recommend continuing to monitor student characteristics.

#### Student Environmental Factors

Socioeconomic status. (SES). Low SES is one of the primary indicators used to identify potential dropouts (Ekstrom et al., 1986; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986; Rumberger, 1987; Barrington & Hendricks, 1989). These studies pointed out that a student from a low SES family is more likely to drop out of school than a student from a high SES family. This differentiation has long been a symbol of how schools are accused of reproducing the social stratification that exists in society. As an antecedent of school failure it evokes a "chicken and egg" quandary. It is difficult to determine if a student drops out as a result of alienation with a school's values and policies or drops out as a result of the low SES home environment that precedes exposure to school. Children whose families live in poverty or on welfare have significantly higher dropout rates. Rumberger (1987) added that economic factors can influence a student's decision and his study found that "about 20% of dropouts report that they left school because they wanted to or felt they had to work to help out their families" (p. 110). Morris et al. found that among Canadian studies "from one third to one

half of the dropouts surveyed or interviewed, depending on the year and locale of the study, tend to be from white collar, managerial, or professional families" (1991, p. 33).

When controls are added for SES, racial differences in school dropout rates are greatly diminished (but do not disappear entirely). Among SES measures, parental education is the strongest determinant; the more advanced a parent's education, the less likely the child will drop out (Dryfoos, 1990, p. 90).

Researchers have been interested in differentiating among family SES in regard to "parenting styles" and looking at different effects. Baumrind and Black (1967) have specified three parenting styles: authoritarian (high in demands, low in responsiveness), permissive, and authoritative (high expectations, firm enforcement of standards, and open communication). Dornbusch, Ritter, Leiderman, Roberts & Fraleigh (1987) have related parenting styles to school performance and found that children who have parents with authoritative styles have significantly higher school grades than children in other types of families (with the exception of Asian children).

While SES has been identified in some research (such as Bachman et al. (1971)) as the single most important family background predictor of leaving school early its contribution must not be taken in isolation. Most other related factors are subsumed by or at least closely related to SES.

Family. Family problems contribute significantly to some students' decisions to drop out (Radwanski, 1987; Ekstrom et. al., 1986; Wehlage 1987; Wehlage et. al., 1989). Wehlage indicated how "the dissolution of the traditional family unit means that fewer than half of all children will grow up in the traditional intact family living with the same mother and father" (1987, p. 19). Single parent families are more likely to have lower incomes

which place them in a low SES learning environment. Radwanski (1987) noted that students from single parent families are more likely to drop out as are children from homes with low parental education levels and lower SES. Wehlage et al. (1989) also noted that a disruptive home life consisting of parental separation, divorce or both parents away for extended periods of time contributes to a decision to drop out. There is a close relationship between many of the factors related to the interaction between a student and family, and pinpointing a specific relationship is difficult. What is possible, however, is to appreciate how influential the family-student relationship is in considering factors that affect a student's decision to drop out. Ekstrom et al. (1986) capsulated the implications of a weaker educational support system when they stated that:

When compared with stayers, dropouts:

- (1) . . . had fewer study aids present in their homes,
- (2) . . . had less opportunity for non-school related learning,
- (3) . . . were less likely to have both natural parents living at home,
- (4) . . . had mothers with lower levels of formal education,
- (5) . . . had mothers with lower levels of educational expectations for their offspring,
- (6) . . . had mothers who were more likely to be working, and
- (7) . . . had parents who were less likely to be interested in or to monitor both in-school and out-of-school activities. (p. 358)

According to Persaud the "family involvement factors identified in the literature that enhanced positive student behaviours included: (a) having high educational aspirations for students, (b) being involved with the students in program planning, (c) providing opportunities for out of school learning, (d) providing space to do homework, (e) monitoring daily activities and school progress, and (f) providing verbal encouragement" (1991, p 21).

Peer Pressure. Peers are a powerful influence in the day to day lives of students. Pressure to identify with a particular cohort may persuade a student to skip classes, complain about school rules or teachers, and influence the formation of the attitudes regarding the importance of school. Peers have an impact not only in what students wear but in what and how they think. This can be either a positive or negative influence. Either way the affect of student's cohort needs to be considered when looking at influential factors for a student dropping out of school.

Role models. Outside the school, students face a variety of situations and personal encounters that compete to influence a student's perspective on the world, including attitudes toward school. The messages received are often contradictory and may result in a confusion and rejection of some of the merits of traditional endeavours such as schooling. Youth who are in situations where there are few jobs requiring academic training or few role models exhibiting the merits of academic achievement will be less likely to conceptualize the merits of staying in school. In fact the obverse may be more influential whereby the prevalence of role models who do not possess academic credentials may entice some youth to follow in their footsteps.

Other Factors. Recently evidence has pointed to other environmental factors as at least in part contributing to dropping out of school. Stevens and Price (1992) have suggested introducing screening mechanisms to help identify students who enter the school system that are considered at risk due such factors as prenatal exposure to drugs and alcohol, lead, AIDS, and abuse that need specialized and early treatment (p. 18).

### School Environmental Factors

School performance. Poor achievement is reported to be a predictive indicator of dropping out (Barrington & Hendricks, 1989; Frymier & Gansneder, 1989; Shepard and Smith 1990; Smith and Shepard 1988; Ekstrom, et al., 1986; Wehlage 1987; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Barrington and Hendricks (1989) found an indicator of 85% predictability of students dropping out for students who failed one subject in grade 9 and a 90% accuracy for students with a grade point average of 1.7 or less. According to Smith and Shepard "retention increases the probability of eventually dropping out of school by 20 to 30 percent, even with achievement, socioeconomic status and gender controlled (1988, p. 214). Shepard and Smith also suggest that students who repeat two grades have a probability of dropping out of nearly 100% (1990, p. 86). Data collected from the High School and Beyond study indicated that the most powerful correlates of dropping out are disciplinary problems, low grades, and course failure (Ekstrom et al., 1986). Reading ability is thought to be central to academic ability. Hammack (1986) found a linear relationship between student reading levels and dropping out. The principal plays a "crucial role in the academic performance of students, particularly low achievers" (Andrews and Soder, 1987, p. 9).

According to Dryfoos (1990), using the High School and Beyond data, virtually all males and 82% of females cited school related reasons among their reasons for dropping out. Finn (1989) stated that "Consistent patterns of scholastic failure may threaten one's self-view, resulting in a search for alternative activities that may be less sanctioned socially but through which the youngster can experience success" (p. 120). This is the basis of what Finn (1986) refers to as the Frustration-Self-Esteem model. It does not make sense for any individual to continue in a situation in which they do not receive any positive feedback. For many adolescents forging their way into adulthood, this is fulfilling the image of standing up for one's rights and what one believes in that is central to the requests of the 'adult' world. When this student reaction is challenged, it reaffirms the frustration

students experience when given freedom to do something but only if it matches with what the adult or teacher considers appropriate. The idealistic freedom of adolescence does not match the realistic constraints of the adult world. With the school holding all of the power to make school decisions it is little wonder that the students experience frustration, and for some students this results in dropping out of school.

Truancy. For many dropouts a pattern of high absenteeism precedes the decision to drop out (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Barrington & Hendricks, 1989; Ekstrom, et al., 1986; Wehlage, 1987; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Whether due to boredom or an attempt to avoid the conflicts that result from attending school, many students seek a remedy by 'skipping out'. Truancy indicators reported by Barrington and Hendricks (1989) suggested that in grade 9 dropouts had absences three times as high as graduates. Bryk and Thum suggest that absenteeism is "the strongest behavioral predictor of dropping out" (1989, p. 353).

School discipline. Wehlage and Rutter (1986) looked at the effectiveness and fairness of school discipline, and the response of a broad range of students indicated a consistently negative view. This suggests that schools have a serious problem with how students perceive the discipline system. "School factors related to discipline are significant in developing a tendency to drop out" (Wehlage and Rutter, 1986, p. 345).

Finn (1986) also identifies a Participation-Identification Model where the more a student participates in school based activities the more he or she begins to identify with the school and thereby adopts appropriate values and school behaviour. Likewise, the less a student participates in school activities the less they will identify with school values and behaviours. Participation may be accomplished in a variety of ways that include participatory involvement in school sports or other events, attending school events as a

spectator or even some form of endorsing school events by wearing school associated emblems such as school jackets. In some ways it is a public declaration of personal allegiance to the school and acknowledges the school values and behavioral expectations. This is often generically calculated in terms of what is called "school spirit". However the voluntary and exuberant participation in extra curricular activities does not mean that a student will transfer the same commitment to the classroom. By contrast, a student who does not identify with the school beliefs or values will be less likely to participate or be perceived as modeling school promoted behaviour. Instead, such a student may model a behaviour that is in direct contradiction to the school expectations as a symbol of this belief or value rejection and therefore come into conflict in terms of school discipline. Pawlovitch concluded: "that early school leaving is a symptom of a fundamental mismatch between student and school" (1986, p. 15).

Boredom. The problems of boredom, alienation, disengagement or any other labels that have been used to describe the various types of disenchantment that students feel towards the school system exist among both potential dropouts and students who do not dropout. This lack of identity faces most, if not all, students but it is those students who also carry burdens of other types for whom this issue is potentially harmful. With a relatively short attention span and the lack of appropriate role models to represent the benefits of an education, it becomes easy to tune out of school and divert energy and interest to some other activity that captivates their attention. If a school is perceived as boring, irrelevant, unfair and a waste of time it is little wonder that some students decide to remove themselves from the situation. If these perceptions are wrong or unfounded, students will need to be shown how they had misjudged the situation. If, however, these perceptions are justly founded, then it will be up to the school system to make appropriate changes to correct the situation.

Rapport. Many research studies indicate the need for interaction and understanding between students and the school organization (Wehlage et al., 1989; Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Bryk & Thum, 1989; Firestone, 1989; Cuban, 1989; Natriello et. al., 1986; Fine, 1986). Natriello et al. (1986) referred to a general rubric of school 'responsiveness' to describe the student's needs and concerns that the school organization should be concerned with. Wehlage et al (1989) recommended 'Schools as Communities of Support' as a means of engaging all students in the learning process. Coleman and Hoffer (1987) researched dropout rates in catholic schools and suggested that lower rates in these schools may be due to a closer linkage between students and the school. Bryk and Thum added that "the typical Catholic high school has a structured academic program that fosters commonality of academic experience among students. The effects of this common ground of shared activities are further enhanced by social relations among both adults and students characterized by human caring and personal interest" (1989, p. 356). These studies and others call for a closer rapport between students and the school organizations in which they attend.

School size. Cuban (1989) suggested that successful schools should have student enrollments from 50 to a couple of hundred in order to help foster the enduring relationships between students and adults. A smaller school also encourages greater participation among students. In the case of larger secondary schools, (Cuban 1989; Nickle, Flynt, Poynter and Rees, 1990) recommended creating schools within a school.

Wehlage and Rutter (1986) also noted weak adult authority, a climate of truancy and low expectations, and the absence of caring adult relationships as school related factors which may affect potential dropouts. A student's success academically, attendance levels, discipline problems, boredom, rapport or the size of the school are a few of the school

related factors to exerting an influence on student's decisions to stay in school or to drop out.

### Interrelationship Among Factors

The complexity of understanding the reasons why students drop out is compounded by the interrelationship among factors. Each student brings a unique set of experiential and background factors that influence the decision to stay in school or to drop out. There is a tendency to put the 'blame' for dropping out on the student or on some factor outside the school instead of examining the school organization as a possible source of contribution. The phenomenon of dropouts extends beyond questions of motivation or other accusations that suggest that it is up to the individual. When close to one out of three students is dropping out of school there needs to be more than simplistic finger pointing to find a cause beyond the school system.

This suggests that negative experiences at school, in a student's home and personal life, and in the community combine in some form to contribute to dropping out. Wehlage (1987) suggested that "The interaction of school experiences and family background that results in the decision to drop out is not well understood by researchers, educators or policy makers" (p. 19). Rumberger (1987) in his conclusion on high school dropouts called for ". . . an interdisciplinary approach that acknowledges not only the educational aspects of the problem, but the social, economic, and psychological ones as well" (p. 119). Wehlage and Rutter (1986) added that "The use of community-based educational resources may well provide the environment that stimulates those students who now find school an unrewarding place to learn" (p. 392). Fine (1986) reached beyond schools by requiring changes within the entire society.

School-based reforms need to be developed in tandem with a package of economic and social reforms, including job programs, provision of child care, funded access to contraception and abortion services, balanced housing development, social and health services, and so forth, and ultimately there needs to be a redistribution of resources and power within society (p. 407).

Mensch and Kandel (1988) analyzed data from the 1984 National Longitudinal Survey of Young Adults at ages 19 to 27 to explore the relationship between dropping out of high school, drug involvement, and other behaviour problems. They found significantly higher rates of substance use among dropouts. As a result of their study, they commented on the interrelationship between influential factors in the life of adolescents, and capture the essence of the interdependency of the myriad of factors.

[The] participation in a variety of activities in adolescence that are deviant because they contravene general societal norms, such as delinquency or the use of marijuana and other illicit drugs, or because they contravene age related norms, such as sexual intercourse, pregnancy or cigarette smoking, greatly increase the risk of dropping out of school. . . . [E]ach behaviour creates unique risks of its own. The role of drug involvement in early school leaving illustrates that participation in one class of deviant activity by itself . . . [significantly] increases the risk of participation in other deviant behaviours and reduces the commitment to the conventional institutions, one of which is the school (Mensch and Kandel, 1989, p. 112).

The Phi Delta Kappan study of students 'at-riskness' by Frymier & Gansneder (1989) used 45 factors that previous research suggested were related to students being at risk of failing in school or in life. " 'At-riskness' is a function of what bad things happen to a child, how severe they are, how often they happen, and what else happens in the child's immediate environment" (p. 142). In order to illustrate the compound nature of at-riskness, Frymier and Gansner explained that ". . . a pregnant 14-year-old is at risk. But, a

pregnant 14-year-old who uses drugs is even more at risk. And a pregnant 14-year-old who uses drugs, has been retained in grade, missed 30 days of school, and has a low self-esteem is still more seriously at risk"(1989, p. 142). The findings from the study indicated that between 25%-35% of the students in the study were seriously at risk with six or more factors that previous research had linked to being at risk. Many students seem to be resilient to individual negative factors but the effect of compounded factors can be an overwhelming influence resulting in the decision to drop out of school. Natriello et al. (1986) framed the interrelationship according to ". . . a pattern of reciprocal relationships of the two antecedent components, the personal and social characteristics of students and the process aspects of their school environments"(p. 431). All of the studies try to demystify the elusive nature of the interaction of factors that sometimes, but not always, explains why students drop out of school. While some students persevere despite tremendous handicaps and barriers others with all of the conceivable support still decide to drop out.

Many studies in the literature have attempted to isolate a particular variable and correlate it with dropping out. The results of these studies have not been very helpful. A correlation does not mean causation and therefore may identify a symptom of the problem rather than a cause of the problem. In an attempt to find a cause there is a tendency to suggest that because 'A' is correlated with dropouts, then by manipulating 'A' dropouts might be reduced. Such simplistic assumptions may lead to a false sense identifying the cause of dropouts. An easy pitfall is to correlate a item such as low SES with dropping out when in reality dropping out of school may have less to do with SES than it might with the side effects of poverty and living conditions such as single parent families, racial prejudice, malnutrition, inconsistency of values or other life experiences of students that differ from students who do not grow up in low SES environments. In order to deal effectively with dropouts, strategies must deal with the causes and not the symptoms. The opportunity for

error becomes more prevalent when considering the potential for multiple causes to be involved.

Student characteristics, home and school environmental factors all play an influential role in a student's life and affect any decision to stay in school or to drop out. Wehlage and Rutter concluded that "we consider the possibility that certain student characteristics in combination with certain school conditions are responsible for students' decisions to leave school early" (1986, p. 389). To isolate the impact of only a few factors as being of primary impact would be to miss the point of how individual students are affected differently. What may be influential for one student may not be for another. All students are under powerful influences some of which may be positive and some may be negative.

### Dropout Reduction Strategies

There are some problems that plague an interpretation of all dropout strategies. First there is a problem in identification of potential dropouts to be included in a program aimed at reducing dropouts. The Salganik, Tan & Burner (1991) study found a 50% success rate in identifying dropouts. Such inaccuracy reduces the validity of the potential benefit of any specific program. If students can not be accurately identified, it can not be concluded that a particular strategy was successful in keeping them in school or that they would have remained in school regardless of a special strategy. The second problem with new strategies is what the literature refers to as the Hawthorne effect. This is where a student improves performance or, in the case of dropouts, simply stays in school due to the novelty and special attention of a program and not necessarily due to a strategic manipulation. A third problem with the strategies is that they usually incorporate numerous changes in a single program and it is therefore difficult to isolate what has been the

successful component in any particular program. Fourth, the elusive elixir that might be responsible for reducing dropouts may also originate outside a school's jurisdiction. A fifth concern revolves around the individual nature of the students so that what works for one student may not be transferable to another circumstance. Therefore the success of a strategy for a particular student may not be effective if reapplied to an apparently similar situation. Not unrelated is the notion that the best strategy to combat the dropout problem may not be a new or different approach but simply the exposure to 'good teaching' through the existing traditional methods.

Despite these inherent restrictions to determine a strategy's success, there are some areas in which new strategies have been applied with some degree of consistency. It is beyond the scope of this review to determine which strategies have been beneficial or to what degree one approach is better than any other. The review of the literature on student characteristics revealed a complex web of interactions and circumstances that interplay to put a student at risk of dropping out of school. Reference to the concept of school dropout does little to convey the diversity of factors that may precipitate such an action. Strategies that are designed to combat the concept of dropouts must encompass the same breadth of factors. It would be unrealistic to imagine a single strategy that would resolve all of the dropout problems. In order to be effective a strategy must match the need of a particular student, or group of students, with a program that aims to overcome, reduce or circumvent the barriers that exist. Brodinsky suggested:

Since there is no one definition of 'at-risk', there is no one solution. The schools that have been the most successful have attacked the problem on a holistic basis. They see it as a problem that begins before the child enters kindergarten and then increasingly manifests itself as the child advances (or fails to advance) through the school. Therefore, successful strategies attack the problem at many levels (1989, p. 44).

Clearly in school strategies can do little to change some general characteristics of dropouts such as family and social background. Personal problems such as substance abuse, learning problems, legal problems, low aspirations, low self-esteem, or the rejection of authority that may emerge as a result of a student's out of school environment may potentially be alleviated by the exposure to the proper counselling, advice or direction by the school to a more appropriate authority. Schools can certainly make valuable contributions in these areas but the onus of responsibility falls beyond what can be considered part of a school's mandate. In contrast to personal problems, school based problems are an area where schools need to ensure that strategies are in place to alleviate any real or perceived problems. Schools need to be concerned with disciplinary problems, truancy, course failures, bored or passive students and any other factors in which the school is directly involved. In order to be a successful strategy, a program must identify the problem, understand why the traditional approach has not worked and consider alternative methods to achieve the desired goals. Wehlage et. al. concluded "Our research offers evidence that special attention by educators can make schools successful in preventing students from dropping out" (1989, p.240). To achieve a reduction in school dropouts will require extensive reforms consisting of strengthened alternative school programs, systematic school reforms and the expansion of community partnerships (Wehlage et. al., 1989). At a minimum, Wehlage and Rutter suggest that schools must address the problem of truancy in the schools and "the very students most at risk must not be allowed to undermine their own chances of success through either misguided permissivism or outright neglect on the part of educators" (1986, p. 390).

Finn (1989) reviewed the literature on interventions for dropouts and divided strategies that addressed school based problems into those delivered in the classroom and those broader based strategies delivered at the school wide level. According to Finn classroom interventions included (a) **positive teacher attitudes** regarding the potential

for success among marginal students; (b) **teaching practises that involve students** in the learning process; (c) a **diversified curriculum** with objectives that are relevant to the needs of the students and that are neither too easy nor too difficult to master with a vocational component being particularly important.

At the institutional level Finn (1989) described interventions designed to reduce dropouts such as (d) **small and perhaps separate schools** for students at risk in order to increase participation rates and establish a greater sense of identity; (e) **flexible school rules** that do not alienate students and discipline that is perceived as fair and effective; (f) an **evaluation and reward structure** that is compatible with the abilities and interests of the students; and (g) **positions of responsibility for students** (p. 137).

Many other strategies have also been attempted in order to solve or reduce the dropout problem. Some of these have been reduced class sizes, student segregation along race or gender lines, less formal classrooms, mentoring, schools within schools, student apprenticeship programs, classrooms in alternative locations such as shopping malls, peer tutoring, counseling programs, parental involvement, teen-parent programs and the list goes on. Incentives have also been used whereby students are attracted by some form of 'carrot' to tantalize students into enduring the existing programs. One of these programs actually pays students a wage while they work in vocational training programs. Braithwaite studied the effectiveness of financial incentive programs in encouraging school retention and concluded "The prospect of getting a financial grant to stay on in school in Years 11 and 12 did not play an important role in their staying/leaving decisions (1992, p. 35).

A different approach to solving the dropout problem has been the "second chance" proposal by Inbar (1990) and others. The idea is that students will be able to dropout more

easily but also that they will be able to return more easily. This may include reentry into the traditional school system or other parallel systems that offer equivalent certification. This process would reduce the stigma attached to being a school dropout while encouraging students to return and continue an educational pursuit when conditions or desire was more appropriate.

For principals confronted with a dropout problem the choice of strategies to combat the problem appears endless. To be an effective strategy there must be consideration of the individual nature of the problem and adaption to a model that addresses what is perceived to be the source of the problem. Ekstrom et. al. echo this and conclude "No single program or policy can meet the needs of the diverse dropout population" (1986, p. 371). These authors suggest three major types of program: (1) to help pregnant teenagers stay in school; (2) to help students with economic needs combine work and school; and (3) to help students who are dissatisfied with the school environment. Beyond the school, policies need to be developed to help parents increase their interest and monitoring of their children's progress and schools need to identify potential dropouts before high school and to begin interventions (Ekstrom, et. al., 1986).

When juggling a variety of factors in an effort to determine the impetus for students dropping out, there is a tendency to gloss over the individual nature of the situation and rely on the more general symptoms of SES or other related indicators. This may in part be because it is easier for educational organizations to deal with a group rather than an individual problem and the respective remedy. Dropouts become associated with images of coming from poverty, being undisciplined or performing poorly academically. The problem of this type of stereotyping through the use of labels such as "at risk" has the danger of prejudging students that happen to fit a particular profile. Not all low SES students are dropouts and the use of any single variable to identify potential dropouts may

do more harm than good. The dangers of labeling students could be overcome by offering many of the successful strategies to all students (Hamilton, 1986). Bachman (from Wehlage and Rutter, 1986) suggested "that dropping out is a symptom which signifies a mismatch between certain individuals and the typical high school environment" and that staying in school longer will not resolve these differences. He continued that "some young men can manage reasonably well on the basis of ten or eleven years of education. Perhaps others would do so if they were not branded as 'dropouts'" (p. 388).

There is some speculation that questions whether schools or society should be concerned with school dropouts. Toby (1989) predicted that no approach to keep more students in school until graduation in the present framework of schools will work. His strategy suggested students should be let out of school to fend for themselves and cites examples such as George Gershwin, Clarke Gable, Muhammad Ali, and Marion Isbell to illustrate how some individuals, labelled as dropouts, can be very successful in society without having a high school graduation certificate.

A wide variety of strategies have been initiated. Hamilton (1986) examined 17 well-documented vocational educational programs that seemed to work and found four common characteristics: (1) they separate potential dropouts from other students; (2) they have strong vocational components; (3) they utilize out-of-classroom learning; and (4) they are intensive in the sense of being small, individualizing instruction, having low student teacher ratios, and offering more counseling than other schools (p. 410). Hamilton (1986) used the example of West Germany which stresses the vocational component in its educational system and provides a smooth and rewarding path from school to career for the majority of young people who do not enter higher education. Levin (1987, 1988) proposed a program of accelerated learning for at-risk elementary students in order to close the achievement gap by the end of the sixth grade. Slavin, Karweit and Wasik (1993) also

supported the merit of early childhood intervention and indicated "Success in the early grades does not guarantee success throughout the school years and beyond, but failure in the early grades does virtually guarantee failure in later schooling" (p. 15).

One of the more prevalent strategies is the idea of schools as communities of support (Wehlage et al. 1989, Firestone 1989, Cuban 1989). This concept was explored earlier in relation to developing a closer rapport between the student and school. Cuban explained that ". . . these small, flexible programs have in common a model of a community, an extended family where achievement is important and so is caring for one another. Building a sense of belonging to a group - in effect, a supportive environment - is consciously sought as a means of increasing self-esteem and achievement" (1989, p. 31). Coleman referred to the functional communities of a student that includes intergenerational closure whereby "A child's friends and associates in school are sons and daughters of friends and associates of the child's parents" (1985, p. 529). Hamby depicts dropouts as the quiet killer of the American dream and suggested that to attack the problem of drop outs effectively: ". . . will take nothing less than the coordinated efforts of all segments of society. Schools, as advocates of youth, can take the lead in such a coordinated effort" (1989, p. 28).

There are also other more extreme alternatives such as that of Woodring (1989) where he suggested:

What urban dropouts most need is a complete change of environment. They need an environment that takes them out of their city slums with their pervasive crime and readily available drugs. One possible way of doing this might be the establishment of a revised version of the Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930's. . . . under the direction of reserve army officers to go out into the national parks to build roads, trails, bridges and to fight forest fires" (p. 469).

Likewise, Barone (1989) stated that society may not necessarily be better off if the dropout rate decreased dramatically. Barone suggested "Before we could say that a lower dropout rate is good news, we would need to know whether the reasons for **not** leaving school are valid ones" [emphasis in the original] (1989, p. 151). Mann (1986) proposed an initiative using what he refers to as the four C's- cash, care, computers, and coalitions. With advice that could be appropriately applied to all of the strategies associated with reducing dropouts Mann heeds that "despite the array of things that have been and are being tried, no one should talk about solutions" (1986, p. 313). Clearly a wide variety of strategies have been implemented in an effort to reduce school dropouts and to some degree there has been positive results. However, in many circumstances strategies have failed to stop students from dropping out of school.

### The Role of the Principal

Historically the role of a school principal emerged as a teacher who was released from teaching duties to perform the clerical functions of the school. The position gradually took on a more senior status with the advent of a organizational hierarchy that included bureaucratic superiors in a central office. This organizational structure left principals in a middle management position representing the go-between for the school and the government. Principals emerged as the senior or primary teachers at the school. Through this transition principals maintained a 'first among equals' relationship with the teaching staff which has translated into the present role as instructional leaders. This role as the head teacher or instructional leader for a school is only one of many 'hats' that the contemporary principal is expected to wear. According to Morris, Crowson, Porter-Gehrie and Hurwitz (1984) other hats worn include the decision maker, site manager, mediator and the creator of a learning environment.

There is extensive literature about the role of school principal as instructional leader. In an effort to make a distinction between more effective and less effective principals Rutherford projected that effective principals:

(1) have clear, informed visions of what they want their schools to become - visions that focus on students and their needs; (2) translate these visions into goals for their schools and expectations for their teachers, students and administrators; (3) continually monitor progress; and (4) intervene in a supportive manner when this seems necessary (1985, p. 32).

In a review of more than 75 research studies Persell and Cookson (1982) reported that among the recurrent behaviours of strong principals were "(1) demonstrating a commitment to academic goals, (2) creating a climate of high expectations, and (3) functioning as an instructional leader" (p. 22). Andrews and Soder (1987) did an analysis of student achievement outcomes and the behaviours of strong instructional leaders according to the perceptions of teachers. They identified four areas of strategic intervention between the school principal and teachers: (1) the principal as resource provider, (2) the principal as instructional resource, (3) the principal as communicator, and (4) the principal as visible presence. It is clear from the literature that the role of a principal as the instructional leader of a school is a fundamental component of effective schools. It is less clear how a principal performs this role. Depending on the individual characteristics of the principal, the experience levels and individual requirements of the teaching staff, the needs of the students and the expectations of the community and department officials, a principal may use a variety of techniques to fulfill this role. Smith and Andrews concluded that "what principals and teachers do collectively on a day-to-day basis has a powerful influence over the behaviour of individual teachers as they interact with children in their classrooms. And the role that principals play as they interact with teachers makes a profound impact on teacher behaviour and student learning" (1989, p. vii).

A principal's role as **decision maker** is dependent upon the interplay between various circumstances. In the image of a ship's captain the principal has assumed the obligations and responsibilities inherent in running a public school and is, therefore, in a position to be the primary problem solver and agent of change in the school. In an environment that consists of differences of opinion among teachers, parents and the central administration, a principal must be able to weigh the potential consequences of different options and make a final decision. The process a principal uses to find a solution may involve intuition and common sense or filtering through one of the many theoretical mechanisms designed to help solve such dilemmas. One of the decision theory strategies that gained popularity was Lipham and Hoeh's "model of the decision making process" (1974). Problems were resolved by comparing the potential outcomes with the degree to which they matched the organizational goals and values. The solution to a particular problem would be the best fit according to the different alternative scenarios. This process would be cumbersome and time consuming. In practise most decisions are not analyzed formally to this degree but are influenced by the individual principal's perception of the situation or the convincing influence by some concerned lobby group. In the end, the principal must make the final decision that best suits the situation at that particular time. It is inevitable that the beliefs and values of the individual principal will play a large part in how he or she comes to understand a particular issue and that these individual perspectives will influence the decisions made.

Another role of the school principal is that of **site manager**. The responsibilities that fall under this category are similar to the original clerical expectations for which the concept of principal was originally developed. Morris et. al. compiled the following list of a principal's responsibility:

- (a) monitoring school facilities and finances;

- (b) developing and overseeing the school's communication system of bulletins, briefings, records and meetings;
- (c) recruiting, selecting and assigning staff;
- (d) overseeing the provision of ancillary school services such as transportation and programs for the handicapped;
- (e) scheduling school activities in sports, drama and music; and
- (f) overseeing student discipline (1984, p. 16).

With the increasing expectations about what the school should be providing there has been a corresponding increase in responsibility assumed with the position of school principal to oversee these functions. While many of the delivery systems can be delegated, the ultimate responsibility for ensuring appropriate execution and standards still rests with the principal. Blumberg and Greenfield (1986) suggest that the conflict between the roles of instructional leader and site manager is problematic for principals. Leadership requires breaking with traditions while the managerial expectations encourage maintaining the *status quo*. A principal must strive to strike a balance between change and stability that leads the school in exploring new ideas while keeping tabs on an ever increasing variety of responsibilities.

A school principal also has a role as **mediator**. The impact of this role is directly linked with other roles played but deserves special mention due to the influential nature of the position. Mentioned earlier under the role of decision maker was the inevitable conflict that arises among education's many constituencies. Weick (1982) describes educational organizations as being "loosely coupled" and it is the position of principal that is in a strategic relationship with most of the components and therefore in a position to manipulate the available resources to implement a desired outcome. As mediators the principals are expected to balance the varying interests and opinions. This involves understanding the

political ramifications of supporting one side or another while not appearing to choose sides in a way that isolates any of the stakeholders. Principals are encouraged to elicit school-community support, the concerns of individual parents or special interest groups, the input from teachers and the advice from the central office (Mann, 1976). Wearing a mediator hat the principal must be able to coordinate a platform that encourages participation and the expression of preferences without relinquishing a principal's control and responsibility. While mediating the various forces that come into play a principal can not help but be influenced by his or her own beliefs.

Possibly the most elusive role of a principal is that of **creating a learning environment**. To create an ethos in the school, community and among the teachers and students that facilitates learning is not a simple manipulation but represents an accumulative effect of a principal's efforts. Morris et. al. suggest ". . . the principal is expected to create that intangible something, that ambiance of mind and spirit which encourages effective teaching and learning" (1984, p. 18).

To describe the role of a school principal as multi-dimensional is an understatement but the diversity and complexity of the task does not lend itself to simple analysis. What is clear is that the principal has an impact on how a school community proceeds and in what direction. Individuals in this position can promote a particular educational issue or agenda. The extent to which an individual may wish to exercise influence will depend on individual differences and the interaction with other interest groups. As a result, there will be variations in how principals perform their role.

### The Construction of Perceptions

The previous section on the role of the principal indicates the diversity of leadership styles used in school organizations. The degree of success for any style will be determined by the match between the specific circumstances within a school and the individual characteristics of the person assigned to be principal of a particular school. The relative influential strength of competing interest groups will affect the latitude that a principal may have in initiating personal agendas. A principal interacts with the superintendent, school board, school staff, students and parents in determining a school's agenda and direction.

Determining how one issue becomes a priority over others is not well understood. As Aldrich (1979) states "Much of what happens in organizations is neither intended or foreseen. Error, chance, and creativity play an important role" A principal plays a central role in promoting or impeding change. Whether conscious or unconscious, the inclinations of a principal affect the eventual choice of which issues are to be addressed and which issues are not addressed. Fris and Balderson (1988) in a study found that 92 administrators identified 752 problems or issues facing the schools. Clearly in such a sea of conflicting opinions and problem diversity it will be the issues and problems perceived as important by the principal that are more likely to receive attention.

Vaill (1989) refers to organizations as 'permanent white water' in an effort to depict the frenzied state in which a large number of problems and issues compete for attention. Dror (1986) suggests that there are limits to the human ability to understand and cope with complexity. In schools, as in other organizations, it is people who select out of the frenzied waters what is to be acted upon. McKall and Kaplan (1985) identify influences in the selection of issues to be addressed such as receiving instructions, seeing the problem as being one's own, seeing the possibility of a solution, the person's sense of the history of

the issue, the perceived degree of crisis involved, the existence of deadlines and others. The authors also noted that "priorities get set by chance" (p. 41).

For principals reacting to simultaneous pressures from the superintendent, board, staff, parents, students or the community there is a tendency to focus on present demands. Due to the nature of the reflex type of reactions often required there is not always the time for reflection, consultation or debate. Long term plans may be superseded by short term demands. As new crises arrive on the principal's desk, a process of educational triage dictates which issues or problems need to be dealt with first. What a principal perceives as being most important or of particular significance is likely to receive attention before other issues that are not perceived as a priority or considered less of a priority.

