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The predictive ability of demographic and psychosocial risk factors, school-related characteristics, and service interventions on grade attainment among at-risk elementary school children in a truancy intervention program

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THE PREDICTIVE ABILITY OF DEMOGRAPHIC AND PSYCHOSOCIAL RISK
FACTORS, SCHOOL-RELATED CHARACTERISTICS, AND SERVICE INTERVENTIONS
ON GRADE ATTAINMENT AMONG AT-RISK ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHILDREN IN
A TRUANCY INTERVENTION PROGRAM

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
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requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

In

The School of Social Work

by
Judith Lee Falgout Rhodes
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M.S.W., Louisiana State University, 2007
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the current exploratory-descriptive retrospective study was to examine the demographic, school-related, and psychosocial risk factors among at-risk elementary school children ($N = 12644$) assessed at low and high levels of risk for continuing truancy. The sample was enrolled in 16 statewide program sites of a community-based truancy prevention program in Louisiana, which provided a letter and attendance monitoring for low-risk participants and intensive case management for high-risk participants. Intercorrelations among risk factors and referred services and on-time grade attainment were assessed for a subsample of the high-risk children ($n = 6088$). Binary logistic regression analyses were conducted to determine which correlates among the demographic, school-related, and psychosocial risk factors and services best predicted on-time grade level at 3 years out among a subsample of the high-risk children ($n = 2864$). Model fit to the data was modest. Findings showed that race and grade at program admission were significantly associated with on-time grade attainment at 3 years out. African-American participants were less likely to be on time for grade than participants not of African-American ethnicity. Participants in kindergarten were less likely to be on time than children in higher grades of elementary school. Children assessed as unmotivated by their teachers were less likely to be on time for grade at 3 years out than children who were not assessed as unmotivated. Other findings showed that participants who completed educational services were less likely to be on time for their grade than participants who did not receive educational services. Implications for social work practice, education, and research are discussed.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

High school dropout is a major social problem that has gained national attention as evidenced by reports among researchers and policy makers (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morrison, 2006; Hammond, Linton, Smink, & Drew, 2007). Notably, President Barack Obama expounded on the implications of the high dropout rate among youth in the United States in his State of the Union Address (Obama, 2011). The problem of students leaving school without a high school credential affects individuals, family, and the community, impacting broad areas in multiple systems.

This study investigates the phenomenon of truancy, which is a correlate and risk factor for later school dropout (Newsome, Anderson-Butcher, Fink, Hall, & Huffer, 2008). Using data collected by a truancy prevention program in elementary schools, this retrospective study investigates demographic, school-related, and psychosocial risk characteristic of elementary school children deemed to be at low risk and high risk for continued truancy during one school year. This study additionally examines intervention services for children deemed to be at high risk. Lastly, the study determines the set of predictors, including demographic, school-related, and psychosocial risk characteristics, and types of intervention services that best predicts on-time grade level attainment at 3 years out.

Scope of the Problem

Nearly one in five individuals in the United States has not earned a high school diploma or credential (Kaufman & Chapman, 2001; U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Currently, one child drops out of school every 26 seconds in America. Over 7,000 students drop out every day, and over 1.3 million drop out each year (Education Week, 2010). The extent of the high school dropout problem in America is at epidemic proportions, and the magnitude of this problem has been obscured by various definitions of dropout.

Definitions of Dropout

School dropout has been defined in multiple ways, namely status, event, and cohort dropout. The various definitions make the degree and severity of the problem ambiguous. Efforts are underway to promote a cohesive definition to more accurately expose the gravity of the dropout problem (U.S. Government Accountability Office [USGAO], 2005). Recent independent research is exposing excessively low graduation rates that were previously obscured by inferior calculations.

Status Dropout

Status dropout provides cumulative data on individuals within an age range; for example, out-of-school youth aged 16 to 24. Status dropout reflects the percentage of the population not enrolled in high school and do not have any type of high school credential, including a diploma or GED credential (National Center of Educational Statistics [NCES], 2007). Approximately 39 million individuals, or 18% of the United States population aged 16 or older who are not enrolled in school, lack a high school diploma or General Educational Development (GED) credential (General Educational Development Testing Service [GEDTS], 2006; Kaufman & Chapman, 2001; U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). According to the status dropout definition, the dropout problem in Louisiana is greater than national figures. In Louisiana, statistics show 786,880 individuals, or 25.2% of the population aged 25 or older, lack a high school diploma or GED (GEDTS; Louisiana Department of Education [LDOE], 2006; U.S. Census Bureau, 2007).

Event Dropout

Event dropout provides an annual measure of recent dropout and is defined as the percentage of students who leave school during a school year without a high school degree; for example, the proportion of high school sophomores who do not return for their junior year in high school. NCES (2002) reported that the event dropout rate of 15 to 24 year olds who dropped

out of grades 10 to 12 from October 1999 to 2000 was 4.8%. Examining ethnic subgroups, the event dropout rates for this period was 4.1% for Caucasians, 6.1% for African Americans, 7.4% for Hispanics, and 3.5% for Asians and Pacific Islanders (NCES). Using 2001-2002 Common Core of Data, NCES (2007) reported that event dropout ranged from 1.9% in Wisconsin to 10.5% in Arizona. Along with Arizona, nine states had rates of 6% or more, including Delaware (6.2%), Illinois and Nevada (6.4%), Georgia (6.5%), Louisiana (7.0%), Washington and New York (7.1%), and Alaska (8.1%). In Louisiana during the 2006-2007 school year, the event dropout rate was 7.7% for ninth grade, 5.5% for tenth grade, 8.1% for eleventh grade, 7.1 for twelfth grade, and 6.7% for ninth through twelfth grades, combined (LDOE, 2009). Event dropout estimations appear less severe than either status or cohort definitions of dropout, and experts believe this masks the extent of the school dropout problem in the United States (Balfanz, 2007).

Cohort Dropout

The cohort definition most accurately captures the extent of the school dropout problem, measuring what happens to a group of individuals over time, specifically the percentage of entering ninth graders who do not graduate in 4 years. State education departments are adopting this federally mandated definition according to directives of the No Child Left Behind legislation of 2001. Using the cohort definition for the class of 2007, nationally about 69% of public school students graduated from high school with a regular diploma (Education Week, 2010). For the 2006 graduating class, 35 percentage points separated the highest rate (New Jersey at 81.2%) and the lowest rate (Nevada at 47.3%). Nationwide, Louisiana ranked in the bottom quartile of states (44th) with a 61.9% graduation rate in 2006 (Education Week, 2009a).

Dropout as a Social Problem

School dropout is not only an educational concern, but also a serious social problem. Individuals who lack a high school credential are overrepresented among ethnic minority, low socioeconomic, incarcerated, disadvantaged, and underachieving populations (Franklin & Streeter, 1992; Fraser, 2004; Hammond et al., 2007).

Populations At Risk

In 2007, graduation rates varied greatly between students of different ethnicities. According to Education Week's annual graduation and dropout report (2010), Asian Americans had the highest graduation rate at 81%, and the graduation rate for Caucasian students was 77%. Students of color had rates that were as much as 25 percentage points below their peers; specific rates were 56% among Hispanic youth, 54% for African-American students, and 51% among American-Indian youth (Education Week).

Examining the class of 2006 and gender, while the overall national graduation rate was 69.2%, the graduation rate was over 7 percentage points higher for females (72.2%) than for males (64.9%; Education Week, 2009a). However, in Louisiana, the graduation rate for females was notably less at 68%, and it was only 55.4% for males for the class of 2006 (Education Week, 2009b). The intersection of ethnicity and gender compounds the problem of school dropout. Nationally for the class of 2006, the lowest graduation rates were found among African American males (44%; 42.5% in Louisiana) and Hispanic males (49.9%; 59% in Louisiana; Education Week, 2009b). For females, the lowest rates in the nation were among American Indian/Alaskan Natives (51.2%). During this timeframe, the graduation rate for Caucasian males (73%; 64.2% in Louisiana) was higher than male or female African Americans or Hispanic youth (Education Week, 2009a).

Consequences of Dropout

Economic and societal detriments are associated with school dropout. Lack of a high school diploma limits earnings and families with low-income levels have children with higher dropout rates. Children aged 16 to 24 years from families with the lowest quartile of family income were approximately 7 times more likely to drop out than their peers from the highest income quartile (U. S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2010). A U.S. Census Report showed that the average annual earnings in 2004 for dropouts were \$19,182 with average earnings for high school graduates at \$28,631 (U.S. Census, n.d.). On average and over the course of a lifetime, a high school dropout earns about \$260,000 less than a high school graduate (Rouse, 2005). According to estimates, students who drop out of school will cost the United States more than \$337 billion in lost wages over the course of their lifetimes (Alliance for Excellent Education [AEE], 2008).

When students exit the school system prematurely with compromised workforce preparation, not only do they limit their opportunities for future education, training and subsequent earnings, but they also often become dependent on social services and are at risk for institutionalization (Hammond et al., 2007). These trajectories are detrimental to the individual and costly to society. A report from the AEE (2006a) estimated that if the dropouts from the class of 2006 had graduated, that over \$17 billion could have been saved in Medicaid spending and costs for uninsured health care over the course of the individuals' lifetimes.

School failure and dropout are correlated with criminality (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001; Harlow, 2003). A Bureau of Justice report indicates that 68% of state prison inmates do not have a high school diploma and that 47% of drug offenders lack a high school diploma or GED credential (Harlow). Using a societal cost-benefit analysis, Lochner and Moretti (2004) found that increasing high school graduation rates nationally by 1% would yield \$1.8

billion in savings. These savings were primarily due to preventing approximately 94,000 crimes yearly (Lochner & Moretti). Similarly, AEE (2006b) estimated that the United States could have a yearly combined savings and revenue of nearly \$8 billion from reduction of crime costs, if the graduation and college entry rates of male students were increased by 5%.

Dropout is a multidimensional problem and encompasses educational, social, community, and criminal and juvenile justice issues. Individuals who leave school without a diploma manifest risk across four domains: individual, family, school, and community (Gandy & Schultz, 2007; Hammond et al., 2007).

Dropout as a Process

Dropout is not a single event, but rather the conclusion of a long process of disengagement from school. The culmination of events, decisions, risks, and other factors lead to dropout. Patterns established early in the school years, such as low attendance and grade retention form a pathway to future school problems and place the student at risk for school non-completion (Jerald, 2006). According to Bridgeland et al. (2006) students described patterns in school attendance prior to dropout and that each absence, either by skipping class or missing school days, made them less and less willing to go back to school.

School truancy, or chronic absenteeism, has been recognized as an early indicator and risk factor in the process that leads to future problems for children including teen pregnancy, substance abuse, delinquency, and eventual school failure and dropout (Gandy & Schultz, 2007; Grooters & Faidley, 2002; Hallfors, et al., 2002; Sutphen, Ford, & Flaherty, 2010). Literature in both school social work and education suggests that truancy in the early grades is a significant risk factor for school failure (Newsome et al., 2008). Longitudinal data show that children, who average 16 absences in the first grade eventually drop out, while those who average 10 absences per school year, successfully graduate from high school (Alexander et al., 2001). Truancy is best

viewed not as a problem in itself, but as a symptom of other underlying issues. In the early school years, truancy can negatively influence a child's academic future because it is indicative of a host of psychosocial concerns that may escalate to potentially severe problems. Thus, early onset of truancy is a key intervention point for children in schools (Richman, Bowen, & Woolley, 2004).

In summary, dropout is a major social problem adversely affecting individuals and their communities. The magnitude of the dropout problem previously has been minimized by its various definitions; however, societal and economic consequences of the dropout problem has gained national attention as negatively impacting multiple institutions from schools to social service agencies to the criminal justice system. Truancy, an early indicator and risk factor for multiple problems, has been identified as a key intervention point for prevention programs to interrupt the process that can lead to dropout.

Theoretical Frameworks

Rather than conceptualize truancy and possible subsequent dropout as individual problems, they can be viewed as the culmination of multiple interconnecting and overlapping individual, psychosocial, and academic risks within complex interactions among systems of the family and school environments (Bowen, 2007; Franklin, McNeil, & Wright, 1990; Fraser, 2004). Theoretical frameworks examined to understand the social problem of truancy and dropout include ecological systems theory and the social development model.

Ecological Systems Theory

General systems theory (GST), proposed by biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy, is a theoretical framework explaining how organizations or systems consist of parts that interrelate and interact upon each other (Weckowicz, 2000). Development of the ecological perspective in social work was influenced by Germain and Gitterman (1996), whose work expanded the

concepts of systems theory to include family processes and other environmental factors that interrelate and interact, impacting the individual. Bronfenbrenner (1997) combined developmental psychology and sociology in a fashion that laid a foundation for viewing the individual in nested microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems. Together with the person-in-environment (PIE) framework, ecological systems theory provides a lens through which the problem of truancy and dropout can be viewed (Bronfenbrenner). Studying the interrelationships of individuals and the various systems in which they live provides a theoretical basis for understanding these complex phenomena. Social work practice is dually focused, incorporating the person in his or her environment, as well as the system and the community (Andreae, 1996; Ashford, LeCroy, & Lorrie, 2006; Bronfenbrenner; Nash & Randolph, 2004).

Social Development Model

In addition to the PIE framework and ecological perspective, truancy and dropout can also be understood using the social development model (SDM), which is composed of three conceptual frameworks: control, differential association, and social learning theories (Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004). Control theory posits that behavior is primarily directed by the internal needs of an individual and that deviant behavior occurs when external social bonds fail to inhibit deviance (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1995). Differential association learning theory postulates that individuals learn criminal behavior through associations and interactions with others who model attitudes and rationalization for criminal acts (Laub, 2006). Social learning theory proposes that a child who is attached to family and to pro-social community values will avoid socially negative activities (Catalano et al.). Similarly to the ecological model, SDM theorizes that a child's social behavior is first molded by family relationships and then later in childhood by the school environment and peer group (Catalano et al.). SDM identifies childhood developmental periods at which risk factors may influence the

child's behavior, which may be amenable to change (Catalano et al.). Research on pathways to delinquency emphasizes the importance of implementing interventions before behaviors are entrenched, thereby enabling efforts to prevent future problems (Loeber & Farrington, 2000; Schroeder, Guin, Chaisson, & Houchins, 2004). Because dropout is a long process of disengagement from school, dropout prevention efforts may be most effective when implemented early in a child's school career (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Intervening with young children and their families may prevent or interrupt future risk as well as increase protective factors for positive school outcomes (Richman et al., 2004).

A Conceptual Framework for Schools

Researchers at John Hopkins University (McPartland, 1994) developed a conceptual framework for understanding the multiple and intersecting variables that impact students in schools, and created a typology to explain student motivation to remain and progress in school. The conceptual framework views dropout and associated problems in the context of organizational environments, both the formal or informal environment, as they intersect with the internal and external nature of problems (McPartland). The framework yields four key areas that affect whether a student remains in school: opportunities for successful schoolwork, relevance of the school experience to the student's community and future, the care and support of the human climate, and assistance with personal problems (McPartland).

In McPartland's (1994) model, opportunities for successful academic work are found within the formal setting of the school and related school experiences. Relevance of the school experience to the student's community and future occurs at the intersection of the formal school setting and external connections with the larger community. The care and support of the human climate occurs informally within the school's social relation networks, whereas assistance with student's personal problems occurs at the nexus of informal school social relations and external

connections within the larger community (McPartland). Although the framework was formulated to examine student motivation in the process that leads to dropout, it can also be used to understand chronic absenteeism and truancy prevention programs.

The four components of McPartland's (1994) typology (e.g., opportunities for successful schoolwork, relevance of the school experience to the student's community and future, the care and support of the human climate, and assistance with personal problems) are foundational of a student's motivation because the absence of any one component can negatively impact a student's ability to attend, progress, and complete school. For example, if a child is having serious problems at home, or external school environment, and if the child is overwhelmed with personal issues, then it is uncertain whether good school experiences, such as having a caring teacher, will be sufficient to provide the impetus for the child to remain and do well in school (McPartland).

The theoretical moorings of both the ecological perspective and social development theory provide frameworks to understand the multiple and interconnecting systems that influence a child's ability to progress successfully throughout their school career, suggesting that both truancy and dropout prevention efforts require intervention incorporating individual, family and social, school, and community domains. Knowledge generated in truancy and dropout intervention, especially for at-risk populations, is needed to address these issues.

Contribution to Social Science Knowledge

The millions of students in American who drop out of school are gaining national and state attention. Truancy is readily being recognized as a contributor to the problem of dropout and its correlates (Bridgeland et al., 2006, Sutphen et al., 2010).

Social workers are in a unique position, with their understanding of the PIE perspective to study and intervene in the problems of both truancy and dropout. A core mission of the social

work profession is to enhance the well being of people and to help them attain their basic needs. The mission chiefly focuses on helping the vulnerable, the oppressed, and the poor (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 1997). The problem of school failure intersects and overlaps with social justice issues, and disparities in academic achievement are considered the new civil rights issue of the 21st century (Fram, Miller-Cribbs, & Van Horn, 2007; Kozol, 2005), as children of color and those disadvantaged by life circumstances and disabilities are among those most often negatively affected by school non-completion and its consequences (Franklin & Streeter, 1992; Fraser, 2004; Hallfors et al., 2002; Hammond et al., 2007; Henry, 2007; Teasley, 2004).

School social workers serving as counselors, behavioral specialists, and interventionists (Franklin & Allen-Meares, 1997) are well positioned to intervene with children, who are at-risk for negative school outcomes, and their families (Pace, 2008). School social workers can benefit from knowledge about characteristics that place children at risk for truancy and dropout, as well as interventions that address barriers to succeeding in school (Grooters & Faidley, 2002). Knowledge about multifaceted approaches that integrate school and community resources can enable school social workers to improve efforts to impact student attendance and success (Gandy & Shultz, 2007).

Understanding the factors that contribute to eventual school failure advances the knowledge base of social work. Prevention research is crucial to determine whether early efforts influence later functioning for at-risk students. Knowledge about school-based prevention efforts and students' academic outcomes may, in turn, inform schools and communities, which, in turn, may influence school reform efforts and educational policy (Marsh, 2005).

Purpose of the Study

Using data collected by the Truancy Assessment and Service Center (TASC) program, a truancy intervention program in elementary schools in Louisiana, this retrospective study investigates demographic, school-related, and psychosocial risk characteristics and service interventions of elementary school children at risk for continuing truancy during one school year. In order to examine children with repeated exposure to TASC, the number of times kindergarteners were admitted to the program over 3 years was investigated. Lastly, this study determines the set of predictors, including demographic, school-related, and psychosocial risk characteristics, and types of intervention services, that best predicts on-time grade level attainment in 3 school years.

This study analyses archival data previously collected by a truancy intervention program in public elementary schools in Louisiana. The study focuses on the risk characteristics of children who have been assessed at low and high levels of risk for continuing truancy. For the children assessed at high risk, the study identifies the variables that optimally predict on-time grade level attainment at 3 years out. Chi-square and logistic regression analyses were conducted to explore the associations between variables.

Research Questions

This descriptive, retrospective study answers the following research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of low- and high-risk children upon admission to the TASC program?
 - What are the demographic, school-related, and psychosocial characteristics of children in the TASC program who have been assessed at low risk for continued truancy?

- What are the demographic, school-related, and psychosocial characteristics of children in the TASC program who have been assessed at high risk for continued truancy?
2. What types of TASC-referred services do high-risk children complete while in the TASC program?
 3. What are the interrelationships among demographic, school-related, and psychosocial characteristics; number of TASC admissions; and types of completed TASC-referred services among high-risk children in the TASC program?
 4. What combination of demographic, school-related, and psychosocial characteristics; number of TASC admissions; and types of completed TASC-referred services, best predicts on-time grade level attainment at 3 years out among high-risk children in the TASC program?

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This review commences with definitions and provides the historical context of truancy in schools. Educational policy and ethical issues impacting children at risk for poor life outcomes are discussed. Risk factors across four domains that contribute to children's school-related problems are reviewed, as well as protective factors that mitigate against risk. The literature review continues by highlighting the characteristics of truancy and dropout intervention programs that address chronic absenteeism in schools. Recommended practices and specific truancy intervention programs are described, as are limitations of truancy intervention evaluative studies.

Truancy

Truancy, or chronic unexcused absenteeism, is a key indicator of potential school problems (Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent, 2001; National Criminal Justice Reference Service [NCJRC], 2007), which is as high as 30% in some schools (Garry, 1996). While many consider truancy a middle or high school issue, chronic absenteeism begins in elementary school (Chang & Romero, 2008; McCray, 2006). In the earliest grades, 1 in 10 kindergarten and first grade children miss at least 1 month of school during the school year (Chang & Romero). In a longitudinal study, Alexander and colleagues (2001) found that students who average 16 absences in the first grade eventually drop out, but those who average 10 absences per school year graduate from high school.

Truancy does not have a universally accepted definition; it is defined differently among schools, school districts, and educational administrators (Lindstadt, 2005). The National Center for School Engagement (NCSE) proposes a brief and concise definition of truancy as any unexcused absence from school (NCJRS, 2007). Based on a review of truancy interventions, Sutphen, Ford, and Flaherty (2010) proposed that truancy be defined as missing 20% of days of

the previous school year or 3 excused or unexcused absences in any 6-week interval. In 2010, the Louisiana legislature approved Act 644, which set habitual absence or tardiness of students as the third unexcused absence or tardy during a school year (Louisiana, Act No. 644, 2010). Comprehensive reviews of truancy interventions found that the definitions used to assess for truancy were inconsistent and in flux (Gandy & Schultz, 2007; Lindstadt; Sutphen et al.).

Truancy is a status offence, which is the legal term for an act that is considered a crime due to the young age of the offender, but the offense is not illegal for an older individual. Other status offenses include running away from home, underage alcohol use, curfew violations, and ungovernability (NCJRS, 2007; Zhang, Katsiyannis, Barrett, & Willson, 2007). Regarding truancy statutes, states enact their own attendance laws, which include the mandatory age for school attendance, the age at which a minor may legally drop out of school, and the number of unexcused absences per school year when the student is considered legally truant (NCJRS). Louisiana's compulsory school attendance law requires enrollment in school from the age of 7 until age 17. In Louisiana, students may be retained if they fail to attend a minimum of school days, although school level committees may waive this requirement on a case-by-case basis (LDOE, n.d.). Each individual school district in Louisiana sets the number of absences that prohibit the child from passing to the next grade level. Both excused and unexcused absences are incorporated into this number (LDOE).

There are as many different criteria for an unexcused absence as ways to calculate the rate of truancy (Lindstadt, 2005; Sutphen et al., 2010). For example, some schools accept a parental note or letter as an acceptable excuse, whereas other schools require a notice from a physician or dentist. Some schools only accept illness as an excuse and other schools accept family obligations or holidays as excused absences. To convolute matters more, excused absences may even vary from school to school within the same school district and from district

to district within the same state (Lindstadt; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention [OJJDP], n.d.). Schools may calculate the total number of times that a child is late for a school day (i.e., tardy) or a class period and count the occurrences as an unexcused absence, for example, three tardies may equal one unexcused absence (OJJDP). Many inconsistencies exist among schools due to the lack of a universally accepted definition of truancy (Lindstadt; OJJDP). The phenomenon of truancy emerged only after the establishment of compulsory attendance laws in schools.

Historical Context of Compulsory Attendance Laws

Consideration of historical contexts is beneficial to gain insight about policies and practices in schools. Compulsory education in America originated in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1642 (Katz, 1976). Enacted by the Puritans, the intent of the law was to transform parents' moral responsibilities of schooling their children to legal mandates. In 1852, more than 200 years after the first regulations were enacted, Massachusetts passed compulsory attendance laws requiring parents to send their children to free public schools.

The first compulsory attendance laws were ineffective and not enforced, and it was not until 1918, that all states enacted compulsory education attendance laws (Katz, 1976; Sheldon, 2007b). As the population increased and demand for well-trained labor grew, systems for enforcement were created (Sheldon). Between 1900 and 1930, these laws were transformed into statutes with complex legal rules. Historically, not all elements of American society have supported compulsory public school attendance. Opposition to mandatory schooling by some groups resulted in court cases dealing with Constitutional issues. For example, the 1972 Wisconsin v. Yoder ruling by the Supreme Court granted Amish parents exemption for their children from compulsory public school attendance past the eighth grade (Katz). Similarly, states have regulations that allow parents to enroll their children in privately run schools or even to

conduct the home education of their children in lieu of traditional public school attendance (LDOE, n.d.).

Louisiana enacted compulsory school attendance laws in 1910, and later in 1944, the Louisiana legislature created the Visiting Teacher Program (LDOE, n.d.). The rationale for visiting teachers was that non-attendance was symptomatic of other problems and that the causes for absenteeism should be identified and services provided to rectify or lessen assessed problems. The Visiting Teacher Program has been transformed and currently functions as two programs conducted by the LDOE: the School Child Welfare and Attendance program and the School Social Work Services program (LDOE).

In Louisiana, current attendance law requires children aged 7 to 17 to attend school (Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education [LBESE], 1996). If younger children enter the public school system in either pre-kindergarten or kindergarten, then they are obligated to follow compulsory attendance rules. Students may withdraw from school prior to high school graduation with parental permission at age 17 (LBESE). Louisiana state law also allows 16-year old students to withdraw from the K-12 school system if they meet certain hardship criteria; which include being pregnant or actively parenting, being incarcerated or adjudicated, living in an institutionalized or residential facility, having chronic physical or mental illness, or having family and or economic hardships (LBESE). Students who prematurely withdraw from school are able to enroll in adult education, technical and career programs that provide GED credential instruction and testing. As reflected in the risk literature for poor school outcomes, including dropout and truancy (Hammond et al., 2007), the policies of LDOE recognize reasons for dropping out of school (LBESE).

Policy Impacting Education

For over 40 years, the federal government has passed laws regarding education. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 was part of President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty and allocated funds in broad-based areas for teacher/professional development, educational programs and instructional materials, and parental involvement programs (Dynarski, Gleason, Rangarajan, & Wood, 1998). ESEA has been reauthorized every 5 years and is currently entitled the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. In 1967, ESEA was amended to include the School Dropout Prevention Program (SDPP) in Title 1, Part H. Local and state education agencies could apply for discretionary or competitive grants (USDOE, 2008). The purpose of the SDPP was to support sustainable, effective, and coordinated dropout prevention and reentry programs in high schools with annual dropout rates higher than their state average annual dropout rates. Middle schools with students who continue to these high schools also were supported (Dynarski et al.). One SDPP program that is currently operational is Talent Search (TS), which was a model developed to promote high school graduation and college enrollment among low income students whose parents did not complete college (Constantine, Seftor, Martin, Silva, & Myers, 2006; McPartland, Balfanz, Jordon, & Ledgers, 1998). In 2005, approximately \$145 million in federal spending was spent on nearly TS 400,000 students.

Early dropout prevention efforts saw little or no improvement; therefore, in 1988, Congress created the School Dropout Demonstration Program (SDDP), which included competitive grants from the USDOE. Congress expanded SDDP in 1991 and ended it in 1996. These restructuring programs were aimed at institutional school reform rather than specific program implementation. Dynarski and colleagues summarized the impact of SDDPs in a comprehensive report. Outcomes for the evaluations included dropout and attendance rates, test scores, self-esteem measures, alcohol and drug use, pregnancies, and parental involvement.

Overall, findings for middle schools were that intensive programs could improve grade promotion and decrease dropout rates. Findings for high schools were that none of the high school programs affected personal and social outcomes, which were operationalized as locus of control, pregnancy, drug or alcohol use, or arrest rates. Dynarski and colleagues (1998) suggested that high intensive interventions in middle school were early enough to impact children's lives, but that high school students' social and academic problems were too advanced to benefit from the interventions. Information gained from SDDP evaluations were used to formulate the next level of interventions (Dynarski et al.). In 2002, the USDOE established the Institute for Education Sciences (IES) to extend evaluation efforts of programs in schools to include programs such as truancy interventions (IES, n.d.).

NCLB redefined and expanded the federal government's role in K-12 public schools. With strong bipartisan congressional support, President George W. Bush signed the NCLB, House Bill 1, on January 8, 2002 (USGAO, 2005). The law promised to help schools improve by focusing on accountability for academic results, using research-based education methods, and giving choice to parents. NCLB was due for renewal by Congress in 2007, and the act remains in its present form until lawmakers amend it, which could be as late as 2019 (USDOE, 2008).

One major component of NCLB is accountability with prescribed measures in test scores, attendance, and graduation rates. Based on these measures, each school receives a school performance score, which determines whether or not the school meets mandatory annual yearly progress (AYP). For AYP, schools must use at least one other academic indicator in addition to annual tests. High schools are required to use graduation rate as one of their academic indicators. NCLB defines graduation rate as the percentage of students who graduate from secondary school with a regular diploma in 4 years. NCLB does not set a minimum graduation rate; however, the law requires states increase their graduation rates over time. Graduation rates presently are based

on the percentage of students who have completed high school within 4 years of the entering cohort in ninth grade. The graduation rate includes special education students graduating by age 21 as well as students in state-approved 5-year high school programs that result in industry certification in addition to a high school diploma. (USDOE, 2008, USGAO, 2005).

If schools do not reach AYP, which includes meeting the state's requirement for test scores, attendance and graduation rates, for 2 years or more, then schools are *identified for improvement*. Directives of the law require schools, that do not meet AYP after 2 years, to take specific action, and this includes allowing parents to transfer their children to a school that has met AYP; this action is termed school choice. Should a school continue to be deficient for a third year, then the school must make further actions such as providing supplemental services to students, such as individual tutoring, training, and transportation. Should a school remain in the status *identified for improvement* for a fourth year, then the school must replace staff, extend the school year or day, institute new curriculum or restructure the internal workings of the school. In the fifth year of failing to meet AYP, the school must reopen as a charter school, be managed by a private management company, replace most or all staff, or relinquish control of the school to the state (USGAO, 2005). High schools that do not receive Title I funding are exempt from offering school choice or supplemental services. Yet, each school district that receives Title I funds must make a school report card available to the public that includes test scores, attendance rates, and high school graduation rates (USDOE, 2008).

NCLB quantifies school success by evaluating high stakes test scores as well as attendance and dropout rates in K-12 schools (USGAO, 2005). The NCLB requirement for states to report rates of absenteeism in schools has further reinforced the high stakes of truancy as attendance rates are part of the formula in school accountability calculations (USGAO).

However, the consequences of NCLB policies are affecting at-risk students in schools. Because federal accountability efforts are pressuring individual schools, their districts, and state departments of education to attain academic, attendance, and graduation marks (USGAO, 2005), students who are truant are detrimental to school AYP scores. Students, who miss school often, tend to fare poorly in school and some hypothesize that schools are forcing out these students so that they do not negatively affect school AYP scores (Edelman, 2010; Kozol, 2005; USGAO). Local educational agencies lose control and the funds associated with those schools, according to timelines established by NCLB, if schools do not meet accountability standards. Students with disabilities are also often viewed as liabilities for schools, and they are often truant (Lehr et al., 2004) Truancy actually may be masking these difficult-to-instruct students, especially those with disabilities (Grooters & Faidley, 2002). According to Lehr et al., children with disabilities may be at the greatest risk for dropping out of school. Lehr et al. found that children with emotional or behavioral disabilities had a dropout rate of 51% and those with learning disabilities had a dropout rate of 27%. These issues among very high-risk students include ethical concerns of social justice that are compounded by academic failure, impacting not only the individual, but also high-risk groups and their communities (Carlisle, Jackson, & George, 2006; Marsh, 2005). Policies and programs are needed to address these and other school related concerns (Bridgeland et al., 2006). These issues are of particular concern for social workers and other advocates of children at risk. Research shows that children of color and children whose families are experiencing poverty are at risk for multiple problems, including school failure (Fram et al., 2007).

Race and Economic Class Achievement Gap Realities

Race and class overlap when viewing the educational achievement gap among disadvantaged and minority, particularly African-American, populations (Education Week, 2010;

Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007). Moreover, a growing body of research is showing how schools in urban areas are producing the largest numbers of students who drop out (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). It has been estimated that approximately 2,000 high schools (about 12% of those in the US), which also are categorized as low performing schools, are producing nearly half of the nation's dropouts (Balfanz & Letgers)

Social justice or equity-oriented issues are obscured when terms like *urban* are used to diminish the effects of complex social systems that may be minimizing racism, classism, and oppression in schools (Carlisle et al., 2006). If the achievement gap is conceptualized as a structural condition, then institutionalized systems are culpable (Carlisle et al.). In a study examining poverty, race, and achievement in schools in the southern United States, Fram and colleagues (2007) found differences between high-ethnic and low-ethnic minority schools that supported the race or class status gaps in children's academic achievement. This achievement gap associated with race and socioeconomic status marks an educational inequality issue for minority and disadvantaged children. The high-ethnic minority schools had teachers with less experience and lower levels of certification than low-ethnic minority schools (Fram et al.). Children who attended high-ethnic minority schools had less adequately equipped classrooms with greater proportions of students with low reading skills. The study found similar results for high-poverty versus low-poverty schools: African-American students were 1.4 times as likely to be enrolled in high-poverty as in low-poverty schools, moreover, African-American students were 3.8 times as likely to attend high-poverty schools as White students (Fram et al.). The authors discussed implications for children's lives, particularly examining structural factors, such as equitable funding for schools and adequate housing, medical care, and community resources (Fram et al.).

While certain characteristics have been traditionally attributed to individual or behavioral choices, such as teen parenthood or underachievement, Fram and colleagues (2007) considered these issues through a social justice perspective. Entrenched poverty of the South was also associated with structural factors, including lack of access to healthcare resources, sexist and cultural biases, and poor educational opportunities. Fram et al. advocated for more structurally oriented interventions to effect change. The conclusion reached by the authors regarding the race or class achievement gap was that educational reform efforts could be facilitated by macro-level practice efforts, such as educational policy and program changes that are rooted in core social work values. A call for system change that positively impacts disadvantaged populations was an implication of the research. School social workers are in a strategic position to identify practices and policies to promote social change. Educational equity is an emerging civil rights issue of the 21st century, which chiefly affects at-risk populations (Edelman, 2010; Kozol, 2005). As factors are identified for children at risk for adverse life outcomes, those factors associated with educational attainment, such as chronic absenteeism, are key intervention points for social work programs in schools (Marsh, 2005).

Risk Factors Contributing to Children's School Problems

Risk factors associated with truancy, academic failure and subsequent dropout comprise four domains: individual, family, school, and community (Hammond et al., 2007; NCJRS, 2007). The domains are interconnected and overlapping, showing interacting dynamics of the various systems. The culmination of factors across the four domains puts students at greater and greater levels of risk for negative academic outcomes (Fraser, Kirby, & Smokowski, 2004; Rhodes, 2007).

Individual Characteristics

Unalterable factors, such as ethnicity and gender, are individual risk factors related to school problems, including truancy and dropout (Glanville & Wilhagen, 2007; Rumberger, 1987, Teasley, 2004). Research shows that African-American males are disproportionately represented among students who drop out of school (Brooks-Gunn, Guo, & Furstenberg, 1993; Education Week, 2009b). Poor cognitive and social skills along with low levels of academic functioning, especially in mathematics and reading, are found among children who drop out (Franklin & Streeter, 1992; Nettles & Robinson, 1998; Richman et al., 2004). Physical health problems, medical disabilities, and emotional disorders are also common among individuals who prematurely leave school (Teasley, 2004; Rumberger; Zhang et al., 2007). Externalizing problems in children, as categorized by child developmental experts, are described as problems associated with under-control, such as fighting, aggressive behavior, and hyperactivity, which often negatively impact children's school experiences (Achenbach, 1991; Eisenberg et al., 2001; Miller-Lewis et al., 2006). Internalizing problems in children are described as problems associated with over-control, such as loneliness, anxiety, shyness, and social withdrawal (Achenbach; Eisenberg et al.; Miller-Lewis et al.). One internalizing individual risk factor includes school refusal behavior, which is recognized as anxiety that makes attending school difficult (Kearney, 2002). Children who demonstrate poor interpersonal skills often have social and school problems (Hallfors et al., 2002; Pritchard & Williams, 2001; Teasley; Zhang et al.). Individual characteristics that place children at risk for poor academic outcomes include parenthood, excessive work outside of school, delinquency, affiliation with high-risk peer groups, and substance abuse (Brown, Riley, Walrath, Leaf, & Valdez, 2008; Richman et al.). Dropping out of school is associated with poor attendance patterns and being uninterested or disengaged from school (Fraser, 2004; Rhodes, 2007). Children with chronic school attendance

problems, especially those children with on-going and enduring absenteeism problems, are at risk for poor academic outcomes, and these on-going problems often begin in elementary school (Chang & Romero, 2008; Dillon, Liem, & Gore, 2003; Teasley).

One particular individual-level risk factor is strongly associated with eventual school dropout: previous grade retention (Alexander et al., 2001; Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2004). Children who fail to progress in school along with their age appropriate peer groups are overage for their grade, which places them at risk for academic and social problems, as well as school non-completion. Longitudinal research supports this claim (Alexander et al.; Entwisle et al.). Grade retention, as early as first grade, predicts dropout (Alexander et al.). Jerald (2006) reported that elementary or middle school grade failure was indicative of future drop out. Balfanz and Legters (2006) found, that in cities with the highest dropout rates, their schools had up to 40% of ninth graders repeating their first year of high school, and of these repeaters only 10 to 15% graduated (Balfanz, 2007). Those who drop out of school often experience a myriad of personal stressors, as do their families (Fraser, 2004).

Family Characteristics

Several authors identify risk factors in the family domain, including poverty and low socioeconomic status, inconsistent discipline and ineffective parenting skills, low family social support and high family mobility, parental emotional disorders, and child abuse or neglect (Alexander et al., 2001; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; OJJDP, n.d.). Additional risk factors identified within families are single parent homes, large family size, transportation problems, and family conflict and domestic violence (Bimler & Kirkland, 2001; Frank, 1990). Overprotective or overly permissive parenting styles contribute to truancy and dropout (Franklin, 1992; Franklin & Streeter, 1992; Teasley, 2004) as do families that are uninterested or unsupportive of education (Epstein & Sheldon; Franklin & Streeter; Lagana, 2004; Sandau-Beckler, Deval, & de la Rosa,

2002; OJJDP). Other family-level risk factors include low levels of family engagement with school and low parental and sibling educational attainment (Hammond et al., 2007). It is not uncommon for kinship groups to have a number of members who do not have a high school degree (Golden, Kist, Trehan, & Padak, 2005).

School Characteristics

Many students who drop out come from schools with low school attendance rates, poor relationships among students, problems with harassment and school safety, and stratified educational tracking, which is the segregation of students into classes by academic ability (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Wayman, 2002). These school traits are characteristic of an emerging construct referred to as school disengagement, which is conceptualized as students' perceptions that they do are not well suited to their school environment. Students who are disengaged may feel that their school may not offer the types of classes or learning environments suitable for them. Disengaged students often are bored with school and learning; moreover, students' perceptions and attitudes about schools' policies regarding discipline, as being unfair, and academics, as being irrelevant to their lives, can negatively affect students' academic performance and attendance patterns (Bimler & Kirkland, 2001; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Finlay & Heilbrunn, 2006; Ford & Sutphen, 1996; King, 2002; McPartland, 1994; Stern, Wu, Dayton, & Maul, 2005). The school environment can negatively affect children's academic experiences (Bridgeland et al.; King).