How a principal comes to his or her own perceptions of what should constitute an educational agenda for a particular school will be based on past experience and a particular understanding of the issues and circumstances. Scheler (from Berger and Luckmann, 1967) analyzed the manner in which human knowledge is constructed by society. He emphasized that human knowledge is given in society as an *a priori* to individual experience and providing this experience with its order of meaning. Based on a particular set of experiences an individual's perceptions of reality appear as a natural way of looking at the world. Scheler called this the "relative-natural world view". Berger (1978) refers to this as "ways of seeing" and suggests that different individuals can perceive the same event differently based on his or her prior experiences. Greenfield describes how 'meaning' is created when he writes:

What we see depends in large measure on what we believe we are going to see. It may be argued that we see, hear, and feel nothing without first having ideas that give meaning to our experience. . . . As aids for understanding, we use larger frameworks and models - theories, if you like - which provide us with reservoirs of

ideas for understanding the world around us. These frameworks or models are images of reality, which we carry in our minds and which we use as templates to stamp meaning into [sic] the world around us. (1979, p. 173)

The perceptions of a principal on a particular issue will be based on how the current circumstances fit into the templates created by a principal's past experiences and understanding. As principals react to the barrage of issues and problems advocated by various interest groups, the 'templates' with which they filter through these items will dictate a specific perception of the situation. The degree to which a situation is then perceived as a priority by the principal will affect how to proceed with a problem, issue or situation.

The research question for this study involves the perceptions of high school principals in regards to students who drop out of school. According to this literature on perceptions, an individual's perceptions about the phenomenon will be based on past experience and some understanding about whether or not dropping out of school is a problem. All of this previous understanding of a situation will be tempered by the specific circumstances that exist in a given place and time. A given place encompasses all of the contextual factors that make up a scenario that could influence that situation. A given time includes other factors simultaneously vying for a principal's attention and the historical implications of a situation. For a principal facing a dropout issue factors might include his or her personal experience in working with dropouts, different pressure groups that exist in the school setting, the diversity of the problem in actual numbers, the community or departmental expectations and the list could go on. Beyond the presence of individual factors is the degree to which a principal perceives a factor, or group of factors, to be significant. If a principal's experience suggests that some strategies are more or less effective than others there may be a tendency to adopt the successful strategies. Likewise, if the pressure to do something about dropouts is coming from a group that is not perceived

as being influential or of significance there may be a tendency for a principal not to react to such pressure. A principal's perceptions about high school dropouts will be based on experience, knowledge about the phenomenon and how this knowledge fits in with other issues involved in running a school. How a principal perceives the high school dropout issue will affect how the issue is promoted or possibly deflected as a priority for a school.

### Summary

The purpose of this study is to investigate high school principal's perceptions of school dropouts. Specifically, this is an analysis of how principals perceive, or have come to understand, the phenomenon of early school leavers. In addition to exploring these perceptions will be to probe into what are the perceived causes of students dropping out of school and what strategies were being used or should be used to respond to the phenomenon of high school dropouts.

This summary of the literature will review the conceptual links in the development of the study, how and why the study evolved the way it did, and what the study will contribute to the knowledge of the dropout phenomenon.

The phenomenon of dropouts involves students who do not graduate from high school and are considered a social problem due to: the loss of tax revenue, increased financial costs of social programs, and the loss of individual self-esteem and human potential. Much has been written about the phenomenon. Recent works have looked at what the schools contribute to the problem. This study will add to the understanding of how schools play a role in a student's decision to drop out. High school principals are in a position of influence. How they perceive a problem may play a significant role in how it will be addressed and what action will be taken. In the case of high school dropouts a

principal's perceptions will provide insight into how a principal understands the situation and in addition how a principal may influence how a school responds to the dropout phenomenon. This study will be exploratory in nature and will enable principals to speak freely and to disclose their personal views about dropouts. Exploring a principal's perceptions will help us to gain insight into how schools regard dropouts and may in turn lead to insights as to how to proceed in the future.

The literature review was designed in an effort to provide the background information to adequately address the research questions and form a basis for the creation of the interview questions. These literature review subject areas were: the dropout characteristics; the strategies to combat dropouts; the role of the principal; and the creation of perceptions.

The task of isolating the factors that contribute to a student's decision to drop out is a complex and nearly futile task. The scope of influential factors is as variable as the individual student. In an effort to compartmentalize (and not prioritize) I have separated many of the factors into three groups. (1) student characteristics, (2) student environment and (3) school factors. This is really an effort to describe the diversity of influential factors potentially affecting a student at risk of dropping out of school. What complicates an understanding of how these factors combine to influence a student, is the interplay among these factors. Not all factors are negative influences at the same time. As a student progresses through a day or year at school, different factors combine to affect dropout decisions. The elusive nature of this chase for pinpointing a 'cause and effect', is also impeded by the fact that what affects one student may not affect another. Understanding the complexity of the influential factors is important in achieving a realistic appreciation for trying to overcome the dropout problem.

The literature has identified many of the factors that are associated with a decision of dropping out. Some factors such as SES are considered powerful indicators of dropping out. Others such as boredom may be less dependable indicators and may also be symptoms rather than causes. The literature does not provide a check list of which factors are pertinent for a specific student. It will be up to the individuals dealing with students to determine which factors are the influential factors and, therefore, the factors to be targeted for successful strategies to combat the problem. A principal will need to identify the pertinent factors to be addressed in order to reduce the number of dropouts.

There is no question that the school principal is one of, if not, the most influential person in the operation of a school, and in the setting of school priorities and policies. An argument can be made that such a position is only middle management and is the recipient of pressures from above (in the form of departmental or school board expectations) and below (in the form of teacher, student or parental interest groups) that override individual influence. The same argument represents the basis of a principal's potential strength - association and potential influence with those up or down the organizational ladder. There may be some principals who continually succumb to the strongest influential force either above or below. Other, charismatic principals, may be able to persuade all or most interest groups to support their perceptions about a particular issue. The truth, or norm, lies probably somewhere in the middle. Most principals will succeed in exerting influence some of the time and give in to other influences at other times. The principal is only a single player in a complex web of influences but understanding the basis of their perceptions will help fill in the gap to help understand how and why schools are the way they are. Asking principals to express their opinions about high school dropouts will help to better understand their role as an influential participant in the dropout phenomenon.

The dropout phenomenon is not new and many strategies have already been attempted to combat the problem. The variety of strategies is as diverse as the factors that are recognized to influence a decision to drop out. The point that emerges from the literature is that for a strategy to be successful there must be a match between a specific strategy and the requirement of an individual. A single strategy will not be effective for all students.

The major focus of the study involves how principals perceive dropouts. In order to understand the "ways of seeing", "templates", or "personal constructs" of a principal it will be important to provide ample opportunity to enable, if not encourage, the principal to speak freely and express their own perceptions. By asking a number of different principals to expand on their perceptions it may be possible to recognize themes or patterns that will contribute to a more complete understanding of the dropout phenomenon.

This information will provide a more complete understanding of the dropout phenomenon. By adding the high school principal's perceptions of dropouts to the knowledge of how schools contribute to dropouts, a more thorough understanding will result. In adding new insights into the discussions about dropouts there will be more information available for future discussions that, in turn, may help improve the dropout situation and add to the data available for future research.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

#### Overview

The research study has three areas of inquiry: the general perceptions of principals regarding the dropout phenomenon; the perceived causes of students dropping out of school; and strategies, used or considered, for reducing the number of students that drop out of school. The data sought are the perceptions of school principals. In order to discover the opinions, insights or points of view of these principals it was necessary to talk directly with the principals. The method was to allow individual high school principals the opportunity to express their understanding of the dropout phenomenon in such a way as to gain insight as to how principals perceive the dropout phenomenon. The personal nature of an individual's perceptions necessitated the selection of a methodology that allowed each principal to speak freely about the dropout phenomenon. By integrating the perceptions of different principals, recurrent themes were established that provided insight into how principals perceived the dropout phenomenon and added to the literature on how schools may contribute to the dropout phenomenon.

#### Design of the Instrument

According to Moore (1986) "The purpose of survey research is to obtain information that describes existing phenomenon by asking the individuals their perceptions, attitudes, behaviours and values" (p. 174). The face-to-face interview, as a form of survey format, best suits these research questions by providing the depth, versatility and insight required to understand individual perceptions. An interview is "... a process by which the researcher gathers data by verbal questioning of the study subjects to elicit data on the

variables being studied" (Abdellah & Levine, 1986, p. 387). A face-to-face interview is a powerful technique and has many advantages. First, this style of research enables a subject to articulate in his or her own words how a situation is perceived. In order to gain insight into understanding an individual's perceptions, the interview also provides the ability to probe for more information or ask for elaboration on a relevant point. The advantage of being face-to-face offers the chance for the researcher to identify useful non-verbal clues that might be missed with other methods. These capacities to clarify ideas will add to a more complete understanding of the perceptions and, therefore, the ability to satisfy the research questions. Dexter (1970) suggests ". . . interviewing is the preferred tactic of data collection when in fact it appears likely it will get better data or more data at less cost than other tactics" (p. 11). In addition, interviews have lower refusal rates and a smaller number of subjects is required than in other techniques.

To obtain data about what high school principals know or think about dropouts, the researcher designed a survey to be used in face-to-face interviews. The overall design of the interview took the form of a semi-structured open-ended interview schedule (Appendix F). Semi-structured refers to the use of prearranged specific questions and an attempt to conduct each interview in relatively the same manner. Open-ended refers to a type of item in a instrument which allows participants freedom in their responses and gives the researcher the option of probing the participant for further insights. Interview schedule refers to a questionnaire that is read to the subjects (Treece & Treece, 1986). The intent in choosing this type of design was to combine the benefits of a structure that gives some uniformity among subjects with the flexibility of being open ended to allow participants to express their perceptions freely. The emphasis of this design reflected the desire to understand each principal's contextual interpretation and construction of the dropout phenomenon by allowing them to define the terms used and encouraging them to express

their perceptions of the dropout phenomenon, the causes and the strategies as they understand them.

The questions utilized in the interview instrument are based on the literature. A similar study had not been done, therefore a new instrument was developed. The research questions acted as a basis from which to build the instrument using the research literature to provide breadth and understanding when constructing specific questions. A central theme through the literature was the complexity and interwoven nature of the variables and characteristics that interplay to create the dropout phenomenon. Strategies used to combat the dropout problem must also take into consideration the matching of a specific strategy to the student needs. When creating an interview instrument it was important to allow the participant enough freedom in defining his or her own perception of what constitutes a dropout problem both in general terms and with specific reference to his or her particular school situation.

The instrument for this study attempted to determine three things: principals' perceptions about high school dropouts; the perceived causes of dropouts; and, the strategies used or considered in reducing dropouts. The majority of the questions were opinion and attitude questions that encouraged subjects to express their feelings, beliefs, ideas, predispositions and values in relation to the dropout phenomenon. In order to establish the subject's knowledge about the dropout phenomenon in his or her school, factual questions were asked being careful to leave the subject free to define terms and concepts according to their own perceptions. The number of questions were limited to those that could be answered in a interview ranging between 45 and 90 minutes.

### Validity of the Design

The validity of using face-to-face interviews as a data gathering instrument hinges on three areas: the researcher, the subjects, and the interview environment. The researcher can not be removed or isolated from what transpires during an interview and is an essential element in what amounts to a dialogue between two people. As Mishler suggests narrative analytic methods are "particularly appropriate to studies of interviews as forms of discourse, that is, as speech events whose structure and meaning is jointly produced by interviewer and interviewees" (1986, p. 105). Researcher involvement occurs through the design of the original questions, probes used, or through interaction in the form of other feedback during the interview process. While constructing the questions and conducting the interview, the researcher attempted not to lead or force the subject in one direction or another but encouraged an atmosphere where the participant was free to express ideas in his or her own terms of reference.

A second area in which interview studies must be wary of validity is with the subjects. The question that must be asked is: how can the researcher determine if what the subject has said is actually true? Treece & Treece (1986) stated "An interview is effective for obtaining opinions, attitudes, values, and perceived behaviour. However it is usually an ineffective procedure for obtaining actual behaviour patterns" (p. 301). This is not simply a case of saying one thing and doing another - although that may happen. It is quite possible that individuals believe they are doing one thing when in fact they are doing another.

The third area affecting the interview instrument's validity pertains to the environment in which the interview takes place. The context in which the subject responds to questions must be conducive to providing an appropriate atmosphere to generate

reflective and thoughtful responses. To facilitate the interview process the interviews were scheduled to take place at a suitable time, in a location free of distractions yet familiar enough to the participant to be relaxing or at least non-threatening, and be of a predetermined duration that allowed for a full and comprehensive dialogue without creating anxiety in the participant by extending beyond the allotted time frame.

The choice of audio tape recording the interviews provided an accurate account of the proceedings that were closely examined to provide a rich amount of detail for analysis, including voice inflections and hesitations that may not have been addressed using other means of data collection.

### The Instrument

The intent of the first series of questions was to gather information about the school and some background information about the principal. These questions served to gain insight into the diversity and extent of a principal's experience. In addition these questions were relatively easy to answer and served to begin the interview dialogue gently. An effort was made with the question formulation to focus on school or individual topics in an effort to avoid rhetorical or stock answers and to elicit the personal perceptions of the individual.

The second series of questions inquired about the general perceptions of the principal by asking about the dropout rate in the school. Questions and prompts explored whether principals collected dropout data, what the dropout rate was, how the numbers were derived, and, how the principal defined a dropout. In addition, the principals were asked if a certain portion of dropouts were inevitable in this school, and had the school played any role in contributing to a student's dropout decision. These questions were

designed to provide insight into what the principal considered a dropout and what part the school played in a student's decision to drop out.

Following these general perception questions came a series of questions inquiring into the strategies for reducing the number of dropouts at the school. Additional questions asked about the rationale for a particular strategy, or lack of strategy, and about the effectiveness of the strategies. These questions focused on what the schools were doing about the dropout phenomenon and why. Also gleaned from these questions was how important deriving strategies to deal with dropouts was to the principal's overall school responsibility.

A fourth series of questions asked the principals to recall the last student they dealt with who was at risk of dropping out and to describe the reasons why that student had or was dropping out. These questions explored the principal's knowledge and understanding of the causes of students dropping out of school. As a follow up the principal was asked if this was a typical scenario and that if it was not typical how was it different and what the school might have done differently for this student. The principal was encouraged to describe what he or she perceived to be the reasons why students dropped out of their school.

Near the end of the interview the principal was asked who he or she considered had the primary responsibility for keeping students in school and finally what schools might do differently in the future to help reduce dropouts. Following the structured set of questions the principals were asked if there were any other areas of the dropout issue on which they would like to comment, and most principals did add or recapitulate some ideas.

### Participants

The population selected for this research study was secondary school principals in the mainstream, English, public school system of the city of Winnipeg, Manitoba. There are ten separate school divisions located in the city of Winnipeg. The initial selection of principals represented a random choice of one high school principal from nine of the school divisions. From Manitoba Education and Training's Schools in Manitoba (1992) a list of all the English speaking high schools in each Winnipeg school division was identified. In order to focus the study on schools representative of a typical suburban context, schools that were French immersion, pure vocational or other specialty schools were not included in the selection process. One school principal was then chosen at random from each of nine Winnipeg school divisions. Two principals declined to be interviewed as part of the study which left one principal from each of seven different school divisions agreeing to take part in the study. All participants had at least two years of principalship experience in their present school and participation in the research study was voluntary.

Schools in the city downtown core or in the neighbouring rural areas were not included in the selection of schools.

### Context of the Data

Approval from the University of Manitoba's Faculty of Education Ethics Committee was obtained prior to commencing with the study. A pilot interview was conducted to refine the instrument and give the researcher experience in asking the questions and fitting in appropriate probes. No changes to the instrument were made at this time.

Initial contact with the participants was in June 1992 through a letter of introduction. This letter introduced the author, explained the purpose of the study and how the information was to be used, and asked for permission to interview (Appendix A). A follow-up telephone call was made to each principal to inquire about accepting to take part in the study. If principals agreed to be interviewed, arrangements were made for a mutually acceptable time and location to conduct the interview. Upon accepting to be interviewed principals were sent a letter confirming the date, time and location of the proposed interview (Appendix B). When seven of the principals accepted, it was decided not to pursue other principals from the divisions that had declined. Seven of nine exceeded the minimum number of interviews required for the study and was thought to be representative of the Winnipeg suburban high schools. Also, in the interest of time, replacement interviews were not sought in the school divisions where the declines had been made. The researcher was not familiar with any of the schools chosen or any of the principals prior to the interviews. The divisional Superintendent for each principal to be interviewed was sent a letter informing them of the study and that one principal from their division had accepted to participate in the research (Appendix E). The Superintendents were not informed of the specific schools or principals involved.

Two principals declined the interview. In one case the principal was moving to a new position and would not be available, and in the other, the principal claimed to be too busy to grant an interview. Both stated that they would be interested in the results of the study when available and wished the researcher good luck in pursuing the study.

All interviews took place within two weeks of the initial contact with the principals and were held at the schools during regular school hours. For many schools this coincided with the spring examination schedule which, according to some of the principals, provided increased flexibility for setting up interview times. Most principals preferred to meet first

thing in the morning when they could confirm a time and indicated that by the afternoon there tended to be various interruptions that could disrupt personal agendas. All interviews were held during the week of June 20 - 27, 1992.

In one instance a meeting had been scheduled for 8:30 am but when the researcher arrived the principal had left for another meeting and had asked the vice-principal to act on the principal's behalf saying that "it is the VP who handles most of the dropouts in this school anyway". The researcher then had to explain that it was the principal's perceptions that were central to this particular study. The interview was then rescheduled for the following morning.

All principals selected for the study had significant previous experience as school administrators and in particular as high school principals. Six of the seven schools had a population of between 950 and 1250 students and one school was smaller at 550 students. The participants had all been principal in the same school for at least two years. On average, the principals had 15 years of experience with the range of administrative experience being from 9 years to 20 years. Respondents uniformly said that they considered themselves experienced with running a school.

While gender is not a variable that is being considered as part of this study, six of the seven principals interviewed were men. No gender reference has been made in reporting the results or during the analysis of these data.

The ages of the principals were estimated at being between 40-50's or possibly early 60's. No specific personal data was collected regarding academic qualifications with the exception being years of school administrative experience. It was noted that one principal used the doctorate prefix along with the name.

Five of seven interviews were held in the principal's office and the remaining two were held in adjoining or administrative conference rooms that were further removed from distractions. All interviews were tape recorded and there was no reluctance on the part of the respondents to this data collection method. Due in part to the tape recording and microphone requirements, most interviews were held across a desk or table with the interviewer and interviewee on opposite sides. In two instances where the principal's office included a sitting area including a coffee table and lounge chairs the interview was set up in this form.

Prior to all interviews the interviewer provided a brief description of the research, and an explanation of how the interview data would be analyzed and included in the study. Each principal was given a copy of the questions that were to be asked during the interview and time was allowed for the principal to read the questions. The principals were also asked to read and sign a letter of consent to be interviewed (Appendix D). Finally, principals were asked if they had any questions about the study. All respondents accepted that while principal, school or division names would not be used in the study that there were aspects of the school descriptions that could possibly reveal the source. This did not appear to be a concern to the principals. The structured, open-ended interview schedule was conducted with each participant while the researcher took notes of non-verbal expressions and audio-tape recorded the dialogue. During the interview, prompts were used to encourage elaboration or to divert answers to ensure that they responded to the question intended and to encourage the participants to express their perceptions freely. There were some initial apprehensions but these eased as the interviewees began to express themselves and their school approaches. The comfort level of the interview is evident in some of the long, often rambling responses to the questions asked. As researcher, an effort was sometimes made to redirect a question but each principal was given the freedom

to expand on a particular point of view. During all interviews, all of the questions presented were answered but not all participants answered the same questions with the same interpretation. For example, the question asking about a specific student and the causal factors that contributed to that student dropping out of school was answered very differently. Some principals talked about an individual student and his or her individual situational factors. Others talked about the degradation of society in general, the collapse of the family, the fault of the school structure or the plight of society since the advent of the television set. An effort was made to encourage principals to express their feelings and beliefs freely about the subject matter in order to collect data for the study.

The length of the interviews varied from 60 to 90 minutes with the majority lasting close to 90. In one interview there was a telephone call that interrupted the conversation and took the attention of the principal away for about five minutes. When the researcher attempted to leave the room in order to provide privacy the principal gestured that I did not need to leave the room during this conversation. After the call the principal apologized for the interruption and the researcher repeated the last question and summarized what the principal had said prior to the telephone call. The principal paused and then carried on without apparent distraction from the break. All interviews were interrupted briefly by the tape recorder reaching the end of side A at which time the researcher turned over the tape and began side B. The pause actually seemed to be beneficial as it gave the principals time to gather their thoughts and when the tape recorder was started again most principals responded with a clear and focused conclusion to the question that had been asked. The slight break in the interview appeared to let them "gather their thoughts".

At the end of the interview questions, most principals continued to discuss the issue of dropouts. Three principals were reluctant to end the interview but had prior engagements to attend. Only one principal became distracted toward the end of the

interview and began glancing at the clock and was conscious of the time. After the last question had been answered this principal made a fairly hasty, but polite exit and left the researcher to gather up and put away the tape recording equipment. All principals showed an interest in obtaining a copy of the findings from the study.

One interview context in particular deserves specific notation. This principal was very defensive and at times aggressive toward what was perceived as an "accusatory" tone in the questions of the interview. One example was when the researcher asked "Are there any ways in which the school is contributing to the dropout problem?" The response of the principal was:

I would phrase the approach and the question quite differently. I would say is the school doing everything it could to reduce the dropout rate? That is a legitimate question. The question you are asking is not a fair question. It assumes that we are so bad and so insensitive that we are contributing to something that we have absolutely no desire of happening. If you are asking the question are we doing everything that we could to reduce the problem, that is a fair question. The other question is based on an attitude that comes to us from an angle that I don't think is quite fair. . . . There is a stance that I resent when people suggest that we contribute to the dropout rate. I will concede that we may not be doing our level best at resolving the problem but to suggest that we are contributing to it I think is an unfair posture. (P2:2)

After the researcher rephrased the question the interview proceeded. In other questions the principal challenged the use of specific words and voluntarily substituted alternative words and then proceeded to answer the question. By the end of the interview the initial apprehension and aggressive responses gave way to one of the most frank and insightful interviews of those included for this study.

Following each interview, the tape was transcribed by the author. This initial transcription was completed as soon as possible after the interview. A copy of this transcript along with a copy of the original questions asked as part of the interview schedule were given to the subject for confirmation. A letter accompanied the transcript asking the principal to make any additions, changes or deletions required to the transcript and to return the approved version to be used in the analysis back to the researcher (Appendix C). No changes or additions to the transcript were made by any of the principals. All of the final transcriptions were compiled to form the data base for study.

Initially, each individual interview was studied in relation to the study's research purpose and each of the questions. For each individual this was done by analyzing the responses to each question and the transcript as a whole in order to understand the individual principal's perceptions of the dropout phenomenon. This included whether the school was concerned about the dropout problem, what the causes of the problem might be, how the school was involved with any of the causes, and what was being done by the school to deal with the problem. At an individual school level this included the principal's perceptions as to the existence of a problem in the school, what strategies had been considered to deal with the problem, and what rationale was used to choose a particular strategy.

From the extensive transcripts a summary of each principal's interview was constructed in order to provide a representation of the individual perceptions of each principal. For the purpose of individual summaries the contextual information reported was brief to ensure analysis focused on the general exploratory issues rather than specific contextual differences and to help maintain confidentiality.

Second, the responses from all of the interviews were compiled and arranged into how interviewees answered the research questions. Themes were established from the grouped responses to understand how principals in general perceive the dropout phenomenon. In addition the general perceptions, understanding or knowledge about the causes of dropping out and the strategies that had been adopted or considered to reduce the number of dropouts were organized into emerging themes. These themes, emerging from the principals' responses, formed the framework of the analysis. In an effort to enhance readability of the study some quotations are repeated when the contents may be germane to different themes analyzed. Following the analysis of the data themes are a conclusion which responds to each of the research questions, recommendations arising out of the findings of the study, and suggestions for further study.

In general the principals showed significant interest in the phenomenon of dropouts and eagerly accepted the opportunity to share their perceptions with the researcher. During the time of the interviews there was a national Federal Government media campaign called the Stay In School Initiative that had helped to raise the awareness of this issue in the public and within the school system.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### INTERVIEW SUMMARY DATA

#### Principal Interviews

The purpose of providing a brief synopsis of each interview will be to give the reader a sense of the perceptions of each principal and, in addition, to use the principal's own words to describe significant points of view. These excerpts are not intended to represent fully the entire transcript but are used to illustrate what the researcher believes was the fundamental basis for each principal's opinions. Additional information from the transcripts of each principal will be used as data for analysis of specific components in relation to their perceptions, causes and strategies. These will be dealt with in further detail later in this chapter under the heading of Presentation of Data. Reviewing some of the significant points of each principal will help to focus the data analysis and develop themes for answering the major research questions.

To avoid using specific names of individual principals, schools or school divisions each principal has been randomly given a label representing numbers one through seven. In an effort to abbreviate and differentiate between the respondents, these labels have been written using the letter "P" to indicate principal and a corresponding number. Individual principals are then identified as: P1, P2, P3 through P7. Each principal is represented by the same identification label through out the study. The use of the identification label which is followed by a colon (:) and a number is used to represent the page number source from the complete transcript. In this form "P3:6" represents text from principal number three that can be found on page six of the transcript.

### Interview with Principal #1

Principal #1 (P1) had been a principal for seven years at this particular school and prior to that had been a principal for ten years at a junior high school in the same school division. P1 described the general student population at this school as:

"... a fairly solid group of students with high ambitions many of whom wish to go on to higher learning. In fact I believe for the last couple of years we have been one of the top few schools for the province of Manitoba in terms of first year enrollment at the University of Manitoba" (P1:1).

The subject of dropouts has been a personal concern for P1. The interview questions were answered with passionate expression that represented considerable prior consideration. In suggesting that this school has a 20% dropout rate P1 struggled to define a dropout and indicated that:

Students who stop being enrolled at the school is generally the term that I will use for dropout and yet in saying that I have to tell you that there are many students who drop out for a semester or two or even three semesters and eventually come back. . . . So there are some success stories. But the definition is very vague and I think by its very nature has to be vague. (P1:1)

Underlying many of P1's views on dropouts was a perceived dichotomy inherent in society's expectations of the educational system. P1 described this during part of the interview process.

In a realistic fashion our society is giving us two messages. It is saying to schools - you are doing a bad job if you have a dropout rate. We want every student to graduate from high school. On the other hand it is saying to us - schools you are softening up and you are making your programs undemanding and weak and therefore your graduating students do not have the skills. Well you can't have it both ways. You either have a fairly significant program which is demanding of

kids or you try to accommodate kids and meet their needs. The public constantly gives us a dual message that is contradictory [and] that can result in some frustration as to which direction we should be going on this issue. Obviously we have to try and look at varying our program offerings so that we appeal more to students who presently form that group who tend to drop out of school. (P1:2)

For many dropouts P1 seems to suggest that solutions to the problem are beyond the capacity of schools as they exist. But in keeping with a central theme in P1's interview, a school must never give up on a student.

It is so easy to cop out on [potential dropouts] and I don't think that we really can or should cop out on them. That inevitable group are kids who are experiencing other problems which the schools haven't been able to help them address. For whatever reasons schools have failed to help youngsters deal with the developmental problems that exist in our society. . . . We can identify many of those kids we certainly have suspicions about many of them but we have not developed a successful intervention to save them. We know those kids exist and we haven't been able to do much to find anything that is going to be successful with them. So our problem is to target those inevitable dropouts but that is only the first part. Now the second part is how do you put in place a program that you can afford that will have a significant impact on those students who are remaining or coming back to school. And therein lies the problem for the inevitable dropouts. If we had an unlimited budget and if my counsellors could meet with these kids on a daily basis and if and if and if . . . we might have a fighting chance. But many of these students require significant inputs and many of them require the passage of time. They have to be able to put school in perspective to the point where they can say "hey, you know I dropped out, I worked now for six months I see how school relates better to what I want to do with my future now I want to go back". It is almost like they have to fall to a level which makes them feel uncomfortable [so] that they recognize that education becomes a part of the solution in their lives instead of part of the problem in their lives. . . . We are responsible to the clients that we have and we should be better able to deal with those youngsters than we are - and I get so frustrated. (P1:3)

The frustration of P1 is further demonstrated by the "jurisdictional confusion" (P1:4) and the inability to coordinate the various helping agencies that are meant to provide help to these students. P1 suggests: "We have a difficult time in mobilizing the present resources at our disposal so that they can be most effectively deployed in meeting the needs of these kids" (P1:4). The inadequacy of these support systems does not deflect the need to have students play a central role in determining their own future. P1 believes that :

[O]ur responsibility to our students is to identify for them: what their choices are; what there options are; what the consequences are of selecting each of the options likely is; and to recommend an option. I don't think we can cop out there and just sit on the fence and say here are your five options - chose any one it is up to you. I think we have a responsibility to identify the options, look at the consequence of choosing that option and then saying that in this particular case I strongly recommend that you look at option 'C'. For the following reasons. . . Then the choice has to rest with the kid. . . . I think we have to recognize that the student has the critical role to play. Let's recognize his right and our responsibility to try to help him make the best decisions for himself. But also truly recognizing that he has got the right to make his own decisions. And he has got the right to be wrong. If he is wrong, and he recognizes that he is wrong he has the right to try again - within reason. (P1:12)

In an effort to understand the phenomenon and identify contributing factors, P1 also recognizes the role of the school and in particular the individual classroom teacher. On this issue P1 stated the following:

I think in an unspoken way, teachers who have pressures on them to complete programs and make sure that the kids are getting the best instruction possible they maybe look at a kid who doesn't attend all the time and say 'you are slowing us down, you are creating a problem for your classmates' and giving him negative messages constantly that basically say that we do not want you here and the kid does not take too long before he hears that. "I'm not wanted here I'm too much trouble" and so they gradually slip away and become part of the statistics. (P1:4)

I'm fearful that at the classroom level that we are giving these kids negative messages and that I think that what we have got to understand as educators if we don't put out that effort now we are going to be paying the gazillions of dollars to keep these people on welfare or in underemployed areas that increase frustration for them as they go through later life. We have got to put a much higher value on tracking our kids. On trying to connect with them. (P1:5)

The main strategy used by the school to identify and therefore formalize the dropout process of students is a vigorous attendance policy that identifies and removes students who have missed five classes in a particular course. P1 is convinced that "Attendance is a major problem of education today. Just plain basic attendance" (P1:4) and that:

[I]f there is an attendance problem I can pretty well be assured that unless there is a significant intervention by someone be it parent, friend, teachers, counsellors, administrators, social workers; unless there is a significant intervention by someone that meaningfully affects the kid this trend is going to continue and probably will accelerate to the point where if he is not an official dropout he is an unofficial dropout. (P1:4)

In order to combat the dropout phenomenon, P1 is convinced that linking a significant adult to the students will help reduce the number of students who just drift away from school. Recognizing that:

Classroom teachers are so much more into other issues such as course quality, homework completion, attendance of classes, to get involved with chasing kids. They just don't feel that they have the time to go chasing kids and looking them up. (P1:6)

In response to this situation P1 has an idea about how the school might overcome this teacher preoccupation and indicates this in the following series of remarks:

I'm throwing around a concept that says if we could hire somebody who would be pro-kid and somebody phoned the kid at home to get them out of bed in the morning and if he didn't show up, darn it, cares enough and has as his mandate to go to that house and take the kid out for coffee and say what is bothering you? If we could get a significant adult in this building for that kid we could save him. (P1:5)

To be a bulldog and chase these kids down and make that personal contact because that is where the payoff is. If they know you have somebody committed to that kid being in school and he is going to talk to the kid and stick with that kid [then] I think you have a chance at success. (P1:6)

Because it takes time - an awful lot of time and probably it is going to mean four or five rejections for every success but it is just that we measure it on that basis. Four or five to one is it worth it? Well hey, if you are that one it is really worth it. And that is what we have to get into perspective. (P1:7)

We save a lot of kids academically that way by making a significant hook-up with an individual. We don't do that with kids who are categorized as malcontents or uninterested in school or bored with school or on dope or drugs or alcohol or whatever. We just don't do that for those kids. I think there is an underlying thought that if they are not in school then they are not having a negative influence on our student body. They are not in our face so the problem does not have to be thought about. But I think that is one of the things that we have to examine. If you can save kids academically by reaching out to them on a one to one basis then maybe we have to start doing some reaching out on a one to one basis with students who are dropping out of school. We try to do that but yet we are not very successful. (P1:5)

So, P1 is concerned about the dropout phenomenon and is considering some innovative approaches to deal with the present situation. P1 suggests that dropouts are caught in the unfortunate struggle of societal expectations between improving standards and increasing the number of graduates. All questions were answered by P1 with a sincere

introspective tone that exposed some of the concern and frustration P1 experienced in dealing with the phenomenon. P1 was obviously troubled by the public perception that solving the dropout problem should be a simple and minimal expectation of the school system while maintaining the highest of standards for graduation.

### Interview with Principal #2

Principal #2 (P2) has been a principal for a total of 18 years and at this particular school for the past seven years. The school was the largest in the study with 1150 students. P2 describes the community as relatively stable and "as good a home base as any area of the city of Winnipeg . . . and the vast majority of students here will, for whatever reasons, chose to take what is still called 00 courses or university bound courses" (P2:1). What made P2's school unique among those studied was a specific strategy that is in place to deal with the phenomenon of high school dropouts.

The interview with P2 provided a wealth of data about the dropout phenomenon which included the most complete presentation of what was perceived to be the problem and what needed to be done to address the problem. The interview, however, was very formal and almost tense at times. Questions that were meant to be open ended and exploratory were interpreted by P2 as being aggressive, argumentative and challenging. Efforts to soften the questions only resulted in modestly defusing the formality and tension. The answers to the questions were thorough, insightful and represented considerable understanding of the issues but the researcher was not able to penetrate beyond what appeared to be rehearsed rhetorical answers. An example of this was the reluctance on the part of P2 to contemplate ways in which the school might be contributing to the dropout problem. So while the school had obviously recognized that a problem existed and had taken action to deal with the dropout phenomenon, there was still a reluctance to acknowledge that the school contributed in any way.