Additional school risk factors include large schools, particularly urban schools with large proportions of ethnic minority students living in poverty (Alexander et al., 2001; Balfanz & Legters, 2006; Richman et al., 2004). Schools with high dropout and truancy rates often have high teacher-student ratios, high absenteeism among students (Gandy & Schultz, 2007; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002), and overall low achievement of the students, as well as few resources and

supports to meet educational needs for the student body (Datnow & Stringfield, 2000; Golden et al., 2005; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994). Negativity in the school environment, particularly troublesome teacher and staff attitudes, are found among schools with high dropout rates (Brewster & Bowne, 2004; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Datnow & Stringfield; Golden et al.; Sinha, 2007; Wang et al.).

Community Characteristics

The presence of crime, gangs, violence, delinquent peers, and interracial tensions within the community impact the child's ability to function well in the school environment (Alexander et al., 2001; Brooks-Gunn et al., 1993; McCluskey, Bryum, & Patchin, 2004; Teasley, 2004). Dropout is prevalent in urban settings and geographic regions with concentrations of poverty and minority populations (Balfanz & Legters, 2006; Fram et al., 2007; Hammond et al., 2007). The societal consequences associated with individuals who do not complete schools weaken communities, for example lower family and individual incomes, loss of national income and tax revenue, and higher unemployment as well as increased demand for social services, reduced political participation, and higher health care costs (Education Week, 2009a; Fraser et al. 2004; Richman et al., 2004). Additionally, Richman and colleagues report that when communities have high dropout rates, public health problems increase, including higher incidence of sexually transmitted diseases and school-age pregnancy. Just as certain individual, social, school, and community factors place children at risk, other characteristics serve as protective factors.

Protective Factors Promoting Academic Success

The presence of protective factors can moderate the negative effects of individual, family, school, and community risk factors. Protective factors serve as mechanisms to increase the likelihood that a child remains on a positive growth trajectory (Fraser et al., 2004). Individual protective factors include having a relationship with at least one caring adult (Rhodes, Reddy, &

Grossman, 2005). Other characteristics serve as protective factors for the individual, including intelligence, positive self-esteem, and good health. Protective factors in the family and environment include regular religious participation, family cohesion, social involvement, peer support, and good employment opportunities. Quality schools with adequate funding and resources, that provide broad opportunities for education; as well as engaged and motivated teachers and school personnel, are protective factors (Fraser et al.; Nettles & Robinson, 1998). Additional protective factors at the community level include safe and supportive neighborhoods, social cohesion, and low crime rates (Dillon et al., 2003; Laguna, 2004). Communities with higher socioeconomic standings have lower dropout rates than less advantaged communities, suggesting that adequate community resources and high-quality schools are beneficial to individuals and may prevent dropout and other social problems (Fraser et al.). Just as there are domains of risk and protective factors, educational researchers have identified four domains, (e.g., staying, progressing, completing, and being college and career ready) to examine interventions that promote successful navigation through school (What Works Clearinghouse [WWC], 2008).

Educational Research Domains

The Institute for Educational Sciences (WWC, 2008), which conducts and disseminates research for the USDOE, established key domains to empirically examine dropout prevention studies (WWC). The first domain is staying in school, which relates to daily school attendance. The second domain is progressing in school, which reflects whether a child completes or passes each school year on time (WWC). The third domain is completing school, which is successful high school graduation. Recently, President Barack Obama (2011) announced an expanded educational mandate, which added a fourth domain: college and career readiness for high school graduates (Bloom, Gardenhire-Crooks, & Mandsager, 2009; USDOE, 2008). Educational

researchers currently are utilizing these four domains as a framework to study school success and to evaluate programs that aim to influence staying in school (e.g., attendance rates), progressing in school (e.g. being on-time for grade level), completing school (e.g., graduation), and being ready for college and career (e.g. college and technical school enrollment or employment). Among the four educational research domains, established by IES, the first domain of staying in school examines programs with attendance and truancy rates as outcomes (WWC).

Truancy, like school dropout, is a multidimensional problem associated with a host of overlapping and interconnected adverse individual, family, social and community risk factors (Chang & Romero, 2008; Hammond et al., 2007, Teasley, 2004). The problem of chronic absenteeism is embedded in each of the four domains of risk for poor school outcomes.

Individuals who are chronically truant tend to fare poorly in school (Fraser, 2004; Richman et al., 2004). Families that are unsupportive of education or that feel disengaged from the school, often have children with high absenteeism rates (Lagana, 2004; Sandau-Beckler et al., 2002; OJJDP, n.d.). Schools with high absenteeism rates are associated with poor academic achievement and high dropout rates (Balfanz, 2007). Communities with many risk factors for school success have barriers that make attending school difficult (Gandy & Schultz, 2007; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). The relationship between chronic absenteeism and school failure is not linear. It is difficult to determine the causal pathways among factors associated with chronic attendance problems and school dropout. What is certain, however, are the costs to the individual and society if the negative school outcomes are permitted to run their course unabated (AEE, 2006a; Rouse, 2005). In order to address the negative consequences of truancy, national organizations, such as OJJDP, provide leadership and resources to develop and implement effective truancy intervention programs on behalf of at-risk children and their families (OJJDP).

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Best Practices

OJJDP with the USDOE and the U.S. Department of Justice recommends five fundamental best practices for truancy prevention programs (OJJDP, n.d.). The first is including parents in truancy prevention activities, for example, by increasing communication between the school and home. The second recommendation is to establish firm sanctions for truancy, such as zero tolerance policies for unexcused absences and legal ramifications for chronic truancy. Third, parental incentives should be part of truancy prevention programs, for example, making public assistance eligibility contingent on children's school attendance. The fourth recommendation is to promote services that focus on the root causes of truancy, such as basic needs, physical and mental health issues, and low parental support for education. Finally, it is recommended that programs develop collaborative links with law enforcement and the court system (OJJDP). These latter recommendations are strongly aligned with statutory and community-based efforts to reduce truancy. In sum, OJJDP's five recommended best practices, including communication between family and school, sanctions and incentives, attention to underlying problems contributing to truancy, and collaboration among school and court systems, all identify key intervention components for truancy prevention programs.

Intervention Studies

Policymakers, educators, and other community stakeholders are seeking ways to promote children's educational attainment (Chang & Romero, 2008; Jozefowicz-Simbeni & Allen-Mears, 2002). This section of the literature review will examine three comprehensive reviews examining studies of truancy intervention programs or studies that included attendance as a key outcome measure. The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (NDPC/N) identified 50 programs that met their criteria for exemplary dropout prevention programs and three (e.g., Big Brothers Big Sisters, Career Academy, Check & Connect) of the 50 programs showed results

that decreased absenteeism. (Hammond et al., 2007). Gandy and Schultz (2007) identified 14 evaluative studies and identified one truancy prevention program (e.g., Project S.T.A.R.T.) with promising effectiveness. Sutphen et al. (2010) reviewed 222 truancy interventions studies and identified 16 studies in the literature that met criteria for inclusion in their review. Of the 16 reviewed by Sutphen et al., half of the studies addressed truancy among elementary aged children.

NDPC/N has delineated 50 exemplary programs addressing individual, family, and school risk factors that contribute to dropout (Hammond et al., 2007). NDPC/N began their search with the Blueprints for Violence matrix of evidence-based programs, that were compiled by the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence at the Institute of Behavioral Science of the University of Colorado at Boulder (Mihalic, 2005). Criteria for inclusion in the NDPC/N report included programs that were ranked in the top tier by at least two sources, for example, being included in the Blueprints for Violence Prevention and as an OJJDP model program, and as having no major program revisions since the ranking by the two sources. Additionally, the program had to be currently operational and targeting K-12 grades. Finally, the program must demonstrate consistent and positive outcomes in evaluative studies (Hammond et al.) NDPC/N noted the challenge in identifying programs due to the fact that the additional sources identified *effective, model, or best practices* using inconsistent and ill-defined criteria (Hammond et al.). Nevertheless, NCDP/N produced a list of 50 programs, with rigorous evaluation data, that addressed targeted risk factors for school dropout. It was noted that many programs designated as promising lacked evaluation data to support effectiveness and were not included (Hammond et al.).

Among the 50 programs identified by NDCP/N, evaluation studies of three programs showed positive effects in promoting attendance in addition to promoting high school

completion, including Big Brothers Big Sisters (Tierney, Grossman, & Resch, 2005), Career Academy (Kemple & Snipes, 2000), and Check & Connect (Sinclair et al., 1998). Only one of these programs, Check & Connect, had reduction of truancy as a primary aim of the intervention. Authors noted the paucity of evaluative research examining risk factors for dropout in elementary and middle school children (Hammond et al., 2007).

Big Brothers Big Sisters

The basic goal of the Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) program seeks to provide support by a caring adult for children aged 5 to 18 years (Tierney et al., 2005). The primary activity is mentoring youth from low socioeconomic status, single parent families. BBBS provides developmentally appropriate activities for the child to experience with the mentor, such as attending school (e.g., science fair), cultural (e.g., theater play) or sporting events, playing catch, or visiting a library (Tierney et al.). In a national 18-month evaluation of BBBS using an experimental research design, Tierney et al. studied the direct and indirect effects of mentoring on academic performance, substance use, and self-esteem in 928 adolescents. Baseline and follow-up data were collected by interview from adolescents, parents, and mentors. Demographic and academic information were gathered from key informants with access to adolescent and family records. The participants had a mean age of 12.25 years, and boys comprised over 60% of the sample. Nearly two thirds of the children were from racial minorities, and nearly 70% of the minority participants were African American (Tierney et al.). Children were randomly assigned to treatment and assigned a mentor, or to the control group and placed on an 18-month waiting list. As compared with youth who received no mentoring, participants in the experimental group reported reductions in drug and alcohol use (Tierney et al.). In addition, results showed improved grades, particularly for minority females and fewer days of school missed, particularly by females (Tierney et al.). BBBS program aims to affect a wide range of aspects of a child's life,

and the national longitudinal evaluation showed a positive effect in attendance patterns for youth, particularly females, at the 18-month follow up (Tierney et al.).

Career Academy

Career Academy (CA), another program deemed exemplary by the NDCP/N report, is a school model developed by the University of California, Berkeley, Department of Education (Stern et al., 2005). Within high schools, CA creates small learning communities ranging from 50 to 200 students, providing college preparatory instruction and vocational trades. The small learning communities, or Career Academies, within the larger high school are linked to themes, such as finance, hospitality and tourism, science, or technology areas (Career Academy Support Research [CASR], 2005). CA was originally developed to assist inner-city youth stay in school, obtain positive academic and occupational experiences, reduce delinquent behavior, and increase protective factors (CASR). A longitudinal randomized control trial (Kemple & Snipes, 2000) of CA was conducted in eight urban areas in six states (i.e., California, Florida, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Washington, DC). Logistic regression analyses were conducted for the study, and Kemple and Snipes reviewed student outcomes among students ($N = 1764$) who applied to the grade of entry (e.g., either ninth or tenth grade) for nine CA schools included in the evaluation. At the end of the first year of enrollment, over one quarter ($n = 474$, 27%) of the total study sample, were predicted to be at high risk of dropping out of high school according to the students' individual and social risk factors. Researchers used student characteristics at the end of the year of random assignment (e.g., attendance, grade point average, overage for grade, sibling dropout, and previous school transfer two or more times) to predict which of the 1764 students were most at risk for dropping out. Of the 474 high-risk students, 86% had been randomly assigned to CA schools. High-risk youth not randomly assigned to a CA comprised the control group and had enrolled in general education programs or other area high schools. Among

the high-risk youth participants, nearly 80% were 15 years old or younger, and a majority was female (57%) and Hispanic (52%). African Americans comprised nearly two fifths (38%) of the high-risk sample and a majority of African-American children lived in single-headed family households (Kemple & Snipes). Kemple and Snipes reported that of those at high risk, CA had a positive and statistically significant effect on dropout. At the end of the 12th grade year, 21% of the CA group and 32% of the comparison group had dropped out. These authors found that CA students were less likely to drop out of school and were more likely to earn more course credits and more likely to have improved attendance rates than students in the control group (Kemple & Snipes).

Check & Connect

A third program that addressed attendance issues and was deemed as having exemplary program status by NDPC/N was Check & Connect, an intervention program that specifically targets chronic absenteeism at the elementary, middle, and high school levels (Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair, & Lehr, 2004). Check & Connect was developed by the Institute of Community Integration at the University of Minnesota. Key features of Check & Connect include relationship building, routine monitoring of alterable indicators (e.g., attendance, academic performance, and behavior), individualized and timely intervention of support tailored to students' needs, commitment to work with the child and family for an extended length of time, persistent academic encouragement, problem solving skills, and access to school related events and activities (Lehr et al., 2004). The program monitor serves as a case manager and plays a key role in terms of assessing students' engagement in school and implementing interventions, while building a positive relationship with the child (Anderson et al.).

In an evaluative study utilizing logistic regression to evaluate outcomes (Sinclair et al, 1998), high school students ($N = 94$) were randomly assigned to either the intervention ($n = 47$)

or control ($n = 47$) groups at the beginning of ninth grade. All participants were classified as special education students with learning, emotional, or behavioral disabilities, with over three fourths of participants having a learning disability and slightly more than two fifths having a severe disability. A majority of participants was African American (59%) and over two thirds were male (68%). Nearly three fourths (71%) of the students received free or reduced priced lunch.

The intervention group received Check & Connect services in the seventh and eighth grades, and then in ninth grade, after being randomly assigned to the intervention group, they continued to receive Check & Connect services in high school. The control group also received Check & Connect services in the seventh and eighth grades, but these students did not continue to receive the program services once they were randomly assigned to the control group at the beginning of the ninth grade. Intervention and control groups attended the same high schools. Sinclair and colleagues (1998) reported that ninth grade students in the intervention group were significantly less likely (9% of students) to have dropped out of school than students in the control group (30% of students) at the end of ninth grade. These authors found that students in the intervention group were more likely to have improved attendance rates than students in the control group (Sinclair et al.).

In sum, the three evaluative studies of dropout prevention programs (e.g., BBBS, Career Academy, and Check & Connect) categorized by NDPC/N as exemplary and using rigorous experimental designs, demonstrated that graduation and attendance rates showed positive and significant differences for the intervention groups as compared to the control groups. The three studies were conducted in middle or high schools. According to Gandy and Schultz (2007), when examining elementary truancy prevention programs, few have been evaluated with rigorous research designs.

In a comprehensive review of over 2000 studies for truancy intervention programs, Gandy and Schultz (2007) identified 14 replicable evaluation truancy intervention studies and concluded that only 3 of the 14 studies (Heyne, 2002; King, 1998; Fantuzzo, Grim, & Hazan, 2005) showed promising evidence for effectiveness. Gandy and Schultz defined *promising* as studies demonstrating favorable outcomes using quasi-experimental research designs. Two of the three identified promising programs addressed anxiety-based school refusal behavior in children. Kearney (2001) posits that children who do not attend school due to school refusal behavior are conceptually different from children who are categorized as truants. School refusal behavior is considered a mental health issue and precludes antisocial behavior (Kearney). One objective of Gandy and Schultz's review was to explore the extent to which Kearney's individualized cognitive-based treatments were incorporated within truancy literature (Gandy & Schultz). The only truancy prevention evaluative study with promising evidence examined was Project S.T.A.R.T. (Fantuzzo et al.; Gandy & Schultz).

Project S.T.A.R.T.

Project S.T.A.R.T. (Stop Truancy and Recommend Treatment), a community-based model aligned with national OJJDP guidelines of best practices that address the root causes of truancy, aimed to reduce truancy in elementary, middle, and high school students (Fantuzzo et al., 2005). Using a quasi-experimental matched group design, participants ($N = 567$) included kindergarten to twelfth grade students, who met criteria of 25 or more unexcused absences in the previous school year and ongoing attendance problems within the current school year. The study was conducted in one urban public school district in the Northeastern United States. Participants were matched on age, sex, race, and unexcused absences for 189 students in each of three groups: the intervention community court program (Project S.T.A.R.T), traditional court intervention, and no intervention. Of the 567 participants, nearly one third (63%) were African

American, 15% were White, and 15% were of other ethnicities. Nearly half of the sample was male (48%). In terms of absences, number of days absent was measured at baseline and subsequently at 30 days, 60 days, and 1-year intervals. The Project S.T.A.R.T. intervention group was offered case management and social service referrals to address academic and social needs. The absenteeism rates of the Project S.T.A.R.T. intervention group decreased, which remained the same after 30 days; however, the absences of the traditional court intervention group gradually increased over the course of the study, and the absences among the no treatment group showed no change. No statistically significant differences emerged between the three groups (Fantuzzo et al.).

Gandy and Schultz (2007) concluded that few rigorously evaluated truancy intervention studies existed and many of the reviewed studies had very small samples. The reviewed studies were also limited by vague operationalization of concepts and few outcome measures besides counting days of students' absences. Studies were limited to proximal outcomes and lacked distal outcome assessment (Gandy & Schultz). The authors recommended expanded examination of truancy intervention programs, particularly for outcomes beyond the current school year of study.

In a systematic review of truancy intervention studies published in the literature between 1990 and 2007, Sutphen and colleagues (2010) identified 222 truancy intervention program studies, with only 16 meeting the researchers' criteria for examination. Inclusion criteria were outcome studies with a discernable research design using some level of statistical analysis that examined strictly truancy intervention and neither school phobia, school refusal behavior, nor dropout. Among the 16 identified studies, half used group comparison designs, albeit methodological designs, small sample sizes, and marginally equivalent comparison groups were

noted as limitations in the 8 studies. The remaining 8 studies used one-group pretest-posttest designs. Overall, 7 of the 16 studies reviewed were conducted in elementary school settings.

Sutphen and colleagues (2010) further categorized the 16 reviewed studies into 3 types: student and family-based, school-based, and community-based interventions (Sutphen et al.). The six student and family-based interventions (Baker & Jansen, 2000; Brooks, 2001; Ford & Sutphen, 1996; Lehr et al., 2004; Licht, Gard, & Guardino, 1991; Newsome, 2004) used positive and negative contingency management in the form of incentives and sanctions, for example token economies providing school supplies, fast food coupons, and movie tickets as rewards and detentions as sanctions (Sutphen et al.). The three school-based interventions (Brunsma, 1998; McPartland et al., 1998; Sturgeon & Beer, 1990) used comprehensive school reorganization strategies, for example small independent academies within large schools or mandatory school-wide uniform policies. The seven community-based interventions (Elizondo, Feske, Edgull, & Walsh, 2003; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Jones, Harris, & Finnegan, 2002; McCluskey et al., 2004; Mueller, Giacomazzi & Stoddard, 2006; White, Fyfe, Campbell, & Goldkamp, 2001; Sheldon, 2007a) utilized primarily punitive measures combined with social and mental health service referrals that met identified needs and strengthened families (Sutphen et al.). Overall, 8 of the 16 studies among the 3 categories were conducted in elementary school settings, and these 8 studies will be examined. The 8 studies were categorized as either student and family-based interventions or community-based interventions. All school-based interventions were conducted in high school settings, and one school-based intervention with positive and significant findings will be reviewed (McPartland et al.).

Of the eight elementary school studies, three were student and family-based interventions. The first was a goal-focused support group in Indiana to encourage attendance (Baker & Jansen, 2000); the second was an attendance incentive program providing daily

counseling and rewards, and then following up with weekly maintenance (Ford & Sutphen, 1996); and the third intervention was the Check & Connect program (Lehr et al., 2004). An earlier Check & Connect study with an experimental design (Sinclair et al., 1998) was identified as an exemplary program in the NDPC/N comprehensive review, but the earlier study conducted by Sinclair et al. was not included in the review by Sutphen et al. (2010), due to the fact that the primary goal of the 1998 study was dropout prevention, thereby not meeting the criteria for inclusion by Sutphen et al.

Student and Family-Based Truancy Interventions in Elementary Schools

Student and family-based interventions utilized rewards and sanctions to encourage attendance (Sutphen et al., 2010). Baker and Jansen (2000) examined elementary school students ($N = 14$) having 10 unexcused absences in one school in Indiana. The intervention aimed chiefly to provide support to students as a motivation for good attendance. Goal-focused, structured curriculum weekly support groups were conducted to encourage attendance among first to fifth grade students. Two groups were formed: one with lower elementary aged children (i.e., first and second graders) and another with upper elementary aged children (i.e., third through fifth graders); however, the children in the two groups were not compared to one another. Using a one-group pretest-posttest design, measures of excused and unexcused absences were collected at the beginning of the program and at the end of the 4-month program. Attendance improved among children in both groups during the intervention period, and there was no follow-up after intervention to determine later attendance rates (Baker & Jansen).

A pilot study conducted by Ford and Sutphen (1996) examined one group of elementary school children in grades 1 to 3 ($N = 9$) with 20 absences during the previous school year in Kentucky. The program sought to determine the reasons for high rates of absenteeism and also to provide incentives and support to children and their families to reduce truancy. The intervention

was administered in two phases. Children first received daily counseling, lasting from 15 minutes to 1-hour, and rewards (e.g., pencils, candy, toys) for good attendance during the first 9-week period. For the second phase of the intervention, the children received 18 weekly contacts by the school social worker. The second phase also included family-based interventions, such as phone calls to encourage attendance. An example of a family intervention included home visits to help establish morning and evening routines for prompt and regular school attendance. Children in the intervention group showed an increase in attendance during phase one with daily counseling and rewards, but absences increased during phase two with the less intensive weekly intervention (Ford & Sutphen).

The third study in the student and family-based category was Check & Connect (Lehr et al., 2004). The study was conducted among elementary students with disabilities ($N = 374$) in nine schools in Minnesota. Truancy was determined as 12% of days missed since enrollment or as 12% of days counted as tardy since enrollment. Measures of student participation included tardies and absences, as well as measures of staff perceptions of student engagement utilizing responses on the School Staff Feedback Survey (Lehr et al.). Using a quasi-experimental design, two groups of children were included in a treatment or comparison group. Because benefits of the program were not expected until after 2 years of treatment in the truancy program, students ($n = 147$) who were served by the truancy program for 2 or more years were the treatment group and students ($n = 217$) who were served by the truancy program for less than 2 years were the comparison group. Both groups participated in the Check & Connect model. Results showed that students who were in Check & Connect for 2 or more years had numbers of absences and tardies that declined significantly compared to children who were in Check & Connect for less than 2 years (Lehr et al.).

Two of the aforementioned school student and family-based intervention programs used a one-group, pretest-posttest design (Baker & Jansen, 2000; Ford & Sutphen, 1996), using the number of absences as the dependent variable. Check & Connect was evaluated using a quasi-experimental design (Lehr et al., 2004). Two of the studies had very small sample sizes (Baker & Jansen; Ford & Sutphen). All three of the studies showed improvement in attendance over the course of the intervention period, which covered time periods of 4 months (Baker & Jansen) to one school year (Ford & Sutphen) to 2-years (Lehr et al.).

School-Based Truancy Interventions

Of the school-based interventions reviewed by Sutphen et al. (2010), none of the studies were conducted among elementary school children. All school-based interventions were operated in high schools. Comprehensive school reorganization showed positive results in reducing truancy in only one of the three studies (McPartland et al., 1998). McPartland and colleagues evaluated the Talent Development High School reform model, which restructured a large high school with high dropout rates and persistent discipline, student achievement, and attendance problems. The Talent Development model includes both structural and curriculum reforms, for example, creating small ninth grade academies within the larger school, themed career academies in the upper grades, and after hours twilight school for students with discipline problems (McPartland et al.). McPartland et al. found the reorganization of one urban, traditionally low-performing school decreased truancy rates, as compared to eight other high schools in a school district in Baltimore, Maryland. Truancy was defined as 20 or more absences. Equivalency of the groups was not reported in the study. The two school-based interventions showing no effects on attendance in high schools included mandatory uniform policy (Brunsma, 1998) and rewarding good attendance with test-taking exemptions (Sturgeon & Beer, 1990).

While no school-related studies were found to examine truancy intervention programs in elementary or middle school, five of the seven identified community-based interventions were conducted in elementary school settings. These programs linked community resources and agencies to students and their families (Sutphen, 2010).

Community-Based Truancy Interventions in Elementary Schools

Elizondo et al. (2003) examined the School Attendance Enhancement Program (SAEP), which was operated by the county probation department under the auspices of the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative (SS/HS). The study examined SS/HS in a federally funded pilot program in one city in California. The aim of SS/HS is to promote and enhance collaboration and partnerships among students and their families, law enforcement and the court system, social service and mental health providers, community agencies, and schools (Elizondo et al.). For this study, truancy was defined as absences above the legal threshold for statutory truancy charges. The sample was reported as a small number of students in the SAEP program across six school sites, but no specific number of participants or sample selection procedures was given. Using a one-group pretest-posttest design, results showed that most students who participated in SAEP reduced their absences and tardy occurrences by more than 50%; however, this was presented without collaborative statistics, and the researchers reported that much of the evaluation was based on anecdotal information (Elizondo et al.).

The Early Elementary Truancy Initiative (McCluskey et al., 2004) was a district-wide truancy prevention program piloted in three elementary schools with attendance problems. The schools were located within a Michigan city that was an Operation Weed and Seed community, funded by the U. S. Department of Justice. Approximately half of the children ($N = 362$) were ethnic minorities from an area of Hispanic and Native American families, where nearly 40% of individuals lived below the poverty level (McCluskey et al.). Nearly half of the community

(45%) did not have a high school diploma or GED credential. Children in the program had missed 20% of school days in the 6-week baseline period, prior to the intervention. The multimodal intervention consisted of two levels. First, the families ($n = 281$ children) were notified by letter of compulsory attendance laws and visited by an attendance officer (McCluskey et al.). If absences ceased, then no other actions were taken. The second level of the intervention included a referral to a social service or mental health provider or a law enforcement contact. In the second level, case managers referred children to appropriate services to meet identified needs (McCluskey et al.). However, if absences continued, then parents were charged with truancy violations and petitioned to court (McCluskey et al.). The first phase of the intervention showed more improvement in attendance than the later stage of the intervention. In order to assess program effectiveness, individual data were gathered at multiple points over the following year. Valid data were collected for nearly 60% of children ($n = 162$; McCluskey et al.). Results showed a 50% reduction in absences for children with 30 or more absences. There was a significant decrease in truancy for children whose families received the notification letter and visit from the attendance officer, and truancy did not decrease for children whose families were summoned to court (McCluskey et al.).

The Countrywide Program, another community-based program, aimed to reduce truancy in three elementary school districts in Idaho (Mueller et al., 2006). Criterion for children ($N = 44$) enrolled in the program was an absence rate of 10% of school days missed during the school year. The Countrywide intervention was a truancy court program. Children and their families were referred to the Countrywide court where attendance officers and the school worked in conjunction with the families to solve problems contributing to truancy (Mueller et al.). Absence and tardy data were collected 4-months pre- and 4-months post-intervention (Mueller et al.). Results from the one-group pretest-posttest design study showed a significant decrease in the

number of absences and tardies. Mueller et al. noted that excused and unexcused absences were not differentiated in the program.

A community-based initiative, the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS), developed school-wide programs to improve overall school attendance rates (Sheldon, 2007a). In an evaluation study, Sheldon found that NNPS elementary schools ($n = 76$) in Ohio showed modestly higher attendance rates compared to 69 matched non-NNPS elementary schools from 2000 to 2001. School characteristics were matched on achievement, attendance, and enrollment data. Using a pretest-posttest group comparison design, the unit of analysis for the study was schools, and the dependent variable was school attendance rates (Sheldon). Broadly, NNPS provided guidelines and tools for establishing partnership programs between schools, students, and families. The study did not provide details about program implementation or specific information about what the programs in NNPS schools included.

In summary, Sutphen et al. (2010) reviewed community-based interventions conducted in elementary schools (Elizondo et al., 2003; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; McCluskey et al., 2004; Mueller et al., 2006; Sheldon, 2007a). These interventions generally incorporated punitive measures along with collaboration among social service agency partnerships to provide assistance for children and their families.

Four of the five community-based interventions utilized one-group, pretest-posttest designs. Only one of the school community-based intervention studies included a comparison group (Sheldon, 2007a). Sample size was not stated in one study (Elizondo et al., 2003). Other study participants ranged from very small ($n = 44$ children; Mueller et al., 2006) to several hundred ($n = 362$; McCluskey et al., 2004). Two studies used schools (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Sheldon) rather than children as units of analysis. Dependent variables were either number of

absences and tardies for children (Elizondo et al.; McCluskey et al.; Mueller et al.) or overall school attendance rates (Epstein & Sheldon; Sheldon).

Findings from studies of community-based interventions showed that initially absences decreased, especially among children considered chronically truant or those children with the highest numbers of absences (Elizondo, et al., 2003; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Mueller et al., 2006). Findings from the community-based interventions conducted with schools showed improvements in attendance, but school response survey rates were low (Epstein & Sheldon) and information about components of the interventions were lacking (Sheldon, 2007a).

Sutphen and colleagues (2010) reached the same conclusions as other comprehensive review authors (Gandy & Schultz, 2007, Hammond et al., 2007) examining evaluative studies of truancy intervention programs, especially in elementary schools. Authors noted the paucity of evidence-based truancy interventions, and that the lack of a uniform definition of truancy and inconsistencies regarding outcome measures complicated comparison across studies. The reviewers cited the need for well-designed and properly conceptualized studies to investigate truancy interventions as the studies reviewed had multiple limitations (Sutphen et al.).

Summary of Prevention Programs Impacting Attendance

OJJDP posits that best practices for effective truancy programs include multilevel collaborative approaches and creation of partnerships where families and students work with educators, mental health professionals, mentors, social service providers, and law enforcement (NCJRS, 2007). Recommended best practices from OJJDP's were found in truancy prevention programs, including communication between family and school (Lehr et al., 2004; McCluskey et al., 2004), sanctions and incentives (Baker & Jansen, 2000; Lehr et al.; McCluskey et al.), attention to underlying problems contributing to truancy (Fantuzzo et al., 2005; Tierney et al., 2005), and collaboration among school and court systems (Elizondo et al., 2003; McCluskey et

al.; Mueller et al.). In order for children to successfully navigate from the kindergarten year through high school graduation, educational domains of staying in school (i.e., attendance), progressing in school (i.e., on-time grade promotion), and completing school (i.e., graduation) are target areas for interventions (WWC, 2008). Interventions that target attendance are part of both dropout and truancy intervention programs (Hammond et al., 2007; Kemple & Snipes, 2000; Sinclair et al., 1998; Tierney et al.). In sum, truancy programs can be viewed as student and family-based interventions that provide rewards and sanctions, school-based interventions that utilize school restructuring and reform, and community-based interventions that include partnerships among children's families, schools, social service agencies, and court systems (Sutphen et al., 2010).

In Louisiana, a collaborative effort among lawmakers, the court system, and social service researchers established a multimodal truancy intervention program in elementary schools utilizing best practices established by OJJDP (OJJDP, n.d.; Rhodes, Thomas, Lemieux, Cain, & Guin, 2010). The next portion of this review recounts the history of the program and its components.

Louisiana Truancy Assessment and Service Center (TASC)

In an effort to decrease truancy and its correlates among Louisiana's youth, Louisiana established the Truancy Assessment and Service Centers (TASC), which were developed by the Office of Social Service Research and Development (OSSRD) at Louisiana State University's School of Social Work. TASC program requirements are delineated and codified in Article 731 of the *Louisiana Children's Code*. The purpose of TASC is to provide early identification of truant elementary school age children (K through fifth grade) via timely assessment and prompt delivery of coordinated interventions to prevent persistent unexcused school absences (Rhodes et al., 2010). In 1999, two pilot truancy centers were established. As of 2011, TASC has expanded

to 13 centers across the state and serves approximately 400 public elementary schools. TASC currently employs more than 120 individuals including TASC program directors, case managers, site monitors, and evaluators (OSSRD, 2010; Rhodes et al.). Information about unexcused absences is collected and analyzed via an extensive data collection system and the individual sites are regularly monitored and evaluated (OSSRD). Short-term outcomes that are measured each year include number of absences and grade progression. The long-term goal of the TASC model is to reduce the correlates of truancy, namely school dropout, delinquent behavior and crime, substance abuse, and teen pregnancy (OSSRD). TASC primarily serves at-risk children in low performing schools (OSSRD; Rhodes et al.).

Teachers refer children at any point of the school year upon children's fifth unexcused absence. The teacher completes and forwards both the TASC referral form and the Risk Indicator Survey I (RISK-I) instrument to the TASC case manager. The TASC referral form collects demographic (age, race, sex, grade) and academic risk factors (number of unexcused absences and tardies, previous grade retentions, special education status, suspensions, expulsions) that are associated with at-risk children. The RISK-I, a single page checklist composed of 54 items in 12 broad categories, measures internalizing and externalizing childhood behaviors and family-related problems that place children at risk for academic problems (Rhodes et al., 2010). TASC referrals are promptly sent from the school to the TASC case manager within 2-days to ensure rapid identification of children at risk. The TASC case manager screens the child as low- or high-risk for continuing truancy within 1-day. The screening process for low- and high-risk status includes appraising information gathered with the TASC referral form and RISK-1 and additionally, reviewing school records and interviewing the child, teacher and school staff, and school counselor or social worker (Rhodes et al.).

Children assessed at low risk show no or few risk factors on the TASC referral form and RISK-I. The TASC intervention for low-risk children requires sending a letter from TASC and community law enforcement to the child's family explaining compulsory attendance law and consequences for continued absences. Attendance of low risk children is monitored for the duration of the school year. If unexcused absence problems are rectified, then no further action is taken (OSSRD, 2010; Rhodes et al., 2010). If absences do not cease, the child is assessed at high risk and the TASC case manager contacts the family to provide the intensive case management intervention (Rhodes et al.).

Parents or guardians of children designated as high risk for continuing truancy during the screening process or during attendance monitoring meet with the TASC case manager and are offered intensive case management services. Case management is recommended in the school social work literature for children and families with multiple needs (Allen-Meares, 1994). For all high-risk children, the TASC case manager meets with the family at a conference, that is scheduled within 21-days. During the conference, the TASC case manager interviews the parent or guardian to assess the problems that are contributing to the child's absences. Additionally, the TASC case manager conducts a more in-depth assessment with the Risk Indicator Survey II (RISK-II) instrument, a single page checklist composed of 47 items in 6 broad categories (viz., educational problems not addressed by school, family social support, financial, medical, mental health-related problems, and transient-related problems) that measures specific needs of the child and family (Rhodes et al., 2010). Information gathered at the family conference and with the RISK-II enables the TASC case manager to create a service plan that details recommended service referrals to school and community resources for specific, targeted interventions to address the problems that contribute to truancy. The service plan is a legal contract, that the child's parent or guardian signs and agrees to fulfill. According to statutory regulations in the

Louisiana Children's Code, the service plan is valid for 6-months; however, it may be extended for an additional 6-months if necessary. The TASC case manager monitors the child's attendance for the remainder of the school year and contacts the family at scheduled intervals to assess adequacy of referred services and to confirm compliance with the service plan (Rhodes et al.). Children served by TASC, who continue to be habitually truant, may be referred to local juvenile justice systems. District attorneys may charge the parent or guardian and child with a statutory violation of the state compulsory attendance law. The judicial process is part of the TASC model, but TASC case managers make every effort to engage children and families and avoid juvenile justice involvement (Rhodes et al.).

Uncontrolled evaluations of TASC have shown positive results in short term outcome measures, namely a reduction in unexcused absences after intervention (OSSRD, 2010). Using a quasi-experimental design, a study of TASC ($N = 700$) in one urban site during one school year showed that the intensive case management intervention was effective in reducing truancy for high-risk children (Thomas, 2011; Thomas, Lemieux, Rhodes, & Vlosky, 2011). However, a longitudinal evaluation has not been conducted (OSSRD).

The TASC program operates within the context of the community in which it is located. Each individual TASC site has a community-based advisory board composed of members representing child advocates, the courts, schools, and community-based physical and mental health agencies. The advisory board works to link the program to community resources and area stakeholders and policymakers (Rhodes et al., 2010).

Summary of Reviewed Literature

Truancy is associated with multiple risk factors for adverse life outcomes (Bimler & Kirkland, 2001; Garry, 1996; Teasley, 2004). Children's futures are increasingly jeopardized as individual, family, school, and community risk factors accumulate by placing children at higher

and higher risk (Fraser, 2004; Hammond et al., 2007; Richmond et al., 2004). Individual risk factors negatively associated with poor school outcomes include gender and ethnicity (Brooks-Gunn, 1993) and low academic skills (Franklin & Streeter, 1992; Richman et al., 2004). Children's school experiences, such as previous grade retention (Entwisle et al., 2004; Jerald, 2006), special education status (Lehr et al., 2004), and suspensions (Richman et al.) place them at risk for school failure (Franklin & Streeter). Characteristics in communities, such as pervasive poverty, inadequate access to quality schools and health care, and high crime and unemployment rates have been identified as risk factors for school failure (AEE, 2006a; AEE, 2006b; Brown et al., 2008; Richman et al., 2004) demonstrating that issues surrounding poor educational outcomes are closely aligned with social justice issues (Fram et al., 2007; Carlisle et al. 2006; March, 2005). Protective factors mitigate risk, and interventions that interrupt or decrease risk for children and their futures may be conceptualized as protective mechanisms (Laguna, 2004). Truancy intervention programs in elementary grades are designed to reduce absences and to increase attendance so that children may attend school, become engaged and connected with school, and progress and complete school (Gandy & Schultz, 2007; OJJDP, n.d.; Sutphen et al., 2010). Comprehensive reviews (Gandy & Schultz; Hammond et al. 2007) of truancy intervention studies concluded that a search of over 2000 studies yielded very few studies with rigorous designs and that the studies had limitations surrounding issues of measurement, such as inconsistent definitions for truancy as an outcome.

Implications

This study examines various risk factors among elementary age children in a truancy intervention program and the associations among their demographic, school-related, and psychosocial characteristics and service interventions and one aspect of academic success,

specifically on-time grade level attainment. Knowledge generated from this study has the potential to impact both practice and policy, education, and research.

The current study systematically examines risk factors associated with children who are identified as having truancy problems in the earliest part of their school careers. Results may show how gender and ethnicity are associated with on-time grade attainment. The results of this study may show differences, in terms of risk factors, that predict on-time grade level attainment. The findings may inform social work practice in terms of better assessment practices.

The current study examines the types of services that are recommended to children and their families with identified problems associated with school truancy. The results of this study may show interrelationships among psychosocial risks and referred services that are associated with timely grade level progression.

Knowledge Base

This research extends the knowledge base regarding truancy intervention because there are few studies examining truancy reduction programs geared toward young children in elementary schools (Gandy & Schultz, 2007). Additionally, many truancy intervention programs are punitive and coercive in nature (Ford & Sutphen, 1996; Gandy & Schultz). Research shows that punitive anti-truancy programs show immediate but temporary improvement (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Finlay & Heilbrunn, 2006). Although truancy intervention programs often work in close collaboration with local law enforcement, best practices address underlying family-related and psychosocial problems of the child that adversely impact a child's ability to attend school (OJJDP, n.d.). Children in the current study were enrolled in a truancy intervention program that aims to work across systems in partnership with families, schools, and the court system to ameliorate problems early during a child's school career as recommended by OJJDP best practices.

Research on truancy intervention is important because it may yield knowledge about elementary age students admitted in a truancy prevention program, an overlooked population in the research (Gandy & Schultz, 2007). Truancy is associated with a host of future adverse life circumstances, namely juvenile delinquency, school failure and dropout, substance abuse, and teen pregnancy (Hammond et al., 2007). Truancy intervention in schools aims to serve as a primary prevention program, before problems escalate and become more difficult to treat (Garry, 1996). This study yields detailed information about the extent of risk experienced by children who are in a truancy intervention program and the types of services completed that were recommended to meet identified needs of children and their families. The information gained may inform professionals working with at-risk children and their families in developing and refining interventions to better address risk factors that are amenable to change. The results of this study may also show how risk factors, which are non-alterable, such as gender and ethnicity, are associated with on-time grade level attainment.