One of the primary reasons why the school initiated a dropout prevention strategy was the public concern about this issue. In addition to the recent media attention focused on the dropout rate in society, P2 added the internal impetus of the new strategy as "even personally as staff here we have never felt good about losing students. Our attempts are made towards keeping students in school" (P2:4). P2 continues:

However, the publicity that is received has probably provoked us to focus our attention and preparation of specific strategies so that we could attack in a planned way rather than in an individual sort of accidental or incidental way. So, we launched a particular model that we think has greater potential than leaving it to the individual person. (P2:4)

By "individual person" P2 is referring to each teacher that deals with a student. When the researcher inquired further as to just how this strategy was devised the response was:

Borrowed would be a good word. Eclectically constructed might be another way of saying it. You read literature, you know the magazines, the professional articles on what has happened in certain schools and certain districts in American schools and some Canadian, the dropout rate is much greater than here. So you read about it and the drastic effects of this and from that kind of reading we developed a kind of model here. It took us quite a while to devise our particular model and to adapt it to what I think is workable at [this school]. (P2:4)

The model that was adopted is based on developing a relationship between a specific teacher and student that provides for a stable situation in the school for each student by having a home room base. As P2 indicates in the following passages:

We have tried to retain some of our traditional or Jr. high traditions of schooling. Which is a home room base and a teacher which is your home room teacher

advisor. So, we have responded and I think that is a reasonable response to make. A teacher can possibly know 20 students rather than try to know 160. (P2:3)

If you can make a student feel good about school and feel that he or she is part of the school then that student is likely to stay. One of the ways to do that we thought was to have students have a home base. (P2:4)

To make the model work every teacher is identified as an "at risk" teacher. Those students who are identified as being at risk are spread among all teachers so that every teacher has two or three students in their home room of 20 that are thought to be at risk of dropping out. It becomes the responsibility of these teachers to provide a personal contact with the student and the home and to act as a coordinator for the other teachers, the guidance counsellors and the school administration in dealing with a specific student. P2 described what the situation was and how the administration responded.

Now, I'm telling you that this school has recognized the fact that students drop out. That there are students who have a greater risk for dropping out. What can we do? What should we do? What we have done is had some in-service time with all the total staff. Certainly that is limited, first of all in time - how much time can we spend on it. Secondly if there are costs involved how much money can we spend at it? This school about three years ago spent a day and a half and brought in some people who were experts at something called mentoring in a more business world but made every effort to adapt their model and their approach to the education situation so that our teachers were prepared to be mentors for students who are potential dropouts. We raised an awareness and gave them some skills in the area of dealing with potential dropouts and then we organized ourselves within the school so that we could - each teacher would relate to a specific student that was on the list of being a potential dropout. So, yes we can do things. Certainly at the high school the teacher can be sensitive to conditions and circumstances in the lives of students that lead a student to be a candidate for dropping out. (P2:3)

Having constructed an appropriate model and provided in-service training the success of any intervention strategy will be based on the degree to which those delivering the program buy into its merits. P2 confirms:

You always have to "sell" certain aspects. It is not to be assumed automatically that a teacher who wants to teach and is prepared professionally to teach a particular course or discipline, it is not to be assumed that that teacher without motivation, without assistance in preparation and professional development that all of them will have the same level of sensitivity or inclination to respond to at risk students. We need to promote it, we need to sell it in that sense we need to continue to support it from the administration in both structure and in terms of staff development. Because if you don't it won't work. It is not something that happens automatically. (P2:4)

The model in the ideal is that the subject teachers will refer things to the home room teacher - but remember each subject teacher is also in part an at risk teacher so that if the subject teacher can handle it there it is okay but if there is a student that has significant difficulty, if there is need for parental involvement, and if that student takes seven courses here you don't expect seven teachers to phone home. You have a system whereby the phone communication is with the TA (teacher assistant) and there is some efficiency and collecting of information that allows things to function. (P2:6)

"So, my job is to make sure the optimum circumstances prevail that this service can be well implemented" (P2:6). In order to accomplish this there are monthly meetings held between nine teachers, a counsellor and a vice principal. Both the counsellor and vice principal are at each meeting of the same nine teachers in an effort to resolve administrative problems or counsellor related problems and to provide continuity of administration to the mentoring process. Each student of each teacher is discussed in turn and if there are no problems the agenda moves to the next student. As P2 explains:

A teacher only worries about dealing with his or her students and at this meeting he or she is reminded and encouraged, supported so that this can go on. So that the teacher can by and large stick to the curriculum as that is after all what he is hired to do. (P2:6)

Likewise, any problems that arise are dealt with by alerting a student's TA. P2 describes this administrative support by saying:

My consideration has been to provide a little more structure in what we do because teachers, their first responsibilities is to be prepared to teach the subjects they have prepared and been assigned to. And that is their natural inclination, so when we ask them to do this aspect of their life we owe them, I think, a little bit of help and guidance, support, structure. (P2:5)

Individual student cases rarely come to the attention of a principal but when they do P2 has a distinct approach that is preferred.

A student tells me that "My mom wants me to move out - we had fights, fights, fights. . . "What I try to say to young people very quickly is "who is the person over whom you have the most influence?" If I can make that person reflect and I know that it is a challenge for young people because they are young. But if I can make them reflect on 'the person that I can control and change most is myself' then if I can't change my Mom a great deal, I know she should but . . . and I can't force her to change. . . but I can change myself. Is there enough possibility of changing myself that I can get along with my Mom and still stay in school and be successful - that is the strategy that I will use if I have a person who I judge to have the capacity to work this thing through. Because every one of us has to concede I believe that we have a hard time changing ourselves but nevertheless it is there. Rather than me changing you or you changing me. So, if you have the level of maturity in that young person potentially, I engage in that type of dialogue. Not saying that I agree with you that your Mom is terrible - I don't say that but saying that look, you and I certainly have no real reason to believe that I can change things for you at home. I can't do that. We can in this school provide you with the good teacher, safe

comfortable place, we guarantee that. Can you adjust enough so that you can come to school ready to participate and benefit. That is a general framework. There are different cases but that is the framework from which I would like to work. (P2:7)

In responding to a question about who has the responsibility for retaining students in school, P2 showed some frustration and became defensive at the suggestion that the school might be in some way responsible. Part of P2's response included:

We are a reflection of society. If you give us a blank cheque we can now do or decide what ought to be done. Then you can ask the question. Until society gives us the authority to do what we deem appropriate, until that time the question is not fair. It is a joint project that we are engaged in with society. We can not be asked by society how come you are not doing this until society gives us the full authority and backs off and says we are going to hold you responsible and do it. But if they want to say we control you at the same time then it is a joint project. And it should be a joint project. But it should also be joint when it is not going well. When the school team wins "we won!" when the team loses it's "they lost" so the same thing in school. (P2:9)

P2 had some specific ideas as to what schools should do differently in the future that would better deal with dropouts. P2 stated:

I would suggest it would be beneficial to sit down and look at the end result. In many areas it is called product, but in education that is considered a bad term. So what are we going to achieve in 12 or so years of education? If we have the time and the courage to identify the features and characteristics and habits of that finished person or semi finished, or the 12 year condition, that would be valuable. We so far in society we do not do that. (P2:9)

. . . we want young people to be responsible but we do not say what are the examples of a responsible person. What do we expect from a responsible person. We shy away from that because we want to let you decide what it means for you and I'll decide what it means for me and then how do we know when we get there -

so we don't. So we shy away from that and avoid it. But in my view we could well spend some time seeking a common ground as to what it is that would be appropriate for this age group to do. What is age appropriate in terms of our expectations and their activities and their lifestyles. . . . What is age appropriate is really not an issue with society today. We tend to be ageless in one sense and that I think is hurting young people. There is a period when they should be allowed to be young - somewhat innocent and irresponsible. (P2:9)

P2 as an adult in society also personally assumes some of the responsibility for the state of the young people in general. P2 states:

I think for the adults in the world we carry the responsibility for the condition of the young. So that we don't want to blame the young people for the condition of the world and society today. We are in charge. We have allowed them to do the things that they do. So if they misbehave I think we ought to take the major share in that responsibility. (P2:10)

In order to address the problem of students dropping out of school P2 has initiated a strategy that attempts to give students some attachment to the school by means of having contact with a specific home room teacher each morning. In addition, there is administrative and counsellor support for teachers to help address student problems before they fester into the proportions that force students to drop out. This strategy was specifically designed to meet the perceived needs of the school and while some adjustments are being made P2 is pleased with the model's ability to address the needs of at risk students. P2 was a central force in initiating this strategy and many of P2's personal beliefs are reflected.

### Interview with Principal #3

Principal #3 (P3) has been principal of this relatively small suburban high school for the past 12 years and had been a vice principal prior to that for seven years. One of the

greatest assets that P3's experience provides is having taught at all school levels. P3 commented that:

I always feel that [having taught at all school levels] is a good experience for all teachers to have if that is possible because it gives them a good perspective as to what kids go through at the different stages and how that impacts on what they do at any given time. (P3:1)

The 550 students in the school represented the smallest school in the study. Students were spread evenly among grades 9-12 and the school did not offer vocational courses. The students are from upper middle class families and as P3 describes ". . . most of the students come from what I would call pretty solid backgrounds socially, economically and also in terms of they come to school with the idea that an education has value and meaning and can provide you access to a more successful life" (P3:1). P3 credits this strong family background for the ". . . less than a dozen that I would classify as dropouts" (P3:1). This approximately two percent dropout rate is based on ". . . students who have not completed requirements for a diploma. They did not finish off the year or semester in which they were enrolled and they were not potential graduating students" (P3:2). According to P3 these low numbers are not the result of a successful strategy to deal with dropouts but are instead the good fortune of being located in a educationally supportive community from which the school draws its students. As P3 describes it ". . . we are just lucky because the community we are in" (P3:10) and "I don't think that we have any particular strategy that other schools don't have. I think that we are just fortunate in that we are in a middle class suburb where [dropouts have] not become a problem" (P3:3). The low number of dropouts may in fact be in what the school does not have. P3 describes:

[T]his is a suburb of private homes in the vast majority, we don't have an excess of low rental housing, subsidized housing you know we don't have a lot of side-by-

side housing so generally speaking it is a combination of affluence and people who generally where the family places a great deal of value on education. I don't see where we have done anything dramatic or unique in this building that draws the kids in and keeps them here. We have the same complaints about boredom and routine shown that you find everywhere else. (P3:4)

In fact, the dropout problem faced by P3 was one of a different sort where students opted out before even coming to school by choosing to go to private schools such as Ravenscourt. To combat this P3 placed a high emphasis on the school academics in an effort to suggest:

[W]ell you know you get just as good an academic education here as you get somewhere else. That wasn't a conscious strategy to get kids from dropping out. That was more a conscious strategy on my part when I came here to battle the 'private superiority' of the private school syndrome and an element of elitism and snobbishness I guess. (P3:4)

The stable community that has contributed to having so few dropouts in the past is changing and P3 is concerned that the phenomenon of dropouts will be a significant issue for the school in the very near future. P3 confirmed that presently:

Most of our dropouts would occur because they have social, emotional problems that are so severe at a given time that they can't cope with what is going on in school. It is not the school that the difficulty with the content of the school that is defeating them it is their own personal and social life and whatever is in there. (P3:2)

In response to how the school might be contributing to dropouts P3 suggested "we wouldn't want to be as honest as to say that we contribute to dropout . . . we could then on the obverse side say, well, we are not doing things to facilitate students who are

experiencing difficulties remaining" (P3:3). Some of the problems are home based but P3 cautions that:

The instances where you do just have the out and out rebellious teenager those are definitely a very small minority. Most of the cases where the child can not function in the home when you scratch away all of the layers of things there is something that explains it. (P3:6)

With further reference to rebellious teenagers P3 commented:

[Y]ou might say that parents and all of the institutions have been handcuffed in dealing with rebellious teenagers. But a lot of this phenomenon comes from this generation of kids we have for whom there are no universally accepted values we have in society so there is no yard stick for them to really judge themselves by at a very crucial stage in their life when they are becoming the most rebellious and need the most direction. (P3:9)

One of the school based reasons for students dropping out of school according to P3 is that:

[T]eachers don't get an opportunity to work with these kids outside of classes. And when they disappear from the classes it is like the toothache is gone [and teachers] don't have the time to cope with these individuals while I have got this pressure with the other vast majority of very successful students who are demanding a lot of time and effort on my part to get them through to the end of the year successfully. (P3:3)

As a result the school is not set up to be conducive to helping at risk students by providing individual attention. As P3 describes:

[A]t the high school level the teacher is dealing with from anywhere from 150 to 200 kids in a 10 month system and here on a semester system they are dealing with

approximately 100 in a five hour day that does not give you a lot of individualized attention. (P3:11)

A perception that recurs throughout P3's transcript is the notion that students have life too easy and that not enough is demanded of them. The following quotation depicts this aspect of P3's interview.

I guess the one thing that I sometimes question is that we don't seem to be asking the question about dropouts as to [what] their responsibility is. See we are very much in a period of time where tacitly or otherwise we are saying to the dropout that the fact that you dropped out is something that you couldn't control. It was everybody else's fault, it was acceptable. . . . We seem to spend a great deal of time always looking at the cause and free will [while] individual responsibility really seems to have gone by the board very very much. Also, this whole dropout thing is a product of affluence very much. Because it is very easy for a student to [drop out]. . . When I look at our community I'm sometimes amazed that a 14-15 year old kid can leave this building, get into an argument with his parents, run away from home and just refuse to cooperate on things that are no different from the things that I went through when I was an adolescent and it wouldn't have crossed my mind to run away from home. Certainly if I had I would never have anticipated that I could have gone to some agency somewhere and get put in a foster home. A lot of kids know they can and they play that game. I sometimes wonder if those kinds of problems or those kinds of resolutions come a little too fast and easily for the kids. Where the kid who is really in a good situation is never forced to just sit back and say well what happens if I don't do this - where do I fit into this whole picture. It is easy to be judgmental in these things. It is strange that United Nations says we are one of the best, or the best country to live in in the world and that we should have a 30% dropout rate. Seems to be somewhat contradictory. I don't know about Japan, Germany, all of the industrialized nations don't have this problem to this extent. The underdeveloped countries don't care about it - they would love to have drop ins or the possibility of going to school. See, education because it is so readily available is not valued in the same way it is in some other parts of the world. But that goes beyond the immediate problem and becomes more philosophical right? I really sometimes wonder if part of our education when you say about

preventing dropouts we are very busy educating kids but we do relatively little when you talk about other things. We do relatively little to educate kids about the importance and meaning and value of an education. (P3:12)

The personal background of P3 suggests that part of the reason why students are dropping out of school is that life has been too easy for them. P3 believes that many parents and social agencies readily cater to these young peoples demands and the school, as one of the institutions that have to deal with young people, is caught up in the tide of giving in to the desires of the young instead of setting standards and holding youth accountable.

Later in the interview P3 talked about a conversation with a student who returned years after dropping out. The dialogue represents to P3 why the school can not always solve the problems that exist for at risk students.

I remember asking him that question. I said what could we have done differently that would have kept you in school. You know what he said to me? There was nothing you could have done differently. You did all the right things but I would leave in the morning on my way to school and I vowed that I was going to that classroom and I was going to work hard but I would come to school and I couldn't do it. I'd walk into the building and I knew if I walked into that classroom I was so far behind I was just going to end up appearing stupid. I couldn't have forced myself in. He said, you know, I wanted straight A's like every other kid in this building. But there wasn't anything the school could have done differently. He said I had to hit rock bottom and I had to - basically he was saying what a lot of alcoholics say. I need help. AA doesn't deal with any people who don't say they are alcoholics. Do we ever ask a student to say "you are a dropout?" Admit that to yourself. I sometimes wonder about the personal responsibility part. . . . There is no doubt that many dropped out because of factors beyond their control but there also may be those who are in ideal situations like . . . you have got kids from very well established situations who have dropped out. Why did they drop out? Why couldn't they see what there parents could see and what the school could see and yet they do see it somewhere down the road. Most of those kids will come back.

Once they reach that personal stage when they say hey I'm not getting anywhere with this. (P3:14)

As a principal P3 recognizes that the school is fortunate to be in a community setting where in the past the family background has been supportive enough to ensure that the vast majority of students stayed in school until graduation. More recently, P3 has noticed a change that suggests that in the very near future the school will be addressing the growing number of students who are unable to complete their schooling due primarily to factors influencing students' lives that are beyond the school's immediate jurisdiction. P3 does not know exactly how the school will adapt except that if it is to be successful in addressing these young peoples' needs it will require a joint effort on the part of all society.

During the interview P3 seemed reluctant to take credit for the school's successful record with dropouts. This would have been easy, but instead, P3 shared some of his calculations as to how the school should adapt to the accumulating pressures of a dropout problem. The uncertainty over which tactic to employ represented an honest insight into how this principal was deliberating over an appropriate course of action. In turn, this provided insight into how a principal's perceptions of the problem might be connected with the development of future policy. Through P3's contemplation of the causes and possible strategies to deal with the dropout phenomenon it exposed some of the elements that, at this stage of development, were competing for prominence in establishing a definite position on dropouts. P3 identified some student characteristic factors that contributed to dropping out such as low skill levels, having life too easy, some student environmental factors such as a negative home influence and some school related factors such as schools not adjusting to the student's personal, emotional and social needs. P3 also indicated a perspective based on his personal experience when he compared the present dropout situation with how expectations had changed since he graduated in 1958 when only 30% graduated. The final

resolution of this struggle was not established but for the purposes of this study it exemplified some of the considerations of a decision making process.

#### Interview with Principal #4

Principal #4 (P4) has been principal of this school for four years and previously a principal at junior high and elementary schools. He appeared younger than the other principals interviewed and dressed in a relatively casual manner. Initially, P4 appeared nervous about the interview and was fidgeting in his seat. The dialogue preceding the questions and answers to the first few questions was short and factual without any elaboration even after prompts. However, after describing the school he began talking about the different types of students in the school and he started to relax and began talking more freely. As the interview progressed he became more comfortable and began talking at length. Usually after hearing a question he would pause for reflection before answering. During the interview it became apparent that he operated a very collegial style of interaction among the other administrators and teaching staff that matched his casual presentation style once the interview progressed. What was also apparent was the degree to which his personal perceptions were reflected in the school. Evidence of how P4 relaxed during the interview was in the additional 20 minutes that P4 continued to talk at the conclusion of the questions. This may have continued further if his secretary had not come in to remind him of another appointment.

Students choose to come to the school from anywhere in the division. P4 describes the school as having a multicultural student composition and as academically oriented with a reputation of having varied and innovative programming. As P4 describes:

We offer things in addition to French and French immersion. There is Spanish at three levels, Mandarin Chinese at three levels, beginning Japanese, Asian studies, a semester abroad program, France and Japan, things like that so people regard it as a

school that offers academic opportunities for that type of kid. But we have the full range of types. (P4:1)

P4 has difficulty in coming to terms with the definition of a dropout and accepting the projections of the national dropout rate. P4 commented:

When the news media use the term and say that 30% drop out it seems to me the only way that can be true is if they are talking about all those who start kindergarten and compare that with those who stick with it until they finish high school. Maybe that is a third. But it certainly is not a third that drop out of high school every year. It is a very tiny percentage actually. (P4:2)

If you lost 300 out of 1,000 I think that would be criminal - and that is what a 30% rate sounds like to me if that is what they are quoting. But we don't see that. I don't know any high school that sees 300 out of 1,000. I can't imagine that. (P4:8)

P4 does not conceptualize students dropping out of school as being a problem. Instead, P4 suggests "I guess I wouldn't define the problem as being a dropout problem. Dropping out is the end act for some people who experience a series of problems at school" (P4:8).

As a result of having spent a few years teaching in Europe, P4 had a different perspective of the dropout phenomenon and adds:

If you look at some statistics from France where I lived for a couple of years, well, they have a selective system and once you are in one because you have been selected into one well I'm sure the dropout rate would be lower. The [European school] equivalent would be our university entrance levels and if you sliced off that group the dropout rate would be almost nil. I don't know how they do it. I don't think many other countries fare very well with the non-university bound, non-honours type of kids. Except some really homogeneous societies like Japan or South Korea where there is a cultural homogeneity that is different from ours and

the social pressure to perform in a particular way is different from ours. I don't think that schools in most of the countries that I have observed do anything close to what North American schools try to do to keep people in schools. French schools are busy kicking them out right and left. At least from what I could see. Japanese schools wouldn't tolerate much at all. That is why some of these statistics are a little phony to me. (P4:7)

Although not articulated as a school strategy, one of the school's ways of dealing with at risk students has been to provide programming that is appropriate for different groups (often along ethnic boundaries) and appealing to specific needs. One of the areas where P4 has had difficulty in adapting the school to the needs of students has been for Native students. P4 explained that:

Indirectly, there are some groups that find it very difficult to stick with school here. We still don't have a very good success rate with native students for example. I don't think they feel at home. [What] we are trying to do is look at a series of program changes that could make them feel more comfortable and maybe get them to stay longer. (P4:2)

One of these changes proposed by P4 is to have native students meet regularly. . .

. . . as a group and talk to each other, and talk to Indian leaders and so on. With the idea that if we can give them more confidence and more sense of importance as to who they are they are more likely to feel more at home in this building. (P4:4)

This is the type of innovative programming that P4 tries to encourage to meet the needs of students who are not fitting into the traditional school model. It is also representative of his personal collegial style through the benefits of getting a group together to talk and possibly resolve problems.

According to P4 most students who eventually drop out of school do not actually do it by choice and it is not a conscious decision to drop out of school. P4 explains further:

The great majority never even consider dropping out. . . . I would say that 95% of kids think they belong in school and that it is sort of like a job they go to and they have to do what is asked of them basically or come close to doing what is asked of them and a terrible punishment for most of them would be being suspended for example. (P4:6)

Usually the symptoms are missing a lot of classes and coming periodically and finally you get to the stage where it is just a bit of fiction that the kid is still in school. Usually by the time that they actually dropout they are saying that this isn't working this year and they will just forget it and come back another time. Because it doesn't happen quickly. They don't see it as a decision that they are making to drop out of school. What happens is it sort of just grows, they start missing some classes, miss more and it kind of just sneaks up on them. We are often the ones who initiate their leaving. By having them face up to the fact that they really have missed a lot of school but I think it is rare - the kid who thinks or says "well I'm going to leave school". I can't tell you how many times I have sat in with the VP with a guy who missed 80% of the classes in a month and he is trying to tell us that really he wants to be in school and really he is going to come back and - really he isn't. (P4:5)

One of the means by which the school administration deals with potential dropouts who start skipping classes is to relate 'time on task' with a student's attendance record. As the number of absences from class increases for a specific student it then becomes the lever that is used by the school administration to initiate a student's departure from school. P4 describes that "you can't say that somebody has credit for grade ten English if they have missed half of the English classes. The evaluation system is based on regular work as well as exams. So, they can't succeed if they are missing a lot" (P4:5). Some students want to be at school but not in the classroom and P4 refers to some students having a "social attachment" to the school. . . . "But they don't really want to be in the learning environment

of the school" (P4:5). For this reason a lot of students who drop out of one semester come back the next semester and drop out again within a week. P4 explains:

I think that there is a kind of romantic notion that people have that this time they are really going to do well in school. But they don't have the kind of commitment that they need to have. Also once they have been out there is a very low success rate if they come back. Unless they wait a few years and come back as adults who have a different experience. (P4:5)

In response to the changing needs of students P4 has attempted to offer program variety as a strategy to meet the needs of students. "You sort of bite away at the problem. I really don't think that there is a strategy. I think that schools have very diverse populations now. Do I feel that we are doing enough? - no" (P4:4). P4 further suggests:

I think this school and most other high schools are trying to get to be more friendly to and more receptive to and have more programs for people from a variety of backgrounds and motivations etc. But every time you invent one you discover it only helps a particular slice that the success rate is not so wonderful. (P4:2)

In the following quotation P4 describes why dealing with dropouts is not a priority in this school.

Well we are not driven by the desire to do something, or to set up the school for this purpose. That would not be our prime objective. More prime objectives for us would be to improve the achievements of the kids who are here to increase the regularity of attendance of the people who are here. To support a kind of work ethic among the kids which is difficult to get going. Certainly we try all sorts of strategies including structural ones developing courses and so on and hiring personnel for specific purposes but I wouldn't feel that our prime objective in the school would be to retain dropouts. Our prime objective I think would be to improve the achievement of most students and to improve their work habits and to

offer a really high quality to upper end kids as well. Those who are never going to be dropouts. (P4:2)

Program variety is the approach used in this school to appeal to as wide a variety of students as possible. P4 explains:

Another angle is that a school that has a variety of things in it can appeal to kids. We have some kids that we hang on to because they are particularly interested in one thing. . . . They would have been long gone if it weren't for that one thing which is more important to them than anything. . . . Sometimes the basketball team is the very thing that keeps him here for the year. Maybe he will grow up enough in that year to for us to hook him in for another year and help him grow up. If you are busy kicking people off things then you may be kicking them off the one thing that means most to some of these vulnerable characters. . . . Here I think we have 85 different extra curricular activities. So, that is very important. It is the ones that are vulnerable that need it the most. And the strong ones need more than a straight academic program. They need to leave school with abilities developed to have to be leaders at different things. (P4:11)

P4 tries to understand what the needs of a particular group of students might be and creates a program or activity that will build a bond for vulnerable students with the school. P4 suggests: "I guess you have to constantly watch for the nature of your population and try to create as welcoming an environment as you can" (P4:8) and further:

There are a lot of things everybody is searching for an answer but I guess the answer is a whole variety of strategies. One is straight offering of a variety of combinations of levels of courses and the possibility of integration depending on how people read the kid. . . . We have different levels of courses and we have integration in what would normally be considered inappropriate levels for the kid with support by teacher assistants who can work one on one with somebody. (P4:3)

P4 does not seem to be concerned with students dropping out of school. Instead, the school offers a variety of programs to meet student needs. Rather than focusing on those students who drop out, the emphasis is on the students who stay in school.

#### Interview with Principal #5

In total, Principal #5 (P5) has 13 years of school administrative experience. Six of those years have been in the present school with four as vice principal and two as principal. The school provides a wide variety of programs and also caters to older students who are returning to school in both its vocational and academic programs. This is one aspect of which P5 is very supportive. "I think it is exciting as hell! I really like the atmosphere we are building it has so many things and such a variety happening at once. I think it is a real benefit to have the older students here. It really gives a balance to the building" (P5:1).

In terms of a definition of dropouts P5 uses a broad interpretation as indicated by:

You hear fantastic figures like 30% and I'm not really sure where they are coming from. You know I think I could safely say that it is not higher than 10% in this school. It might be surprising. I don't know that that means that we are doing anything particularly right . . . in very general terms any kid who leaves the high school setting before graduation is technically a dropout. Any kid who has not got to the end of the road - for whatever reason. (P5:2)

P5 does have some very strong ideas about what contributes to students dropping out of school. One of these is the idea of administrative burnout. Part of the problem for administrators is that of jumping to conclusions about predictable failure for a student with a history of problems and not allowing for a student to change over time. P5 admits:

I would say that these kids who arrive on our door step have come through a number of serious social and emotional problems before they have even arrived.

You can tell as they come through your door that I don't think this kid is going to make it. (P5:2)

Or as P5 states later:

It is highly frustrating to deal with [potential dropouts] knowing full well that you probably are not going to succeed. You can look at the kid who has got the horrible attendance pattern in Jr. High school and you could probably bet \$10 that that kid will be a dropout. You have that kid figured out right from the beginning. And all the reasons why they were not attending in Jr. high are often related to the dysfunctional family and poor parenting skills. It hasn't changed just because they have come across the school yard and come into a new building in grade 9. (P5:12)

Lord, we could just put in so much time and so many resources with that group of kids already that just the thought that I might spend more of my time on it is almost repugnant. (P5:13)

I would say that the lower 15% of your students embody or occupy the bulk of our attention and sometimes we feel badly about that too. . . I think that we get worn out. I think that people who work at the secondary level get worn out with the volume of kids who have these exceptional problems. The number of kids in classroom who need some sort of special attention are so numerous that I think you have to be Jesus Christ Himself to stay up and have the energy to deal with it day after day. (P5:3)

P5 is not comfortable with labelling students as potential dropouts before they even come to the school but the reality of experience indicates that too often these expectations are found to become true. This, however, has not meant that P5 has given up trying to find solutions as the administration continues to be focused on "the lower 15% of students". The researcher was not able to determine whether or not such preoccupation was realistic or possibly only P5's perception that these few students continually occupied the majority of administrative time.

Part of P5's frustration with dealing with the potential dropouts is the unfairness to the other students which comprise the majority. The deliberation between catering to the individual minority or the group majority causes P5 to resent the time spent with the potential dropouts.

Whether we articulate it in terms of trying to prevent dropouts or whether we articulate it in terms of trying to get our school trying to run a little bit more smoothly for the top 85% of the kids who are somewhat distracted by the antics of the lower 15%. It is a focus, but I don't know that that is the only focus though. I have often heard myself saying to the parents of students who I am removing from courses saying that it is really unfortunate that we are now putting your child in the ranks of the dropouts but we have an obligation to the rest of the kids - the kids of average ability and above who are having their progress hurt by your son and his inability to either get here every day. (P5:4)

We probably spend the bulk of our time on behalf of that group of kids who are experiencing the most problems and ultimately are our school dropouts. . . . The community is paying a really fat bill for us to deal with this group of kids. It is unfortunate as hell because that kid in the middle, the kid who does most of his work but is struggling along at 65% and gets no attention at all. . . . There is some inequity in the system in that most kids don't get too much attention. (P5:5)

The advice to our teachers is really pretty simple - No individual has the right to interrupt your educational plan for that period. You have to deal with that kid in such a way that that kid doesn't get away with interrupting. Use all your skills to persuade the kid from continuing and if that is not possible then you had better send that kid to me. Because you have to get on with that other business it is too important for you to let one kid screw it up for everyone. (P5:8)

[W]e are concerned about [dropouts] but we can't lose track of the majority of people who are entitled to a good education here without undue interruption. There comes a time when the right of the individual has to give way to the right of the group. You could concentrate so much attention on the right of the individual to be

there that you ultimately would deliver an inferior product to the larger group.  
(P5:4)

While admitting to some administrative impatience when dealing with potential dropouts, P5's belief is that the fundamental cause of the dropout phenomenon is clearly based in the family. P5 spoke at great length about how family problems were the major contributing factor to dropouts.

Oh, I'd like to throw [the primary responsibility] back on the family. I'd like to throw it back to where I really believe the root of the problem is. I think ultimately what has gone on at home really puts the shape to the package. An awful lot of our kids are coming from homes that are completely non-literate. They have nothing but three televisions on. Mom and Dad have not modelled reading a book ever, or writing or communication because everyone has their own television set and are watching their own programs. They do not eat supper together. They don't communicate as a family. Don't really have any common rules within the family to conform to because everybody starts doing their own thing in their own little way. We get them in an environment here which is a literate environment we expect them to read and write and listen, and talk, and communicate, and they don't like this environment because the environment from which they have come at home is so different. (P5:8)

Sure. You know the press is ripping in to us all of the time that the skill levels of these kids are declining- they are, but who is responsible for it. The assumption is that teachers are getting worse at their jobs and I think that is "bull s\*\*\*". I think that parents are getting worse at their jobs. There is more family breakup than ever before. I really don't think that parents are paying attention to good parenting. They are off pursuing their own lives and not paying too much attention to what is going on. They are just being very very hopeful that somehow because their kid is still in school everything is going to be okay and it is not. (P5:8)

I really have strong beliefs in that [it all comes back to the family]. And that is not to say that we are doing everything right and couldn't do it better. But ultimately

the damaged goods that we get are being caused by the dysfunctional family with poor parenting skills. (P5:11)

Closely associated to the forces of the dysfunctional family is the part played by television in the homes and minds of young people. According to P5:

I really don't see evidence that parents are becoming aware that maybe this television s\*\*\* should be modified a little bit. Maybe our kids don't need their own television set in their own bedroom. Maybe the family should have one television set and we should watch limited hours of television together. Maybe we should learn how to talk to each other again and maybe we should spend part of our time reading and building literacy skills. I don't see any evidence that families are coming to terms with that. Families will express their concern about the amount of violence and sex that is displayed on television but they are not taking the quantum leap by saying maybe we should break the pattern and not watch the stuff anymore. (P5:9)

Despite the sometimes pessimistic outlook of P5 there is still some optimism in working toward dealing with those students that are still potentially salvageable.

I think by now you become a little realistic that there is so much you can do and because you are getting the product of the dysfunctional home and the poor parenting that there is only so much you can do with certain numbers of kids. But what you want to do is to make sure that kids from marginally dysfunctional homes and marginally poor parenting can be convinced by the strategies we have in place to change their attendance patterns and to work a little harder so that they don't become dropouts. (P5:12)

You can always do more. You can always spend a little bit more energy into it. (P5:5)

It is the anticipation of keeping a student who is only marginally at risk of dropping out of school that keeps P5 motivated to continue the potentially futile and often exhausting efforts of the administrative team. It is clear from the interview that P5 does not anticipate that the present dropout situation will improve until the families from where these students originate take a more active and supportive role in preparing young people for school.

#### Interview with Principal #6

Principal #6 (P6) has 20 years experience as a principal and seven years at the present high school. Due to a large number of high schools within the area the school has had to consider "alternative clientele" and as a result over a third of the school population is comprised of older adult students. The struggle to maintain an adequate number of students and the impetus for closely monitoring the dropout rate is based on a fear that if there is a significant decline in the number of students attending the school there will be a corresponding decrease in the number of staff that are hired. So, in the mind of P6 the concern about school dropouts is premised by the need to protect "his" staff jobs. During the interview P6 stated:

We are five high schools in an area that can't support that in terms of population from grade 9 so we have looked for alternative clientele and we have come up with adults. We are heavily involved with adults with about 450 of our students out of 1250 [being] adults. (P6:1)

I have made [dealing with dropouts] a priority. I have made it a priority for the school. Jobs are dependent on it and there is nothing like survival. (P6:3)

We are in declining enrollment. We are very receptive to keeping kids in school. Because it can mean jobs. Therefore your survival depends on it. Particularly my vocationals. If they don't get the enrollment then they don't have a job and some of them can not teach in another area so they are subject to lay offs. So, there is a big axe behind it all. (P6:4)

P6 was the only principal to mention the preservation of staff jobs in relation to a concern of dropouts. This perception on the part of P6 represents a stance whereby the deciding factor in making decisions was not for the welfare of the students but an allegiance to other staff members who may be in jeopardy of losing a job. This should not be interpreted as a principal who is not interested in acting in the best interest of students. P6 continues to be concerned with the welfare of students and is anxious to provide the best education possible within the allotted means. What it does indicate is that if a confrontation exists between the rights of students and the welfare of employees P6 might be inclined to side on the welfare of staff. This is an implicit interpretation of the arguments put forward by P6 and is not the result of an explicit statement by P6. The issue is extended here because it raises an important question as to the potential conflict of interest that arises out of the position of school principal.

In addition to perceiving dropout prevention in terms of job preservation P6 also stresses the future monetary advantage as the fundamental reason why a student should stay in school. Similar to the rationale used by P6 to prevent dropouts in order to save jobs, the rather simplistic message of staying in school for the monetary gain is realistic but does not represent the broader implications involved.

I think kids ultimately have to take the responsibility for their education themselves. The old cliché- "the horse to the trough but you can't make them drink - but you can salt his oats and you can run him hard so, the likelihood of drinking is pretty high." I guess dropouts are the same way. We try to bring to the forefront the economic conditions -we try to teach in guidance and what not, that this is what you make if you graduate, this is what if you get a university degree, and this is what you make if you drop out of school this is where you end up - in prison, on welfare or a very low paying job. (P6:5)

According to P6 the administration is forced to perceive dropouts in this fashion due to the grant structure which finances schools based on attendance.

[T]he grants- you keep your kids in school until [the grants are settled] then it is nice if he is out of your class - you don't have to mark papers, there is less work. It is sort of a reverse reward system that they need the kids originally but after October 30, which is our divisional date, it is not the province's, who cares? (P6:5)

The administrative style of P6 deals with issues in terms of simplistic and inanimate confrontations and the template for decisions seems to be that of institutional priority by corralling as many students through the graduation gates as possible. It is a tendency to favor quantity over quality. Students are perceived more as a product to be assembled for the benefit of the institution rather than nurtured for the benefit of the individual or society.

Contrary to most of the other principals interviewed P6 would have no trouble identifying potential dropouts in the school.

I could point them out to you. Some of them just amaze you. They tend to dress differently, they don't look you in the eye, they skulk into school, skulk out, they don't have a good image of themselves. . . . So, I find no trouble with identifying them. You know a winning kid when you meet one. It is not long hair - if it is clean the kid is usually good. I've learned that. And clothes - that is part of it too. . . . You just know the kids. At least I think I have generally a pretty good idea. (P6:8)

P6 suggests that a school administration should not make it easier for students to make the decision to drop out of school. By instituting mechanisms whereby at risk students are identified by means of attendance policies and computer tracking programs it may actually make it easier on the students dropping out of school. And making it easier,

by forcing the drop out decision, is not what is needed because P6 believes students already get too many breaks. During the interview P6 said:

And kids use [the attendance policy] as an excuse to drop out. It is a face saving device. They reach 10, they come for reinstatement and the teacher won't accept them so the system got them. They didn't get themselves but the system got them and I think there is so much of that in our society it is always somebody else's fault and not your own. I believe people have to be responsible for their own behaviour. I think that we let kids off too lightly some times. (P6:4 )

When you are confronted with a problem you either fight, go around it or run away from it. And a dropout is a run away. So, they have problems, and they run away from their problems and one of them is to get out of school. School is a problem. School is telling you that you are no dam good and you are not doing well then it is a problem. (P6:8)

P6 admits to being a "bit overwhelmed" by the diversity and quantity of students in need of some form of assistance. During the interview the researcher received a mixed message regarding the stated need to give students a fresh start when entering school, and in contradiction, that the best indicator of dropping out was past performance. The following statements were expressed by P6.

I hate to say that [any dropouts are inevitable] because I've experienced kids that I think are total failures and if you keep nurturing them along suddenly somebody turns the switch, or they grow up or they mature and suddenly their education can become important. (P6:2)

The biggest indicator that we have found the most reliable, we have kids that are identified at risk in Junior high and they identified about 160 and they sent me about 120 of them but you take a look at them and sometimes they change who they are because it is a different environment so I don't believe in labels. I like people to start off fresh and see what happens and often the best indicator is when they drop a

course and you should get on that kid because he can be out the door before he can blink an eye. (P6:5)

If the "best indicator" for dropping out of school is indeed the at risk identification from "Jr. High" then it is surprising that the school waits until a student drops a course before considering the implications of the previous record. This may result from being "overwhelmed" administratively and in some ways using the veil of allowing a student to change to overshadow the administration's inability to provide enough individual attention and resources to make a difference. As P6 struggles for the school's survival by keeping as many students in school and attracting adults to fill the vacancies, the reasons why students should stay in school and why schools should strive to keep these students in school get lost.

#### Interview with Principal #7

Principal #7 (P7) has been principal of this particular school for only two years but had 10 years of principalship before coming to this school. The school serves grades 7-12 but according to P7 the 205 students of the grade 7-8 are somewhat separate both physically and administratively from the high school component.

One area that P7 returned to throughout the interview was the need for the educational system to reconsider the present model of educating students and to find ways to appeal to a broader range of student needs. According to P7 the present system is not capable of adapting to the present and future needs no matter how much "tinkering" is done. It would be through a new structural approach that P7 would anticipate schools being better able to facilitate students presently at risk of dropping out of school.

[Keeping students in school] is the school system responsibility and I'm not sure it is an individual's. I think an individual school should do all they can to retain

students but when you come right down to the crunch to providing programming that will keep them in school I think there is a more system wide responsibility. . . . We have to bear the responsibility for it somehow. We just don't provide the kinds of alternatives that they might relate to. And society won't accept them if we do. We can provide them with an education that is perhaps more relevant than what they need but if we provide them with a certificate with something other than regular academic program then nobody is going to accept it. And I think that is one of the broad issues that society needs to see that there are other ways of kids learning stuff than sitting here for 12 years every day. (P7:9)

The issue of dropouts is not going to be solved by tinkering with classroom programs. By making the history course better or making the art course painting instead of clay. Those programs will make some difference but individual subject tinkering with will make no difference at all. Tinkering with school program as a whole to allow for more credits of work experience and not be so picky about science would go some way to alleviating the problem but in general I don't think it is a problem that can be solved almost within the system. And the Department of Education requirements are getting tighter and tighter in terms of the very academic stuff that these kids are either rejecting or not coping with now. I don't know if some of the European models of streaming kids into vocational schools etc etc would work or not. They are not socially acceptable in Canada at the moment.

We probably could structure differently. I think the balance becomes if we structure differently to maintain or retain these kids what kind of damage are we doing to the others. We would need to get away from the concentration on the subject matter and develop groupings. We do not have groups of kids with computerized timetables. You go to a math class and you see a whole different group of kids than when you go to your English class. They need an intact group that they can work with all day and every day. . . . It is certainly possible to structure a school that way but the kids on the other end - the kids we now have who are being awarded scholarships to Harvard, Yale, McGill and Queen's would do fine in that system too but they wouldn't get nearly the same high quality academic instruction they are getting now. Because teachers' focus would be on the social skills perhaps, a catch phrase I don't like - but getting along with one another and getting along with people in the work force and getting along with etc etc. because that is what they are really lacking. If you spend a lot of time doing

that you can't teach much physics. So I think there is a need for a different structure and I don't know that any school can do both and I don't know what the reputation would be of a school that set out to do that. Kids would not go there first that is for sure - or their parents would not let them go there first. . . . I don't know if a single public high school can do both. Maybe it can but it would be tough. (P7:8)

[T]he perception that we can take all students and put them through those same hoops is not realistic at all and unless we can provide different programs, and I'm not talking about different learning styles and teaching science differently is not going to make kids any more happy to take science if they do not want to take science, but we need a whole new content areas that are much less abstract and related to the real world and equally respected and that is the toughy. You are never going to get the respect for a credit in work experience that you get for a credit for physics 300 and so I don't think that is ever going to happen. But we certainly need to look at it. (P7:10)

Statistically speaking a certain percentage in not going to fit in no matter what. Maybe that is the reality that there is no system. Just given how the normal curve works there is a group of kids that are not going to be served by any particular structure and we can tinker with it all we like but all we are doing is changing the names on that outside edge of the curves. In some ways we are already doing that with private schools. I think [they] are pulling off the other end that we are not serving. (P7:10)

There is a group at both ends that any system does not serve. And if we tinker long enough with the system that we have now but instead of Johnny Smith it will be Susie Jones. It is just a matter that no single system can possibly handle everything. (P7:10)

I think we need a whole other set of either institutions or sets of goals for kids because schools as they are presently structured were never meant to deal with the entire range of adolescence. So we either change the structures or we change the expectations. (P7:12)

It was clear throughout the interview that while P7 was concerned with the students who drop out of school the solution of coming up with a viable alternative under the present structure was not possible. School dropouts were the by-product of a single traditional approach to learning that does not accept other learning styles.

There was one aspect of schooling that schools failed to take advantage of - most students want to be in school because that is where their friends are. According to P7:

School is really interfering with the important things in their lives like their friends, their part time jobs and whatever else they might be doing - watching television - school gets in the way of that. (P7:4)

[T]he important thing in teenagers' lives is their friends and their peer group. And if we have any hook on them at the moment - we can get them in the building because that is where their friends are. That is where their social interactions are. What we have to work on is getting them into the classroom once we have them in the main hallway which is where they hang out all of the time. So, we do have that hook if we can just somehow use it to get them into classrooms. (P7:4)

Later P7 described how some courses lure students into the building such as art or music. "It is something that brings kids into the building and I really feel that once we get them into the building we can get to work with them" (P7:6). However, just getting them into the building or getting them interested in a particular course will not ensure that students will complete the graduation requirements.

Students were leaving school before graduation a long time before the media picked up the phenomenon and made it into a contemporary topic. The whole issue of dropouts is perceived as being overemphasized according to P7 who states:

I just have the feeling that maybe [school dropouts] is not such an issue. Society is making it an issue that you can't live unless you have your grade 12 diploma. And I don't know that that is necessarily true. (P7:12)

[Dealing with dropouts] is probably not so much of a priority as we like to say it is. I think we spend a lot of time sitting around and saying that we have to keep these kids in school and we have to do this and we have to do that - I'm not sure that we really mean it except in the abstract. I don't think it is the right place for lots of kids to be. (P7:4)

In fact, when initially asked to define the term or concept of dropouts P7's response was:

I really find it difficult to talk about [a dropout rate] because I don't define a dropout until they are 85 or something - and a funeral service has been held or something. You work at the adult education center and you know there is no limit to when people can come back and finish. . . .I look at it as a temporary aberration. (P7:2)

For some students this may be a short term "aberration" while for other students it may be longer. P7 is concerned that the important factor is that opportunities exist for students to return to learning when their personal circumstances are more favourable. Clearly P7's personal experience in the adult education avenue has influenced the perception that once out of school does not mean that a student can not return at another time to complete the requirements.

In response to a question about whether the school kept actual records on dropout information P7 responded:

It is not valuable information. As long as there is one dropout we have a problem. If we have 10 there is the same problem with 10 individual kids so we don't keep it and don't calculate it. (P7:3)

Part of the reason for not calculating this information is that the diversity of factors that possibly contribute to a student being at risk of dropping out of school is so broad that most students could be considered to be at risk for some reason. P7 states that "I think every kid I talked to is probably a potential dropout in some form or another" (P7:7).

The concept of a dropout becomes confusing when all students could potentially be dropouts and that a dropout is never really a dropout because they may eventually return to complete their education. It is out of this perception that P7 considers the idea of a second chance the best alternative of the future.

I guess if it comes to a solution for the dropout problem I would rather spend time and energy giving people that second chance than trying to maintain or retain here a 17 year old who isn't getting any benefit from it and maybe he would get a benefit from it if he came back when he was 19. (P7:12)

While P7 is committed to students staying in school there is a limit to what can be accomplished with the present model of schooling. As a result P7 suggests that students who did not fit into the current system, for whatever reason, are better left out of the system and allowed to return at a later date than to try to be coerced to adapt.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DATA THEMES

#### Overview

The previous section has identified some of the key features of the individual interviews. It serves to provide a flavour of each of the principal's perceptions on the phenomenon of high school dropouts and highlights significant aspects of the complete transcript. The purpose of the following section is to combine the ideas expressed by the principals and to identify recurrent themes and areas of emphasis that respond to the research questions.

For each of the three major research questions the presentation that follows is a general analytic summary of the interview data. The interviews were studied in isolation and in comparison to determine thematic lines. The result is a distillation of the interview comments of seven high school principals about students dropping out of school. The presentation will be structured into three headings that correspond to the research questions: principals' perceptions; the perceived causes of the dropout phenomenon; and, strategies that respond to this phenomenon.

#### Principals' Perceptions

##### Level of Concern

Central to understanding the perceptions of high school principals on high school dropouts is determining whether or not an individual principal is concerned with the phenomenon of dropouts. A principal who is concerned with the phenomenon is likely to respond by taking action that addresses the concern. This may be by means of promoting a

strategy that responds to the perceived concern or simply by being sensitive to the need to address the dropout phenomenon. However, a principal who is not concerned about the phenomenon is not likely to initiate or promote a strategy and will not likely be sensitive to the needs of addressing dropout related issues. The level of concern of each individual principal was the first issue on which principals were compared.

Of the seven principals interviewed, five were concerned with the phenomenon of dropouts as it impacted their school, while two principals were not. Such categorization is helpful but it does not tell the whole story. For each of the five principals who were concerned with the phenomenon of dropouts there was a different base from which that concern initiated. In examining what formed the basis for each principal's concern it was determined that one principal had distinctly responded to the concern and implemented a strategy in the school using mentorship and the introduction of a home room specifically to address the dropout phenomenon. Another principal was relying on an attendance policy to identify potential dropouts but was obviously concerned with the phenomenon and was actively seeking alternative mechanisms to meet the school and individual needs. A third principal was concerned because of the way individual rights were infringing on group rights and by responding to the dropout phenomenon this principal was primarily trying to improve the quality of education for those students whose group rights were suffering. Another principal was concerned about the phenomenon of dropouts due to the impact on teacher jobs that could be lost as a result of declining enrollment. The fifth principal was concerned about dropouts because it symbolized an inequity in that a single system was not able to provide education to the range of students that exists in society. The level of concern in general terms by this principal was less evident at an individual level where he believed that if an individual was not motivated to be in school it might be in his or her best interest to return to school at a later date. The different basis of concern are significant but

do not detract from the overall sensitivity to the issue of dropouts and this perspective may in turn be reflected by the actions of the principal and/or school to affect potential dropouts.

The individual variation of the principals can be attributed, in part, to the different school contexts. An example of influential school context is the different parental influence described by P3 where parents are perceived as supportive and contribute to students staying in school, and P5 where parents are perceived as the major contributing factor in students dropping out of school. In addition, many of the principals expressed secondary and tertiary concerns about the dropout phenomenon that further extended the diversity of personal opinions. These principals indicated that they were concerned about dropouts in their schools but the rationale for this concern exposed a diversity of reasons which will be explored further later in this section.

Two principals did not appear to be concerned about the dropout phenomenon in their schools. Again this perception was based on different situations and personal experience. One of the principals not concerned about dropouts was in a school that, he said, had a two percent dropout rate. The principal's reaction to this was that the school was just "lucky" to be in a community where dropouts had not yet become a problem. While not concerned with this particular school, the principal did indicate concern in the wider educational jurisdiction. The second principal showed a lack of concern over the phenomenon of dropouts in part because other issues in the school were of greater importance. Secondarily this principal believed that to maintain quality in the educational system will inevitably result in a certain number of students who fail to succeed in the system as it exists. Principals who were not concerned with the phenomenon of high school dropouts were still concerned with providing a quality education and catering to as wide a range of student needs as possible. The lack of concern on the part of these principals seemed to be as a result of defining the situation in terms of a group of students

identified as dropouts who need assistance or in terms of trying to provide as high a quality an education to as wide a variety of student needs as possible under the existing resource limitations.

The level of concern expressed by each principal over the dropout phenomenon offers a general insight into the perceptions of the principals. Likewise, the rationale underlying the principals' different concerns provided a basis from which the principals' perceptions could be compared for this study.

There were several recurrent themes that emerged through out most or all of the principal interviews. These themes emerged from the answers, opinions, musings or reciprocal questions raised by the principals during the interview process. These have been categorized into four themes: the **definition** of dropouts; how **schools** need to change to better meet the needs of students; some general perceptions about **students**; and comments about schools' place in **society**. Each of these themes will be explored separately by using excerpts from the interview dialogues to aid in capsulating the principals' perceptions.

### Dropout Definition

To compare the perceptions of high school principals on dropouts it was important to determine whether the concept of a school dropout was the same for different principals. In point of fact that there was a great diversity in how principals defined a dropout. Without an explicit or coherent definition from which to begin, comparisons become erroneous. What was unanimous, however, was the problem that principals expressed in attempting to define or conceptualize the term dropout. In general terms principals had no difficulty with the term but the ambiguity emerged as principals attempted to articulate how dropout numbers were derived. The idiosyncrasies of these perceptions potentially lead to

misinterpretation of data and unnecessary confusion about the phenomenon. For this reason the first section of this data presentation will focus on how principals defined a dropout and how they expressed their insecurity with this perception.

The conceptual framework of how a dropout was defined extended between two interpretations. One model measured the difference between the number of students who initially enter the school system at approximately age six and the number who eventually graduate 12 or 13 years later. In this model the difference in these two numbers is considered the dropout rate. The alternative model used was the difference between the number of students who begin a specific term and those who complete it. Other versions represented variations on these two models.

The potential confusion arising from the use of either model is that a statement consisting of "The dropout rate is 30%" could mean that since a cohort entered the school system 30% have left before graduation. This definition would suggest a graduation rate of 700 students from a original class of 1,000 students. Alternatively, it could mean that 30% of the students who started the term have not remained in school. This would account for the loss of 300 students out of 1,000 in a single year or semester. The second model does not take into account the compounded nature that such a measurement would have. For example, over the duration of a three year high school period, a starting student population of 1,000 students that experienced a 30% dropout rate for each of three years would have only 343 graduates (or 657 students dropped out). Likewise, a dropout rate of 11% for each of three years results in nearly the same accumulative number of dropouts as a 30% rate over the same period of three years. There was a tendency for principals to only look at the second model which does not represent the accumulative nature of dropouts over a number of years. Most of the principals interviewed considered the dropout rate as the

number of students who have left school during a given semester. Some of the definitions representing the second model were:

Those are students who have not completed requirements for a diploma. They did not finish off the year or semester in which they were enrolled and they were not potential graduating students. (P3:2)

I don't know how to define a dropout. If we look at who come in in September and who sticks it out for the whole year I'd say that we probably have 50 or 60 who don't see it through. But there are shades of success too. Plus we have a semestered system so we get a whole lot of people in September and 50 or 60 drop out before the end of January. Many of them come back in February or new ones come and 50 or 60 drop out before the end of June. Sometimes it is the same ones. Often it is the same ones. But in addition to that, people drop out of or are eliminated by us from courses because if you don't attend well after a certain time you don't get credit for the course so we drop them out of courses. There are quite a few who stick to school who don't have a whole program for the whole semester. So, I don't know what you call a dropout. (P4:1)

I would probably be using it in terms of the kid who was here in February and is not here any longer. That is not really fair because many of them will be back here on September 1st. On that definition we probably lose each semester about 20% maybe. I know that is a low estimate for over all but I do not really know what over all is. (P7:2)

In contrast, P5 describes an interpretation using the first model whereby dropouts are perceived over a much larger time frame. As P5 indicates:

Any kid who leaves the high school setting before graduation is technically a dropout. Any kid who has not got to the end of the road - for whatever reason. (P5:2)

Many of the principals qualified their definition of a dropout suggesting that they were not comfortable with their own conceptual definition.

Students who stop being enrolled at the school is generally the term that I will use for dropout and yet in saying that I have to tell you that there are many students [who] drop out for a semester or two or even three semesters and eventually come back. We have one young man who dropped out of here four times but came with his parents in August and indicated an interest in trying a fifth time and in fact he will be graduating in June this year. So there are some success stories. But the definition is very vague and I think by its very nature has to be vague. (P1:1)

While many principals expressed concern about the dropout phenomenon, P6 was the only principal who kept a record of the school's dropout rate. This was an interesting finding and represented an inconsistency with the level of concern expressed by most principals. The anomaly of P6's record keeping prompted further inquiry into P6's perception of a dropout definition. A school that was keeping track of the dropout rate should be in a position to accurately define what it was that the school is tracking. In response to the initial question about dropouts P6 stated:

Yes, it is running at about 18-20 %. We are in the last semester of a six semester or three year profile study. Basically it looks like it will be about 18-20% as far as our school is concerned. It is not particularly good but it is certainly not the 30% that people throw around rather fast and loose. (P6:1)

From these remarks it is not clear whether P6 is using the first or the second model to derive the dropout rate. This response was typical of the ambiguity with which principals talked about dropout rates. The researcher asked for clarification on what factors the dropout rate was based on. In answering P6 depicts some of the confusion and inconsistency expressed by many principals in defining what a dropout rate is. Some of these remarks were:

It is [based] on the number of kids that drop out each semester and if they return of course they are not considered a dropout. What we are doing is looking at

everyone who starts a semester and then drops out. And we have people who drop out maybe two or three times in a sense that they keep coming back. But as soon as they graduate they are no longer considered a dropout. (P6:1)

I think it depends of course on what you measure as a dropout. That is crucial. We are fairly stringent in that a person must be attending school and as soon as they leave school if it is not to transfer to another division or another school and they are not doing anything or going to school - even if they go to work that is a dropout. So, I guess the definition is the important one. I think the toughest definition you can have is any dropout who starts in say grade 10 and doesn't graduate in grade 12. I find that not a fair statistic because I think kids learn at a different rate and a lot of kids that are at risk don't do well in school and consequently I would see that I have a lot of kids who complete their education in four or even five years. They have stops and starts and they drop courses and you have to coax them along and give them the opportunity. (P6:2)

With the computers you can keep a better track of the students. We have a tremendous turnover in this school so it makes it very difficult and complex. Now we tend to track our dropouts just for our division so when we have outside students who come in we don't consider them. We tend to just stick to the students in our division - that we have our own responsibility. (P6:1)

This adds another interpretation to the definition if the dropout rate does not encompass the entire school but is only representative of "our divisional students" and not the "outside" students. Many other schools do not count transfers from a school as dropouts and so these students' success or failure rate may not be represented in any documentation and in essence "fall through the cracks" of the dropout calculation. Whether these students would sway the dropout rate one way or another is not within the speculation of this study. However, it is safe to say that the exclusion of these students from the calculation would add to the ambiguity of the results. P6 commented on another erroneous component of the dropout definition:

It might be a high dropout rate but there are a lot of students who come back and do get their grade 12 and that is not factored into the studies such as this [referring to a divisional study on the desk]. Anybody who has come back who dropped out three years ago and comes back next year won't be in this study. He or she will be listed as a dropout and yet they have come back and taken their grade 12 of equivalence. So you have to define what you mean by a dropout. And I'm telling you no one agrees on that. (P6:2)

Finally, the researcher asked specifically what P6 considered as a dropout. He replied:

Well, [a dropout] is somebody who is tuned off as far as education is concerned and not completing and not graduating from grade 12. I tend to look at it being within a reasonable period of time and I would certainly say that within 5 years is reasonable. (P6:2)

This response is closer to what would be expected from a model one interpretation and is in contrast to what had been said earlier. The example of a single principal oscillating between two interpretations demonstrates the ambiguity with which the term dropout is currently used. Providing a five year grace period or window in which to graduate introduces yet another dilution of the dropout definition as a coherent and useful concept.

Of interest to the principals was the mystery behind the national dropout rate of 30%. While most principals cited this statistic as a comparative figure with reference to their own situation, there was little understanding of exactly what this number represented or how it was derived. Similarly, principals who indicated that their dropout situation was not like the 30% national figure because their statistics only showed 20% a year failed to consider what the accumulative dropout rate might be over a series of years.

Some of the principals expressed their curiosity about the origin, and validity, of this national figure.

You read certain statistics that 30% of students who start don't finish on schedule. That doesn't mean that they don't get a high school diploma. That is a bit of a political figure I'm sure. What is an actual figure I wish that I knew. (P2:1)

When the news media use the term and say that 30% drop out it seems to me the only way that can be true is if they are talking about all those who start kindergarten and compare that with those who stick with it until they finish high school. Maybe that is a third. But it certainly is not a third that drop out of high school every year. It is a very tiny percentage actually. Certainly in this school and I think the same is true for (others down the road). But then a lot of people register for high school with no intention of coming. That is the other thing so will we call them dropouts? We get some guys who are under court order to attend school or to register to school. Some of them come to school and register but they never intended to come to school. They get a paper signed. Some people have as a condition of social assistance that they attend school so that they register, get a timetable, get a paper signed and it does them for a couple of months. Those people have dropped out before they come. (P4:2)

When you read in the paper that 30% of high school students drop out I don't know quite what they mean by that. Does that mean that 30% of those who enter kindergarten don't finish high school? (P4:1)

[Our dropout rate] certainly is not the national average. You hear fantastic figures like 30% and I'm not really sure where they are coming from. You know I think I could safely say that it is not higher than 10% in this school. It might be surprising. I don't know that that means that we are doing anything particularly right. I have often wondered where those figures come from to begin with. (P5:1)

P5 later continues with:

If we lost 300 kids or even 100 kids in a year I would think that we had a bigger problem than we do right now. If you lost 300/1000 I think that would be criminal.

- and that is what a 30% rate sounds like to me if that is what they are quoting. But we don't see that. I don't know any high school that sees 300/1000. I can't imagine that. (P4:8)

These examples illustrate how the principals are confused by the national 30% dropout rate that is presented in the media, and elsewhere. Underlying many of these comments was a skepticism about the authenticity of the figures. This seemed to be based on two notions. First, that such numbers were possibly manipulated for dramatic affect by such means as using total cohort attrition over 12 years of schooling or possibly counting the same student twice if they drop out of in sequential terms. Second, that it was not comprehensible for schools to have a annual dropout rate of 30% except in rare circumstances such as core areas in very large cities. Because a 30% dropout rate was not considered plausible in their experience of a suburban high school, there was little indication that principals perceived such a dropout rate to be realistic, and, therefore discounted the 30% national reality.

In addition to the uncertainty over what the meaning of the terms dropout and dropout rate represented, the principal's understanding of how the rate could be manipulated either intentionally or unintentionally further diminished the dropout rate as a useful guideline. As P7 described:

It is easy to tinker with the dropout rate and it depends just when we decide to take them off the register. . . . So, I wish somebody would define exactly what is meant and so that we are all talking the same language. (P7:12)

The problem with defining the dropout rate and determining how to use this rate spanned all of the principals. Other concerns related to problems with specific exceptions and special circumstances that principals did not understand how to factor in to the rate. Some of the issues mentioned were what to do with students who register for school but

never show up in September; what to do about adult students who come back for upgrading; and, what to do about the student who leaves one semester and returns the next. These are the type of issues that will have to be resolved before principals begin to use the terms consistently. The inconsistency of usage is not due to insurmountable obstacles but rather the lack of an official definition. It is noteworthy, however, that no principal had difficulty with talking at length about various issues that surround the dropout phenomenon. So, the dropout rate as a generic term to describe the inability of a school system to meet the needs of all students was easily accepted and expounded upon. Principals used the term freely in conjunction with school, societal, home and individual student incongruity with the traditional school standards and expectations. In order for principals to translate a school specific concern about dropouts to a wider and possibly more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon it will be necessary to clarify the dropout definition. Only then will the broad range of influential factors be cohesively addressed and possibly better understood.

### School

A theme running through the majority of interviews pertained to how schools must change to meet the changing demands of society. Principals generally perceived that schools must respond to the growing diversity in the students by offering the courses and programs that meet these changing needs. Some of these sentiments were expressed in the following statements:

Schools haven't changed in a 100 years or 80 years. We still have a whole bunch of one room school houses and we haven't thrown them open and we haven't [done] the kinds of things that other segments of society have done and so on. We leave that to industry and business out there and we don't do it ourselves. Certainly our traditional western civilization view of what a traditional education is in k-12 is being questioned. And probably rightfully so. (P1:11)

When I deal with students I sometimes think that the system is such that we don't do a lot to adjust to the students' personal and social needs or emotional needs when they are going through a crisis. Again, that is because of the nature of how schools operate and in our particular case it would be because of the nature of the community expectations. (P3: 2)

Schools have got to fit better into the context. They have got to relate better into the family, they have got to be seen as a service to families, as a supporter of families, as being there as a resource to families, one of many which includes child and family services, the health people and the other areas that I mentioned earlier in that they form part of the set of structures that are a support to a student and his family. I think we must stop looking upon it as Johnny, you have a problem and the problem is dropout. That is not looking at a problem in context. Taking a look at the symptoms, and dealing with that - I just don't think that is right. We have got to become much more holistic in our approach to the kids. Make [dealing with the problem in context] my mandate and I think that maybe we can begin to make a dent in the problem. Add that to my mandate of 18,000 other things that I have to do and I suggest that that will not happen. (P1:12)

The principals recognize the need to change but are overwhelmed by the task of shouldering the responsibility for a student's failure due to factors that extend beyond a school's expected jurisdiction. This represents a key point made by the principals during the interview process. Principals were perplexed by the conundrum of meeting the often opposing expectations of increased student quality, budget restrictions, expanded curricular expectations and a reduced dropout rate. In addition was the expectation for the school to be a catch-all for all of society's ills that pertain to youth. Many of the influential factors involved were not within a school's capacity to deal with such as family influence, part-time jobs or television. While many principals struggled against using these external forces as a scapegoat for a school's inadequacies they remained an impediment to meeting societal expectations. Attempting to balance the needs or demands of various interest groups caused principals to be troubled about the consequences of meeting the demands of one group at the expense of another. While some principals would prefer to shed some of the

responsibility for dealing with students who fail to succeed in the school system most recognize that the school system, as it presently exists, must still continue its social obligation. P7 commented:

I really think that students really need to take more responsibility for themselves. . . . We never make them actually sit down and make the choice. They are not making any conscious decision to drop out. I would find it easier to deal with a student who came in and said I hate this place and school means nothing to me and I'm leaving, than the ones that simply say I'd really like to be here but. . . . So, I would like to place the responsibility on kids and parents but I don't think they understand the consequences of the decision and I don't think they understand that a decision is being made by default. It is not a conscious decision. So, no, we have to bare the responsibility for it somehow. (P7:9)

One principal expressed the responsibility of meeting the needs of all young people at a personal level and said:

I think for the adults in the world we carry the responsibility for the condition of the young. So that we don't want to blame the young people for the condition of the world and society today. We are in charge. We have allowed them to do the things that they do. So if they misbehave I think we ought to take the major share in that responsibility. If we got our act together as adults who are responsible for operating whatever is operating in society and got together I think they would be well served. Today it is very difficult. (P2: 10)

Principals generally understood the expectations on the part of society but were not clear how schools could or should achieve such a goal. High school dropouts were perceived as the symbol of how all expectations were not being met by schools. When external forces cease to be a viable scapegoat for schools, the dropouts are possibly a consequence of a shifting priority to other competing expectations within schools. Efforts to combat students dropping out from within the school system have been of limited benefit and this in turn has led to frustration on the part of principals. If there was a simplistic

solution to the problem it might be easier to allocate funding or resources to address dropouts. It is the complexity and the elusive nature of the phenomenon that contribute to haunting principals. P1 described an administrator's ability to never give up on at risk students as "a tribute to the resilience of the human spirit" (P1:7). Many principals spoke of the frustrations in constantly dealing with school dropouts or students at risk of dropping out. Some of these comments were:

It is hard to use that term successful when it is such a frustration dealing with [students dropping out]. If success is measured by the number of kids you keep in school, then yes. But, boy do you ever pay a price for that. Kids look upon you in raising problems of attendance with them as hassling them. Let's face it. It is very difficult to go through the course of a day and see 15 youngsters regarding attendance problems and still maintain a positive, up beat, warm kind of a personality. At some point you get frustrated with it. When you are seeing a student for the third month in a row, who has failed to live up to the commitment that he has given to you, then you have to start saying to that youngster "I'm sorry but I'm not prepared to go to the wall for you any more". "You are making your own decisions here" and it can get very deflating in those situations. While it may be somewhat successful, although not outstandingly successful, there is high price. (P1:9)

I would say that the lower 15% of your students embody or occupy the bulk of our attention and sometimes we feel badly about that too. The number of cases that I deal with and particularly the VP deals with that come from that 15%, the troubled kids who are not doing very well academically and are from broken homes, abusive homes, we are simply spending the bulk of our time with these kids. Whether we articulate it in terms of trying to prevent dropouts or whether we articulate it in terms of trying to get our school trying to run a little bit more smoothly for the top 85% of the kids who are somewhat distracted by the antics of the lower 15%. (P5:3)

I guess if I'm honest I can imagine that there will always be [dropouts]. It will be very hard to reduce the number of dropouts over a year from what we have. I think that we could do better, and should do better, but you hit a kind of number where I

suspect it would be unrealistic to expect that you are going to do very much better. Even with an infusion of a lot of resources. I think there are diminishing returns after a while. (P4:8)

I think by now you become a little realistic that there is [only] so much you can do and because you are getting the product of the dysfunctional home and the poor parenting that there is only so much you can do with certain numbers of kids. But you want to do is to make sure that kids from marginally dysfunctional homes and marginally poor parenting can be convinced by the strategies we have in place to change their attendance patterns and to work a little harder so that they don't become dropouts. . . . Lord, we could just put in so much time and so many resources with that group of kids already that just the thought that I might spend more of my time on it is almost repugnant. (P5:12)

In order to help deal with students at risk of dropping out, the principals indicated that they rely heavily on teachers. This in part was in recognition of the front lines effort put in by teachers and also some wishful thinking that in that teacher-student interaction might be a partial solution to some of the problems. Principals recognized that teachers operate in a variety of capacities to provide services to students in need of both academic and nonacademic services.

Teachers on the whole are caring, supportive people and they want kids to succeed and I guess that is the key and you work on it. You get the right teachers and most of your dropouts will be solved. (P6:4)

Principals also realize that teachers have constraints on their time that diminish the ability to provide the extra attention that a single student might require due to the demands of the majority of students. According to P6:

I think a school has to try to accommodate everybody. The art of teaching is to challenge everyone and frustrate none. If you can do that you can walk on water. It is practically impossible, you are asking too much of us. (P6:3)

This comment represents a sense of futility that was apparent in many of the interviews. Principals, while attempting to keep a brave face and hiding behind such rhetorical phrases as "you can lead a horse to water but you can't make them drink" often expressed nonverbally that, despite their best efforts, there are students in the school system who are not going to succeed.