Definitions of Key Terms

This research addresses empirically and theoretically relevant concepts (i.e., demographic, school-related, and psychosocial risk factors) associated with on-time grade attainment, which is associated with eventual school completion, namely high school graduation. The following terms are defined as pertaining to this research study.

On-Time Grade Attainment

Research demonstrates that children who have been retained in a grade and consequently are overage for their grade level are at risk for future school non-completion. For this study, being on time for grade will be defined as children progressing one grade level per school year for each of the 3 years.

Demographic Characteristics

Individual risk factors, such as African-American ethnicity and male gender, have been shown to place children at risk for school failure. Demographic characteristics examined in this study are age, gender, and race or ethnicity of children. Age in years is calculated as the date of admission less the date of birth. Gender is either male or female. Race or ethnicity is one of the six categories recorded on the program referral form: African American, Caucasian, Hispanic/Latino, Native American, Asian, and Other.

School-Related Characteristics

Children who drop out of school often exhibit school-related risk characteristics. Retention at any age is a strong predictor of future school dropout. Other indicators for future school dropout include excessive absences and special education status. Previous grade retention, special education status, and unexcused absences are the three school-related characteristics included in the current study.

Number of TASC Admissions

Children with chronic school attendance problems are at risk for poor academic outcomes. The number of times that kindergarteners are readmitted to the truancy prevention program will be calculated over 3 school years.

Psychosocial Risk Characteristics

Behavioral, developmental, cognitive, and social problems affect a child's ability to learn and succeed in school. Psychosocial risks will be examined in 12 categories, as assessed by the children's teachers. The 12 categories are recorded on the Risk Survey Instrument (RISK-I). The categories include: aggressive, attention seeking, defiant, developmental issues, inappropriate emotional response, hyperactivity, isolated, manipulative, risk-taking behaviors, unmotivated in school, negative parental attitudes, and unstable home life.

TASC- Referred Services

The phenomenon of school failure is not a single occurrence, but rather a multifaceted problem that requires multimodal approaches across the individual, social or family, school, and community risk domains. Addressing problems associated with truancy by making recommendations to a variety of services from community agencies and the local school system, the following menu of 18 services will be examined in this study as recorded in the intervention database: Attention Deficient Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) screening, child protection agency, clothing assistance, counseling, crisis intervention, financial support services, home visits, hygiene education, Medicaid or Louisiana Children's Health Insurance Program (Medicaid/LaCHIP), medical referral, mental health assessment, mentoring, other service, parenting education, recreational activity, School Building Level Committee (SBLC), TASC-sponsored summer program, and tutoring.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Conceptual Framework

This chapter first provides a description of the research methodology, including the research questions and design. Next, definitions of study variables and operationalization of key terms are delineated. Sample characteristics, data collection methods, instrumentation, and issues related to internal and external validity threats are presented. Data analyses for the research questions conclude the chapter.

Purpose

This exploratory-descriptive, retrospective research uses archival data to examine demographic, school-related, and psychosocial risk characteristics of elementary school children deemed to be at low and high risk for continued truancy. This study explores what combination of demographic, school-related, and psychosocial risk characteristics and types of completed TASC-referred services best predicts on-time grade level attainment at 3 years out for children deemed to be at high risk for continued truancy.

Research Questions

This study answers the following research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of low- and high-risk children upon admission to the TASC program?
 - What are the demographic, school-related, and psychosocial characteristics of children in the TASC program who have been assessed at low risk for continued truancy?
 - What are the demographic, school-related, and psychosocial characteristics of children in the TASC program who have been assessed at high risk for continued truancy?

2. What types of TASC-referred services do high-risk children complete while in the TASC program?
3. What are the interrelationships among demographic, school-related, and psychosocial characteristics; number of TASC readmissions; and types of completed TASC-referred services among high-risk children in the TASC program?
4. What combination of correlates, including demographic, school-related, and psychosocial characteristics, number of TASC admissions, and types of completed TASC-referred services, best predicts on-time grade level attainment at 3 years out among high-risk children in the TASC program?

Operationalization of Key Terms

Dependent Variable

This research examines the empirically relevant concept of progressing in school (WWC, 2008). Research shows that children who have been retained and resultantly are overage for their grade are at risk for future school dropout (Alexander et al., 2001; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). This study examined correlates of on-time grade attainment for high-risk TASC children, first observed during the 2004-2005 and then again, 3 years out, during the 2007-2008 school year. The 2004-2005 school year was selected due to variables of interest (e.g., psychosocial risk characteristics), which became consistently available in 2004 (E. Winchester, personal communication, April 13, 2010). The dependent variable was dichotomously coded as (0) indicating that the child was behind for grade level, and as (1) indicating that the child was on time for grade level at 3 years out. Logistic regression analysis was utilized to predict the likelihood of children being in one of two groups, which was either on time for grade level or behind for grade level at 3 years out.

Independent Variables

Demographic Characteristics

Individual risk factors, such as African American ethnicity and male gender, have been shown to place children at risk for school failure (Brooks-Gunn, 1993; Brown et al., 2008; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Newsome et al., 2008; Rumberger, 1987). Demographic characteristics were defined as the age, gender, and race or ethnicity of TASC children. These three variables are listed on the TASC referral form, which is completed by the child's teacher or school staff and inputted into the TCMSD by TASC case managers or TASC data personnel. Age was determined by the child's date of birth, as indicated on the TASC referral form. The researcher computed actual age of the child at the TASC admission date. The TASC admission date is the calendar date that was indicated on the TASC referral form. Age was measured at the ratio level. Gender is indicated on the TASC referral form as either male or female, as reported by the child's school. Gender was measured at the nominal level. Race or ethnicity was recorded by the teacher or school staff and recorded on the TASC referral form. The TASC case manager or TASC data entry personnel enters race or ethnicity into the TCMSD as one of the following six categories: African American, Caucasian, Hispanic/Latino, Native American, Asian, and Other. Race or ethnicity was measured at the nominal level. The race or ethnicity variable was recoded as (0) for the Caucasian, Hispanic/Latino, Native American, Asian, and Other categories or recoded as (1) for African American.

School-Related Characteristics

Large proportions of children with truancy problems have school-related risk characteristics (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Bimler & Kirkland, 2001; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Fraser, 2004). The most reliable predictor of future school dropout is retention at any grade level (Balfanz, 2007; Bridgeland et al.). A host of indicators that should be monitored as school-

related risk factors are cited in the literature, including academic failure, especially in math and reading, grade retention, behavioral problems, and excessive absences (Balfanz; Newsome et al., 2008). Children who are enrolled in special education programs are at high risk for school-related problems and school dropout (Lehr et al., 2004). In the current study, three school-related characteristics of children who have been admitted to the TASC program were defined as 1) previous retention in a grade, 2) special education status, and 3) number of unexcused absences at TASC admission. Previous retentions by TASC children were recorded by the child's teacher on the TASC referral form and measured at the ratio level. Special education status was indicated on the TASC referral form by the child's teacher as 'yes' or 'no' for having special education status and measured at the nominal level. The number of unexcused absences at TASC referral was recorded on the TASC referral form by the child's teacher and was measured at the ratio level.

Number of TASC Admissions

Children with chronic and recurrent problems, evidenced by multiple admissions to school-based and social service agencies, are at risk for poor academic outcomes (Chang & Romero, 2008; Richman et al., 2004; Teasley, 2004). The total number of TASC readmissions for children in kindergarten from the 2004-2005 through the 2007-2008 school year was calculated from TASC database records and measured at the ratio level. Children in kindergarten admitted to TASC had at least three additional opportunities to be admitted to the TASC program by the 2007-2008 school year. The total number of times that children in kindergarten were readmitted in the TASC program was calculated from TASC archival records by the TASC database manager, imputed into an Excel file, and measured at the ratio level.

Psychosocial Risk Characteristics

Behavioral, developmental, cognitive, and social problems affect a child's ability to learn (Fraser, 2004; Laguna, 2004), and teachers' perceptions of these problems among elementary children were reflected in items listed on the TASC referral form and RISK-I instrument. The RISK-I was developed by OSSRD specifically for the TASC program, based on research (OJJDP, n.d.; Schroeder et al., 2004) and input from TASC case managers and directors (OSSRD, 2010; Rhodes et al., 2010). Information about risks for continued truancy was collected via the TASC RISK-I and TASC referral form at admission to the program. Teachers complete the RISK-I for children referred to the program, and teachers or school staff complete the TASC referral form.

The RISK-I is composed of 55 items in 12 broad categories. The 12 categories are listed as aggressive, attention seeker, defiant, developmental issues, emotional response, hyperactivity, isolated, manipulative, parental attitudes, risk-taking behaviors, unmotivated, and unstable home life. The RISK-I was validated using factor analysis and demonstrated internal reliability (Kim & Barthelemy, 2010). For the current study, the individual 55 items on the RISK-I were weighted and summed to yield one composite score. Dr. Mark Lipsey, a program evaluation expert from Vanderbilt University, established the scoring points (See Table 1) in order to conduct a regression discontinuity research study (A. Trainham, personal communication, October 6, 2009; Thomas, 2011; Thomas et al., 2011). To create the composite score, each individual item on the RISK-I was assigned a score ranging from 0 to 5 points, with 0 points indicating no risk and 5 points indicating high risk. Using this process, two years of data (e.g., 2004-2005 and 2005-2006 school years) were retroactively scored to calculate the mean score for each of the 55 items.

Table 1

Psychosocial Risk Factors of the Risk Indicator Survey 1 (RISK-I) Instrument

RISK I Categories (Total points)	Items and Points per Item
Aggressive (16)	Bullies/threatens/intimidates others – 5
	Hit/bites peers or teachers – 5
	Breaks or throws objects – 5
	Other – 1
Attention Seeker (6)	Wants teacher’s undivided attention – 1
	Causes class disruption – 3
	Talks at inappropriate times –1
	Other – 1
Defiant (11)	Argues with authority figures – 5
	Uses obscene language/gestures – 5
	Other - 1
Developmental Issues (6)	Sucks thumb – 1
	Enuresis – 1
	Sleeps at inappropriate times – 1
	Eating Problems – 1
	Speech/Language/Hearing Problem – 1
	Other – 1
Emotional Response (6)	Inappropriate response to correction – 2

(Table 1 continued)

	Lack of empathy – 1
	Flat affect – just stares – 1
	Does not express joy – 1
	Other – 1
Hyperactivity (9)	Can't sit still – 4
	Short attention span for age/grade – 4
	Other – 1
Isolated (6)	Ignored by peers – 1
	Rejected by peers – 1
	Withdrawn – 3
	Other – 1
Manipulative (6)	Sneaky – 1
	Distorts truth – 2
	Blames others for mistakes – 2
	Other – 1
Parental Attitudes (12)	Minimizes child's problems – 3
	Blames other for child's problems – 3
	Unresponsive to attempts contact – 5
	Other – 1
Risk-Taking Behaviors (23)	Harms self intentionally – 5
	Sexual acting out – 5
	Suspected substance use/experiment – 5
	Risky physical behaviors – 2
	Steals – 5

(Table 1 continued)

	Other – 1
Unmotivated (8)	No desire to learn – 4
	Not prepared daily – 1
	Frequently has no homework – 1
	Exhibits little curiosity – 1
	Other – 1
Unstable Home Life (12)	Poor hygiene – 3
	Regularly complains of hunger – 1
	Inappropriate clothing for weather – 1
	Suspected substance abuse by adult – 3
	Chronic Illness/Lack of med. Care – 3
	Other – 1

Completed TASC-Referred Services

School failure is not a single occurrence, but rather a multidimensional problem that requires multimodal approaches that target individual, social or family, school, and community risk domains (Hammond et. al, 2007). TASC addresses problems associated with truancy by linking children and their families to needed services within the community and local school system. The TCMSD includes 18 types of services, including Attention Deficient Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) screening, child protection agency, clothing assistance, counseling, crisis intervention, financial support services, home visits, hygiene education, Medicaid or Louisiana Children’s Health Insurance Program (Medicaid/LaCHIP), medical referral, mental health

assessment, mentoring, other service, parenting education, recreational activity, School Building Level Committee (SBLC), TASC-sponsored summer program, and tutoring.

TASC case managers recommend services during the family conferences for children deemed at high risk for continued truancy. (Children assessed at low risk for continued truancy are provided with notification of compulsory attendance law and monitoring and not the intensive case management intervention.) After the family conference, TASC case managers enter codes into the TCMDS that correspond to the types of services to which family members and children are recommended. Then, at the end of the school year, the TASC case manager records in the TCMSD whether each recommended service was completed, partially completed, or not completed. For this current study, only TASC-referred services recorded by TASC case managers as *completed* in the TCMDS were examined. Each of the 18 completed TASC-referred service categories were measured at the nominal level.

Method and Procedures

Sample

The theoretical population for this retrospective study was all elementary aged, public school children in Louisiana with five or more unexcused school absences, who participated in the TASC program. The data for this study were extracted from the TCMSD, which is a large archival program evaluation database for the TASC program. As of 2010, over 83,000 referrals had been entered for over 50,000 children across the state since the inception of the program (E. Winchester, personal communication, April 13, 2010). For the study, the nonprobability sample was composed of elementary public school children admitted to the TASC program during the 2004-2005 school year ($N = 12,644$). Of the 12,644 children who enrolled in TASC during 2004-2005, over half (53.1%, $n = 6,719$) were located in the LDOE database during the 2007-2008

school year. Of these 6,719 children, over two fifths (42.5%, $n = 2,861$) had been deemed at high risk and had received the TASC intensive case management intervention in 2004-2005.

Data extracted from the LDOE database for the current study included the grade level of the child during the 2007-2008 school year. In order to link data for the children between the 2004-2005 and 2007-2008 school years, three data elements were utilized: child social security number (SSN), date of birth, and child first name and surname. Two of the three criteria were required for a match (S. Robison, personal communication, February 10, 2010). Prior to and during the 2004-2005 school year, individual TASC programs were not required to record child's SSN in the TCMSD. All TASC program sites were required to collect child SSNs beginning in August of 2007. Prior to that date, TASC program sites reported either the child SSN or school district student identification number (E. Winchester and J. Smith, personal communications, January 31, 2011). This policy inhibited the matching of children 3 years out and contributed to attrition rates from the 2004-2005 to the 2007-2008 school years.

Demographic, school-related, and psychosocial risk characteristics of low-risk TASC children in grades kindergarten (K) to 5, inclusively, were examined during the 2004 -2005 school year. For high-risk children in grades K through 5, demographic, school-related, and psychosocial risk characteristics, and types of completed TASC-referred services were examined during the 2004-05 school year. For the kindergarteners only, total number of readmissions to the TASC program from 2004 to 2008 was examined.

Because only children at high risk for continued truancy received the intensive case management TASC intervention, which included referrals to services (OSSRD, 2010; Rhodes et al., 2010), grade level attainment for high-risk children in K through 5th grade was examined 3 years later during the 2007-2008 school year.

During the 2004 - 2005 school year, 16 TASC programs were in operation in 23 parishes in the state, as shown in Appendix A. The 2004-2005 school year was selected for this study, due to the fact that the RISK-I and service data were not consistently entered into the TCMSD until the 2004-2005 school year. Moreover, the LDOE data available to this author for study were from the 2007-2008 school year (E. Winchester, personal communication, April 13, 2010).

Representativeness

A nonprobability, convenience sample results in inherent limits to generalizability (Rubin & Babbie, 2005); therefore, results of this study are only generalizable to elementary children in the Deep South with similar demographic characteristics and similar histories of excessive absences. Results may be generalized to similar populations in similarly funded and organized school districts. TASC programs are located within Judicial District Court (JDC) jurisdictions. Participants were located in 16 JDCs that encompassed 23 school districts in Louisiana, which further limit generalizability of the study.

Protection of Human Participants

Secondary data were analyzed for this anonymous study. There were no physical, psychological, social, or legal risks to the participants, because only archival data were examined. No participants were contacted for this study. Students' information cannot be traced back to participants because all identifying information (e.g., names and SSNs) was stripped from records prior to analysis. The research, which examines TASC programs in Louisiana public elementary schools, is permitted due to the TASC program's Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the LDOE and compliance with the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA; FERPA/34 CFR Part 99) to conduct research in an educational setting. FERPA and the aforementioned MOU supersede directives to acquire child verbal assent and parental consent forms prior to research. Application for on-going research for the TASC

program is submitted annually to the LSU Institutional Review Board (IRB), which includes this author and study.

Research Design

This exploratory, retrospective research utilized secondary data to describe characteristics and to investigate interrelationships among demographic, school-related, and psychosocial risk characteristics for elementary school children who have been assessed at low and high risk for continued truancy. For children assessed at high risk for continued truancy, types of completed TASC-referred services were additionally examined. The number of readmissions to the TASC program over a period of 3 years was also investigated for a subsample of kindergarteners at high risk of continuing truancy. Finally, this study examined what combination of demographic, school-related, and psychosocial risk characteristics, and types of completed TASC-referred services among high-risk TASC children best predicted on time grade attainment at 3 years out.

Issues of Validity

Internal Validity

Internal validity is the extent to which an independent variable results in a change in the dependent variable in experimental and quasi-experimental designs (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002). Because this study is not an experimental or quasi-experimental design, major concerns chiefly include representativeness and reliability and validity of measurement. Attrition is considered within the context of the study.

Differences in teachers' understanding of the manner in which to complete the RISK-I instrument may affect the reliability and validity of the measures captured by the RISK-I. Inaccurate data may be an issue due to the number of TASC case managers and staff who enter data into the TCMSD; however, protocols are in place to assure reliability and validity of data inputted into TCMSD, which includes semi-annual data input training of case managers as well

as annual data audits by TASC program monitors, as the TASC program is funded and operated under regulations approved by the Louisiana legislature and the *Louisiana Children's Code* (LCC) Articles 791.4 and 791.5 (OSSRD, 2010). To access TASC funds, each TASC site must submit a program plan that details specific procedures at the local TASC site. This includes all the information required by the TASC model as delineated in the TASC Planning Guide (OSSRD, 2010). Each individual TASC site undergoes yearly program audits and monitoring by OSSRD program staff, according to directives in the LCC. The monitoring and auditing protocols assure that the TASC intervention is consistently implemented across sites. OSSRD monitors visit each site at least two times each school year. Audits are composed of various elements, including adherence to program components and data quality assurance monitoring. OSSRD monitors interview program directors twice per year, observe case managers conducting family conferences, and review a random selection of case files to determine the quality of process components (e.g., screening, assessment, and case management procedures) and overall fidelity to the TASC model. The data audit includes a systematic review of randomly selected case files, which determines whether documentation in the on-site case files match data recorded in the TCMSD. Results of the audits are detailed in an annual evaluation report. These procedures ensure that the individual TASC is in adherence to the prescribed TASC model and that data collected are accurate and reliable. TASC programs that are found to be deficient or requiring closer supervision are placed in corrective active status. OSSRD works closely with sites in corrective action to ensure improvements are made or the site is closed (OSSRD, 2010; Rhodes et al., 2010). Additionally, OSSRD conducts a 2-day TASC case management and database training biannually. TASC training is recommended for all new TASC employees. Current TASC employees are also encouraged to attend trainings. On-going program

consultation and troubleshooting is available year round by OSSRD staff to every TASC program site, including a database help desk with e-mail access.

Nevertheless, the specific practices in the manner that individual case managers interact with children, parents, teachers, schools, and service providers is not known and may contribute to measurement problems. Omission of variables associated with case management practices contributes to internal validity issues.

Since the beginning of the TASC program, the format of the referral and Informal Family Service Plan Agreement forms have varied from site to site until the 2008-2009 school year, at which time the forms were standardized; however, the variables of interest for this study were consistently collected and entered into the TCMSD during the 2004-2005 school year to the present. Missing data may also be a problem in terms of measurement reliability and generalizability.