I don't think the problem is going to get any less severe in the immediate future. Yes the schools like ours will have to look very seriously at it but I don't think the school alone will solve that problem. It will have to be a combination. (P3:14)

Within a school system there is no one person who can bear that burden. But you are really working up hill in some cases because of everything else they are experiencing. I don't think that it is possible to counter act completely a home environment. And it is very difficult to counteract ten years of lack of success. . . . I think everybody along the way, from elementary teachers much sooner than high school teachers have been trying to make school appealing and welcoming and so on to kids and it is just very difficult. (P4:6)

Other comments made by principals indicated the close link between what is happening in society and the implications for schools. P5 as an example was certainly pessimistic that any change would occur in schools before there was a change in societal values. This is explored more completely in the section on society.

School programming was touted as both part of the problem and part of the solution. It was considered part of the problem because of the additional resources required to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. In times of fiscal restraint new programming is often at the expense of existing programs. It was part of the solution because offering programming that was perceived as being more relevant to the students would, in turn, entice students who had been previously bored to stay in school. P6 and P3 spoke about the need for program relevancy:

He has never been successful for 9 years and he has come here and there are some amazing turn arounds because kids learn best by hands on and that is the vocational component. They also see meaning in their learning when they are stripping a car and putting it back together again and working on their own car. This gives meaning to learning so it is relevant. I think that is one of the key factors in dropouts. With the element there is a lot of boredom in some kids and that is because they see it as totally irrelevant. They see no immediate gains and therefore not important. There are two sides of the question. The ones that are successful and the ones that are bored. I think a school has to try to accommodate everybody. (P6:3)

We will have to look at very very carefully as to how relevant is the programming to the students. Not how relevant is it to me and how relevant may society consider it to be but we may have to reexamine how relevant some of the programming is that we request students. Some of the hoops that they have to jump through. After 30 years for some of us that is very difficult to say that this isn't important. (P3:14)

P4 mentions that no amount of programming would meet the needs of all students and suggested introducing more programming that makes students "feel more comfortable":

I think this school and most other high schools are trying to get to be more friendly to and more receptive to and have more programs for people from a variety of backgrounds and motivations etc. But every time you invent one you discover it only helps a particular slice that the success rate is not so wonderful. I know we do not have it but daycares for example for teenage mothers who want to keep their babies so that allows them to stay in school. We don't have it but that is the kind of extreme to which some schools are going. I don't know how well that works. . . . We are trying to look at a series of program changes that could make them feel more comfortable and maybe get them to stay longer. (P4:2)

P6 also introduced a different concept for school programming. In an extension to relevancy P6 suggested the need for programs to meet the needs of the 75% of students not going to university and the contribution of vocational education.

More alternative programs. I think we have to be flexible. The more flexible you are the better. I think where our whole education system is wrong is that it is designed for the 25 % who go to university. . . . Really you should be looking at the 75% who are going to go out and work and make them competitive and trainable so that they can retrain. The world has changed. You are not going to have the same job. . . . But, this whole idea of just looking after the 25% is just absolute nonsense in our society. And of course they put a stigma on my school, a vocational, [because] it is for the less abled which is absolute nonsense. The best combination you can have is an academic vocational. Have a little practical along with the theory. There is nothing like building a canoe before you design one. (P6:8)

Not all principals thought that program variety was an appropriate solution. P7 spoke at length about how "tinkering" with the present programs was not the proper way to address the present dropout phenomenon.

The issue of dropouts is not going to be solved by tinkering with classroom programs. (P7:9)

By making the history course better or making the art course painting instead of clay. Those programs will make some difference but individual subject tinkering will make no difference at all. Tinkering with school program as a whole to allow for more credits of work experience and not be so picky about science would go some way to alleviating the problem but in general I don't think it is a problem that can be solved almost within the system. And the Department of Education requirements are getting tighter and tighter in terms of the very academic stuff that these kids are either rejecting or not coping with now. I don't know if some of the European models of streaming kids into vocational schools etc etc would work or not. They are not socially acceptable in Canada at the moment. (P7:9)

I really see the current stuff that is going on about changing credit systems from grade 10 to grade 9 and this many credits that are compulsory and so on is simply taking us back to a 1950's kind of model which worked very well at that time for about 60% of the population and will continue to work for about 60% of the

population and we will now be talking about 40% or 35% or whatever the number is of dropouts. It is really naive of people somewhere to think that all kids can - should -will take these same 18 credits and do them successfully and if we just teach better they will do better that is very naive. These questions need to be seriously addressed by a much higher level than a local school and if the people who are making the decisions are looking back longingly at how things were in 1950 or 1960 totally forgetting that at that time the dropout rate was extremely high but it was okay to drop out of school because you could get a job and you did very well and you probably got richer than we did. But the perception that we can take all students and put them through those same hoops is not realistic at all, and unless we can provide different programs, and I'm not talking about different learning styles and teaching science differently is not going to make kids any more happy to take science if they do not want to take science, but we need a whole new content areas that are much less abstract and related to the real world and equally respected and that is the toughy - You are never going to get the respect for a credit in work experience that you get for a credit for physics 300 and so I don't think that is ever going to happen. But we certainly need to look at it. Maybe we don't have places in the world who don't have math and science and History and English and whatever else the school program is providing. (P7:10)

Program manipulation has a potential benefit for the school in making a visible change that attempts to recognize the school's population diversity. Whether or not the programs succeed in reducing student dropouts, it provides a perception that the school is responding to the needs of these students. When clear cut solutions are not available there may be a tendency on the part of principals to do something even if such program manipulation does not make significant reduction in dropouts.

An alternative programming strategy many principals addressed was a scenario where students drop out of school and then return to school at a later date. This was generally perceived to be an option that warranted further consideration. This topic will be dealt with further under "strategies" but an example of some of the comments made by

principals follows because it also pertains to gaining insight into the principals' perceptions.

I think as an administrator of a school we have to keep paying attention to the way that we can allow kids to drop back in. . . . [But] those 'drop back in' opportunities are very expensive for the tax payer. (P5:13)

I guess if it comes to a solution for the dropout problem I would rather spend time and energy giving people that second chance than trying to maintain or retain here a 17 year old who isn't getting any benefit from it and maybe he would get a benefit from it if he came back when he was 19. (P7:12)

Principals' general perceptions about schools touched on a number of different areas including the need for schools to meet the changing demands of society, the frustration felt on the part of principals in shouldering society's expectations, the vital role teachers play in dealing with at risk students, the manipulation of programming options to increase relevancy and the idea of students "returning to learning" at a more appropriate time. These comments have touched on some of the themes expressed by the principals regarding school issues with implications for dealing with students who drop out. Many of these issues are examined further in relation to the headings of causes and strategies.

### Students

Principals commented at length regarding the personal characteristics that contributed to students dropping out of school. The specific causes will be handled in the next section of this data review but many comments made during the interview process raised more general issues that will be commented on here.

I often [think back] when we rant and rave about all of the problems that we have, and again these are stats that we haven't kept in any organized fashion. But every now and then when I sit back, or walk down the hall and it will strike me that that

individual was in the office almost 100% of the time last year. There are a lot that come through it. The majority come through it. (P3:7)

There are a lot of others whose problems are short term and it may last for a month, two months, half a year, sometimes a year. Even the ones who drop out in a given year the vast majority come back the following fall and they worked out. (P3: 7)

These comments represent a cautionary note on the part of principals to avoid overreacting just because some students were having difficulty at school. Such perceptions serve as a balance that recognizes the inconsistency inherent in adolescent maturation. Students challenging the prescribed path or temporarily aberration from traditional expectations should be perceived as within the normal scope of development. The ability to differentiate between normal development and significant derivations that identify at risk students is not very well understood but there is a need to not over react with all students who step off the straight and narrow.

P4 suggests that most students want to be in school:

The great majority never even consider dropping out. . . . I would say that 95% of kids think they belong in school and that it is sort of like a job they go to and they have to do what is asked of them basically or come close to doing what is asked of them and a terrible punishment for most of them would be being suspended for example. (P4:6)

As mentioned earlier, but warrants repeating, P1 had specific ideas of the extent to which a school could be expected to assist a student resisting help and in turn how a student needed to see education in perspective in order to appreciate its merits.

And therein lies the problem for the inevitable dropouts. If we had an unlimited budget and if my counsellors could meet with these kids on a daily basis and if and if and if . . . we might have a fighting chance. But many of these students require significant inputs and many of them require the passage of time. They have to be

able to put school in perspective to the point where they can say "hey, you know I dropped out, I worked now for six months, I see how school relates better to what I want to do with my future now I want to go back". It is almost like they have to fall to a level which makes them feel uncomfortable [so] that they recognize that education becomes a part of the solution in their lives instead of part of the problem in their lives. (P1: 3)

Some principals referred to the challenge of changing a tradition of failure that some students have experienced.

Until the school can be seen as a place of support and acceptance we will continue to lose those kids who do poorly. It almost becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. I can't make it here so I have to leave here. (P1:13)

For a lot of these guys they have had so little success in school and school is definitely a minor part of their lives. [Dropping out] is not a great loss, sometimes it is a liberation. (P4:10)

I don't think that it is possible to counter act completely a home environment. And it is very difficult to counteract 10 years of lack of success. . . . I think everybody along the way, from elementary teachers much sooner than high school teachers have been trying to make school appealing and welcoming and so on to kids and it is just very difficult. (P4:6)

A few principals spoke specifically about student academic ability indicating that a lack of ability was rarely the primary contributing factor for dropping out. One of the comments was:

If you asked teachers about the potential and could the student be successful - in the vast majority of cases the potential is there, it is not that the student couldn't be successful in the classes. (P2:7)

In contrast, many principals still identified poor academic performance as one of many indicators of dropping out. As P4 described:

By the way, we get very few dropouts who are potentially high achievers. We don't get very many of the high fliers who are bored. Most of our dropouts are low achievers who have a long history of poor achievement and not very good success at school - lots of social problems related to them. Sometimes learning problems but more often social problems or social problems compounded by learning problems. But not very many sharp, intelligent students who just sort of leave because they are not stimulated. (P4:2)

Most interviews raised the issue of individual student responsibility as being a lost element in the dropout equation. Student responsibility was a multi-faceted theme but some individual comments are worthy of highlighting. As described more completely in the summary of P3, this principal identified the lack of student responsibility and suggested that many students have learned to "play the game" with resolutions to problems coming too easily to some students and as a result students do not take on any of the responsibility for education. As P3 suggested: "See, education because it is so readily available is not valued in the same way it is in some other parts of the world. . . . We do relatively little to educate kids about the importance and meaning and value of an education. (P3:12)

In concordance with the need for more student responsibility P6 advised:

I think kids ultimately have to take the responsibility for their education themselves. The old cliché - "the horse to the trough but you can't make them drink - but you can salt his oats and you can run him hard" so, the likelihood of drinking is pretty high. I guess dropouts are the same way- we try to bring to the forefront the economic conditions we try to teach in guidance and what not, that this is what you make if you graduate, this is what if you get a university degree, and this is what you make if you drop out of school this is where you end up in prison, on welfare or a very low paying job. (P6:4)

And kids use [the attendance policy] as an excuse to drop out. It is a face saving device. They reach 10, they come for reinstatement and the teacher won't accept them so the system got them. They didn't get themselves but the system got them and I think there is so much of that in our society it is always somebody else's fault and not your own. I believe people have to be responsible for their own behaviour. I think that we let kids off too lightly some times. (P6:4)

To repeat one of P7's remarks:

I really think that students really need to take more responsibility for themselves. . . . We never make them actually sit down and make the choice. They are not making any conscious decision to drop out. I would find it easier to deal with a student who came in and said I hate this place and school means nothing to me and I'm leaving than the ones that simply say I'd really like to be here but . . . So, I would like to place the responsibility on kids and parents but I don't think they understand the consequences of the decision and I don't think they understand that a decision is being made by default. It is not a conscious decision. (P7:9)

The onus of responsibility for a student to learn often pivots on an individual's motivation. Principals seem reluctant to fully accept the responsibility for insuring an individual's education and expect students to share in that responsibility. However, one principal encapsulated the perception that most students do not have a clear idea of the level of commitment required to come to school and succeed.

[A] lot of them want to see a kind of social attachment to the school. But they don't really want to be in the learning environment of the school. . . . A good number of those students who dropped out in the first semester came back and an awful lot of them left again within a week. I think that there is a kind of romantic notion that people have that this time they are really going to do well in school. But they don't have the kind of commitment that they need to have. Also once they have been out there is a very low success rate if they come back. Unless they wait a few years and come back as adults who have a different experience. (P4:5)

If you have a 17 year old who drops out and has been a poor attender and tries again and drops out, he is not likely to be successful in the third try. . . . So we end up seeing them trying to determine whether they have any real desire or not and they will swear that they want to be in school and we would always give them the benefit of the doubt to give them another try but the success rate there is very low. Once they have left it is very hard. (P4:6)

The degree to which students ought to be responsible for their own education is contentious. In a perfect world perhaps all students would be highly motivated but in reality principals are left to resolve the societal expectations and create ways to entice these students to stay in school. The inability on the part of principals to rectify the lack of responsibility on the part of students, has added to the frustration experienced in finding solutions to the dropout phenomenon.

Of all of the contributing factors to dropouts, the student's home environment conjured up the most passionate remarks. Principals were clearly exasperated with trying to overcome the influence of the home environment.

The greatest determinant for success for a kid is parent involvement in education. How important is education to the parent. (P6:6)

And the family, I don't know where it is at but - man - it is pathetic. Yet, as soon as anybody tries to do anything for the families they attack them. I think the breakdown of the family has really led to a lot of the problems that we have. It inevitably increases the dropout rate. (P6:3)

Principals recognized the influence of the home environment but were unable to compensate for the effects of a negative influence on students at risk of dropping out of school. Family as a contributing factor to student dropouts will be examined in further detail in the section that examines causes of student dropouts.

The general perceptions about students recognized the variation in students and that some students had personal characteristics that impeded progress at school. The capacity to do the work was not an issue but often the tradition of failure thwarted efforts to salvage at risk students. Two issues that dominated principals' perceptions were the level of responsibility that should be expected on the part of students and the inability of schools to compensate for any negative influence of the home.

### Society

A final theme that was expressed by the principals involved the role of society in dealing with students at risk of dropping out. The perceptions appeared to stem from a fundamental incongruity with school's inability to meet the expectations of society. In general principals suggested that it may be unrealistic for schools to be all things to all people. While not arguing the merit of some of these expectations, there was the perception that to accomplish so many objectives requires other agencies to be part of the solution. Some of the comments made were:

The school is supposed to do all those things that a family and the other accepted institutions that used to be there did and no longer is the case. The only place left in society where you have all of the students is the school system. So you say what can schools do for dropouts? Schools will do for dropouts what society demands they do. Right now, we have too many dropouts across the country roaming the streets and that is becoming a problem so society says public education must do something to address this problem. And maybe that isn't wrong. We ask public health to address the health problems of people so I guess public education should address the dropout rates. But it is going to require more than just people in the school system to resolve that. (P3:8)

I'm pessimistic. I don't know, perhaps if we went into a very much more serious economic decline it might change society's values. Maybe there is some sort of cataclysm in society - I'd hate to think of that but it might force change on society's values. I suppose if you look back historically you can see an ebb and flow of

society as it becomes wealthier and fatter and the decline of the roman empire as it became more and more riddled with immorality. That ultimately it collapses all together and people have to regather their values. Maybe, but I can't even think in those terms. I can't think of Canadian society as ever getting that desperately low level. So, given that Canadian society is going to continue for the next 50 years as it basically has for the last 50 years I'm not optimistic. So, more and more of our students may drop out . . . we are going to have the well parented kid, the well motivated kid in school but are we ever going to deal with this lower 10 -20 - 30% of kids I don't think so. I really don't think so. That is going to be here forever. (P5:11)

Hey, you can not make a hospital out of this place - it is tough enough to teach kids to learn let alone trying to deal with all of the social problems of society which they pour on to us. And we are the only institution left. (P6:2)

We tend to cycle and the people who are having the kids aren't the ones - the successful people. So, it is a society problem too. Everyone should be involved, including business and central office, and not just the schools and not just the teachers. (P6:6)

[Society is] giving two messages: decrease the number of dropouts and increase quality of graduates. (P1:2)

What is age appropriate is really not an issue with society today. We tend to be ageless in one sense and that I think is hurting young people. There is a period when they should be allowed to be young - somewhat innocent and irresponsible. (P2: 10)

Principals recognized their role as a social agency but are overwhelmed by the perceived unrealistic expectations. However, they are not raising a white flag of surrender but instead reaching out to ask for other private and public institutions to share in the responsibility of nurturing young people that extends beyond educational capacities.

## Conclusion

This section on the general perceptions included some of the more salient perceptions expressed by the principals during the interviews. Five themes were identified, and discussed, including the level of concern of principals about the dropout phenomenon, confusion over the definition of a dropout, and perceptions involving schools, students and society. The interview data identified five principals who were concerned about the dropout phenomenon and two who were not. What was significant was the variation in rationale used to articulate each principal's perceptions. Two distinct models of defining dropouts were identified with many principals espousing to conflicting interpretations during different parts of the interview. This suggests principals were generally nescient of the implications of a definition discrepancy. The result is the perpetuation of conflicting, and therefore confusing, perceptions of the situation. In response to the dropout phenomenon, and societal expectations, principals recognized a need to change in order to meet student requirements. There was, however, a reluctance to shoulder the responsibility of student failure due to influential factors that were perceived to be beyond the school's jurisdiction. The inability to find easy solutions to the dropout phenomenon has created a sense of futility and frustration. Efforts to manipulate programming to improve relevancy is perceived as a token or minimal change that will not solve the problem. Principals were concerned about their inability to address the variety of personal characteristics that are associated with at risk students; students have the ability to do the work but are often thwarted by a tradition of failure. Student responsibility in the learning process was examined as was influence of the home environment. Finally principals perceived society to hold unrealistic expectations for schools to solve the majority of youth related problems for which schools do not feel equipped.

Of the three research questions, general perceptions are the most vague but may offer the widest scope for a principal to express perceptions about the phenomenon in his

or her own terms. Principals are concerned about students at risk of dropping out of school. This concern is tempered by confusion over exactly what a dropout is which leads to misunderstanding. Further, principals are frustrated by expectations to find a solution, the powerful influences affecting students that are beyond their control, and by the lack of viable solutions to solve or reduce the problem. A further examination of the principals' perceptions regarding causes and strategies will occur in the next sections.

### Causes

This section reviews the data from the interview transcripts that relate to the principals' perceptions regarding the causes of students dropping out of school. During the interview process principals were asked what caused students to be at risk of dropping out of school. As exploratory research the intent of this section was not to chronicle the causes exhibited in the interviews. Instead, the section will analyse and report how the interview data coincide with the literature review. The perceived causes will be presented using the same categories used for the literature review. These were: student characteristic factors; student environmental factors; school environmental factors; and the interrelationship among factors.

#### Student Characteristic Factors

The principals as a group touched on all of the basic categories as might be expected. There were, however, some topics that were mentioned especially often or with significant emphasis. Gender issues were not addressed directly. Principals generally used the pronoun "he" when describing dropouts and only periodically would couch the description with "he or she". There was no indication of how being male, and all that might relate to being male is a cause worthy of recognition for the school to react to in order to deal with dropouts. Indirectly then, the school recognized the predominance of males

that comprise the dropout population without articulating maleness as a indicator of, or factor that contributes to, dropping out.

Ethnicity as a contributing factor to dropping out was represented in three ways. First, there was a recognition by some principals that the area in which their school is located is changing. By inference, this recognized a changing school clientele which represented a higher multicultural proportion of students. Second, an admission that Native students specifically have failed, and continue to fail, in the present school system. Third, a symbol of the diversity of student ethnicity is represented by the curriculum offered to cater to these needs in some schools. As an example of this, in P4's school Mandarin Chinese, Japanese and Spanish are offered as optional credit courses in order to appeal to ethnic minority students.

A student's self concept and low self-esteem were mentioned by most principals as an indicator rather than as a causal factor, that in isolation, contributes to dropping out. Students do not drop out specifically due to a low self concept so much as a low self concept is a result of a variety of factors, that in combination, contribute to a student losing his or her self concept. Students may then remove themselves from the source of some of the contributing factors by dropping out of school. What principals clearly articulated was that many of the sources that contribute to the deflation of self esteem originate outside of the school but are reflected in the self image of a student while at the school. One of the characteristics noted by P6 is that of "problem avoidance" whereby potential dropouts do not face up to minor challenges or problems which eventually mount up to bigger problems. As a result students often run away from instead of confront a situation. This behaviour pattern becomes the basis for some students dropping out of school for reasons that might have been resolvable. This same principal stated that "The dropouts are isolates, they are kids that are really not part of something. They really don't have an identity or

much self-esteem. They are potential dropouts from society" (P6:7). The issue for principals was in recognizing the effects of low self-esteem while at the same time being unable to completely counter the external forces contributing to the self concept. As reported earlier in the principal interview summaries, P6 represented many of the principals' perceptions when he indicated that "They tend to dress differently, they don't look you in the eye, they skulk into school, skulk out, they don't have a good image of themselves" (P6:8).

School involvement was used as an indicator of a student's potential for dropping out. P1 mentioned the self fulfilling prophecy of how a student who is not involved in school activities becomes progressively more isolated and disengaged from the school and will in turn be more likely to drop out. P4 and P7 contend that certain subjects and extra curricular activities provide a hook whereby some students maintain an attachment to, and involvement in, the school. The purpose of maintaining a peripheral connection is the possibility that with the passage of time, maturity, or some other perhaps mysterious intervention, the student will respond with a more complete involvement in school activities. A principal described one possible reason for the lack of school involvement:

I think the fundamental cause is that they don't feel engaged with the learning that is going on in school. They don't feel really part of the main stream school life. And so typically dropouts will cluster socially, they will even act in anti-social ways in classrooms because they seem to want to emphasize their separate difference from the rest of the group and so on. I don't think it is conscious and I don't think it is considered to be high status but it is sort of a childish reaction that says I recognize that I can't be as good as the rest. For whatever reason I think I can't be as good as the rest so I'm going to carve myself a little profile here that gives me an identity. (P4:9)

Later during the same interview the principal reflected that "school is a good place for people who like schoolish things" (P4:11). The task of increasing school involvement

for principals would appear to be making school a good place for people who do not normally like schoolish things or adapting schoolish things to appeal to more students. Principals recognized that school involvement was an indicator of student at riskness.

Attitudes, work habits and aspirations were mentioned as indicators rather than as causal factors. Variations of this category were mentioned. One principal described the situations as:

Our younger generation has been referred to as the McDonalds generation. 'Instant gratification and someone else to clean up your mess'. You come into school and the gratification is not so instant and they have to clean up their own mess. They are not quite so happy about that. A lot of kids in grade 10 and 11 [believe] they are not getting the instant gratification [such as] "this is not leading anywhere. I am just miles away from the real world. You can tell me that these courses are important and that they will lead ultimately to some better standard of living for myself because I will have better education but that is too far in the future - I'm used to instant gratification." Therefore they can't be convinced to stick it out - and will drop out because "I'm not getting anywhere. It is not leading anywhere - this is senseless". Now, I'm really generalizing but I have seen that over and over again. (P5:8)

The student attitudes described by the principals are closely associated with the lack of student responsibility identified earlier under the principals' perceptions of students. P7 suggested that "it is an attitude that says this [schooling] is not important" (P7:7). Of a similar perception was the summary of P1 who said: "Lethargy, lack of interest, flat emotional presentation style, those would be the major ones. . . . If I had to say the four or five most prevalent that would describe most dropouts those four or five things would be them" (P1:11). Some principals used these traits as personal tools for recognizing students in their school who were potential candidates for dropping out.

Principals generally did not speak of student characteristic factors as a potential target to use as a remedy for resolving the dropout problem. Ethnicity, student self concept, school involvement and student attitudes, work habits and aspirations were, both individually and collectively, not considered to be causal and determining factors in dropping out. Instead, these factors were perceived as the manifestations of problems rooted elsewhere. As indicators, principals relied on these factors to help identify or confirm that some students were at risk of dropping out.

### Student Environmental Factors

Unlike student characteristics, these factors were considered a viable target for addressing the dropout phenomenon. Family influence in particular was repeatedly cited as a contributing factor. Principals expressed some frustration at the futility of tackling elements beyond a school's jurisdiction. As noted in an earlier section these sentiments were expressed by one principal as: "I think by now you become a little realistic that there is so much you can do and because you are getting the product of the dysfunctional home and the poor parenting that there is only so much you can do with certain numbers of kids" (P5:12).

Socioeconomic status was not mentioned specifically as a contributing factor but was part of many principals' descriptions of the schools regions from which students were drawn. As one principal described:

We have still a very large number of students from affluent families and very academically committed families - and in some cases too much so - like pressure on some of the kids to achieve at a very high level. At the same time we have kids from subsidized housing, a lot of single parent families, which is not a big deal, lots of families unemployed, lots of very low wage earners and there is no slum housing in the area but there is a lot of what I would call low rental housing and we get kids from there. (P7:1)

While principals did not attribute low SES with causing dropouts there was an appreciation for the burden that students from these low SES environments endured. In one instance this was described as "They have so many problems, so much baggage themselves that a kid has trouble getting to school let alone learning" (P6:7).

Family, parents and a student's home environment were the most consistent focus for principals' perceptions of what causes a student to drop out of school. Related items included parental education levels, lack of communication skills, the lack of common rules, the influence of too much T.V. viewing, the effect of single parent mothers and the breakup of the family unit that fails to provide a supportive environment. One principal went so far as to say:

The breakup of the family is devastating. I don't know, I even think a bad family together is better than a single family. You have to draw the line somewhere but I have seen some weird and wonderful families yet the kids have an identity, they have something to belong to. I think that is important. (P6:7)

The home environment as a primary contributing factor to students dropping out of school was demonstrated through the following remarks:

Crumbling family values - it is incredible the number of parents who don't speak to their kids and the number of kids who don't speak to their parents. . . . I think we have a crumbling family and if we have that, and I think there is plenty of evidence that says we do, how does that auger for the future? (P1:8)

I think it is sort of a self defence mechanism that kicks in with some parents who are frustrated and don't know how to deal with there kids so they say that this is the school's problem. I'm going to deal with the 10,000 issues I have here at home with my son or daughter and their behavior and I'm going to leave the school's issues to the school to deal with. (P1:10)

One principal in particular focused on the family repeatedly for its role in influencing the dropout phenomenon. Some of the comments were reported earlier in the principal interview summary and are repeated here in abbreviated form to help illustrate this connection. A summary of some of P5's views about the connection of family and dropouts are:

I'd like to throw [the primary responsibility to keep students in school] back on the family. I'd like to throw it back to where I really believe the root of the problem is. I think ultimately what has gone on at home really puts the shape to the package. (P5:8)

Parents are not communicating with their own kids but are expecting the school to do that. . . . And we are in a catch 22 because if we don't do that then it is not going to get done. So, drug education, alcohol education, family life education, AIDS education - questions of morality that we are trying to deal with which traditionally have been dealt with by the family or the family's church or whatever are now falling to us. (P5:9)

I think that parents are getting worse at their jobs. There is more family breakup than ever before. I really don't think that parents are paying attention to good parenting. . . . They are just being very very hopeful that somehow because their kid is still in school everything is going to be okay and it is not. (P5:8)

Ultimately the damaged goods that we get are being caused by the dysfunctional family with poor parenting skills. (P5:11)

One principal came to the defense of parents as an easy scapegoat for the school system to blame for student failure. As this principal suggests:

[P]arents are not setting out to make their kids dropouts they certainly want them to be [in school] and want them to achieve. (P7:9)

And later continues:

I do not know if any of us in the school system knows how to teach those skills that the kids do not have. Our grade 7 and 8 teachers spend a lot of time trying to make sure that kids do complete tasks, and that they do work on their own, and that they do try to do the best that they can instead of turning in slip shod jobs etc etc. They try to teach those skills but I do not know if we know how to teach those skills. (P7:11)

Principals believe that families have tremendous influence over the performance of students in the school. While a parent's active reinforcement of the school will usually result in a positive and beneficial effect, a lack of reinforcement, either explicitly or implicitly, may result in a negative and harmful effect. Home is therefore considered to be a significant factor in a student's decision to drop out of school.

Peer pressure was only cited by two principals as being a contributing factor to students considering dropping out of school. According to one of these principals:

[T]he important thing in teenagers lives is their friends and their peer group. And if we have any hook on them at the moment - we can get them in the building because that is where their friends are. That is where their social interactions are. (P7:4)

I think the big schools are very impersonal and irrelevant to the kid. In their perception we are totally irrelevant to their life. Like adults the job is starting to interfere with the things they want to do and for these kids it is happening much earlier. School is really interfering with the important things in their lives like their friends, their part time jobs, and whatever else they might be doing - watching television - school gets in the way of that.(P7:4)

P7 used a hypothetical scenario to describe the chain of events leading to a student developing a new cohort of peers that potentially reduces the affiliation of student and school. This is described more fully in the section about the influence of part time jobs.

The idea of a role model, significant adult, or mentor is dealt with more fully in the strategies section of this paper. P2 in particular created a school strategy which revolves around creating a bond between student and staff which is described in detail in the section dealing with strategies. An example of how principals perceived role models was described by a principal in regard to a plan for the future that the school has to deal with a specific segment of the school population. This principal explained:

One part of it is Native students - we want to set up a series of activities for them so that they can sort of become more confident and feel they are part of the school and that will include identifying them, having them meet together as a separate group periodically, having weekend retreats where they go as a group and can talk to each other, and talk to Indian leaders and so on. With the idea that if we can give them more confidence and more sense of importance as to who they are they are more likely to feel more at home in this building. (P4:4)

In general, principals acknowledged the significance of role models as a contributory factor for students at risk of dropping out. Role modelling was also recognized as having potential negative consequences when parents make excuses for students' absences.

Three other factors were mentioned by principals that had not been included in the literature review. One was the general expectation that young people should be in school and how this message was transferred through a student's environment. To what degree a student receives this message, where the message comes from and to what degree a student accepts this source as credible may be factors in a student's decision to drop out of school. A description by P5 created an image of a student floating through the school system without ever considering why he was attending and, as a consequence, was unwilling to apply himself to meet the school's expectations. The student did not internalize the

messages he was receiving from the school and home about the importance of schooling. The point the principal was making suggests it is not enough to simply ensure that the proper messages are provided but the message must be made in such a way as to be meaningful to the recipients.

A second influential factor repeatedly mentioned by the principals was that of television. Television had effects at two levels - in the classroom and as a powerful influence outside of the school. The following two excerpts represent these two views.

I have heard educators say everything from programs that are too challenging, programs that are too irrelevant, to programming that is not as interesting as television. You know we are dealing with this television generation here we are dealing with some kids who average four or five hours per night and I guess an argument can be made that we can't compete with the comedians. . . . The instant gratification issue. The expectation that you had better entertain me in this class because if you are not going to entertain me I'm not going to waste my time and come here. The loss of value that education has taken in the western world. (P1: 8)

As mentioned in the principal interview summaries, P5 was adamant about the destructive influence of television in the lives of students and parents. To repeat one of his comments:

I really don't see evidence that parents are becoming aware that maybe this television s\*\*\* should be modified a little bit. Maybe our kids don't need their own television set in their own bedroom. Maybe the family should have one television set and we should watch limited hours of television together. Maybe we should learn how to talk to each other again and maybe we should spend part of our time reading and building literacy skills. I don't see any evidence that families are coming to terms with that. Families will express their concern about the amount of violence and sex that is displayed on television but they are not taking the quantum leap by saying maybe we should break the pattern and not watch the stuff anymore. (P5:9)

[T]he youth of today are spending more and more of their leisure time in a passive pursuit. And that is watching the tube. You hear statistics like the average kid watches 17 1/2 hours./week - that makes me want to barf. 17 1/2 hours why doesn't he go out there and chase a ball on the street with his buddies and talk to them. And communicating actively and learn how to be in a community setting with his friends or talking with mom and dad or doing something with them. . . . The sad part is that mom and dad are also watching 17 1/2 hours of television and probably the 17 1/2 hours don't even match. Even when the kid is away from the tube mom and dad are at it. (P5:12)

A third student environmental factor was mentioned in the literature but not to the extent emphasized by the principals and that was the often negative influence of part time jobs.

I have had good students who take a 40 hour job and try to come to school - it never works. I think the stats are after 20 hours the likely hood of dropping out is 100%. I try to publicize that with parents. Parents seem to think that a job is the end all and the be all. I think that punching little buttons at McDonalds is not exactly a learning experience but so I guess I say there are better things to do with your time than make money. But our society, our *raison d'etre*, is consuming and materialism. It doesn't promote learning. The buck is almighty. I think it rubs off in the kids so it is very difficult. (P6:7)

Another principal included having a part time job as part of the 'typical' pattern which is instrumental when a student begins to fade away in the grey area between being a student and being a school dropout. This principal describes a fictitious student caught in this spiralling fade away process as follows:

This is a student who has a part time job. There is a survey out now that over 50% of students in grade 11 and 12 have a part time job and with the money from the part time job decided he should have a car and now that he has the car, now he needs more hours at the part time job which leaves him less time for going to school or doing any work and makes that real shift towards where school is no longer the center of his life or his time and commitment. He has much greater draw towards

other things. Along with the job comes a new group of friends who are not in school because they have dropped out or graduated and again we are down to a typical fade away kind of kid. It becomes less and less and less. . . . And we work our way to the point where he comes in and says there is no point in my coming to school as I am not going to pass anything and I might as well come back next semester and probably about 50% do come back in the next semester but our dropout won't. (P7:7)

As will be reiterated later in the section describing the interrelationship of factors, it is often difficult to distinguish individual factors as separate from the influence of multiple influential factors. Student environmental factors can certainly be diverse and principals seemed to understand this connection. The potential negative effect of family background was considered the most powerful influence with students. For many principals these student environmental factors represent the root of what must be addressed if real changes are to be made to the dropout phenomenon.

### School Environmental Factors

These factors, by definition, constitute areas in which principals have more influence over and consequently more opinion about than factors originating outside of schools. While one principal in particular was very defensive about any questions that might suggest that the school was not doing everything possible to prevent dropouts, most principals admitted that even their best efforts fall short of providing an optimal learning environment for all students. Generally the comments made by the principals reflected those projected in the literature.

School performance was uniformly listed as a leading indicator of a student at risk of dropping out of school. The following is a rather lengthy list of some of the comments that addressed this issue. The proportion of comments attributed to school performance is

representative of the degree to which principals perceive it to be, either directly or indirectly, a cause of many students dropping out of school.

We get very few dropouts who are potentially high achievers. We don't get very many of the high fliers who are bored. Most of our dropouts are low achievers who have a long history of poor achievement and not very good success at school - lots of social problems related to them. Sometimes learning problems but more often social problems or social problems compounded by learning problems. (P4:2)

There is another group that is, if you could put it on a continuum, there is another group that are not so severe that they would be identified with a file that thick and an IEP. They are at risk for dropping out because they really don't have the personal ability or motivation to really live their high school life without a lot of help or monitoring. (P4:4)

Well they are identified long before they come here. These things don't hit at age 15 or 16. They are identified from about grade 1 most of them. There are very few surprises. Not just transcripts, we have a series of meetings with feeder schools. . . . Many of them come with what is called an IEP, individual education plan where they have been diagnosed and things have been tried, and we continue with those. So there is a lot of effort put into picking up. . . . It is crucial. In fact most of those guys would never have been in high school 10 years ago. (P4:3)

My wife has taught grade one and she says that "I can tell you which ones are not going to make it through high school already". Isn't that sad. And I'll bet you if she did a longitudinal study that she would be right . . . so what responsibility should the schools take for that? How could the school screw things up in the kids in grade one? (P5:11)

We have a pretty good indicator when a kid is starting to become at risk, he starts dropping his English, History or Math. (P6:3)

One of the first warning bells is for me to take a look at the photocopy of all the interim report cards that went out on October 4 of this year. Hey, this kid is failing three courses and it is only October 4 - what the hell is going on here? Poor performance is your first thing and then I will talk to one of the VPs and ask if this

kid has been missing a lot of school? "Ya, he has already got the '6' letter". OK well there is your early warning. It is poor performance, its poor attendance, and when you phoned home what kind of response did you get? - "Oh, not very warm response, he basically told us that we shouldn't be bothering him at work". OK well I'm getting a pretty early picture right now. . . . We are going to be in trouble with this kid. This kid is probably going to drop out. We are often right in that unfortunately. (P5:10)

We have a lot of kids coming in even here who read at the grade four level who their mathematical skills are maybe at the grade three or four level. These kids are plunked into high school programs. These kinds of kids then start getting in to a very defeatist kind of situation where self esteem goes down and before they know it the only thing they can be successful at in the school situation is not to be there. (P3:10)

It may surface in the semester through very poor performance right across the board and or sometimes teachers are very quick to spot a kid that is having a lot of difficulty and most of the teachers certainly are sensitive enough to know or to spot when a child's difficulty is something beyond their control and they usually say to the guidance counsellor that -hey this individual may be if you have an opportunity call this individual in and spend some time with him and usually finds out that the problem goes much beyond that one classroom situation. (P3:5)

As indicated by these comments, the factor of school performance is closely linked to many other factors and it is difficult to separate a student's school performance as a causal factor from these other influences. However, interwoven among the elements is a powerful indicator and potentially a cause for students dropping out of school.

Truancy was another leading indicator of students who were considered on a path that would lead to dropping out of school. Many principals repeated a relatively obvious assertion that a fundamental requirement for school success is regular attendance. The following comments represent how principals expressed attendance as an indicator of potential school dropouts.

What it really shows us is that their priorities are elsewhere and because it hurts the educational process for the rest of the kids to have these kids attending so infrequently we tell them sorry you have lost the credit. You lose two credits we are going to tell you that you are right on the edge of being out of school. If you lose the third credit you are out of school. Come back at the beginning of the next semester and try again. (P5:2)

It is time Jimmy realized that there is a consequence here so that when he comes back next semester he will attend more regularly. Either he starts believing regular attendance is needed or he will become a dropout. (P5:6)

The degree to which P5 relies on attendance patterns has been mentioned earlier in the principal summary and is repeated here.

You can look at the kid who has got the horrible attendance pattern in Jr. High school and you could probably bet \$10 that that kid will be a dropout. You have that kid figured out right from the beginning. And all the reasons why they were not attending in Jr. High are often related to the dysfunctional family and poor parenting skills. It hasn't changed just because they have come across the school yard and come into a new building in grade 9. (P5:12)

Many principals spoke about attendance problems in terms of a progression whereby there was an escalation from seemingly insignificant absences building up to dropping out completely. Some of these observations were:

Come April they decide, or we decide for them, that they have missed so many classes that they are not getting a credit and it would be best if they went back in September and started. Whether they show up is another question. And how long they will stay. Hopefully they are older and wiser and they have made some sort of decision. They don't make a decision to drop out they make a decision not to go to class today, they make a decision to stay home today because maybe I don't feel too well, or was out late last night but they do not make a decision to drop out of school. They make a lot of little decisions along the way which culminate in either

our making the decision or their deciding that it is simply useless or hopeless. Most students don't come to see anybody, they just disappear. (P7:3)

This week they don't come one day, next week they don't come two days and three weeks later they don't come any days and somewhere along the way - and that is what makes it difficult to place numbers on it because until we actually delete them from the roll we are not sure that maybe they will turn up again in two weeks with a wonderful story about having had measles which is possibly true. (P7:3)

If there is an attendance problem I can pretty well be assured that unless there is a significant intervention by someone be it parent, friend, teachers, counsellors, administrators, social workers, unless there is a significant intervention by someone that meaningfully affects the kid, this trend is going to continue and probably will accelerate to the point where if he is not an official dropout he is an unofficial dropout. (P1:4)

Typically, what happens is that there is a progression. It seldom just happens. You hardly ever get a kid who is a really good attender running away from home and going to Vancouver. So, you start with poor attendance usually. . . . Usually the symptoms are missing a lot of classes and coming periodically and finally you get to the stage where it is just a bit of fiction that the kid is still in school. (P4:5)

There was a feeling of helplessness expressed by the principals whereby if the student chooses not to come to school or not to come to class, that the school can do little about changing the situation and as a result that student will probably become a school dropout.

Issues of school discipline were not mentioned by most principals in comments about the causal factors of dropping out. This would appear to be in contradiction to expectations based on the literature. Some of the points made by P5 were:

Some of our dropouts are alcoholics. Some of them have been boozing from their earlier years of Junior high school. They have a drinking problem. They are very

active on the bar scene and are dragging themselves in at 2 am and 3 am and unable to get to school and even if they get to school do not have the energy to do anything while they are here. Their grades drop off very seriously and because they experience nothing but failure here they then drop out. Some of them have a serious drug addiction. Alcohol is a drug addiction too but I mean have an addiction to hash or other drugs they may be taking and as a result they arrive here not in very good shape. The concentration is very poor. They are not motivated. Their evening time is not spent reviewing for the next day's test it is being out on the street or whatever being involved in drugs. They become dropouts. In some cases these kids are not really behavioural problems again. If anything they are zombies here. They are uninvolved. A lot of kids with drug problems will deny that they take drugs and are very hard to deal with at that point. (P5:7)

And then we have the behaviourally or emotionally disturbed kid who just really is obnoxious because this person has been so bruised through some sort of abuse they have gone through probably from early childhood. By the time they get here telling someone to "f\*\*\* off" is just so natural and comes so quickly that we wind up not being able to deal with the disruption and we have to tell them to become a dropout. We tell them, sorry, you can't be here or we are going to let you go for the rest of the semester and when you come back, you are going to have to deal with some of the behaviour because we are not going to accept it and then ultimately they repeat it and we have to . . . and usually with those kinds of kids we have gone the gambit with the guidance counsellors and child guidance clinic with interviews with the home and that kind of thing and in some cases parents will refuse child guidance clinic permission forms. Because there has been things happening at home that they don't want the school to find out about. (P5:7)

Boredom as a causal factor to dropping out was mentioned both directly and indirectly. An example of the specific reference was:

I think [boredom] is fairly typical of students who drop out. I mean if you are being successful somewhere you probably can endure anything but if you are not being successful and you are studying things which you consider to be irrelevant to you where you are and where you think you are going why keep your hand in the fire? Take it out, be smart why suffer any more than you have to. So kids are

rejecting the traditional education. Why, because we are turning out people who have no skills for the jobs that are there. (P1:11)

In an indirect sense it was also an element of some of the individual scenarios describing a specific student who dropped out of school. The essence of P5's description of Scott was mentioned earlier regarding the need for students to internalize the meaning of education from someone they respect. The influence of boredom as a causal factor was evident in P5's description of Scott.

Ultimately, I noticed that Scott didn't come back, he is about 20 years of age now, so Scott is a dropout. He was sitting at about 14 credits of his 20 and it hurt because he was not an obnoxious kid, he wasn't raising hell around here really, he wasn't raising hell at all. He wasn't selling drugs in the building, he wasn't vandalizing the place, he was just an unmotivated, kid who didn't see any real reason or purpose in school. He was coming here because it was the thing to do and ultimately will join the ranks of the dropped out. (P5:6)

This dialogue continued and raised an interesting question about what priority a school places on a student who is simply bored and not really causing problems for the school. As P5 continues to describe the same student:

Because Scott was not a behavioural problem, we probably didn't go to the same lengths with Scott that we might have with another kid. We referred him to guidance and guidance spent time talking to him just as I had spent time talking to him. Didn't really detect any serious family problems or emotional problems to warrant a referral to child guidance clinic to take it up a notch higher. Probably spoken to Scott's mother so often that by now she knows my voice and knows exactly who it is on the phone. But I have phoned home an awful lot of times, I have met with mom and Scott many times, basically as far as Scott is concerned he just kept getting the consequence and we had to hope that eventually if Scott took the consequence one more time he would suddenly snap, and open his eyes and say - I guess I do have to attend regularly these guys mean it. Scott never learned. I got to the point that in the last couple of semesters I said to Scott, you don't have 12

absences, you have 6. You are on a short leash. Because I don't want to waste our time anymore, you either decide you want to come to this school and get your education or leave and go get a job. We were telling him that. Do it or go get a job. Eventually he didn't come back. (P5:6)

This raises an interesting question about how schools react to different students and how students who are simply bored and not causing a serious disruption to the school may "fall through the cracks" of the administration. It may be easier to ignore these students than to solve the problem. Often closely related to the issue of boredom is the next factor of rapport.

The degree to which a student feels rapport with the school is a measure of "at riskness" for some principals. This is closely associated with a student's school involvement as already discussed. It is more difficult to differentiate between whether such rapport or lack of rapport should be considered a primary or secondary factor in indicating if a student is at risk of dropping out. Support for rapport as a primary factor was indicated by P4: "I think the fundamental cause is that they don't feel engaged with the learning that is going on in school. They don't feel really part of the main stream school life" (P4:9).

An alternative suggested by P7 was that a lack of rapport may be due to a mismatch between school and student which requires searching for a better match that will result in a stronger rapport and possibly school involvement. As P7 describes:

Somehow the relationship between the kid and the school hasn't formed and we will try again maybe they will form it here and if it doesn't maybe they will go to [school X] and try it there. . . . I'm sure there is a place where they could actually achieve and slot their selves in. They haven't found the right spot. And in many cases the right slot doesn't exist. I'm not suggesting that if they keep looking they will find it. I think it doesn't exist and whether it is up to the system to create a spot I don't know. (P7:3)

Most of the schools represented in the study were of similar size but school size was mentioned by principals as being a potentially contributing factor. Large schools, the semester system, and rotating classrooms made it difficult for school staff to develop the kind of close contact with students on a regular basis in order to develop trusting relationships that might help prevent dropouts. Some principles did raise this issue as a possible causal factor as indicated in these passages:

Classroom teachers are so much more into other issues such as course quality, homework completion, attendance of classes, to get involved with chasing kids. They just don't feel that they have the time to go chasing kids and looking them up. (P1:6)

At the high school level the teacher is dealing with from any where from 150 to 200 kids in a 10 month system and here on a semester system they are dealing with approximately 100 in a five hour day that does not give you a lot of individualized attention. (P3:10)

I think the big schools are very impersonal and irrelevant to the kid. In their perception we are totally irrelevant to their life. (P7:3)

School environmental factors, that directly or indirectly caused students to drop out, were recognized by principals to be potential areas to target for reducing the problem. Primarily a student's academic performance was thought to be central to a student's decision to drop out. Although it represented a complicated combination of factors principals believed that students who fail or do poorly academically were the most vulnerable to drop out. Closely related was the issue of a student's attendance. While principals felt they had less control over attendance it was still perceived as a fundamental cause of dropping out. To a lesser degree the factors of boredom, rapport, and school size were raised as contributing to a student's decision to drop out.

### Interrelationship Among Factors

Inherent in most of the principals' perceptions of the causal factors of dropping out of school has been the interrelationship among the factors. In the preceding sections a wide variety of causes have been identified. All principals agreed that focusing on individual causes provides an incomplete understanding of the complexity of the dropout phenomenon. Each individual at risk student represented a unique combination of influential factors that all contribute to various degrees. To conceptualize causes as if they were easily or singularly identifiable (and therefore treatable) was considered misleading and possibly counter productive to addressing the phenomenon. It was the need to consider the interrelationship among factors that prevented schools from ignoring factors that originated outside the schools' jurisdiction. Addressing school related factors in isolation was not expected to reduce the dropout problem. The result was a tendency for many principals to attribute the primary cause of dropouts to external negative factors such as the dysfunctional home, part time jobs and truancy. In effect, the interrelationship among factors provided an easy vehicle with which principals diverted the blame of student dropout rates toward the myriad of external factors with the added twist that schools could not be expected to solve the situation until the external forces were corrected. Left unsaid was the notion that if other factors such as family stability, increased student motivation, rapport and school involvement improved that there may not be a dropout problem. Some of the comments were:

Most of our dropouts would occur because they have social, emotional problems that are so severe at a given time that they can't cope with what is going on in school. It is not the school that the difficulty with the content of the school that is defeating them it is their own personal and social life and whatever is in there. . . . It would be more because of, as I say, family difficulties, their own personal social life, pregnancy and things of that nature that have impacted on their ability to be successful at school. (P3: 2)

I guess there are so many different types of dropouts that you have. You have the pleasant unmotivated dropout, you have the alcoholic, or drug addicted who can't pay attention and fail, and you have the behaviourly and emotionally disturbed kid who can't get conformed behaviourly and really do cause so much disruption so frequently that you have to start concentrating on the welfare of the group instead of the single individual. We get to the end of our rope and wind up removing him. (P5:7)

My guess is that in many many cases by the time a student is in high school - it doesn't start here, it often starts earlier in the majority of cases, the student would not have been a good student in Jr. High, would not have had a good year in grade 10, it is an accumulation of many things, usually of many years. So that the general profile of a student would be very complex. It is true I would say that there is a much lower risk of a student dropping out if he or she comes from a home where things are going well. For instance, family relationships, but there are also many students who come from homes where there is a single parent and they are doing well. . . . We look at the attendance, the academic performance, we look at I guess social development or social problems, relational problems and that gives us the potential dropout. (P2:7)

In these comments which represent most of the perceptions of the principals interviewed, the descriptions illustrate the many causes that are considered external to the schools and avoid including school related factors. The principals resist accepting blame for these students' lack of success. In the following remark P4 accepts that the school should be doing something but it is still based on "non academic problems".

We have emotional upsets, we have suicides attempts, we have family breakups, we have abuse, we have students who have nervous breakdowns of various kinds and so on. But I think the failing of the school in them is that we haven't found ways to make sure that all of these people with all of these non academic problems can cope at school but I don't know that we ever will. I don't know what an acceptable rate would be. (P4:6)

The literature and principals agree that there is significant interrelationship among the factors that cause students to drop out. Represented in the interview data was also the realization that if causes could not be isolated naturally in order to identify a causal relationship, then it should be considered as a multi faceted problem and not be broken into components artificially for the ease of study and finding a solution. What was significant from the interview data was the degree to which principals were accusing the non school environmental factors over which they had limited control instead of focusing their attention and efforts on the school environmental factors over which they had more control.

There were notable exceptions to this trend. P2's school has obviously made significant attempts to identify and adjust many school related factors in terms of a home room base and providing mentors. More of this and other strategies will be examined later.

#### Other Factors

Some of the principals also raised some causal factors that had not been mentioned in the literature review. These are the result of personal observation on the part of the principal and in some cases looking into the future as to what new causal factors may be significant.

I am starting to hear little whispers of concern out of kindergarten teachers and grade one teachers about the next phenomenon that we are facing and that is the nursery school children. Kids who were raised at nursery schools. They are aggressive, they are all raised on a steady diet of 'Ninja Turtles' you don't ask politely for something but you take what you need and if that means you have to push the kid in the face to get at what you want then that is what you do. These survival mentalities are starting to show up in kindergarten and grade one and maybe into grade two. What does that mean for these kids five years from now? seven years from now? eight years from now? What presenting behaviors will they demonstrate different from the kids we are dealing with now? It is really scary.

(P1:9)

The semester system is part of it and the grants - you keep your kids in school until then it is nice if he is out of your class - you don't have to mark papers, there is less work. It is sort of a reverse reward system that they need the kids originally but after October 30 which is our divisional date, it is not the province's, who cares? (P6:5)

I do not know if any of us in the school system knows how to teach those skills that the kids do not have. Our grade 7 and 8 teachers spend a lot of time trying to make sure that kids do complete tasks and that they do work on their own and that they do try to the best that they can instead of turning in slip shod jobs etc etc. they try to teach those skills but I do not know if we know how to teach those skills. (P7:11)

You see some kids who are not completing assignments and kids who are starting to skip classes I think as early as grade 6. . . . Start seeing kids who have a very hard time concentrating or focusing on their work. Don't take tasks to completion and I am not just talking about not handing in homework I'm talking about no matter what they start they do not finish. Kids who are not at all independent and they have to have somebody telling them to turn the page, now read the first word, now read the second word and have no ability to work independently. . . . We are not talking about rebellion or anything we are simply talking about kids who have been so pampered and have always had decisions made for them and they have never had to make a decision. (P7:11)

These data represent principals' perceptions that extend beyond what is currently in the literature about the causes of dropouts. The individual scenarios that come to the attention of the principal do not always fit a simplistic categorization of causal factors. New inter-relationships and situations continually present themselves for principals to resolve, compensate for, or cater to. In addition to unpredictability, principals are also wary of future trends such as "nursery school children", the implication of funding restrictions or the insecurity of not really knowing how to teach the skills that are deficient.

It is the intangible nature of students' dropout causes that continues to haunt principals attempting to find solutions.

### Conclusion

The data involving principal's perceptions regarding the causes of students dropping out of school was examined in conjunction with the literature review. There were five facets of the research question that emerged from analysis of the interview data. The first was the student characteristic factors from which there was general agreement between the literature and the data findings. Principals generally considered factors such as self concept, school involvement, attitude and work habits to be manifestations of problems rooted elsewhere rather than rudimentary causes of dropping out. As such, principals used many of the causes to identify or confirm students at risk of dropping out. Second was student environmental factors which collectively represent the largest influential obstacle for the school because they are located beyond a school's jurisdiction. Of these factors the family and home influence was perceived to be the most powerful. It was noted, however, that it was difficult to isolate a primary student environmental factor as being unrelated to other factors. Third, the school environmental factors explored causes that were directly within principals' governance and the data represented the diversity of causes found in the literature. Of these school performance, or more specifically poor school performance in general and failure in particular, was considered the primary cause of students dropping out. Poor school performance was also perceived to be the precursor of other student characteristic factors such as low self esteem. Low school attendance was considered to be a cause of subsequent dropouts and a strong indicator of at risk students. The fourth area examined the interrelationship among factors which reinforced the literature in suggesting that due to the complexity of the causal interaction involved, principals could not, and therefore should not, artificially isolate causes. Within the examination of the interrelationship of factors there was a tendency for principals to concentrate on the causes

representing student environmental factors such as family rather than school environmental factors of which they have been held more accountable. The final area of examination exposed additional ramifications that added to the complexity of identifying the cause(s) of dropouts. In general, the principals' perceptions about the causes of students dropping out of school reflected what was found in the literature. There was a tendency for principals to cite external factors such as the deterioration of family influence as a excuse instead of confronting the internal school related factors over which they have direct control.

### Strategies

#### Overview

This section will analyse the data from the interview transcripts that relate to the third research question. This question was "What strategies are in place in this school to deal with dropouts and what rationale was used to develop these strategies?" As mentioned earlier under the section on perceptions, there was a difference among the principals regarding their level of concern about school dropouts. This distinction was based on the principals' general perception of dropouts as either a problem to be concerned about or not a problem to be concerned about. The strategies introduced, or considered appropriate, naturally vary according to whether or not a principal perceives dropouts to be a problem. To restate the findings of these general perceptions, there were two of the seven principals who indicated that they were not concerned about dropouts in their school. As a consequence it would seem unlikely that these principals would introduce, or consider, strategies explicitly focused at reducing the number of dropouts. In addition, one principal had already introduced a specific strategy to address the problem of dropouts and represents a complete match of concern followed up by strategy. The remaining four principals did perceive dropouts to be a concern to some degree.

The data is organized to present the principals' perceptions on strategies in two sections. The first section has two parts. Part one consists of a brief review of the two principals who did not consider dropouts a problem in their schools. A second part examines the strategy of the principal who had an "official" strategy in place for reducing dropouts. The second section explores themes regarding strategy data representing perceptions from all of the principals. This section will be further subdivided into principals' perceptions involving teachers, programming, administration and other strategies.

### Principals not "concerned"

Principals P3 and P4 suggest that developing a specific strategy to help prevent dropouts is not a priority in their schools. They state this, however, for very different reasons. P3 claims that it is just luck and influence from the parents in the neighbourhood that has given the school such a low dropout rate but not something that the school has done or is doing deliberately to address this issue. Repeated from the principal interview summary, P3 describes:

I don't think that we have any particular strategy that other schools don't have. I think that we are just fortunate in that we are in a middle class suburb where this has not become a problem. . . . I don't see where we have done anything dramatic or unique in this building that draws the kids in and keeps them here. We have the same complaints about boredom and routine shown that you find everywhere else.  
(P3:3)

Despite having no actual strategy at the moment it was clear through the interview that P3 predicted there would be a need for a more formal strategy in the near future and that some plans were underway to ward off any future increases in the dropout rate. Some of these strategical plans are raised later.

Principal P4 had a different approach to the dropout issue. While dropouts were admittedly a concern for the school and there were many strategies in place that indirectly affected at risk students, P4 was determined not to let the school's agenda be set by these students at the price of the majority of students. Instead, the priority has been to work with those students who are at school in an effort to improve their achievements. P4 raises the issue that perhaps the best strategy for dealing with at risk students is simply quality education of the same variety that all students need or would benefit from. There are a variety of strategies that P4's school uses that might be considered indirectly supportive for at risk students. In a remark expanded further earlier on in this paper P4 suggests: "I guess we try to find an array of strategies to deal with all of these problems that lead to dropping out. Usually they relate to disengagement from the school for typically non academic reasons" (P4:8). P4 is assisted in part by operating a school in a division that has open boundaries across the division. This strategy allows a school to attract students from the whole division rather than a smaller localized catchment area which suggests students attend because they choose to be there. In addition P4 has tried to be responsive to students' preferences by offering a wide variety of programming.

What we are trying to do is look at a series of program changes that could make them feel more comfortable and maybe get them to stay longer . . . I think this school and most other high schools are trying to get to be more friendly to, and more receptive to, and have more programs for people from a variety of backgrounds and motivations etc. But every time you invent one you discover it only helps a particular slice that the success rate is not so wonderful. I know we do not have it but day cares for example for teenage mothers who want to keep their babies so that allows them to stay in school. We don't have it but that is the kind of extreme to which some schools are going. I don't know how well that works. (P4:2)

There are a lot of things everybody is searching for an answer but I guess the answer is a whole variety of strategies. One is straight offering of a variety of combinations of levels of courses and the possibility of integration depending on

how people read the kid. For example if you have a really weak student with very weak reading skills you might put him in an 04 class but if the resource teacher or anybody working with the kid feels that this kid would perform integrated into a different level of class with support by a teacher assistance we do that too. Depending on how the kid is reacting. We have different levels of courses and we have integration in what would normally be considered inappropriate levels for the kid with support by teacher assistants who can work one on one with somebody. (P4:3)

Then as last ditch efforts the division has a program called ACE, I forget what the letters stand for, but it is off site. It is in a strip mall where students who just can't cope in school but want to continue go to this ACE program where they meet in seminar and then go out on work experience. There are various work experience programs, school based work experience programs, of course there is access to all of the traditional social agencies, social work and all that sort of thing. (P4:3)

Many of these strategies are very similar to those suggested by the other principals with the exception that these are tempered by a rationale of best serving the larger school population that attends school regularly and only incidentally are beneficial to students considered at risk of dropping out. P4 felt that it was inevitable that some students would not graduate from high school and that a school should not be preoccupied with these students that leave but needs to focus on those students who remain. There was a reluctance to have "The tail wag the dog".

Principals P3 and P4 both have strategies that address the area of at risk students even though they may not have adopted these strategies with the intention of having an impact that reduces school dropouts.

#### Principal 2's Strategy

Principal P2, by comparison, had developed and implemented a strategy that specifically targeted students who were potential dropouts. The impetus for developing the

strategy originated, in part, from the perceptions of P2 regarding the cause of at risk students dropping out of school. This cause was the lack of interaction between at risk students and school staff. The essence of this strategy was to foster a relationship between those students identified as at risk and a designated staff member of the school. P2 described the process as mentoring and originally adapted the strategy from a variety of sources to respond to the perceived needs of this particular school setting. Through this mentoring model of staff and student interaction, students were expected to feel more attachment to the school. Theoretically, the staff were in a position to monitor a student's progress and identify potential problems and find solutions before they needlessly festered into a larger problem that could only be resolved by students dropping out of school. In order to facilitate this relationship all students attended a daily home room to which they were assigned. Each staff member, including library and physical education staff, were assigned a home room with about 20 students in it. This home room was for the entire year and so with the change in semesters a student may have had new classroom teachers but would retain a certain continuity by having the same home room teacher. Some effort was made to evenly distribute those students identified as at risk so each staff member had a similar number. The strategy also included a plan for continuity by including the same guidance counselors and vice-principals meeting with the teachers on a regular basis to discuss any administrative, counseling or other area of assistance that could be given to a teacher to help retain a given student. P2 talks about the impact of this strategy:

Certainly we are, because we have responded because of our concern for the dropout rate we have a very good 'at risk' program in place so that again we are not here to collect statistics, we are here to try and help students so that maybe we should have more statistics to motivate us and tell us whether we are on track or effective but in a general way we have every teacher identified as an 'at risk' teacher. So that every teacher has two or three students assigned to him or her for that year and a student who has been identified as potentially at risk for dropping out. In that sense you can in a general way address 10 % of your student body. If 10% of your student body is at risk at least you have made significant impact upon

addressing the concern. But, our preoccupation has not been with keeping statistics but we believe we are making some headway and having a positive impact but the program is now finishing its second year and we believe in the third year, next year, we have adjusted a few things that will allow us to be even more optimistic in our impact. (P2:2)

One of the things is that the student doesn't feel that he or she belongs to the school there is less likelihood of that student staying given the fact that there may be home situations or personal situations that make school unattractive or puts the school in strong competition with something else in the young person's life. So, if you can make a student feel good about school and feel that he or she is part of the school then that student is likely to stay. One of the ways to do that we thought was to have students have a home base. Without being very very specific, when you have a large school like this, every time you move you spend five minutes of 1100 or 1200 people's time. If you want to use statistics. So, when you have a home room meeting you are spending five minutes every day- If you go straight to class and are ready for class, which is the current model for most schools, you save those five minutes. Secondly, if you are the odd ball in the community or in the province, almost, expecting students to come for those five minutes you are going up hill. So, yet we believe that it helps students to have a home room base in school. To have one adult with whom they can relate and that one adult that will miss you every morning if you are not there and will take note of you being there or not being there. Who might even notice that you are not happy this morning. So, the human element, the social aspect of relationships, that motivates us in quite a significant way to provide that. On that base you can say that if you have that in place and further we use most of our staff. Traditionally you have home rooms which were 25-33 or so in size. Well, by using the Library and Phys Ed and a few other people as home room bases we have reduced that to roughly 18-22. Then we thought that was better for relationships. So we now have about 20 in our home rooms. (P2: 4)

When the strategy was first introduced the school provided in-service training for all staff and according to P2:

We raised an awareness and give them some skills in the area of dealing with potential dropouts . . . the teacher can be sensitive to conditions and circumstances in the lives of students that lead a student to be a candidate for dropping out. (P2:3)

P2 has also recognized the critical role that teachers play in making this strategy successful. In regard to how the administration can assist teachers and motivate teachers to 'buy into' the strategy P2 made the following comment:

You always have to "sell" certain aspects. It is not to be assumed automatically that a teacher who wants to teach and is prepared professionally to teach a particular course or discipline, it is not to be assumed that that teacher without motivation, without assistance in preparation and professional development that all of them will have the same level of sensitivity or inclination to respond to at risk students. We need to promote it, we need to sell it in that sense we need to continue to support it from the administration in both structure and in terms of staff development. Because if you don't it won't work. It is not something that happens automatically. (P2:4)

The model in the ideal is that the subject teachers will refer things to the home room teacher - but remember each subject teacher is also in part an at risk teacher so that if the subject teacher can handle it there it is okay, but, if there is a student that has significant difficulty, if there is need for parental involvement, and if that student takes seven courses here you don't expect seven teachers to phone home. You have a system whereby the phone communication is with the TA and there is some efficiency and collecting of information that allows things to function. (P2:6 )

When asked about the success rate of the strategy, P2 was a bit defensive and suggested that due to a change in administrative and teaching staff it was still too early to evaluate the strategy. P2 was still committed to the strategy and was convinced it would be beneficial in reducing the number of dropouts by providing what he perceived to be the fundamental element of the strategy - an increased connection between at risk students and school staff.

### General strategies

For most schools there were no specific strategies initiated in order to deal with retaining at risk students. Instead, most principals incorporated procedures that responded to the needs of at risk students without specifically identifying a particular group of students as a impetus for adopting the procedure. Many of these reactive strategies dealt with individual student scenarios rather than responding to general trends. Most principals had very definite ideas as to how the schools assist at risk students without suggesting that such assistance was a strategy. In order to organize some of these ideas this section will group these unofficial strategies into themes. These themes consist of strategies involving teachers, programming, school administration, second chance alternatives and finally, a few other ideas that do not fit a specific theme.

With each of the themes selected there is some overlap between the categories. This separation is not meant to indicate that the principals suggest that one theme is separate from another. Many principals adopted a varied approach that responded to at risk students with all available resources that incorporated some or all of the following themes.

Teachers. All of the principals recognized and talked about how teachers were central to any successful approach in dealing with at risk students. As a strategy principals emphasized that quality teachers were needed to deal with at risk students. Principals described how even quality individual teachers vary in how they approach at risk students. Common elements among the teachers' tactics were developing a relationship with students, changing pedagogical techniques to meet individual needs, the early identification of at risk students and, from an administrative position, the importance of matching compatible students and staff together.

Some of the general comments made about teachers included:

[M]ake sure that classroom teachers are involved [in all strategy development].  
(P1:2)

We try to work with the classroom teachers who teach them. To meet and decide what to do with the kid and everybody try to operate on a sensible method of dealing with these kids. But we lose quite a few of them. This is not a result of research but is just an observation. (P4:4)

The advice to our teachers is really pretty simple - No individual has the right to interrupt your educational plan for that period. You have to deal with that kid in such a way that that kid doesn't get away with interrupting. Use all your skills to persuade the kid from continuing and if that is not possible then you had better send that kid to me. Because you have to get on with that other business it is too important for you to let one kid screw it up for everyone. (P5:8)

Many principals elaborated on the role of a teacher:

I think we are in some ways inflexible and in some ways overly flexible that they really don't know at any time what is expected of them. The teachers who are very successful with them are the ones who are very straight and open about this is what you will do, this is what you will learn, this is how you will learn it. This is when you hand in this and I'm not talking about inflexibility because that doesn't work either but I am suggesting that we have to be very conscious of the structure that they need. (P7:4)

I think the teachers in every classroom give that student special attention, and provide all kinds of encouragement, and try to maintain that sense of belonging and the counsellors and the resource teachers. I think a lot of the kids who are dropping out are finding the work academically difficult mostly because when you miss Tuesday it is tough to do Wednesday, and when you can't do Wednesday's you can't do Thursday's stuff, so that is a real cycle that sometimes a little help from a teacher after school can break that. We all look upon dropouts as a failure on our part and we would like there not to be any. (P7:12)

If a kid leaves your class you are a failure and there is a sense of loss. Besides which he takes a \$39 text book with him usually. A real loss. (P7:12)

The one thing that I feel, and this is my own particular view of the world and human nature and teachers included in that aspect of life. My consideration has been to provide a little more structure in what we do because teachers, their first responsibilities is to be prepared to teach the subjects they have prepared and been assigned to. And that is their natural inclination, so when we ask them to do this aspect of their life we owe them, I think, a little bit of help and guidance, support, structure. (P2:5)

A few principals recognized that some teachers had greater success with at risk students than others. Through the interview it was possible to recognize some principals' attempt at probing into the individual characteristics of some of their schools' more successful teachers in an attempt to identify the elements of teaching strategies that make them successful. Some of the comments describing what makes a good teacher:

Well they are discouraged and alienated to start with when you first meet them. They are often involved in a lot of antisocial behavior. I think what they respond to is personality and if people were to do a study that I suspect the personality of people who handle kids in that situation being more critical than any particular program. I think these kids will come and perform for the right kind of person. You can see it in a school. They will cluster around certain teachers . . . these vulnerable kids need teachers that have that quality of personality which attracts them. (P4:7)

[I]t is a lot of characteristics. Strong personality, [a] confident person who isn't always judgmental, who is very encouraging, who knows how to be light hearted with kids who are difficult to be light hearted with. A good listener, they have to sense that this person really cares about them. . . . These guys do not need weeping willows but they need strong confident, well adjusted happy people who give them the real feeling that they care about them, and would go to great lengths for them. Including calling them up at home and saying get to school. That sort of thing. It has to be based on a lot of personal attachment. (P4:8)

Well, I think the front line is the class room teacher, a very supportive, caring, and I'm repeating myself, teacher but who really believes that a student should be in school and will follow it up with a personal phone call and notes and contact with the parents and with interviews with the student is one of the best things you can do. (P6:4)

I guess in high school you have got to have a caring concerned school and you need teachers that are that way and go the extra mile. Make the kid feel worthwhile. (P6:3)

The qualities of the teachers that were effective in working with at risk students were also effective in working with most students. Principals recognized that teachers utilized different individual strategies to be successful. Part of the administrative task was in matching teachers with at risk students and in providing quality personal contact between teachers and at risk students.