Attrition is experimental mortality, which involves the loss of participants in a study (Shadish et al., 2002). The TCMSD aids in the tracking of students, because a permanent demographic record exists for each child in TASC. Until August 2007, TASC sites collected either the child's SSN or school assigned identification number. Since August 2007, all TASC sites have collected child SSNs. LDOE requires collection of children's SSNs to enroll in school, and these SSNs are linked to the students' records in the LDOE statewide database. Besides having the ability to track participants, this study included a large sample size. A sample of 2,861 participants was matched in the LDOE database in 2007-2008, providing sufficient power for statistical analysis. Preliminary efforts to link TASC and LDOE records showed an attrition rate of approximately 5% for each school year from 2001 through 2008, except for both the 2005-2006 and 2006-2007 school years. Both the 2005-2006 and 2006-2007 school years showed approximately 15% attrition rates (S. Robison, personal communication, February 10, 2010). The

historical events of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita occurred in August of 2005, impacting school enrollment throughout the state and admissions to TASC programs. Twelve of the 16 TASC programs in the current study, located in both southeastern and southwestern Louisiana, were directly impacted by the 2005 hurricanes.

External Validity

External validity is the ability of the researcher to generalize the results of the study (Shadish et al., 2002). Threats to external validity can be addressed by fully describing the characteristics of participants that are under investigation; therefore, for this study relevant demographic, school-related, and psychosocial risk characteristics of the participants were reported. Results of the current study are only generalizable to children with similar characteristics.

OSSRD has manualized each component of the TASC intervention, for example detailed assessment, screening, family conference guidelines and procedures, service intervention and case manager follow-up, and evaluation components in the TASC Planning Guide (OSSRD, 2010). Standardization and manualization of interventions increase the ability to replicate the program, which increases external validity (Fraser, Richman, Galinsky, & Day, 2009; Shadish et al., 2002). Other means to increase external validity include increasing sample size; this study had over 12,000 participants. Precise operationalization of conceptual terms used in the study increases external validity, which allows other researchers to replicate the study. Constructs for this study are theoretically based in the literature, which minimizes the confounding of constructs (Shadish et al.).

Mode of Observation

Measurement

The current study utilized secondary data for quantitative analyses. TASC case managers enter all raw data into the TCMSD. The data are housed by the Louisiana Supreme Court data managing system and maintained by an information technology company, which is contracted by OSSRD. TASC data are maintained in an ACCESS database. The ACCESS program dictates data to be stored as grouped or stacked files of related information. For example, all items on the RISK-I instrument are grouped together in the ACCESS files and are available via a query report, rather than as the variables associated with each subject. ACCESS query reports link information among the various stacked files. In the TCMSD, all data about each child are linked by the child's admission to TASC and associated with a referral or case number, rather than by child identification number. In order for these data to be used for the current study, the TASC data manager, an employee of OSSRD, extracted the specified variables and converted them from stacked form into a flat file by child identification number, which is the typical configuration of data utilized by Statistical Package for the Social Sciences™ (SPSS). This reconfigured research dataset is referred to as the TASC flat file. In other words, the TASC data manager extracted the variables of interest for each participant, and, as a result, the variables of interest for each participant occupied one line of the TASC flat file dataset.

The current study also required that TASC children in 2004-2005 were matched with the Louisiana Department of Education's (LDOE) database in 2007-2008. OSSRD maintains a memorandum of understanding with LDOE, and at the conclusion of each school year, LDOE provides OSSRD with records of all children in Louisiana public schools. LDOE records are arranged by child SSN. The TASC data manager matched children in the TCMSD with LDOE records (S. Robison, personal communication, February 10, 2010). Data regarding grade level

during 2007-2008 were inputted by the TASC data manager into the aforementioned research flat file in order for analyses to be conducted with SPSS.

Instrumentation

All data for this study extracted from the TCMSD were gathered with three TASC forms: the RISK-I (see Appendix B), the TASC referral form (see Appendix C), and the Informal Service Plan Agreement form (see Appendix D). All TASC sites were mandated in the 2008-2009 to adopt standardized forms (OSSRD, 2010). Prior to the 2008-2009 school year, TASC sites were able to configure their own forms with OSSRD annual approval. The three forms found in the appendices are the current forms utilized by all TASC sites. Teachers completed TASC referral forms that gathered data about children's demographic and academic characteristics. TASC case managers entered the data from the TASC referral form into the TCMSD. Data about children's psychosocial characteristics were gathered with the RISK-I form that was completed by the children's teachers, and then case managers entered the items into the TCMSD. The total number of TASC readmissions for children in kindergarten, from the 2004-2005 through the 2007-2008 school year, was calculated by the TASC data manager from the ACCESS TCMDs, imputed into an Excel file, and then transferred to the TASC flat file dataset (S. Robison, personal communication, February 10, 2010). The types of TASC-referred services were collected from the Informal Family Service Plan Agreement forms (that were recommended by TASC case managers for the children and families during the family conference) and subsequently entered into the TCMSD by the case managers. Data about completed TASC-referred services were extracted by the TASC data manager and inputted into the TASC flat file dataset.

Data Analysis

Power Analyses

Power is the probability of rejecting the null hypothesis when it is false. Increasing sample size reduces the risk of a Type II error, but it increases the likelihood of a Type I error. A Type I error is falsely rejecting a null hypothesis, and a Type II error is accepting a null hypothesis when it is false (Rubin & Babbie, 2005). For this study, a power analysis was conducted to determine whether the sample size was sufficient for the planned statistical analyses with the standard statistical power of .80 at the .05 level of significance. The sample size was more than sufficient for the analyses (Cohen, 1988).

Considering the number of variables in multivariate analyses, Knapp and Campbell-Heider (1989) recommend that the number of observations should be at least ten times the total number of variables in the equation, and additionally, the observations should exceed the number of variables by at least 30. Therefore, if there are 40 variables in a multivariate equation, as is the maximum considered in this study, then a sample size of at least 430 observations are required. The sample size for this study was more than sufficient for the analyses according to these directives.

Descriptive statistics

Univariate analyses are conducted to examine frequencies and to summarize data (Rubin & Babbie, 2005). Descriptive statistics were used to summarize demographic, school-related, and psychosocial risk characteristics of each grade level (e.g., K – 5th grades) during the 2004-2005 school year for children assessed at low and high levels of risk for continued truancy. Completed TASC-referred services among all high-risk children in grades K to 5 were also summarized. The univariate statistics show frequencies and measures of central tendency for selected variables, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Study Variables and Levels of Measurement

Demographic	Age (ratio)
	Ethnicity or Race (nominal)
	Gender (nominal)
School-Related	Grade level (interval)
	Suspensions (ratio)
	Previous Grade Retention (ratio)
	Special Education Status (nominal)
	Unexcused Absences at Referral (ratio)
TASC Readmission for Kindergarteners	Number of TASC Readmissions (ratio)
Psychosocial Risk Characteristics	Defiant (nominal)
	Manipulative (nominal)
	Aggressive (nominal)
	Isolated (nominal)
	Parental Attitudes (nominal)
	Attention Seeker (nominal)
	Emotional Response (nominal)
	Unmotivated (nominal)
	Risk-Taking Behaviors (nominal)
	Unstable Home Life (nominal)
	Developmental Issues (nominal)
	Hyperactivity (nominal)

(Table 2 continued)

TASC-Referred Services

ADHD Screening (nominal)
Crisis Intervention (nominal)
Counseling (nominal)
Mental Health Assessment (nominal)
Clothing Assistance (nominal)
Financial Support Services (nominal)
Hygiene Education (nominal)
Tutoring (nominal)
SBLC (nominal)
Home Visits (nominal)
Parenting Education (nominal)
Medicaid or LaCHIP (nominal)
Medical Referral (nominal)
Mentoring (nominal)
Recreational Activity (nominal)
TASC- summer camp (nominal)
Child Protection Agency (nominal)
Other (nominal)

Bivariate Statistics

Bivariate statistics are used to examine relationships between variables (Rubin & Babbie, 2005). Bivariate analyses were used for comparisons between two variables to provide descriptive summaries of the relationship between them (Rubin & Babbie). Chi-square, a

nonparametric statistic, was used to examine associations among variables measured at the nominal level and the dependent variable (Rubin & Babbie). Questions about the interrelationships among demographic and school-related risk characteristics and completed TASC-referred services were answered using the chi-square statistic.

Interrelationships among continuous and the nominal level dependent variable were examined with biserial point correlations (r_{pb} ; Cohen et al., 2003). When one variable is an interval or scale level variable and the other is nominal, biserial point correlations are automatically computed in SPSS, allowing interpretation of the biserial point correlation coefficient in the same manner as the Pearson's Moment Product correlation (r), by strength and direction (Cohen et al.). Intercorrelations (r_{pb}) among independent variables measured at ratio levels (e.g., age, grade at referral, unexcused absences at referral, risk composite score) and the dependent variable were examined.

Inferential Statistics

Multivariate analyses allow for examination of multiple correlations among combinations of variables to develop a model that best predicts the dependent variable (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). Logistic regression, a non-parametric approach, was used to examine what combination of demographic, school-related, psychosocial risk characteristics, number of TASC readmissions, and types of completed TASC-referred services best predicted on-time grade level attainment at 3 school years out for children who had been assessed at high risk for continued truancy.

Logistic regression is an appropriate multivariate strategy when the dependent variable is dichotomous and one or more independent variables are discrete or continuous. Logistic regression is used to predict group membership and allows for the identification of significant predictors of the dependent variable. Logistic regression produces the odds ratio, which is the

increase of the value of the predictor, when it increases by one unit, (or decrease if the ratio is less than one) in the odds, or probability, of the case being in one of the two outcome categories (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1996). The odds ratio yields the likelihood of the occurrence of on-time grade level attainment for each different predictor variables (e.g., demographic, school-related, psychosocial risk characteristics, number of TASC readmissions, and completed TASC-referred services). Interpretation of the coefficient for a discrete predictor, as is the case with the majority of predictors in this study, depends on its coding. Tabachnick and Fidell (1996) state that the most common coding (0 and 1) leads to an interpretation that is consistent with the interpretation for a continuous variable, namely, that the likelihood of being in the outcome coded as 1 (on time for grade level) is multiplied by the odds ratio (e^B) for a case that is in the predictor level coded as 1, in relation to a case that is in the predictor level coded as 0.

Because analyses of large samples often render overestimation of significant findings, creating Type I errors, robust estimation of standard errors, also called heteroskedasticity-robust, Huber-White, or Eicker standard error estimates, was utilized for this study (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1996). Robust estimates can correct for heteroskedasticity in small samples. However in this study, robust standard error estimation was used to reduce bias, thus allowing for estimation of significant relationships among variables in the regression models (Wooldridge, 2009).

Robust estimates of standard error are resistant to errors in the results but do not change beta coefficients in their application. In order to determine robust estimation of standard errors, the bootstrapping option in SPSS™ version 19 was utilized in these analyses, calculating estimates with 1000 bootstrap samples, as recommended (SPSS, 2010).

For the current study, logistic regression was utilized to determine which variables predicted membership in one of two groups: on-time grade level attainment and behind for grade

level at 3 years out (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). Data analyses were conducted using SPSS™ version 19 (SPSS, 2010).

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This chapter presents results of this study, which are arranged by order of research questions posed in chapter 3. First, the overall sample will be described, followed by a summary of the demographic, school-related, and psychosocial characteristics of children at low and high risk for continuing truancy. Secondly, TASC-referred services that were completed by high-risk participants are presented. Results of bivariate analyses are described, and interrelationships among variables are presented. This chapter concludes with results of multivariate analyses. Nine regression models that best predict on time grade level attainment for a subset of high-risk TASC children at 3 years out are presented. Among the multivariate analyses, the models in equations 1, 7, 8, and 9 showed few significant relationships and model fit were modest. The models in equations 2 through 6 did not fit the data.

The purpose of this exploratory, retrospective research was to investigate interrelationships among demographic, school-related, and psychosocial risk characteristics of elementary school children deemed to be at low and high risk for continued truancy. For high-risk children, the examination included the types of completed TASC-referred services. Finally, this study investigated what combination of correlates, including demographic, school-related, and psychosocial risk characteristics, and types of completed TASC-referred services best predict on time school grade level attainment at 3 years out, among children at high risk for continued truancy. Multivariate analyses include an additional independent variable: the number of TASC admissions among high-risk kindergarteners in 2004-2005.

The first research question addressed by this study is concerned with the characteristics of low- and high-risk children upon admission to the TASC program, including demographic, school-related, and psychosocial risk characteristics.

Description of Participant Characteristics

This study described characteristics of 12,644 elementary school children in the TASC program during the 2004-2005 school year who were deemed at low ($n = 6550$, 51.8%) and high ($n = 6089$, 48.1%) risk for continuing patterns of truancy. Low- or high-risk designation for five children (0.03%) was unknown.

Among the overall sample, over half ($n = 6597$, 55.1%) were male, and over two fifths ($n = 5682$; 44.9%) were female. Just under two thirds of all the children were African American ($n = 8018$, 63.6%) and one third ($n = 4254$, 33.6%) of the children were White. Among all participants, additional ethnicities categories included Hispanic/Latino ($n = 264$, 2.1%), Asian/Pacific Islander ($n = 79$, 0.6%), and Alaskan Native ($n = 1$, 0.007%) groups. The children ranged in ages from 4 to 16 years old and were, on average, just over 8 years old ($M = 8.32$; $SD = 2.31$). The typical child served by TASC was an African-American male who was approximately 8 years old. Prior to bivariate and multivariate analyses, race was recoded as either African-American ($n = 8018$, 63.4%) or non-African American ($n = 4625$, 36.5%), which included White and all other ethnicities. Table 3 shows the distribution of gender and ethnicity among the low-risk and high-risk groups.

Elementary Grade Level

Among the overall sample, over one third ($n = 4968$, 39.2%) of children were admitted to TASC during kindergarten and 1st grade. The next two grade levels comprised similar proportions, with 14.5% ($n = 1835$) of the children in 2nd grade and 14.3% ($n = 1805$) of the children in 3rd grade. The second largest proportion of children was 4th graders, who comprised approximately one fifth of all TASC admissions ($n = 2386$, 18.9%).

Table 4 shows the grade levels of children in the overall sample and in the low-risk and high-risk subsamples. Slightly larger proportions of children in kindergarten, and 1st grade were

categorized as low risk, and slightly larger proportions of 4th and 5th graders were considered high risk. Similar proportions (approximately 14%) of children in 2nd and 3rd grades comprised the low- and high-risk categories. Table 4 shows the grade levels of children in the overall sample and in the low-risk and high-risk subsamples.

Table 3

Descriptive Characteristics of Gender and Ethnicity for the Overall Sample ($N = 12644$) and Low-Risk ($n = 6500$) and High-Risk ($n = 6089$) Subsamples

Characteristics	Overall Sample		Low-Risk		High-Risk	
	<i>N</i>	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)
<u>Gender</u>						
Female	5682	(44.9)	3107	(47.4)	2575	(42.3)
Male	6957	(55.0)	3443	(52.6)	3514	(57.7)
<u>Total</u>	12639 ¹	(99.9)	6550	(100)	6089	(100)
<u>Ethnicity</u>						
African American	8018	(63.4)	4115	(62.8)	3900	(64.0)
White	4254	(33.6)	2192	(33.5)	2060	(33.8)
Other	371	(2.9)	243	(3.7)	128	(2.1)
<u>Total</u>	12643 ²	(100)	6550	(100)	6088	(99.9)

Note. ¹Gender of three participants is unknown. ²Ethnicity of one participant is unknown.

Previous Grade Retention

Just over three fourths of children in the low-risk ($n = 4792$, 73.2%) and nearly two thirds of children in the high-risk ($n = 3742$, 61.6%) group had never been retained (See Table 5).

Overall, a larger proportion of high-risk (38.3%) than low-risk children (26.7%) was retained at least once.

Special Education Status

Fewer than one in ten children ($n = 1058$, 8.4%) were assigned special education status by their school, which included a greater proportion of high-risk ($n = 608$, 10.1%) than low-risk children ($n = 449$, 6.9%; see Table 6). Special education status was unknown for 4.4% ($n = 552$) of all children.

Table 4

Grade Levels for the Overall Sample ($N = 12644$) and Low-Risk ($n = 6500$) and High-Risk ($n = 6089$) Subsamples

Grade	<u>Overall Sample</u>		<u>Low-Risk</u>		<u>High-Risk</u>	
	<i>N</i>	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)
K	2750	(21.7)	1507	(23.0)	1241	(20.4)
First	2218	(17.5)	1211	(18.5)	1006	(16.5)
Second	1835	(14.5)	952	(14.5)	883	(14.5)
Third	1805	(14.3)	927	(14.2)	878	(14.4)
Fourth	2386	(18.9)	1136	(17.3)	1248	(20.5)
Fifth	1650	(13.0)	817	(12.5)	833	(13.7)

Suspensions

As seen in Table 7, the numbers of suspensions ranged from 0 to 18 among all children admitted to TASC. Among all children with no suspensions ($n = 6110$), the vast majority of low-risk children ($n = 3024$, 91.9%) and over three fourths of the high-risk children ($n = 3083$,

75.7%) had no recorded suspensions. In terms of proportions, approximately twice as many high-risk (6.7%) than low-risk children (3.6%) had been suspended at least once. Children assessed at high risk for continued truancy had more suspensions than those assessed at low risk.

Table 5

Previous Grade Retention History for the Overall Sample ($N = 12615$) and Low-Risk ($n = 6542$) and High-Risk ($n = 6073$) Subsamples

Times	<u>Overall Sample</u>		<u>Low-Risk</u>		<u>High-Risk</u>	
	<i>N</i>	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)
0	8534	(67.6)	4792	(73.2)	3742	(61.6)
1	2897	(22.9)	1223	(18.6)	1674	(27.5)
2	1184	(9.3)	527	(8.0)	657	(10.8)
Total Retained	4081	(32.5)	1750	(26.7)	2331	(38.3)

Note. Previous grade retention was unknown for 29 children.

Table 6

Special Education Status for the Overall Sample ($N = 12580$) and Low-Risk ($n = 6536$) and High-Risk ($n = 6039$) Subsamples

Special Ed Status	<u>Overall Sample</u>		<u>Low Risk</u>		<u>High Risk</u>	
	<i>N</i>	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)
No	10970	(87.2)	5862	(89.7)	5104	(84.5)
Yes	1058	(8.4)	449	(6.9)	608	(10.1)
Unknown	522	(4.4)	225	(3.4)	327	(5.4)

Table 7

Suspensions for the Overall Sample ($N = 12644$) and Low-Risk ($n = 6500$) and High-Risk ($n = 6089$) Subsamples

Number of Suspensions	<u>Overall Sample</u>		<u>Low-Risk</u>		<u>High-Risk</u>	
	<i>N</i>	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)
0	6110	(82.9)	3024	(91.9)	3083	(75.7)
1	392	(5.3)	119	(3.6)	273	(6.7)
2	466	(6.3)	87	(2.6)	379	(9.3)
3	222	(3.0)	39	(1.2)	183	(4.5)
4	90	(1.2)	15	(0.5)	75	(1.8)
5-11	77	(1.1)	7	(0.1)	70	(1.7)
12-18	9	(0.1)	0	(0.0)	9	(0.1)

Unexcused Absences Upon TASC Admission

Another key school-related characteristic examined was the number of unexcused absences upon admission to TASC. Table 8 displays the number of unexcused absences among the overall sample and among low- and high-risk subsamples. Unexcused absences ranged from 0 to 79 ($M = 7.95$, $SD = 4.69$) occurrences for children in kindergarten through 5th grade. Among the overall sample, 2% ($n = 256$) had no unexcused absences. The TASC model requires that children be referred at five unexcused absences, and the largest proportion of children ($n = 2382$, 18.9%) were admitted to TASC at this threshold of five unexcused absences. Proportionately, over one third ($n = 4141$, 32.7%) of the overall sample was admitted to TASC with five or fewer unexcused absences.