Another intervention with at risk kids is put them with the right teachers. Like, that is the one thing about individualized time-tabling - it is a pain in the neck for administrators but it is great for kids. (P6:8)

If a kid comes in and asks for teachers, we give them because it is a win-win situation. If the kid wants the teacher - you tell the teacher that the kid wants them and you have already established a great thing. (P6:8)

[I] wish to hire an adult with a mandate to deal with kids missing school. To be a bulldog and chase these kids down and make that personal contact because that is where the payoff is. If they know you have somebody committed to that kid being in school and he is going to talk to the kid and stick with that kid I think you have a chance at success. (P1:6)

Because it takes time - an awful lot of time and probably it is going to mean four or five rejections for every success but it is just that we measure it on that basis. Four

or five to one - is it worth it? Well hey, if you are that one it is really worth it. And that is what we have to get into perspective. (P1:7)

P1 was the most outspoken about the need for more personal contact as a strategy to combat dropping out. While personally he perceives this contact to represent the best strategy, he also recognizes the realities of financial restraint precluding any significant changes that would provide for more personal contact. During the interview P1 explained his understanding:

We save a lot of kids academically that way by making a significant hook-up with an individual. We don't do that with kids who are categorized as malcontents or uninterested in school or bored with school or on dope or drugs or alcohol or whatever. We just don't do that for those kids. I think there is an underlying thought that if they are not in school then they are not having a negative influence on our student body. They are not in our face so the problem does not have to be thought about. But I think that is one of the things that we have to examine. If you can save kids academically by reaching out to them on a one to one basis then maybe we have to start doing some reaching out on a one to one basis with students who are dropping out of school. We try to do that but yet we are not very successful. (P1:5)

The number of students to significant adults plays a role and I don't think our society can afford teachers being assigned on a basis of 8:1 through out. Maybe a little smaller ratio would give that significant person an opportunity to have a greater impact on the kids. And therefore keep them better connected to the school. I don't think that is going to happen in our present climate however. I don't think any answer which has a significant financial implication short term will be an answer that is acceptable to school divisions . . . in spite of the fact that you can intellectualize that it just won't see the light of day. So it won't happen. (P1:13)

Principals agree that a successful strategy for at risk students must involve teachers. More specifically, those quality teachers that have a special disposition, however mysterious or indefinable, to work with these students. The one characteristic that emerged

from the principals was the idea of personal contact between at risk students and the teachers who work successfully with them. However, despite recognizing the link between teachers and at risk students most principals did not have a strategy that utilized this connection.

Programming. Strategies involving programming included the relevance of the programs offered, the flexibility, the variety, the specific adaptation of programming to meet student needs and the general adaptation of programming to meet the needs of students. Programs that meet the needs of at risk students are only one element of this program manipulation. Many changes are directed at the entire school population or other segments of the population and only indirectly affect at risk students. Principals generally did not see program changes as a complete solution to solving dropouts but it was a method of adapting the present structure to better meet the needs of at risk students. Many of the programming changes represent high profile strategies which also serve to answer some of the perceived criticism of not adequately addressing the needs of these students. As was pointed out earlier programing also offers an opportunity for principals to do something specific for potential dropouts even if the actual benefits are dubious.

Some ideas about programming strategies were presented earlier under principal perceptions about schools. Principals expressed the need to adapt to changing expectations in society and the need to include relevancy as a central component of programs. P3 indicated:

We will have to look at very very carefully as to how relevant is the programing to the students. Not how relevant is it to me and how relevant may society consider it to be but we may have to reexamine how relevant some of the programming that we request students, some of the hoops that they have to jump through. (P3:14)

In improving relevancy principals expected to reduce the boredom factor of many at risk students. Reducing boredom, however, is still a long way from achieving a school's educational goals. P4 identified the futility of program manipulation and cautioned: "But every time you invent one you discover it only helps a particular slice, that the success rate is not so wonderful" (P4:2). Despite the ineffectiveness of programming it was used by most principals as a basic strategy.

Program manipulation as a strategy for helping at risk students was also valued as an alternative approach for students who, for whatever reason, were out of step with the traditional classroom pace and for whom getting back on track was difficult. Principals were still searching for some means by which to channel students back into the regular classroom. A few of the remarks included:

We haven't gone that extra step yet where we can say to the student that okay, when you come back you will pick up the program where you left off and don't worry about what is happening and get this problem resolved. In terms of working with these individuals that is the next step. (P3:5)

Be prepared to make exceptions to the rules to cater to individual student's needs. (P1:6)

We would have to look at changing some of our programming. The one thing that we have been wrapping around just from the small numbers [of dropouts] that we have now is looking at what becomes an element of staffing (convincing the board and so on) that some schools have transition classes or reentry classes and what we have been talking about here is we feel we are getting very close to the stage where we need a class with a teacher where, if a student will operate with that teacher through some kind of semi correspondence situation or unit based programming, where they come in and do a unit and if they are away from home and then come back a week later they can pick up and carry on from where they were. Now they have missed a whole week of classes and you make it up or you get 0 and the test is on Tuesday after school and if you want to get extra help then come and see me at 8

in the morning - well that is not usually the kind of student who is going to do that. So, that is definitely one of the strategies that we have been looking at particularly with the grade 9s and 10s. (P3:4)

I think what you have to do is create a safety net and allow kids to move at their own pace and decelerate their rate of learning and make sure they are in to mastery learning and into a caring and rewarding system . . . I don't know if you can do this for the whole population but you can do it if you have the right teacher and the right system it is possible. (P6:3)

Another purpose of program manipulation as a strategy for dealing with at risk students was to provide programs that included extra curricular activities and off campus programs that serve to retain a distant yet distinct connection between school and student. The expectation is that in time and possible maturation the student will maintain enough contact with the school to encourage reentry into the regular programming when it becomes more appropriate. By retaining a loose and often tenuous foothold with the school the student is not quite a dropout and remains potentially salvageable.

A school that has a variety of things in it can appeal to kids. We have some kids that we hang on to because they are particularly interested in one thing. . . . They would have been long gone if it weren't for that one thing which is more important to them than anything. . . . Sometimes the basketball team is the very thing that keeps him here for the year. Maybe he will grow up enough in that year for us to hook him in for another year and help him grow up. If you are busy kicking people off things then you may be kicking them off the one thing that means most to some of these vulnerable characters. . . . Here I think we have 85 different extra curricular activities. So, that is very important. It is the ones that are vulnerable that need it the most. And the strong ones need more than a straight academic program. They need to leave school with abilities developed to have to be leaders at different things. (P4:11)

Vary program offerings to appeal to more students. (P1:2)

We have two very specific programs. We have a program here for teenage mothers. They bring their babies with them and there is day care provided within the school. It is not a day care because we are not licensed but it is an infant development lab and we use it to provide day care for teenage mothers and a teaching practicum for students in the family studies program. So that is there and serves a maximum of 12 students at a time and has made it possible for them to continue in school where they probably couldn't have otherwise as infant day care is very expensive and not available in large quantities in Winnipeg. So that is one program that has been relatively successful but when we talk about dropout rates our dropout rate in there is certainly very high but it is not as high as it might be otherwise as it is a very high risk group. If we retain 35% which is probably what we are retaining that is good because it would be 0% otherwise but it is still not perfect . . . Another program which is also here and has been here for a long time is an individualized study program for senior high students. Along with that hook of the peer group there is another group of kids that really don't work well in a classroom setting. This is a teacher directed program but it is individualized and there is maybe 15 kids in a classroom during regular school hours and instead of going to a math class during their math period they will go to room 10 where they will work on their math program with a set of modules, not correspondence courses but something similar. We have two rooms going at all times. . . . Basically they work at their own speed, at their own rate, we use it for kids who can't deal with the structure of a classroom, can't bear to sit still that long or can't stop talking or bear or whatever. (P7:5)

Individual courses that keep kids coming back. . . . Art is another one that is a hook for some kids, music is another one. Business education although that is not as strong as I would like it to be but it is something that brings kids into the building and I really feel that once we get them into the building we can get to work with them. (P7:6)

There are a lot of things everybody is searching for an answer but I guess the answer is a whole variety of strategies. One is straight offering of a variety of combinations of levels of courses and the possibility of integration depending on how people read the kid. For example if you have a really weak student with very weak reading skills you might put him in an 04 class but if the resource teacher or anybody working with the kid feels that this kid would perform integrated into a

different level of class with support by a teacher assistance we do that to. Depending on how the kid is reacting. We have different levels of courses and we have integration in what would normally be considered inappropriate levels for the kid with support by teacher assistants who can work one on one with somebody. (P4:3)

Then as last ditch efforts the division has a program called ACE, I forget what the letters stand for, but it is off site. It is in a strip mall where students who just can't cope in school but want to continue go to this ACE program where they meet in seminar and then go out on work experience. There are various work experience programs, school based work experience programs, of course there is access to all of the traditional social agencies, social work and all that sort of thing. (P4:3)

Principals appeared very supportive of initiating programs for students at the fringe of school involvement. P4's description of the ACE program as a "last ditch effort" located off site, focusing on work experience rather than academic material, and with "all" of the potential social agencies represents a wishful attempt to resolve the problem based more on hope than a thought out strategy.

Part of the discussion on programming involved offering an appropriate type of programming that reflected the needs of the students and the community. Principal P6 spoke of the need to focus on the non-academic 75% by increasing the vocational component of schools rather than the 25% minority who go on to university. Many principals introduced the balance between academic and vocational programming streams as a means of providing programs that help to keep students in school longer. Some of the comments made in this area were:

The very academic emphasis here and that you know the kids will say things like this school is the second best school in the province next to Ravenscourt and so on. That wasn't a conscious strategy to get kids from dropping out. That was more a conscious strategy on my part when I came here to battle the 'private superiority' of the private school syndrome. (P3:4)

The one program that has really been successful in our division here has been the vocational education, cooperative education where the students spend part of the time in school and then spend part of the time working in an industry or work place that they feel they would like to be in when they leave high school. That is proven to be a very successful program in pulling back in the dropouts. (P3:14)

Principal P7 was not convinced that "tinkering" with programming was going to make any significant difference for at risk students. P7 cautioned that:

There may be curricular things that we could do as a province or as a country that would make kids hook in better but I don't think it would make much of a difference. If you don't want to learn stuff you don't want to learn stuff and it doesn't matter what the stuff is. If you don't like to learn you don't like to learn. Certainly we could make it more interesting. I'm not saying that teachers should be dull and boring I just don't think that the whole debate over teaching Astronomy instead of teaching kids Chemistry would be more interested. I don't think it makes a bit of difference. (P7:4)

Programming manipulation as a strategy used by principals represented a wide range of rationales and techniques that address the needs of all students. Principals did not consider programming changes to represent a solution to solving the problems of at risk students. It was, however, a visible effort that did address some of the desire for program relevancy and provided a specific avenue of intervention where few other options appeared to exist. In addition programming offered a safety net for students temporarily forced to the fringes of school life. In providing a tenuous hook for students either academically or through extracurricular activities the school maintains contact with a student which may provide a source from which to build in the future. Changes in programming were not perceived to be the only answer but they did provide an attainable first step.

Administration. The administrative strategies raised in the interviews dealt with a wide range of ideas. Apparent in many of the interviews was the limited success in dealing with at risk students and the corresponding level of frustration principals experienced in continually dealing with at risk students. Strategically this is significant because it represents a degree of apathy among the principals. When administrative efforts to retain students were made, the primary strategy was to monitor student attendance. Many principals also used attendance as a strategy by informing parents of student absenteeism. The limited rate of return on these efforts has not dissuaded principals from continuing to monitor attendance as a primary strategy to combat dropouts. Other secondary strategies that pertain to administration included insight into one principal's personal approach to dealing with at risk students, ideas about restructuring the entire school system, and some implications of older students returning to the classroom.

Frustration as an element in dealing with at risk students permeated many of the principals efforts to find strategies. Before examining some of the administrative strategies it may be useful to explore some of the sentiments that existed. Some of these remarks were recorded earlier under the heading of principals' perceptions.

It is hard to use that term successful when it is such a frustration dealing with [students dropping out]. If success is measured by the number of kids you keep in school, then yes. But, boy do you ever pay a price for that. Kids look upon you in raising problems of attendance with them as hassling them. Let's face it. It is very difficult to go through the course of a day and see 15 youngsters regarding attendance problems and still maintain a positive, up beat, warm kind of a personality. At some point you get frustrated with it. (P1:9)

I guess if I'm honest I can imagine that there will always be [dropouts]. It will be very hard to reduce the number of dropouts over a year from what we have. I think that we could do better, and should do better, but you hit a kind of number where I suspect it would be unrealistic to expect that you are going to do very much better.

Even with an infusion of a lot of resources. I think there are diminishing returns after a while. (P4:8)

I think by now you become a little realistic that there is [only] so much you can do and because you are getting the product of the dysfunctional home and the poor parenting that there is only so much you can do with certain numbers of kids. . . . Lord, we could just put in so much time and so many resources with that group of kids already that just the thought that I might spend more of my time on it is almost repugnant. (P5:12)

You can always do more. You can always spend a little bit more energy into it . . . Make more phone calls, make more parental contacts, interview, and call more kids down to the office to spend time with them. It is just the time spent, if you were just more energetic to make more personal contact with the kids themselves and with their parents and that kind of thing. (P5:5)

If we feel the problem is that they are failing, we try to make sure that it is referred to resource and if it is a social or abusive situation, or with chemicals or drugs we try to bring guidance in and we do have an ESS group, (educational support services) with a psychologist and a social worker but we are a bit overwhelmed. (P6:5)

I think that we probably throw more resources into [students who show sudden changes] because it is so apparent that the early potential is there and we know that we have a chance to deal with this because we can see the product at the beginning that the kid was achieving at one time so let's try to find out what is going on. We are probably more aggressive in those situations. (P5:10)

P7 described the dropout as a "fade away" which might suggest that these students were not the recipients of intervention strategies because they did not demonstrate sudden change, disruptive behaviour, or some other categorical display that would have given them access to a specific program of assistance. They may not have been "bad" enough to warrant developing a strategy but are still at risk of dropping out of school.

Student attendance and keeping tabs on students not in school was a strategy that received a great deal of attention, time and effort on the part of the school administration but the principals did not seem satisfied with the results. Efforts to keep track of student attendance only succeeded in reemphasizing the importance of being in school in order to succeed at school. For principals attendance was a problem that was closely associated with at risk students without really having a strategy to do anything other than monitor the situation. When attendance was used as a strategy, it usually involved using a poor attendance record as a tool for removing at risk students from the school registry as a means of avoiding dealing with the problem. When examined in conjunction with the preceding remarks about frustration and principal apathy, attendance policy offered principals a method with which they believed they could readily identify at risk students. Such identification only exasperated the principals' inability to overcome the dropout problem and represented a vicious cycle. The more principals monitored attendance the more it became apparent that attendance was fundamental to school success and that dropouts were generally poor attenders. Reaffirming this perception coupled with a lack of success in improving attendance for these students in turn added to the principals' frustration.

Some of the comments on using attendance as a strategy were:

The attendance policy identifies troubled kids and formalizes the dropout process.  
(P1:4)

We follow something that the Catholics do - we have a kind of confession where a student will say 'yes I skipped those classes but I'm prepared to commit to you on paper'. So, we have a reinstatement process. (P1:5)

Attendance is not a question of punitive measures it should really be a question of what positive things can we do to get that kid to come here. (P1:8)

We have a strict attendance policy we are taking a hard look at. I think kids have to be in school to learn. (P6:4)

I think our attendance policy on the one hand makes it look as if we are through kicking kids out into the cold cruel world. Okay kid, you have 16 absences you are not going to get your credit in physics now good bye. (P7:6)

The fact that we are tightening up is having a positive impact on some of these fade away types because they are saying you really mean it and maybe I won't start skipping. Because once a kid starts skipping the odd day it becomes easier and easier until they ultimately fall. While it is almost contradictory to say that a strict attendance policy helps prevent dropouts I believe it does. While it doesn't prevent the hard core but it is the easily swayed ones that will come if there is enough pressure on them the strict policies deal with them quite well. And that is probably the majority of the dropouts. (P7:6)

Principals' reliance on attendance as an indicator of students at risk is understandable. In a situation where principals are frustrated by the the futile attempts to resolve the dropout phenomenon, monitoring the attendance offers two factors that principals can rely on. First, the data on student absenteeism provides concrete evidence that is readily available and from which the principals rationalize why individual students should not be in school. Second, by being able to identify these students and rationalizing why the students are at risk of dropping out (or are being kicked out) the principal shifts the onus of responsibility from the school to the student and/or parent. In a scenario where principals are expressing their frustration at dealing successfully with these students, attendance offers a relatively appealing solution. Unfortunately the literature did not support the principals' assumption that attendance was a reliable indicator of dropping out. The allure of trying to alleviate the frustration may have influenced principals to seek a solution in the form of a scapegoat that resolves the problem by removing the students from the school for truancy. From the interview data the principals did not consider the implications of the attendance policy on the dropout phenomenon.

One of the strategies involving attendance utilized automatic telephone calls home for any student that missed a class. This activity personifies how some principals "pass the buck" on to parents who, it was hoped, would motivate the students into attending more regularly without the school taking any responsibility. Comments regarding a computerized telephone system included:

[The school is] looking at adding a phone home computer program to contact parents for each absence. (P1:9)

There are a lot of efforts made on the straight attendance thing and keeping kids engaged. If they start missing, then it is very hard for them to get reengaged. So, we even have an evening secretary to phone home. . . . We have a computer scanning system where attendance is scanned class by class and by 4pm you can tell who missed what period and we have an evening shift secretary who comes and phones parents of kids, especially grade 10s and 11s. If you catch something early the chances are you can avoid a dropout. (P4:9)

We are on individualized time-tabling and we are on a computerized phoning system so every kid is phoned for every class he misses every day. (P6:1)

Individual principals suggested different administrative strategies. Some of these were:

For some, a small percentage, they have a specialized, individualized educational plan. Which means that all of the rules of a school are adapted to the kid. (P4:3)

If I had not bent on that rule she would have quit school - she would have become a dropout. (P5:3)

[The semester system] is definitely an advantage it offers because a student is not jeopardizing a whole year or loosing a whole year. Even there some students will disappear in the fall and appear again on Feb 1. (P3:7)

Many principals indicated that as a principal they do not do a lot of the personal dealings with potential dropouts. Interaction with these students was usually dealt with at the vice principal level. The lack of personal contact with at risk students did raise the question about exactly what principals based their perceptions on if it was not on personal contact. Certainly past experience in the positions of vice principal or teacher in dealing with at risk students, and the relatively serious cases that recently have been passed on by vice principals provide some of the insight. Principal P2 described a personal approach to convincing a student to stay in school.

What I try to say to young people very quickly is "Who is the person over whom you have the most influence?" If I can make that person reflect, and I know that it is a challenge for young people because they are young. But if I can make them reflect on the person that I can control and change most is myself, then, if I can't change my Mom a great deal, I know she should but that is no. . .[solution] and I can't force her to change. . . but I can change myself, is there enough possibility of changing myself that I can get along with my Mom and still stay in school and be successful - that is the strategy that I will use if I have a person who I judge to have the capacity to work this thing through. Because every one of us has to concede I believe that we have a hard time changing ourselves but nevertheless it is there rather than me changing you or you changing me. So, if you have the level of maturity in that young person potentially, I engage in that type of dialogue. Not saying that I agree with you that your Mom is terrible - I don't say that but saying that look you and I certainly I have no real reason to believe that I can change things for you at home. I can't do that. We can in this school provide you with the good teacher, safe comfortable place, we guarantee that. Can you adjust enough so that you can come to school ready to participate and benefit. That is a general framework. There are different cases but that is the framework from which I would like to work. (P2:7)

Principal P3 described a different type of interaction with one at risk student as demonstrated by:

There was a lot of intervention and counselling. There was a lot of fighting and agreement and disagreement and meetings and cajoling and threatening and so on but she is graduating. (P3:7)

Without regular contact many principals missed the opportunity of working with the students. The lack of direct interaction may affect principals' perceptions of the phenomenon and in turn insight into what strategies should be introduced.

Principal P7 talked about changes to school structure as the only realistic strategy for meeting the needs of at risk students.

We probably could structure differently. I think the balance becomes if we structure differently to maintain or retain these [at risk students] what kind of damage are we doing to the others. We would need to get away from the concentration on the subject matter and develop groupings. . . . They need a intact group that they can work with all day and every day. They need probably a different approach to subject matter they are not going to do the hard sciences. It is certainly possible to structure a school that way but the kids on the other end -the kids we now have who are being awarded scholarships to Harvard, Yale, McGill and Queen's would do fine in that system too but they wouldn't get nearly the same high quality academic instruction they are getting now. Because teachers' focus would be on the social skills perhaps, a catch phrase I don't like - but getting along with one another and getting along with people in the work force and getting along with etc etc. because that is what they are really lacking. If you spend a lot of time doing that you can't teach much physics. So I think there is a need for a different structure and I don't know that any school can do both and I don't know what the reputation would be of a school that set out to do that. Kids would not go there first that is for sure or their parents would not let them go there first. . . . I don't know if a single public high school can do both. (P7:8)

The strategy of giving students a second chance and encouraging older students to return to the classrooms was lauded by some principals. Some of the comments included:

We have to get better at allowing kids to drop back in. (P5:9)

Well with respect to second chance they drop back into here until they are 21 and after they drop into the Adult Ed. Center. We will have kids who have been in and out of school six or seven times before they graduate. . . . I think that that second chance is always there and I think we take it for granted that kids do move in and out a lot. I guess one of the solutions to the problem is to make that more possible. And more desirable and socially acceptable or whatever. (P7:12)

You must be careful never to say that the school is gone or finished. As long as you keep the door open you never know who is going to come walking in. Some of the kids that I have seen walk back in six months, a year, 18 months later I tell you showed me more courage by walking through that front door than they could show in many, many other ways because this is the scene of their failure. You must make sure that when they leave, if they leave, that you give them a very strong message that they recognize that if the door is open and if they ever want to come and talk about coming back to school to give me a call and we will talk. You are not going to have to go through abuse in order to get back in the school. So many kids don't do that because they are ashamed, they are humiliated about what happened that led them to losing credit or dropping out of school and they just can't screw up the courage to come back and face the music. So what we have got to do is make sure the music they have got to face is not as dramatic as all that. If it stands in the way of the kid coming back then he probably won't. We have to remove those impediments as best we can. (P1:6)

I guess if it comes to a solution for the dropout problem I would rather spend time and energy giving people that second chance than trying to maintain or retain here a 17 year old who isn't getting any benefit from it and maybe he would get a benefit from it if he came back when he was 19. (P7:12)

Second chance exists but I don't think we publicize it very well that it would be a good thing to do. That your friends won't think you are a wimp if you came back to school. Billboards on the bus and stuff like that. (P7:12)

I think it is a real benefit to have the older students here. It really gives a balance to the building. (P5:1)

Principal P7 was generally supportive of offering programs that encouraged students to get back to school but also had a few reservations.

One of the things that stands in the way and particularly with six years school is that I am not keen to have a lot of 20 year olds coming back to school for a variety of reasons good and bad mixing with my 12 year olds. I think it is easier in a school with grades 10-12. It is not that I mind the age but you don't know what you are getting when you get a 20 year old that you haven't met before. But I think there will be much more of that as time goes on and certainly the schools are encouraging it as schools are allowed to accept kids up to the age of 21 and then we are supposed to refer them to the adult education center. In the suburban districts where there is not an adult education center they are providing a lot of programming for adult students and I think most of us will. (P7:12)

The reality is kids, young adults, early 20's with a host of problems lots of financial problems, early responsibilities and lots of potential for other types of problems with drugs and alcohol etc etc. It is not an easy mix but it is one that we are going to have to look at. (P7:12)

Despite some misgivings about having older students in the school by P7 most principals were in favour of encouraging students who had previously left school to return. This position was emphasized by P6 who relied heavily on adult students to maintain the number of students in the school and the number of teaching staff.

The primary strategy pertaining to administration involved student attendance. Principals closely monitored attendance and in many cases used absenteeism as tool to dismiss students. There was a sense that principals used attendance as a means of alleviating the frustration that existed at their inability to resolve the dropout phenomenon. Instead, principals rationalized that students must be in school to learn and the onus of insuring that students are in school lies with the individual student or parents but not with

the school. To help monitor attendance principals used computer generated phone calls home for each absence. Other strategies included one principal's personal approach to student counselling, recommendations for changing school structure, and some insight into increasing the number of adult students in the school.

Other Strategies A common strategy used by most principals was to apply all the resources available to help solve the dropout problem. This "shot gun" approach suggested a desperate measure to make an impact on the phenomenon without really knowing what will work. When no specific solution existed students were exposed to a battery of counsellors, teachers, vice principals, external counsellors, and internal resource teachers in the hope of finding the cause of a student's decision to drop out. This approach is neither right or wrong but indicates that principals were grappling for solutions to the problem. The multiple approach strategy also has the appearance of doing a great deal to address the needs of at risk students. Some of the ideas expressed were:

You employ the services of your three guidance counsellors, you employ the services of your two resource teachers, you rely on the good graces of the classroom teacher to be sympathetic with the individuals coming in with the bag of problems and the academic delays in the hopes that they will be able to show the empathy to this child to make him feel welcome. The number of things that you can do to make this child feel welcome - you can put him in touch with support services through the guidance counsellors and child guidance clinic. All of that can be put in place but if the situation back [home] has not changed at all and is the same old stuff going on at home - and if this is a street kid and is basically up till 1 am during May and June shooting baskets and the parents don't really even know where they are then the chances of your succeeding are probably pretty minimal. (P5:3)

So interim report cards, calls home, interventions with guidance and resource and sometimes the interventions start to accelerate because you can get psychology and social work involved and sometimes we find out the kid has a drug and alcohol problem and involve AFM. We probably spend the bulk of our time on behalf of

that group of kids who are experiencing the most problems and ultimately are our school dropouts. (P5:5)

It would be really tough in most schools to do a large number of very visible things about dropouts and to divert a lot of resources without both parents and teachers complaining in a sense that your resources are scarce and if you take them for that you are taking them from somewhere else. The balancing act is something that administrators are finding very difficult. However, if we had any really good ideas we would certainly implement them. (P7:9)

Basically we try to give them a clean slate and the ones that are highest priority, highest risk we try to deal with in a monthly meeting. So, there are other support systems there. Resource, guidance, and ESS, we have peer tutoring, the mentorship program and we also have an 04 program I think you have heard of that which is essentially for slow learners. We try not to water down the curriculum - we try but it is very difficult some times. Some of the kids that you get - their level of ability is really difficult to work with but that helps. (P6:6)

We also have the funding in Manitoba too. That makes a difference too, we have to have identified L1s, L2s, and L3s - and we got them. We have resources at high school which is unusual and that is a real bonus. It helps you identify people to get the funding and then bring in some solutions to solve the problems. (P6:6)

The principals also had a number of strategies that did not fit into any of the above categories. Some of these were:

As far as the strategies to combat the dropout problem I think it is communication with the home, it is communication with the student that the situation is starting to fall apart then our staff are pretty much tuned in to the services of our guidance department and the resource area. (P5:4)

It is nothing but lots and lots of time that is spent. (P5:5)

I think what you do then is work more with industry and get more partnerships in [education], more relevancy in their learning. We don't do that. (P6:8)

I don't think [dealing with dropouts] is a separate issue from doing a good job with the kids that are here. We like to think, and we are probably incorrect, but that if we do a good job in the classroom the kids who are here will do better and those who are here will stay. (P7:4)

I think that if we know that they are likely to drop out then we are fairly successful at [preventing a student from dropping out]. The teachers work very hard to keep the kids in class and keep them working, to be concerned about them, to phone when they are away. The counsellors are extremely skilled at sort of getting them over a tough time if it is a very temporary sort of my assignments are all due, and I am going to go home and kill myself and it is a terrible life, those kinds of short term frustrations they are very skilled at working with. The kid who sort of just fades away bit by bit is tougher to deal with. (P7:6)

### Summary

The research question asked: "What strategies are in place in this school to deal with dropouts and what rationale was used to develop these strategies?" Two principals were not concerned with the dropout phenomenon and therefore did not put a priority on developing strategies to respond. One principal conceded that it was just "luck" that his school was located in an area where dropouts were not a problem due to parental support in the school's catchment area. The second principal considered the focus of the school's efforts should be directed toward the majority of students who attended school regularly and not on those who strayed. In contrast one principal had implemented a specific strategy that had been created to respond to the dropout phenomenon. By introducing a home room each day and dividing students identified as at risk among all staff the principal was creating a staff student interaction and monitoring of these students. Staff were considered mentors for these students and were expected to help resolve student problems before they festered into insurmountable problems that forced them from school. The initiative to create a strategy which is directed to address the needs of at risk students was

largely due to the level of concern of the school principal. The remaining four principals showed various levels of concern about the dropout phenomenon, but the concern had not yet translated into implementing any specific strategy to address the problem. Among all of the principals' general strategies, were themes categorized according to teacher, program, and administrative orientations.

Teachers were recognized by all principals as being the fundamental component of any successful strategy in working with students. While principals could identify teachers who were adept at working with at risk students, they were less able to isolate the attributes that enable teachers to triumph where others failed. Principals generally did not utilize teachers in any specific strategy to deal with dropouts. Program manipulations as a strategy involved all students and not just at risk students. Principals did not consider programming changes to represent a comprehensive solution. It was, however, a visible effort that addressed some of the desire for increased program relevancy and provided a specific avenue of intervention where few other options appeared to exist. Principals believed that in providing a tenuous hook for students either academically or through extracurricular activities the school maintained contact with a student which might provide a source from which to build in the future. Changes in programming were not perceived to be the only answer but they did provide an attainable first step.

Administrative strategies dealt mainly with student attendance. Principals relied on the attendance policy to formalize the drop out process. Students missing school repeatedly were removed from the school register. While principals did not rationalize their actions it would be fair to extrapolate that by expelling students from school, principals no longer had to deal with the frustration of not being able to find a solution to these students' problems. Using absenteeism as a lever to remove students from the registrar, also served to put the onus of responsibility for attending school on the students and parents rather than

the school. As a strategy, using attendance did not resolve the underlying causes of dropping out but eliminated the situation all together. Increasing the adult or drop-back-in component of schools was one alternative that was considered to have some potential for the future. Other strategies represented a wide range of approaches designed to cover as many basis as possible in attempting to identify the cause or causes of a students' at riskness. While principals had no solutions they considered a wide variety of strategies to address the dropout phenomenon.

CHAPTER SIX  
CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND  
SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Conclusions

Summary of Findings

- Principals had sincere concerns about the phenomenon of dropouts but were reluctant to accept responsibility due to a host of external factors, including the roles of individual students, the home, and society which collectively diffused principals' motivation to invoke change.
- The study found principals do not have well thought out views regarding dropouts, had a tendency to use stereotypes, did not actively collect dropout data, and were not familiar with current research findings.
- Most principals had not introduced any specific strategy to retain students and there was a general lack of imagination in considering possible alternatives.
- The issue of dropouts competes with other issues in terms of a principal's priority. Judging from their comments, that the dropout phenomenon was important but the absence of strategies imposed by the schools left questions about what priority the issue actually had. If actions speak louder than words, then the data would suggest dropouts, while important, are **not** as high a priority as some of the dialogue might suggest.

### Principals' Perceptions

All of the principals interviewed were eager to discuss dropouts. As a few of the principals indicated, when a small percentage of the student population consumes the majority of administrative time and frustration, there is a tendency to be preoccupied with resolving this perceived problem. The students considered most at risk of dropping out were those with the greatest variance from the school norms. Students who dominate administrative time by having daily problems or by being unacceptably absent, or who have failing grades were considered at risk. While principals demonstrated concern about dropouts, there was little evidence to suggest that they were doing anything about the situation.

General comments. Principals' perceptions of school dropouts encompass a wide range of insights and ideas about the dropout phenomenon. The interviews provided both general and specific data about the principals' perceptions. Specific data, including individual school dropout data, were not gathered by most schools. When data were gathered they were incomplete and incompatible between schools and could not be synthesized into meaningful comparisons. While the purpose of this study was not to focus on dropout data comparisons, the lack of data and the incompatibility of definitions provided insight into the principals' actions (or lack thereof) and general understanding of the underlying confusion of the phenomenon. Of the three research questions, the one about general perceptions is the most vague but analysis offered the best opportunity for a principal to express perceptions about the phenomenon in his or her own terms.

The absence of clear cut solutions, the complexity of individual at risk factors, the pressure imposed by a national media campaign to find solutions, and a principal's personal experience in dealing with at risk students all contributed to a principal's understanding of the issue. From the data analysis it was clear that principals were

concerned about students at risk of dropping out of school and most said they wanted to improve the situation. The interview data identified three different responses by principals to the pressure of finding solutions. The first was to implement changes that address the perceived needs, as determined by a particular context, in the hope that such changes would produce beneficial results. A second response was to continue to monitor the dropout situation in the hope that some alternative strategy would become apparent in the near future and in the meantime to make minor program changes that might at least superficially alleviate the problem. This response was clearly the most prevalent in the principals interviewed. Third, the response of one principal exemplified not being concerned about dropouts but rather accepted dropping out as natural attrition and instead concentrated efforts on those students attending school regularly and not considered at risk. Each of these three responses of: action; wait-and-see; or no action was rationalized by the principals as being appropriate for a particular school. What was not discernable from the data was whether principals in a different context would utilize the same or a different response mechanism. By the same reasoning, the study was unable to determine whether a particular response was determined by contextual factors, personal convictions, or some combination of influences.

Analysis of the data identified five themes from which to gain insight into the principals' perceptions. These were: concern expressed; personal influence; perception of the school's role; perception of the student's role; and perception of society's role. Each of these areas offered some understanding toward a principal's overall perception.

Concern expressed. Initial analysis identified five principals who were concerned about the dropout phenomenon and two who were not. Of those concerned only one had actually implemented a strategy to address the situation. The other principals concerned had not taken decisive action and focused their interest on a single aspect such as attendance, individual vs. group rights, the system's inherent inequality, and the potential

loss of teacher jobs. The principals not concerned included one determined not to respond and one who claimed to have a 2% dropout rate for which intervention did not seem necessary. A significant finding in the study was the variation in rationale used to articulate each principal's perceptions. Each of the seven principals premised his or her concern, or lack of concern, about the dropout phenomenon on a different basis. Not only are the individual premises worthy of analysis but so too is the diversity of rationale.

Personal influence. One element of the study was to examine the degree to which individual principals had succeeded in imposing personal perspectives regarding school dropouts into school policy. The diversity of rationale used in determining each principal's concern about the dropout phenomenon suggests a principal's perception is influenced either by local school context or by differences among individual principals. These findings are significant because the study purposely attempted to identify typical suburban high schools and avoided using downtown core area or rural schools that might have included more visible contextual differences that could have contributed to the phenomenon. If variation in why principals are concerned about dropouts exists in apparently similar schools, it may be valuable to explore what contributed to the individual differences in perception. Judging by the interview data, no principals indicated any interest group had influenced their personal perceptions and all school policies appeared to coincide with the principal's perceptions. It was not possible to ascertain whether principals adopted the school's position or were influential in creating the school's position. The data seems to suggest that in determining school policy the principal's personal experience consisted of a greater determining factor than did school context. It could be that school context has little or no influence in the formation of principals' perceptions. The variety of perceptions found in the data adds credence to this study's initial premise of the potential influence of the perceptions of school principals in

developing school policy that affects at risk students and the value of exploring those perceptions.

The study found that all principals had, to some extent, influenced school policy regarding dropouts. All principals seemed to be satisfied that their school was doing all that it should be doing with respect to dropouts. The differences in what schools were actually doing for potential dropouts was more a reflection of what the individual principals believed should be done. No principals left the impression that they would do anything differently if given the opportunity (with the exception of what might be accomplished with unlimited resources).

Two principals in particular had distinctly influenced their schools approach to dropouts. One had developed and implemented a specific strategy to help retain students in which there was little doubt that this principal had been central in persuading others to adopt what should be done for dropouts. Another principal had been equally persuasive in convincing a school not to implement a strategy based on his perception that a certain portion of students would always fail or drop out. As a consequence, this principal was not concerned about dropouts but instead focused on the majority of students actually attending classes. This principal's personal experience in a European country appears to have been influential in formulating his perceptions. He suggests that in other countries little is done for students that are not in the academic stream. Based on this experience and his perception that attempts to remedy the at risk problem have not been overly successful, he believes his efforts would be better utilized by applying resources to where they will be more effective: to the entire student population. Significant is how this principal's European experience appears to have shaped the personal perception and how in turn the principal's perception influenced school policy.

Both of these principals had succeeded in imposing their personal perceptions of what strategies should be considered in relation to the dropout phenomenon. The implication is that they had influenced others in adopting their perspective of how the school should react to a given situation. The other five principals had no distinct conviction and were indecisive in comparison. However, it would appear that these principals may have also been successful in imposing their perceptions on schools and what should, or should not, be done as these schools had not taken significant steps to retain students. The platitudes expressed by the majority of principals about "never giving up on a student", "improving program relevancy to better meet their needs" or blaming the family who "put the shape to the package" fail to symbolize leadership in terms of initiating change to address the dropout phenomenon. The capacity for principals to influence the development of policy affecting dropouts was demonstrated in this study but the data suggests that most principals are not compelled to make changes. The consequence of such indecision on the part of principals will be the absence (or lack) of strategies introduced by schools to deal with the phenomenon despite the principal's potential influence to make change. Dropouts are then likely to remain a much talked about but little changed phenomenon in the foreseeable future.

Perceptions of the school's role. The principals' perceptions involving the role of the school involved two main findings. First, the principals recognize the need for schools to change but are overwhelmed and reluctant to shoulder the responsibility for students' failure due to factors that are considered beyond a school's expected jurisdiction. As a result, principals were not actively seeking solutions to the problem and instead were maintaining the status quo. Second, program changes in order to improve relevance and cater to an increasingly diverse population are perceived as a token or minimal change that is not believed to solve the problem. It provides a perception that the school is responding to the needs of these students whether or not the programs succeed in reducing student

dropouts. Principals, as school leaders, were reluctant to say that they did not have solutions or planned strategies for the problem.

Perception of the student's role. Principals recognized the variety of student characteristics that are associated with at risk students. Some of these included students' self concept, the resolution of personal problems, the development of appropriate attitudes, work habits, and aspirations. Consistent with literature, principals perceived students to have the ability to do the academic work but were often thwarted by a tradition of failure. Student responsibility in the learning process was considered by most principals to be fundamental to any successful school strategy to reduce the number of dropouts. Many principals expressed themselves with the metaphor of "You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink" to make the point that the necessary level of responsibility that should be expected on the part of students is noticeably diminished in dropouts. Another issue that dominated principals' perceptions was the inability of schools to compensate for any negative influence of the home. Principals did not seem to recognize that their efforts to attribute the cause of dropping out to external factors created a scapegoat for the school's apparent failure in meeting the needs of these students.

Perception of society's role. Principals perceived society to have played a role in creating the dropout phenomenon in part by holding unrealistic expectations for schools to solve the majority of youth related problems while also expecting higher standards for graduates and lower dropout rates. Principals spoke of society's demand for increased student quality which created some resistance to watering down the curriculum. For many principals efforts to ensure quality contributed to some students' lowered academic performance and in turn a higher dropout rate. Principals believe that any solution to the phenomenon would require changes by society in terms of expectations, resources and values. Principals took their jobs very seriously and despite perceiving unrealistic

demands, they were determined to do the best job they could with the resources they had. Part of the frustration exhibited by the principals stems from a desire to do even more than the limitations of their resources permit. Dropouts symbolize a failure of the system to meet the needs of these students but not a lack of desire to do so. It is with a sense of personal anguish that principals rationalize why schools have not been able to find solutions to the dropout phenomenon.

#### Causes as Perceived by the Principals

Principals evaded accepting responsibility for school dropouts and instead blamed external factors in general, and especially poor school attendance and the influence of the family. In comparison to the analysis of the general perceptions of principals, the examination of causes attributed to dropping out provided relatively detailed insight into principals' perceptions. While most principals emphasized the individualistic nature of the dropout phenomenon, there was also evidence of inconsistency in their perceptions. An example was their tendency to stereotype the identifiable traits of the dropouts at their schools. The principals' understanding of the causes appears to have come through individual experience rather than any specific knowledge of the dropout literature. According to the principals, the causes of dropping out were both individually unique and at the same time largely predictable based on circumstances. Most of the responses were in concurrence with the literature.

Principals' perceptions regarding the causal factors that contribute to a student dropping out of school were analyzed in four themes. These themes were student characteristics, student environment, school environment (with a special focus on school attendance in particular), and the interrelationship among factors.

Student characteristics. Principals generally did not speak of student characteristics as a potential target for resolving the dropout problem. Ethnicity, student self concept, school involvement and student attitudes, work habits and aspirations were, individually and collectively, not considered to be causal and determining factors in dropping out. Instead, these factors were perceived as the manifestations of problems rooted elsewhere. Principals relied on student characteristics as indicators to help identify, or confirm, that some students were at risk of dropping out. However, principals also recognized that just because an individual may have had one or more of these characteristics does not necessarily mean the student is at risk of dropping out. Surprisingly, some of the same principals who acknowledged the fallibility of using characteristics also indicated that they felt they could readily identify dropouts using these characteristics. The unreliability of using student characteristic factors contributed to some of the frustration principals expressed in dealing with dropouts. Likewise, some principals reasoned it would be wrong to ignore these characteristics as a identification tool just because they are not foolproof. Until a more reliable means is found to identify at risk students, these characteristics will continue to be used by principals.

Student environment. Student environmental factors represent such powerful influential forces as the family, peer pressure and SES. Principals cautioned that because students spend a relatively small portion of their time at school other factors such as television, peers, and the family play a significant role in influencing students. In addition, the advent of semestered schools, having numerous teachers for short periods of time, and the amalgamation into large high schools have further reduced the opportunity for interaction between teachers and students. The potential negative effect of family background was considered the most powerful influence with students. For most principals these student environmental factors represent the root of what must be addressed if real changes are to be made to the dropout phenomenon. Principals did not acknowledge

that for many of the students labeled at risk, and for whom the family was not providing a supportive environment, the school may offer an alternative structure and expectations that may enable them to succeed. The family was not considered a potential resource and efforts to work with families consisted mainly of the school telling families of problems such as attendance.

School environment. The school environmental factors that directly or indirectly caused students to drop out, were reluctantly recognized by principals to be potential areas to target for reducing the problem. Primarily a student's academic performance was thought to be central to a student's decision to drop out. Because students were considered capable of doing the academic material, teachers were considered to have a central role in creating an environment that allowed success for all students. While principals uniformly identified academic performance as a primary cause of dropping out, there was resistance to accepting the responsibility of student failure. Instead of taking action to identify and assist these students, principals diverted the blame for school failure to individual (lack of individual responsibility and effort) and societal (high expectations and not enough resources) factors rather than to the school.

When asked to identify the causes of dropping out, a principal's initial response usually involved the issue of a student's attendance. Truancy was perceived as a fundamental cause of dropping out. Principals were very concerned about daily attendance and directed significant resources in terms of secretarial time and computer tracking to record absences and to inform the home. Principals considered absenteeism a root cause of dropping out and did not usually consider what might be influencing students to miss school. Principals failed to recognize that truancy problems are the manifestation of other factors in a youth's life and simply addressing the attendance issue does not serve to change why students are not attending school in the first place.

Principals paid little attention to other school related factors that contribute to dropping out such as student engagement, community partnerships, school discipline or school size. There was a general reluctance on the part of principals to consider how schools contribute to the phenomenon. Some principals acknowledged that schools were in part contributing to dropping out but when asked for more specifics the principals tended to resort to external factors as the "real" causes.

Interrelationship among factors. The literature and principals' responses agreed that there was significant interrelationship among the factors that cause students to drop out. Principals struggled to articulate what they perceived caused students to drop out of school. Part of their inability to depict causes easily seemed to be due to how the causes were directly linked to individual cases. Each case represented a unique composition of circumstances representing different causes with different emphases. Efforts by principals to list or prioritize causes were full of exceptions based on other cases where apparently contradictory circumstances may have prevailed. The principals' difficulty in isolating the causal factors was an example of how inextricably interwoven the factors may be.

#### Strategies Used or Considered for Retaining Students

Beyond most principals' eagerness to discuss dropouts was an apparent void in strategies designed to rectify the problem. Most principals adopted a wait and see position and utilized various attendance policies to identify and monitor potential dropouts. There was a general lack of imagination in considering possible alternatives and a lack of leadership in implementing some form of corrective measure. Instead principals did not appear to consider the problem to be severe enough to warrant corrective strategies and were convinced the root of the problem was external and not school induced. The exception was a single principal who perceived a problem, identified specific areas for

school improvement, and implemented a strategy involving the introduction of a home room and the use of staff-student mentoring for students identified as being at risk.

Principals were superficially concerned about students dropping out of school and individually had some notion about how schools should respond to the causes that contributed to dropping out. Two principals had very specific ideas about what should, or should not, be done while the majority had inclinations but were not committed to any particular course of action. The large number of principals uncommitted suggests that either they have not identified an adequate strategy or they have not received enough pressure to motivate them to initiate change. These principals' flight plan consisted of a holding pattern waiting for some evidence that a particular strategy will meet their needs or some external influence to proceed. Considering how long the dropout phenomenon has been an issue for debate, it raises the question of how long these principals intend to wait before they pursue strategies. Principals appeared unwilling to take risks and show leadership in reducing the problem. In the study only one principal had implemented a deliberate retention strategy aimed at reducing the exodus of students before graduation. The potential long term cost to society of not taking action does not appear to be factored in the principal's decisions, or rather indecisions.

As mentioned principals seemed preoccupied by the external influences, such as a student's home, over which the principals felt little control. The feeling of frustration, of not having the resources for effective strategies and the futility, that even if they did it may have little effect if the external factors weren't changed, contributed to the principals' malaise about what to do about the phenomenon. In the absence of a clear agenda to resolve the problem, principals rely on relatively cosmetic changes on a temporary basis in the hope of finding more effective strategies in the future.

Three themes emerged in conjunction with strategies for at risk students. These were teachers, programming, and school administration. In addition there will be a review of the specific strategies used by the schools in the study.

Teachers. Principals agreed that a successful strategy for at risk students must involve teachers. More specifically, principals talked about trying to recruit those quality teachers that have a special disposition, however mysterious or indefinable, to work with these students. The one characteristic of teachers that emerged from the data was the personal contact between at risk students and the teachers who work successfully with them. However, despite recognizing the link between teachers and at risk students, most principals did not have a strategy that utilized this connection. Recruiting the best possible teachers and creating a supportive school environment for at risk students were the only recommended means of including teachers as part of a strategy for dropouts.

Programming. Programming manipulation as a strategy used by principals represented a wide range of rationales and techniques that responded to the schools' population diversity. Principals did not consider programming changes to represent a final solution to solving the problems of all at risk students. It was, however, a visible effort intended to appease a growing public awareness of the dropout problem by responding to requests for increased program relevance and providing a specific avenue of intervention where few other options appeared to exist. In addition, programming diversification offered a safety net for students temporarily forced to the fringes of school life and in danger of dropping out. Through programming changes some principals embraced the theme involving a "tenuous hook" for students either academically or through extracurricular activities, whereby the school maintains contact with a student which may provide a source from which to build in the future. Changes in programming were not perceived to be the only answer but they did provide an attainable first step.

Administration. As mentioned under causes, the primary strategy pertaining to administration involved student attendance. Principals expelled students for truancy to alleviate the frustration that existed at their inability to resolve the dropout phenomenon. School attendance figures offered factual information that was relatively easily obtained, was reliable, and had proven acceptable in removing students from the school registrar. There seemed to be an unspoken intimation that if the school could inform parents immediately that their son or daughter was not in school, such action would deflect the responsibility of a student's attendance to the parent. When numerous absences amass, the students could be removed without any cause or blame attributed to the school. The reliance on the use of attendance for this purpose supports the perception of principals not having alternative solutions for at risk students. As a strategy this was effective but it does not counteract the barriers facing at risk students and it does not reduce the dropout rate.

Re-entry, second chance or drop back-in strategies were considered by many principals to represent potentially useful alternatives. Principals agreed that students returning to learning when their personal circumstances are more conducive offers a better scenario for graduation. While most principals considered drop back-in strategies as being a positive alternative, there was little evidence in the data that principals were utilizing such strategies. One school principal proudly described having a large number of adult students but these were considered to be an alternative clientele to be used to bolster overall enrollment to maintain teaching positions. Principals had not taken initiatives to encourage dropouts to drop back in and complete their graduation.

Specific strategies. Two principals had definite, but conflicting, ideas about what should be done for dropouts. One had implemented the most notable strategy found in this study which created a home room in which students were assigned to a teacher in the hope

of fostering a closer relationship through mentorship. The school's at risk students were identified and then equally distributed among the teachers and a deliberate effort was made to monitor these students and develop a teacher-student rapport. This school represented a clear example of what could be done by a school to respond to a dropout problem. The effectiveness of this particular strategy is not in question (although it does concur with the recommendations in the literature). What is significant is that given relatively similar suburban high schools this was the only school to specifically implement a strategy designed to respond to the dropout phenomenon.

In contrast, another principal's strategy was to not have a strategy to respond to the dropout phenomenon. The primary rationale for creating strategies in this school was to cater to the diversity of needs that existed for the majority of students who do attend regularly and not for the students who do not attend. Some of the programs incidentally help at risk students but that is not the sole intention of the programs. This principal was concerned about the majority of students who do attend and was reluctant to have "the tail wag the dog". The strategy used was to employ the school's resources, energy, and attention to where they would be the most useful. The decision was not made by default but reflected the personal experience and beliefs of the principal. The remaining schools demonstrated various levels of concern and some token changes but had not made any serious attempt to address dropouts in their schools.

Rationale for strategies. The literature suggested that the perceptions of a principal on a particular issue will be based on how the current circumstances fit into the templates created by a principal's past experience and understanding. As principals react to the barrage of issues and problems advocated by various interest groups, the templates with which they filter these items will dictate a specific perception of the situation. The degree to which a situation is then perceived as a priority by the principal will affect how to proceed

with a problem, issue or situation. The selection of principals to be studied from (non-city core area) suburban high schools provided for some uniformity in school context but each school is also unique due to individual school differences. This study examined the role of the principal in influencing the school differences that pertain to how schools respond to dropouts. The data suggest there was variation in how each principal perceived dropouts, the rationale used to form individual perceptions, and the resultant courses of action pursued. Analysis of the data highlighted the diversity of factors considered by principals, both as a group and individually. How a particular principal came to perceive dropouts remains unclear but evidence from the data suggests that personal experience played a greater part than school context or pressure groups.

Most principals did not appear to have a coherent, integrated view of the dropout issue. During the interview their comments followed a predictable pattern. Initially, principals resisted using specific examples and responded in very general terms. Questions asking to define a dropout helped to expose some of the specific uses of the term and through exploring the definition principals inevitably talked about exceptions and individual cases. Principals tried to generalize but constantly reverted to using individual examples. Many interview responses progressed along the lines of "You can't generalize, but I know of a case where . . . ". As the interviews progressed the answers to the questions got longer and responses would flow as principals talked about one factor or example and then moved on to another without always having a connection between the two. The individualistic nature of the dropout phenomenon caused confusion for principals because efforts to generalize resulted in too many exceptions and no one individual example represented the breadth of factors involved. Through the interviews each principal introduced a wide variety of related issues without establishing a priority or hierarchical framework as to which causes or strategies might be considered prominent or most promising. The three most consistent themes used to rationalize perceptions were: P2's

strategy using home rooms and mentorship; P4's lack of concern over dropouts as a priority; and P5's indignation at the lack of family values. When principals did return to specific themes they usually included two forms: (1) a scapegoat, based on the overwhelming influence of external factors; and (2) a plea, suggesting schools can not be expected to solve the dropout problem alone. Principals were concerned about dropouts but the diversity of influential factors that appeared consistently inconsistent left most principals unsure of which tactic the school should use in combating the problem.

In addition, the issue of dropouts competes with other issues in terms of a principal's priority. The data analysis identified: one principal for whom dropouts were a priority; two principals for whom dropouts were definitely a low priority; and four principals that were noncommittal. For these latter principals there was an indication, judging from their comments, that the dropout phenomenon was important but the absence of strategies imposed by the schools left questions about what priority the issue actually had. If actions speak louder than words, then the data would suggest dropouts, while important, are not as high a priority as some of the dialogue might suggest. Instead many principals, after reflecting on the lack of alternatives, suggested that what was good for all students was probably also good for at risk students.

### Recommendations

#### Better Data

1. Dropout definition. This study reaffirms the need to standardize and redefine, or clarify, the meaning of a dropout. A potential alternative may be to separate the concept into: (1) a "cohort completion rate" which quantifies the long term difference between the number starting in the school system in kindergarden and completing via graduation (perhaps allowing for

a two or three year window); and (2) a "year or semester attrition rate" which, in the short term, will count those students who begin a term and do not complete it. The use of two terms will facilitate the gathering of both long and short term dropout data. Individual schools, or their collective umbrella organizations, may then be able to gain a greater understanding of the magnitude of the phenomenon and, therefore, be in a more knowledgeable position to take appropriate action. Clarification of the definition process will not solve any of the factors associated with dropping out but the study showed that many of the principals were concerned about the dropout phenomenon and yet were hesitant to take any distinct action. The provision of more detailed data about the long and short term numbers involved may induce principals' decision making to implement appropriate strategies or to be better informed to decide why a strategy is not necessary.

2. Ensure appropriate measurement is done. Principals need to be encouraged to keep track of the dropout phenomenon in their schools. Even if agreement has not been achieved as to which definition or recording process is preferred, a consistently used definition will at least provide a better understanding than no measurement at all. If principals are concerned about dropouts in their school, some effort to quantify the size of the problem will be a necessary first step. Modern computer technology is capable of tracking and providing comparisons for local, provincial, and national measurements. Until a provincial, or preferably national, system for calculating the dropout rate is developed and used to collect data, dropout prevention efforts will be hampered by insufficient evidence upon which to rationalize initiatives.

3. Lack of a complete range of national data It is little wonder that most principals are wary of the authenticity of national figures stating a 30% dropout rate. There would appear to be a reluctance to publish figures that represent where those locations are which are much higher than the national average. As a result both the impressions of the principals interviewed and most of the available data suggests rates well below the national average. The researcher knows of individual schools with 100% dropout rates and some in rural Manitoba where they are close to 70% but these are not widely reported. Principals need to gain access to dropout data that represents the full range of findings.
4. Early identification as a misconception. Too many principals were convinced that they could easily "point them out to you as soon as they walk through the door". This is not supported by the literature and may require either further study into the fallibility of identification predictions or efforts to ensure that principals are aware of the existing studies and the potential ramifications of mislabeling students. Better yet, both tactics should be pursued.

#### Higher Priority

5. Preoccupation with absenteeism. Principals perceive truancy as a major cause of students dropping out of school and have devoted a lot of attention to monitoring this factor. The goal of school retention, or a decreased dropout rate, is not merely to keep students off the street but to ensure that they master appropriate skills to lead productive lives when they leave school. Using absenteeism as a lever with which to monitor and then possibly remove students from school is effective in resolving the short term problem but principals need to consider its educational merit and its

long term implications. The same forces influencing students to miss school, whatever they might be, will continue to adversely affect other students in the future unless a higher priority is given to identifying and then addressing the appropriate issues. Principals need to reexamine the intent of truancy policy.

6. Public expectations. Instead of retorting that society has unfair expectations of increased quality and reduced dropouts, principals may have to recognize their role, as educational leaders, in explaining to the public why such expectations are unfair. Until principals are able to communicate to the public why all students should not be expected to graduate with minimal quality standards, the public will continue to hold such expectations.
7. Implications of a principal's mandate. If P6 is representative of a significant proportion of principals, and perception exists that the concern over dropouts is premised by the potential loss of teacher jobs, I believe this has very scary implications for the creation of school policy and the welfare of the public education system. Who is serving whom? The needs of the student and the needs of society must remain paramount. Any principal who fails to acknowledge this and focuses instead on the preservation of teacher jobs, should be removed from this position.
8. Power of perceptions. When hiring principals, it might be useful to consider a candidate's perceptions. By gaining insight into the rationale of a principal's beliefs it may be possible to match an individual to the needs of a school. For example, a principal who is inclined to be sympathetic to the

educational gaps attributed to a student's lack of home stability, may be more appropriate for a particular school than a principal whose tendency would be to dismiss a similar problem as being beyond the school's jurisdiction. The one principal in the study who repeatedly stated that his primary concern about dropouts was the potential loss of teacher jobs represents an example that would not fit the provincial claim of having a child centered education.

#### Fuller and Better Set of Strategies

9. Principals' objectivity. There is a reluctance for principals to acknowledge a school's role in contributing to the dropout phenomenon. It may be true that external factors collectively constitute the primary influence in dropping out, but principals may need to play the role of a school's conscience to ensure that all internally contributing factors are investigated and dealt with before casting stones outside the school walls. The principals needs to ask: Is the school ensuring that students are engaged or reconnected to the learning process? What can be done to help fill in student's educational gaps in an effort to reduce dropouts due to poor academic performance? What may be alternatives to expelling students for truancy? How do we further integrate the school and community partnership? Principals need to release themselves from the defensive posture of rationalizing why they can not resolve the dropout problem and begin objectively reviewing the school's performance through the perspective of an advocate for students at risk.
  
10. Seeking community cooperation. If principals perceive the primary impediments to a student's success are based beyond a school's jurisdiction, then it should be incumbent upon the principals to pursue

tactics that may help to address these needs or conditions. Barriers that are real, or that a school's community perceive to be real, will need to be opened up so that interested parties can gain access to, and influence with, the schools. Parents, other social agencies, business and taxpayers can all be solicited for their ideas and various contributions. Working together offers an opportunity for all of the partners in education to gain a better understanding of each others positions and to collectively create a more understanding environment that is sensitive to the needs of at risk students. Working collaboratively may help ascertain some of the local non-school conditions affecting at risk youth, initiate some of the necessary changes, and potentially attain the increased individual and societal benefits of a lowered dropout rate. In an era of world globalization practices principals need to reach out to the wider community.

11. Active vs. reactive strategies. Due to the progressive nature of the dropout phenomenon and the inability to identify at risk students, schools need to replace or augment their relatively ineffective reactive strategies. By the time a student has missed a large number of classes or failed courses, the opportunity has been lost to "nip the problem in the bud" and consequently the problem is bigger and the chance for success diminished. Not all problems may be solvable, but for those that are early treatment should be more effective. Even if early identification is not possible the fact that many more, if not all, students are at risk, to some degree, should be sufficient reason to target all students with dropout prevention strategies such as problem resolution skills, improved academic performance, and parental involvement.

## Suggestions for Further Study

### Which School Official Deals With Dropouts

1. The data from this study indicates that principals were not the primary school agents in dealing with dropouts. This finding was not a surprise but as a result many principals' answers tended to be general and rhetorical. Vice principals who deal more directly with the dropout phenomenon may have provided a more insightful, school specific analysis of what was actually happening with, and for, dropouts. Vice principals may have less overall influence with other facets of education than principals but with this issue, where they provide the primary interaction, they may have significant influence. A future study that examines the perspectives of vice principals may offer useful insight into how schools are dealing with dropouts. Additionally, a case study examining both principals and vice principals would also provide a wider understanding of the role of school administration in regard to the dropout phenomenon.

### The Tenuous Hook

2. If a student is staying in school merely to continue to play on the basketball team or socialize with friends, is this a significant enough reason for maintaining a student on the school role? Principals appear divided on this issue and it may be worth doing further investigative study into the issue.

### Final Comment

Principals' perspectives about dropouts offer an insight into what is actually happening in suburban high schools. This study serves as an interpreter into the social reality of how schools might be contributing to the dropout phenomenon. As exploratory research this study attempted to find out how principals understand the phenomenon of school dropouts, what they perceived to be the causes, and what was being done to respond to this problem. The study found that schools have not responded to the dropout literature and public concern which suggests that principals have not been influenced by these pressures to affect school policy. In fact principals are continuing to influence school policy based on their own experience and predispositions. The lack of change by schools indicates a need to consider alternative means, or reinforced attempts, to convince school principals of the merits of addressing the needs of these students. By not responding to the needs of at risk students as potential dropouts from school, and possibly society, schools are perpetuating the alienation and disengagement forces that are contributing to the phenomenon now, and will likely do so in the future if left unchecked. Waiting longer to react to the needs of these students will not necessarily provide greater insight into means of responding to their needs. These principals' perspectives indicate the need to act now to regenerate the drive to improve the chances for these students. They deserve our best efforts.

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## APPENDIX A -- LETTER SOLICITING PARTICIPATION

Winnipeg, Manitoba

May 26, 1992

Name  
Principal, School  
Address  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
postal code

Dear principal,

I am a graduate student in Educational Administration at the University of Manitoba. My M.Ed. thesis involves researching high school principals' perceptions about school dropouts. In order to complete this research I need to interview six to ten principals in Winnipeg. The study will be based on interviews representing each of the school divisions in Winnipeg. I am writing, therefore, to ask you to consider taking part in the study by agreeing to be interviewed.

The interview will last approximately 45-90 minutes and be conducted at a time and place that is convenient for you. The questions are intended to seek your perceptions about the dropout phenomenon and ask for your opinion on the causes of, and remedies for, dealing with high school dropouts. A copy of the interview questions will be sent to you for your consideration immediately upon your agreement to participate in the interview. Interviews will be audio-tape recorded for later analysis. A summary of the interview will be returned to you for any changes, additions or deletions you wish to make. Your name and the school name will not be used in the study in an effort to maintain confidentiality. In situations such as specific school descriptions or school policy where the inherent nature of the information may reveal the source, your permission to include the information in the final study will be sought prior to data analysis.

I will be contacting you by telephone early in June to find out if you are willing to participate in the study. Should you be willing, we will be able to schedule the interview at that time. I hope to conduct all interviews in June.

If you have any questions about the study I can be reached at home at \_\_\_\_\_ or you may contact any of the members of my advisory committee at the university. They are: Dr. B. Levin (Chair) 474-8236, Dr. J. A. Riffel 474-9075, and Dr. P. Madak 474- 8712.

Thank you in advance for your anticipated co-operation.

Yours sincerely,

D. Donald C. Grant

## APPENDIX B -- LETTER SETTING UP INTERVIEW

Winnipeg, Manitoba

June 9, 1992

Name  
Principal, School  
Address  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
postal code

Dear Principal,

I would like to thank you for volunteering to be interviewed as part of my thesis research study on principals' perceptions of high school drop outs.

The interview questions will focus on three areas. 1) What do you feel are the causes of school dropouts? 2) What strategies are in place in your school for retaining students? and 3) Why have these particular strategies been implemented? In addition to these themes there will be a few factual questions about your school. The interview should be able to be completed in about one hour.

I look forward to meeting you at (time) on (date) (and place) . Thank you again for your participation.

Yours sincerely,

D. Donald C. Grant

## APPENDIX C -- LETTER TO RETURN TRANSCRIPTS

Winnipeg Manitoba

Sept 15, 1992

Principal's name  
School  
Address  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
postal code

Dear Principal

Last spring seems so long ago as you begin a new school year but I hope that you will recall that you kindly agreed to be interviewed as part of my research study into principals' perceptions on high school dropouts. Enclosed is a copy of the transcript from our discussion.

I have not made any adjustments to the material and if there are any obvious faults in the document it may have been as a result of deciphering the tape. I now plan to use the transcripts as data to answer my research question which is: What is the perception of high school principals regarding students leaving school before graduation? Through this study I am trying to find out if schools should be concerned with this phenomenon of school dropouts; what are the perceived causes of school dropouts; what strategies are in place for dealing with dropouts and why these particular strategies have been selected. If you feel that your answers are incomplete or you wish to make other changes or comments I would ask you to write these out and send them to me as I would be pleased to include them as part of my data source. Otherwise, I will be using the transcript data as it exists. All personal and school names will be removed from the data text before analysis.

I have been very impressed with the quality of answers given during the interviews and wish to thank-you for your time and thoughtful responses. If you have any further questions about the transcripts or the study in general, please do not hesitate to call me at home at

Yours sincerely,

D. Donald C. Grant

## APPENDIX D -- LETTER OF CONSENT

UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA  
 Faculty of Education  
 Department of Educational Administration and Foundations

Thesis title: Principals' Perceptions of High School Dropouts

LETTER OF CONSENT

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_.

- I consent to being interviewed about my perceptions of high school dropouts.
- I understand that this interview will be audio-tape recorded, take approximately 45-90 minutes, and that I will have the opportunity to review a summary of the transcripts and make additional comments, changes or deletions.
- I understand that all identifying names and references will be deleted but that absolute anonymity can not be guaranteed.
- I understand that once transcripts have been made the tapes will be erased.
- I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the study. This includes withdrawing or terminating the interview process at any time and for any reason prior to, or during, the interview process. There will be no penalty of any kind for withdrawing from, or terminating, the interview.
- I will receive a copy of the summary of research findings and understand that a complete copy of the final thesis will be placed in the Faculty of Education library.

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Signature of consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Signature of researcher  
 D. Donald C. Grant

## APPENDIX E -- LETTER TO SUPERINTENDENTS

June 26, 1992

Name  
Superintendent,  
School Division No.  
Address  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
Postal Code

Dear Superintendent,

I am a graduate student in Educational Administration at the University of Manitoba. My M.Ed. thesis involves researching high school principals' perceptions about school dropouts. In order to complete this research I need to interview six to ten principals in Winnipeg. The study will be based on interviews representing each of the school divisions in Winnipeg. I am writing, therefore, to inform you that I will be seeking high school principals in your school division to volunteer as participants in my study.

Individual principal names and school or division names will not be used in the study in an effort to maintain confidentiality. The study will be focusing on trying to understand how high school principals perceive the phenomenon of early school leavers. I hope to conduct all interviews in June, complete the analysis, and have the study finished in the fall of 1992.

If you have any questions about the study I can be reached at home at \_\_\_\_\_, or you may contact any of the members of my advisory committee at the university. They are: Dr. B. Levin (Chair) 474-8236, Dr. J. A. Riffel 474-9075, and Dr. P. Madak 474- 8712.

Yours sincerely,

D. Donald C. Grant

## APPENDIX F -- INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

- Preamble:
1. Introduce self.
  2. Briefly review the purpose of the study.
  3. Reassure option of voluntary withdrawal at any time and ensure that the participant consent form has been signed.
  4. Describe the procedures that will be taken during the study: tape recorded interview and participant's review of the interview summary.
  5. Please ask for question clarification or repetition if necessary.
  6. Are there any questions?

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:

- How long have you been a high school principal?
  - in general
  - at this school
- How many students attend this school and in what grades?
- What is the dropout rate in this school? What definition did you use to determine this?
  - how is this rate determined
  - does this school keep track of these records?
- What proportion of these dropouts are inevitable?
  - realistic best figure; will drop out in any case?
- Of the proportion which might have been avoided, how has the school contributed to their decision to drop out?
  - what are schools doing to make this a problem?
- Is dealing with the dropout problem a priority for you and your colleagues?
  - do you feel you have to 'sell' the dropout issue to teachers; school board?

- What strategies are in place in this school for retaining students?
  - How are DO issues dealt with in this school?
  - Do these strategies target individual students or the whole school population?
  
- Why have these particular strategies been implemented?
  - How was this strategy initiated?
  - Were other strategies considered
  - What made this strategy more suitable?
  
- Do you think that these strategies have been successful?
  
- With reference to the last student who came to see you about dropping out of school, what reason(s) did he or she give for dropping out?
  - home characteristics, school characteristics, student characteristics
  
- Was this student typical for this school? What made it unusual?
  
- What could the school have done differently for this student?
  - early identification, special programs,
- In your view, who has the primary responsibility for retaining such students?
  - the student- the parent- society- the school?
  
- In the future what should schools do differently to help students at risk of dropping out?
  
- Are there any other aspects of the dropout phenomenon that you would like to comment on?