Among low-risk children, the vast majority ($n = 5904$, 90.2%) ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 6.01$) had 10 or fewer unexcused absences upon admission to TASC, with less than 1 in 10 ($n = 599$, 9.16%) showing 11 to 20 unexcused absences upon admission. Among the high-risk children, over two thirds ($n = 4142$, 68.1%) ($M = 5.59$, $SD = 8.58$) had 10 or fewer unexcused absences, with just under one third ($n = 1729$, 28.9%) having 11 to 13 unexcused absences at admission to the program.

Table 8

Unexcused Absences Upon Admission to TASC Among the Overall Sample (N = 12644) and Low-Risk (n = 6500) and High-Risk (n = 6089) Subsamples

Unexcused Absences	Overall Sample		Low-Risk		High-Risk	
	<i>N</i>	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)
0-5	4141	(32.7)	2791	(42.6)	1349	(22.1)
6-10	5909	(46.7)	3113	(47.6)	2793	(45.9)
11-15	1807	(14.2)	514	(7.8)	1293	(21.2)
16-20	521	(4.1)	85	(1.3)	436	(7.1)
21-25	144	(1.1)	22	(0.3)	121	(1.9)
26-30	50	(0.3)	9	(0.1)	41	(0.6)
31-40	38	(0.3)	3	(0.0)	35	(0.5)
41-60	8	(0.0)	1	(0.0)	7	(0.1)
61-79	3	(0.0)	0	(0.0)	3	(0.0)

Note. Number of unexcused absences of 28 children was unknown.

Psychosocial Risk Characteristics

Table 9 summarizes frequencies and percentage of psychosocial risk factors as recorded by teachers on the RISK-I for children upon admission to TASC. The psychosocial risk characteristic most frequently indicated among the overall sample was ‘unmotivated’ ($n = 4409$, 34.90 %), followed by ‘attention seeker’ ($n = 4129$, 32.6%), and ‘manipulative’ ($n = 3562$, 28.2%). For children deemed at low risk, the most frequently reported psychosocial risk characteristics were ‘unmotivated’ ($n = 1727$, 26.3%) and ‘attention seeker’ ($n = 1670$, 25.5%). Similarly, ‘unmotivated’ ($n = 2682$, 44.1%) and ‘attention seeker’ ($n = 2458$, 40.4%) were most often reported for children at high risk for continued truancy.

Teachers reported psychosocial risks among high-risk children approximately twice as often as they reported risks for low-risk children in 5 of the 12 categories, specifically ‘aggressive’, ‘defiant’, ‘negative parental attitudes’, ‘risk-taking behavior’ and ‘unstable home life’ risk characteristics. Proportionately speaking, nearly three times as many children assessed at high-risk ($n = 16987$, 27.7%) for continued truancy showed ‘unstable home life’ as a risk factor than children assessed at low risk ($n = 772$, 11.7%).

To create a risk composite score, items on the RISK I were weighted. Table 10 shows over one third ($n = 4535$, 35.9%) of all children were admitted to the TASC program with no psychosocial risk characteristics indicated on the RISK I form, which is the same as a psychosocial risk composite score of 0. The largest proportion of children with a score of 0 was among the low-risk children (43.7%). The risk composite scores for the overall sample ranged from 0 to 87 ($M = 8.14$, $SD = 11.53$) with a median risk composite score of 3. The risk composite scores for the children at low risk ranged from 0 to 66, with an average score of just over 5 points ($M = 5.22$, $SD = 8.65$). In comparison, the risk composite scores for children at high risk

ranged from 0 to 87, with an average score of just over 11 points ($M = 11.29$, $SD = 13.29$).

Table 9

Psychosocial Risk Characteristics for the Overall Sample (N = 12625) and Low-Risk (n = 6545) and High-Risk (n = 6080) Subsamples

Risk Factors	<u>Overall Sample</u>		<u>Low-Risk</u>		<u>High-Risk</u>	
	N	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)
Aggressive	2339	(18.5)	742	(11.3)	1596	(26.2)
Attention Seeker	4129	(32.6)	1670	(25.5)	2458	(40.4)
Defiant	2718	(21.5)	961	(14.6)	1756	(28.8)
Developmental Issues	1998	(15.8)	803	(12.2)	1194	(19.6)
Emotional Response	3434	(27.1)	1289	(19.6)	2144	(35.2)
Hyperactivity	149	(1.1)	58	(0.8)	91	(1.4)
Isolated	1665	(13.1)	619	(9.4)	1044	(17.1)
Manipulative	3562	(28.2)	1443	(22.0)	2119	(34.8)
Parental Attitudes	2011	(15.9)	677	(10.3)	1332	(21.9)
Risk-Taking Behavior	601	(4.7)	156	(2.3)	445	(7.3)
Unmotivated	4409	(34.9)	1727	(26.3)	2682	(44.1)
Unstable Home Life	2460	(19.4)	772	(11.7)	1687	(27.7)

Table 10

Psychosocial Risk Composite Scores for the Overall Sample ($N = 12620$) and Low-Risk ($n = 6545$) and High-Risk ($n = 6080$) Subsamples

Composite Risk Score	<u>Overall Sample</u>		<u>Low-Risk</u>		<u>High-Risk</u>	
	<i>N</i>	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)
0	4535	(35.9)	2862	(43.7)	1670	(27.4)
1	1079	(8.5)	652	(9.9)	427	(7.0)
2	559	(4.4)	335	(5.1)	224	(3.6)
3	481	(3.8)	278	(4.2)	203	(3.3)
4	434	(3.4)	252	(3.8)	182	(2.9)
5	487	(3.9)	279	(4.2)	208	(3.4)
6-10	1558	(12.3)	758	(11.5)	799	(13.1)
11-20	1689	(13.5)	663	(10.1)	1026	(16.8)
21-30	957	(7.6)	293	(4.4)	664	(10.9)
31-40	510	(4.1)	110	(1.6)	399	(6.5)
41-50	269	(2.2)	50	(0.7)	219	(3.6)
51-87	72	(0.4)	13	(0.1)	59	(0.9)

Note. Risk level of five children was unknown.

Number of TASC Readmissions for Kindergarteners

Table 11 shows the number of times that kindergarteners were readmitted to the TASC program during the 3-year period subsequent to the initial admission. Among all kindergarten children ($N = 2750$) who were admitted to the TASC program during the 2004-2005 school year,

over one fourth ($n = 735$, 26.8%) were readmitted, one or more times, to the TASC program by the 2007-2008 school year. Approximately one fourth ($n = 355$, 23.5%) of low-risk kindergarteners were readmitted to the TASC program at 3 years out. A slightly greater proportion ($n = 380$, 30.6%) of high-risk kindergarteners was readmitted to TASC during the 3-year timeframe.

Table 11

Number of Times All ($N = 2750$) and Low-Risk ($n = 1507$) and High-Risk ($n = 1241$) Kindergarteners Readmitted to the TASC Program Between the 2004-2005 and 2007-2008 School Years

Times Readmitted	<u>Overall Sample</u>		<u>Low-Risk</u>		<u>High-Risk</u>	
	N	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)
1	557	(20.3)	276	(18.3)	281	(22.6)
2	160	(5.8)	69	(4.5)	91	(7.3)
3	18	(0.7)	10	(0.6)	8	(0.6)

Note. Risk level of two children was unknown.

TASC-Referred Services for High-Risk Children

The second question posed by the current study was concerned with the types of TASC-referred services completed by high-risk children. Table 12 shows the number and proportion of services that were *recommended* and the number and proportion of *recommended and completed* services among high-risk children.

Among children ($n = 6089$) assessed at high risk for continued truancy, nearly two thirds ($n = 3998$, 65.7%) had service referrals recommended at the family conference. Overall, children were recommended to a total of 9,233 services, and among these latter services, over one third

were completed ($n = 6202$, 67.7%). On average, children completed one service ($M = 1.0$, $SD = 1.499$), with the number of services completed per child ranging from 0 to 13.

Among children at high risk, roughly similar proportions completed home visits ($n = 794$, 95.9%) and assistance with clothing needs ($n = 306$, 95.4%). Approximately three fourths ($n = 770$, 72.5%) completed other services (e.g., transportation and parent-teacher conferences). A relatively small proportion ($n = 82$, 1.1%) of children were recommended to child protection services and over 85% of child protection referrals were completed.

Table 12

**TASC-Referred Services Recommended and Completed Among High-Risk Children
($n = 6089$)**

Services	<u>Recommended</u>		<u>Completed</u>	
	<i>n</i>	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)
Home Visits	794	(13.0)	762	(95.9)
Clothing	306	(5.0)	292	(95.4)
Hygiene Ed	276	(4.5)	255	(92.3)
Medicaid/LaChip	142	(2.3)	127	(89.4)
Child Protection	82	(1.3)	70	(85.3)
Financial	266	(4.4)	224	(84.2)
Crisis Intervention	100	(1.6)	82	(82.0)
Other	1061	(17.4)	770	(72.5)
ADHD	275	(4.5)	197	(71.6)
SBLC	384	(6.3)	266	(69.2)
Medical Referral	517	(8.5)	353	(68.2)

(Table 12 continued)

Mental Health Assessment	389	(6.4)	248	(63.7)
Tutoring	486	(8.0)	308	(63.3)
Counseling	1605	(26.4)	953	(59.3)
Recreation	178	(2.9)	98	(55.0)
Mentoring	128	(2.1)	69	(53.9)
Parent Education	1800	(29.6)	963	(53.5)
TASC-Camp	444	(7.3)	165	(37.1)

Bivariate Analyses

The third research question addressed in the current study was concerned with the interrelationships among demographic, school-related, and psychosocial risk characteristics and grade level attainment at 3 years out. Also examined was the association between completed TASC-referred services and grade level attainment at 3 years out among high-risk children.

Demographic Characteristics

A cross tabulation analysis was computed to assess the association among ethnicity and grade level attainment 3 years following admission to TASC. In terms of proportions, about half (53.9%) of African-American children and two thirds (66.1%) of non-African American children were on time for their grade at 3 years out, a significant difference, $X^2(1, N = 2861) = 42.067, p = .000$ (see Table 13).

The association among gender and grade level attainment at 3 years out also was examined. Just under two thirds (63.2%) of the girls and over half (55.7%) of the boys were on time for grade, a significant difference, $X^2(1, N = 2861) = 15.845, p = .000$. In sum non-African American children were more likely than African-American children to be on time for their

grade at 3 years out, and girls were more likely than boys to be on track at 3 years out.

A correlation matrix was computed to examine the interrelationship of the child's age at TASC admission and grade attainment. The strength of the interrelationship was assessed according to the guidelines by Cohen (1988), with a correlation of .5 considered strong, .3 as moderate, and .1 as weak. The interrelationship between age and grade attainment was weak and positive ($r = .22, p < .000$).

School-Related Characteristics

A cross tabulation analysis was computed to examine the associations among children's grade levels, special education status, and whether they had ever been suspended or previously retained. As seen in Table 14, significant associations emerged among grade level and grade attainment, $X^2(5, N = 2861) = 65.25, p < .000$ and among suspension and grade attainment, $X^2(1, N = 1911) = 12.174, p < .000$. Significantly greater proportions of children were on time for their grade as grade level increased, and children who had never been suspended were more likely than those who had been suspended to be on time for their grade at 3 years out.

A correlation matrix was computed to examine the interrelationship of number of unexcused absences and grade attainment. The interrelationship between unexcused absences and grade attainment was weak and positive ($r = .06, p < .000$).

Psychosocial Risk Characteristics

A cross tabulation analysis was computed to examine associations among psychosocial risk characteristics and grade attainment at 3 years out. Significant associations emerged among 9 (aggressive, attention seeker, defiant, developmental issues, emotional response, manipulative, parental attitudes, unmotivated, unstable home life) of the 12 risk factors and grade attainment (Table 15). Non-significant associations emerged among grade attainment and hyperactivity, isolated, and risk-taking behavior characteristics.

In terms of psychosocial risks associated with grade attainment, a greater proportion of children who were not assessed as aggressive were on time for their grade ($n = 1286, 60.7\%$), as compared with those who were rated as not aggressive and were behind for their grade ($n = 833, 39.3\%$). This difference was significant, $X^2 (1, N = 2856) = 10.51, p < .001$.

A greater proportion of children who were not assessed as attention seeking were on time for their grade ($n = 1039, 62.1\%$), as compared with those not assessed as attention seeking and behind for their grade ($n = 633, 37.9\%$), a significant difference, $X^2 (1, N = 2856) = 17.19, p < .001$.

A greater proportion of children who were not assessed as defiant were on time ($n = 1235, 60.7\%$), as compared with those who were similarly assessed and behind ($n = 801, 39.3\%$), also a significant difference, $X^2 (1, N = 2856) = 8.76, p < .01$.

A greater proportion of children rated as having no developmental issues was on time for their grade ($n = 1379, 61.3\%$), than children who were assessed as having no developmental issues and behind for their grade ($n = 871, 38.7\%$). This difference proved significant, $X^2 (1, N = 2856) = 24.40, p < .001$.

A greater proportion of children who were assessed as having no emotional response were on time for their grade ($n = 1140, 62.3\%$), as compared with children who were rated as having no emotional response and behind for their grade ($n = 687, 37.7\%$), also a significant difference, $X^2 (1, N = 2856) = 24.30, p < .001$.

A greater proportion of children who were not assessed as manipulative were on time for their grade ($n = 1159, 62.8\%$), as compared with children who were not rated as manipulative and behind for their grade ($n = 688, 37.2\%$), also a significant difference, $X^2 (1, N = 2856) = 31.55, p < .001$.

A greater proportion of children whose parents were not perceived by teachers as having negative attitudes were on time for their grade ($n = 1138, 60.2\%$), as compared with those children whose parents were not perceived as having negative attitudes and behind ($n = 886, 39.8\%$). This difference proved significant, $X^2(1, N = 2856) = 6.31, p < .01$.

A greater proportion of children who were assessed as not unmotivated were on time for their grade ($n = 1049, 65.9\%$), as compared with children who were rated as not unmotivated and behind for their grade ($n = 542, 34.1\%$), also a significant difference, $X^2(1, N = 2856) = 72.82, p < .001$.

A greater proportion of children who were assessed as not having an unstable home life were on time for their grade ($n = 1281, 61.1\%$), as compared with children who were not rated as having an unstable home life and behind for their grade ($n = 815, 38.9\%$), also a significant difference, $X^2(1, N = 2856) = 15.57, p < .001$.

A correlation matrix was computed to examine the interrelationship of the risk composite score and grade attainment. The interrelationship between the risk composite score and grade attainment was weak and positive ($r = .08, p < .000$).

Table 13

Associations Among Demographic Characteristics and Grade Attainment at 3 Years Out Among High-Risk Children (N = 2861)

	<u>Behind for Grade</u>		<u>On Time for Grade</u>		X^2	df
	<i>n</i>	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)		
<u>Ethnicity</u>					42.06***	1
African-American	782	(46)	915	(53)		
Non-African American	395	(33)	769	(66)		

(Table 13 continued)

<u>Gender</u>			15.84***	1
Male	733 (44)	923 (55)		
Female	444 (36)	761 (63)		

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 14

Cross tabulations of School-Related Characteristics for On Time and Behind for Grade Among High-Risk Children at 3 Years Out

	<i>N</i>	<u>Behind for Grade</u>		<u>On time for Grade</u>		X^2	df
		<i>n</i>	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)		
<u>Grade at Referral</u>	2861					65.25***	5
Kindergarten	823	416	(50.5)	407	(49.5)		
First	449	183	(40.8)	266	(59.2)		
Second	371	172	(46.4)	199	(53.6)		
Third	356	113	(31.7)	243	(68.3)		
Fourth	503	171	(34.0)	332	(66.0)		
Fifth	359	122	(34.0)	237	(66.0)		
Previously Retained	2854	351	(39.3)	542	(60.7)	1.66	1
Not Previously Retained		821	(41.9)	1140	(58.1)		
Special Ed Status	1669	110	(40.9)	159	(59.1)	1.87	2
No Special Ed Status		996	(41.5)	1404	(58.5)		

(Table 14 continued)

Suspension	1911	198	(46.6)	227	(53.4)	12.17****	1
No Suspension		553	(37.2)	933	(62.8)		

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 15

Cross tabulations of Psychosocial Risk Characteristics for On Time and Behind for Grade Among High-Risk Children at 3 years Out ($N = 2856$, $df = 1$)

	<u>Behind for Grade</u>	<u>On Time for Grade</u>	X^2
	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	
Aggressive	340 (46.1)	397 (53.9)	10.51****
No Aggressive	833 (39.3)	1286 (60.7)	
Attention Seeker	540 (45.6)	644 (54.4)	17.19****
No Attention Seeker	633 (37.9)	1039 (62.1)	
Defiant	372 (45.4)	448 (54.6)	8.76**
No Defiant	801 (39.3)	1235 (60.7)	
Developmental Issues	301 (49.8)	304 (50.2)	24.40****
No Developmental Issues	871 (38.7)	1379 (61.3)	
Emotional Response	484 (47.1)	543 (52.9)	24.30****
No Emotional Response	689 (37.7)	1140 (62.3)	
Hyperactivity	18 (45.0)	22 (55.0)	.25
No Hyperactivity	1155 (41.0)	1661 (59.0)	

(Table 15 continued)

Isolated	224 (44.1)	284 (55.9)	2.33
No Isolated	949 (40.4)	1399 (59.6)	
Manipulative	485 (48.1)	524 (51.9)	31.55***
No Manipulative	688 (37.2)	1159 (62.8)	
Parental Attitudes	287 (45.4)	345 (54.6)	6.31**
No Parental Attitudes	886 (39.8)	1338 (60.2)	
Risk-taking Behavior	94 (41.8)	131 (58.2)	.05
No Risk-taking Behavior	1079 (41.0)	1552 (59.0)	
Unmotivated	631 (49.9)	634 (50.1)	72.82***
No Unmotivated	542 (34.1)	1049 (65.9)	
Unstable Home Life	358 (47.1)	402 (52.9)	15.57***
No Unstable Home Life	815 (38.9)	1281 (61.1)	

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

TASC-Referred Services

A cross tabulation analysis was computed to examine associations among completed TASC-referred services and grade attainment at 3 years out. As seen in Table 16, significant associations emerged among grade attainment and 3 of the 18 service categories: ADHD screening, mental health assessment, and SBLC services. Non-significant associations emerged among grade attainment and 15 of the 18 categories: child protection, clothing assistance, counseling, crisis intervention, financial services, home visits, hygiene education, Medicaid or LaCHIP referrals, medical referrals, mentoring, parenting, recreation, TASC-summer camp, tutoring, and other services.

A greater proportion of children who did not complete ADHD screening services were on time for their grade ($n = 1631, 59.3\%$), as compared with children who did not complete ADHD assessments and were behind for their grade ($n = 1120, 40.7\%$), a significant difference, $X^2 (1, N = 2861) = 5.38, p < .05$.

A greater proportion of children who did not complete mental health assessments were on time for their grade ($n = 1626, 59.2\%$), as compared with children who did not complete mental health assessments and behind for their grade ($n = 1119, 40.8\%$), also a significant difference, $X^2 (1, N = 2861) = 3.92, p < .05$.

A greater proportion of children who did not complete SBLC services were on time for their grade ($n = 1620, 59.6\%$), as compared with children who did not complete SBLC services and were behind for their grade ($n = 1098, 40.4\%$), also a significant difference, $X^2 (1, N = 2861) = 12.36, p < .001$.

Table 16

Associations Among Completed TASC-Referred Services and Grade Attainment Among High-Risk Children at 3 Years Out ($N = 2861, df = 1$)

Completed TASC-Referred Service	<u>Behind for Grade</u> <i>n (%)</i>	<u>On Time for Grade</u> <i>n (%)</i>	X^2
ADHD	57 (51.8)	53 (48.2)	5.38*
No ADHD	1120 (40.7)	1631 (59.3)	
Child Protection	14 (38.9)	22 (61.1)	.07
No Child Protection	1163 (41.2)	1662 (58.8)	
Clothing	45 (44.1)	57 (55.9)	.38
No Clothing	1132 (41.0)	1627 (59.0)	

(Table 16 continued)

Counseling	231 (44.3)	290 (55.7)	2.69
No Counseling	946 (40.4)	1394 (59.6)	
Crisis Intervention	15 (48.4)	16 (51.6)	.68
No Crisis Intervention	1162 (41.1)	1668 (58.9)	
Financial	40 (37.7)	66 (62.3)	.52
No Financial	1137 (41.3)	1618 (58.7)	
Home Visit	96 (43.4)	125 (56.6)	.52
No Home Visit	1081 (40.9)	1559 (59.1)	
Hygiene Education	62 (45.9)	73 (54.1)	1.34
No Hygiene Education	1115 (40.9)	1611 (59.1)	
Medicaid/LaCHIP	25 (39.7)	38 (60.3)	.056
No Medicaid/LaCHIP	1152 (41.2)	1646 (58.8)	
Medical Referral	70 (40.9)	101 (59.1)	.00
No Medical Referral	1107 (41.2)	1583 (58.8)	
Mental Health Assess	58 (50.0)	58 (50.0)	3.92*
No Mental Health Assess	1119 (40.8)	1626 (59.2)	
Mentoring	19 (55.9)	15 (44.1)	3.08
No Mentoring	1158 (41.0)	1669 (59.0)	
Other	171 (44.6)	212 (55.4)	2.24
No Other	1006 (40.6)	1472 (59.4)	
Parenting Education	198 (42.9)	264 (57.1)	.67
No Parenting Education	979 (40.8)	1420 (59.2)	

(Table 16 continued)

Recreation	23 (42.6)	31 (57.4)	.04
No Recreation	1154 (41.1)	1653 (58.9)	
SBLC	79 (55.2)	64 (44.8)	12.36***
No SBLC	1098 (40.4)	1620 (59.6)	
TASC-Summer	39 (39.0)	61 (61.0)	.19
No TASC-Summer	1138 (41.2)	1623 (58.8)	
Tutoring	64 (44.4)	8 (55.6)	.68
No Tutoring	1113 (41.0)	1604 (59.0)	

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Multivariate Analyses

Multivariate analyses were employed to determine what combination of correlates (i.e., demographic, school-related, and psychosocial characteristics, number of TASC admissions, and types of completed TASC-referred services) best predicted on time grade attainment at 3 years out among high-risk children in the TASC program.

Logistic regression analysis allows for prediction of group membership from a set of variables that may be continuous, dichotomous, discrete, or a mix (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1996). The current study employed direct binary logistic regression analysis for equations 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9. Direct logistic regression analysis is the method in which all predictors are simultaneously entered into the equation, and it is commonly used if there are no specific hypotheses regarding the importance or order of predictor variables and allows for estimations of individual contributions of independent variables (Tabachnick & Fidell). In direct logistic regression, each predictor is evaluated as if it were the last variable entered into the equation

(Tabachnick & Fidell). The current study employed sequential logistic regression analysis only for equations 3 and 4. In sequential logistic regression, the order of predictors is entered into the model (Tabachnick & Fidell). SPSS allows sequential entry in logistic regression of one or more predictors by use of ENTER instructions.

Prior to analyses, the dependent variable (on time for grade) was dichotomously coded (0 = not on time, 1 = on time). Only children who were either on time or behind were included in the analyses. Children ($n = 72$, 2.4%) who were ahead of their respective grades were eliminated from analyses. Conceptually, the research question did not seek to determine the predictive ability of children who had advanced ahead of their grade, because previous grade retention is a risk factor for eventual school non-completion (Alexander et al., 2001).

Three control variables (DPS, Poverty, Lead Agency) were added to the dataset to account for TASC program site differences. Two of the three control variables were continuous: a) poverty index and b) district performance score (DPS). The third control variable was dichotomously coded: lead agency (0 = non-court, 1 = court). Measures for two of these three variables (DPS, Poverty) were extracted from data reported by the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE, 2006). The 16 TASC program sites were composed of 23 school districts, which operated approximately 920 elementary, middle, and high schools, with TASC programs conducted in nearly 400 elementary schools. Six of the 16 TASC programs comprised more than one school district (Appendix A), and DPS and poverty index control variables were computed as an average of the combined DPS and poverty index measures.

DPS is computed by the LDOE and reported yearly in the State Accountability Results Report (LDOE, 2006). The DPS combines school performance scores (SPS) for each individual school located in each school district for one year. SPS calculations are derived from high-stakes test data (*i*LEAP/LEAP, LAA1, and LAA2) as well as attendance and dropout data. The LDOE

2004-2005 Accountability Results Report (2006) DPS scores were used for the control variable. DPSs ranged from 60 to 140. The DPS was measured at the ratio level of measurement.

The poverty control variable was extracted from the *Parish Socioeconomic and Demographic Overview* of the LDOE 2004-2005 Accountability Results Report (2006). This variable measured percent of persons below poverty in 2000 per school district, as reported by U.S. 2000 Census data. This control variable was coded as the percent of poverty in the district and was measured at the ratio level.

The lead agency variable reflected whether the TASC site was operated under the auspices of either a court or non-court governing body. Lead agencies operationalized as court included juvenile court, District Attorney offices, and the Judicial District Court. Lead agencies operationalized as non-court included community-based agency offices and parish youth services organizations. The lead agency control variable was coded as non-court (0) or court (1) and measured at the nominal level.

Prior to analyses, 34 predictor variables were dichotomously coded: race (0 = African-American, 1 = non African American), suspension (0 = no, 1 = yes), previously retained (0 = no, 1 = yes), special education status (0 = no, 1 = yes), each of the 18 services (e.g., ADHD screening, child protection agency, clothing assistance, counseling, crisis intervention, financial support services, home visits, hygiene education, Medicaid/LaChip, medical referral, mental health assessment, mentoring, other, parenting education, recreational activity, SBLC, TASC-summer camp, and tutoring; 0 = no, 1 = yes), each of the 12 psychosocial risks (e.g., aggressive, attention seeker, defiant, developmental issues, emotional response, hyperactivity, isolated, manipulative, parental attitudes, risk-taking behaviors, unmotivated, unstable home life; 0 = no, 1 = yes). Sex was entered as a discrete variable (0 = female, 1 = male). The continuous predictor

variables included: a) number of unexcused absences at referral, b) grade, and c) risk composite score.

Prior to analyses, data screening lead to the elimination of the variable age, which was highly and significantly correlated with grade level ($r = .91$). Therefore, grade level at referral was utilized as the predictor variable, thus eliminating the problem of multicollinearity among these two variables.

Psychosocial risk was entered in two different ways: Equations 1, 3, 5, 7, 8, and 9 included 12 dichotomously-coded individual psychosocial risk categories from the RISK-I, and Equations 2, 4, and 6 included the risk composite score, a continuous variable summing the 55 items measured with the RISK-I.

When computing logistic regression, SPSS employs a listwise deletion of missing values; therefore, only cases with non-missing values for the dependent and all independent variables were used in the analyses, because none of the categorical variables had more than two levels of responses, the categorical subcommand of SPSS was not required for the multivariate analyses (SPSS, 2010). Statistical significance was determined at a level of .05. In order to determine robust estimation of standard errors, the bootstrapping option in SPSS version 19 was utilized in these analyses. The SPSS bootstrapping function produces estimates of robust standard errors of a population parameter, such the mean, median, proportion, odds ratio, correlation coefficient and regression coefficient. The bootstrapping function resamples the original sample 1000 times to ensure model stability (SPSS, 2010).

In sum, nine regression models that best predict on time grade level attainment for a subset of high- risk TASC children at 3 years out are presented. Among the multivariate analyses, the models in equations 1, 7, 8, and 9 showed few significant relationships and model fit were modest. The models in equations 2 through 6 did not fit the data.

Equation 1

Logistic regression was conducted to determine which independent variables best predicted on time grade attainment among at-risk elementary children 3 years out. Forty independent variables were entered directly into the equation. Three control variables were entered into the model: DPS, lead agency, and poverty index. Three demographic variables were entered (gender, race, grade at referral) and four variables measuring school-related characteristics (previous grade retention, special education status, suspensions, number of unexcused absences). Variables measuring 12 psychosocial risk factors were entered (aggressive, attention seeker, defiant, developmental issues, emotional response, hyperactivity, isolated, manipulative, parental attitudes, risk-taking behaviors, unmotivated, unstable home life). Also, variables measuring 18 TASC-referred services that were completed were entered (ADHD screening, child protection agency, clothing assistance, counseling, crisis intervention, financial support services, home visits, hygiene education, Medicaid/LaChip, medical referral, mental health assessment, mentoring, other service, parenting education, recreational activity, SBLC, TASC-summer camp, and tutoring; See Table 17).

Results indicated that the overall model that included 40 predictors was statistically reliable in distinguishing between children who were and were not on time for their grade at 3 years out; however, model statistics indicated that the overall fit was questionable. Model fit was confirmed by significance of the Wald chi-square test (Wald = 86.76, $df = 1$, $p < .001$), indicating that the constant is not zero when all predictors are entered into the model, and that inclusion of all independent variables significantly predicted on time grade level attainment. The Nagelkerke r-square statistic indicated that inclusion of the 40 independent variables explained approximately 11% of the variance in the dependent variable. The large -2 log likelihood (-2 Log Likelihood = 2367.04) indicated questionable fit of the model to the data, because smaller -2 log

likelihood values indicate better model fit (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1996). A perfect model has a -2 log likelihood value of zero. Goodness-of-fit indexes showed significance of model fit, $X^2(40, N = 1888) = 161.04, p < .000$, indicating that the predictors differentiated between children who were either on time or behind for their grade level. The Hosmer-Lemeshow chi-square (H-L X^2) statistic indicated goodness of fit of the model, $H-L X^2(8, N = 1888) = 5.37, p = .71$. H-L X^2 statistic is a test of goodness-of-fit used only for binary response models and is considered a more reliable goodness-of-fit index in logistic regression than the Pearson chi-square statistic (Hosmer & Lemeshow; Tabachnick & Fidell). H-L X^2 sorts observations into deciles. In order for the H-L X^2 to be estimated, there must be at least 3 decile groups computed from the data. H-L X^2 calculates the Pearson chi-square statistic from observed and expected frequencies, then H-L X^2 statistic is compared to the Pearson chi-square distribution (Hosmer & Lemeshow, 2000; Tabachnick & Fidell, 1996). Small p values for H-L X^2 indicate lack of fit of the model, meaning that a finding of non-significance for the H-L X^2 statistic shows that data fit the model (Hosmer & Lemeshow, 2000).

According to the classification table, the model correctly classified about two thirds (64.3%) of the cases. According to Tabachnick and Fidell (1996), this percentage of correctly classified cases is acceptable in the social sciences. Regression coefficients are presented in Table 17. According to the model, the log of the odds of a child being on time for grade level at 3 years out was positively related to race ($p < .01$) and to grade at referral ($p < .001$). The odds of being on time for grade was negatively related to completion of SBLC services ($p < .05$) and being assessed as unmotivated ($p < .001$) at referral. However, odds ratios for race or grade at referral indicated little difference in the likelihood of being on time for grade.

Non-African American children were more likely to be on time for grade than African-American children. (African American was coded as 0 and Non-African American was coded as 1.) The odds of being on time for grade for non-African American children were only 1.358 times greater than the odds for African-American children.

In relation to grade, the higher the grade at referral, the greater the likelihood that the child was on time for grade; however, the odds of being on time for grade attainment (OR = 1.197) increased only slightly as the grade level increased by one year.

Children assessed as unmotivated at admission to TASC were less likely to be on time for their grade at 3 year out than those not assessed as unmotivated. The odds of being on time were about half (OR = .533) for those assessed as unmotivated compared to those not assessed as unmotivated.

Examining completed SBLC services, children who completed this service were less likely to be on time for their grade at 3 years out. The odds of being on time for grade were about half (OR = .592) for those completing SBLC services compared to those not completing SBLC services.

In sum, two demographic (gender and race), one psychosocial risk factor (unmotivated), and one completed service (SBLC) significantly predicted on time grade attainment at 3 years out among high-risk children. However, the odds ratios for these latter four variables indicated little difference in the likelihood of on-time grade attainment (Table 17).

Equation 2

A second binary logistic regression was conducted to determine which independent variables best predicted on time grade attainment at 3 years out; however, the psychosocial risk composite score was entered instead of the 12 variables measuring individual psychosocial risk factors. Results indicated that the overall model of 29 predictors was not statistically reliable in

determining between children who were and were not on time for their grade at 3 years out. H-L χ^2 statistic was significant, showing poor fit of the model to the data, H-L $\chi^2(8, N = 1888) = 25.961, p < .001$.

For Equation 2, 29 independent variables were directly entered into the model. Three control variables were entered into the model: DPS, lead agency, and poverty index. Three demographic variables were entered (gender, race, grade at referral), and four variables measuring school-related characteristics (previous grade retention, special education status, number of suspensions, number of unexcused absences) were entered. One psychosocial risk variable (risk composite score) was entered. Variables measuring 18 TASC-referred services that were completed were entered (ADHD screening, child protection agency, clothing assistance, counseling, crisis intervention, financial support services, home visits, hygiene education, Medicaid/LaChip, medical referral, mental health assessment, mentoring, other service, parenting education, recreational activity, SBLC, TASC-summer camp, and tutoring).

Table 17

Equation 1: Binary Logistic Regression Model Classifying Children As On Time or Not On Time for Grade

Predictor	<i>B</i>	SE <i>B</i>	Wald	<i>p</i>	Exp(<i>B</i>)
Constant	.338	.766	.204	.64	n/a
DPS	.007	.006	1.348	.24	1.007
Lead Agency	.169	.111	2.213	.12	1.184
Poverty	-.029	.015	3.995	.06	.972
Gender	-.116	.107	1.210	.27	.890

(Table 17 continued)

Race	.306	.121	7.511	.01**	1.358
Grade	.180	.032	35.165	.001***	1.197
Prev Retained	.150	.133	1.475	.23	1.161
Special Ed	-.010	.118	.009	.93	.990
Suspension	-.269	.183	2.447	.12	.764
Unexcuse Ab	-.007	.011	.449	.50	.993
Aggressive	.047	.177	.076	.78	1.048
Attention Seek	-.079	.142	.337	.56	.924
Defiant	.020	.188	.013	.91	1.020
Devel Issues	-.209	.134	2.564	.10	.812
Emo Response	-.065	.143	.228	.65	.937
Hyperactivity	.029	.459	.005	.94	1.029
Isolated	.186	.151	1.550	.20	1.204
Manipulative	-.216	.153	2.073	.15	.805
Parental Attitude	.028	.142	.048	.85	1.029
Risk-taking Beh	.287	.225	1.964	.19	1.332
Unmotivated	-.630	.126	26.360	.001***	.533
Unstable Home	-.046	.147	.129	.74	.955
ADHD	-.108	.286	.179	.64	.897
Child Protect	-.060	.440	.020	.88	.942
Clothing	-.067	.372	.039	.83	.935
Counseling	.024	.143	.028	.87	1.024
Crisis Interv	-.331	.532	.485	.46	.718

(Table 17 continued)

Financial	.222	.345	.542	.49	1.249
Home Visits	-.095	.195	.273	.61	.909
Hygiene Ed	-.161	.293	.40	.56	.851
Med/LaChip	.445	.389	1.53	.21	1.56
Medical Ref	.305	.230	2.205	.16	1.356
MH Assessment	-.450	.338	2.884	.16	.638
Mentoring	-.682	.515	2.736	.14	.505
Other Service	-.146	.113	2.055	.16	.864
Parenting Ed	.060	.163	.155	.70	1.062
Recreation	.225	.396	.359	.52	1.252
SBLC	-.524	.250	5.177	.03*	.592
TASC-Camp	.147	.282	.278	.58	.598
Tutoring	-.344	.318	1.337	.25	.709

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Equation 3

Using sequential entry of 40 predictors in two blocks, a binary logistic regression was conducted to determine which independent variables best predicted on time grade attainment among at-risk elementary children 3 years out. Results indicated that the overall model of 40 predictors was not statistically reliable in distinguishing between children who were and were not on time for their grade at 3 years out. Examination of model statistics in the first block showed that H-L X^2 statistic was significant, indicating poor fit of the model to the data, H-L X^2 (8, $N = 1888$) = 18.617, $p < .01$.

For Equation 3, five independent variables were entered in the first block and 35 independent variables were entered in the second block. Three control variables (DPS, lead agency, poverty index) and two unalterable demographic variables (gender and race) were entered in the model in the first block. Next, in the second block five variables measuring school-related characteristics (grade at referral, previous grade retention, special education status, number of suspensions, number of unexcused absences), and variables measuring 12 psychosocial risk factors were entered (aggressive, attention seeker, defiant, developmental issues, emotional response, hyperactivity, isolated, manipulative, parental attitudes, risk-taking behaviors, unmotivated, unstable home life). Variables measuring 18 TASC-referred services that were completed were entered (ADHD screening, child protection agency, clothing assistance, counseling, crisis intervention, financial support services, home visits, hygiene education, Medicaid/LaChip, medical referral, mental health assessment, mentoring, other service, parenting education, recreational activity, SBLC services, TASC-summer camp, and tutoring).

Equation 4

A binary logistic regression was conducted using sequential entry of 29 predictors in two blocks similarly to Equation 3, except the psychosocial risk composite score was entered instead of the 12 psychosocial risk factors, to determine which independent variables best predicted on time grade attainment 3 years out. Results indicated that the overall model of 29 predictors was not statistically reliable in distinguishing between children who were and were not on time for their grade at 3 years out. Examination of model statistics in the first block showed that H-L X^2 statistic was significant, H-L $X^2(8, N = 1888) = 18.617, p < .01$, indicating poor fit of the model to the data.

For Equation 4, five variables were entered into the first block and 24 variables were entered into the second block. In the first block, three control variables (DPS, lead agency, poverty index) and two unalterable demographic variables (gender and race) were entered in the model. Next, in the second block five variables measuring school-related characteristics (grade at referral, previous grade retention, special education status, number of suspensions, number of unexcused absences), and one psychosocial risk variable (psychosocial risk composite score) were entered. Finally in the second block, variables measuring 18 TASC-referred services that were completed were entered (ADHD screening, child protection agency, clothing assistance, counseling, crisis intervention, financial support services, home visits, hygiene education, Medicaid/LaChip, medical referral, mental health assessment, mentoring, other service, parenting education, recreational activity, SBLC services, TASC-summer camp, and tutoring).

Equation 5

In order to examine whether readmission to TASC influenced grade attainment, direct binary logistic regression among a subsample of kindergarteners ($n = 501$) was conducted. This analysis included the continuous variable, number of times readmitted. Results indicated that the overall model of 40 predictors was not statistically reliable in distinguishing between children who were and were not on time for their grade at 3 years out. Model statistics showed that the Wald statistic was not significant, indicating poor model fit for the data, $Wald = .577, df = 1, p = .448$.

In Equation 5, 40 predictor variables were directly entered. Three control variables were entered into the model: DPS, lead agency, and poverty index. Two demographic variables were entered (gender and race), and four variables measuring school-related characteristics (previous grade retention, special education status, number of suspensions, number of unexcused absences) were entered. Variables measuring 12 psychosocial risk factors were entered (aggressive,

attention seeker, defiant, developmental issues, emotional response, hyperactivity, isolated, manipulative, parental attitudes, risk-taking behaviors, unmotivated, unstable home life). Variables measuring 18 completed TASC-referred services were entered (ADHD screening, child protection agency, clothing assistance, counseling, crisis intervention, financial support services, home visits, hygiene education, Medicaid/LaChip, medical referral, mental health assessment, mentoring, other service, parenting education, recreational activity, SBLC services, TASC-summer camp, and tutoring). One variable measuring TASC readmissions (number of times readmitted) was entered.

Equation 6

In order to examine whether readmission to TASC influenced grade attainment, logistic regression among a subsample of kindergarteners ($n = 501$) was conducted, except (in Equation 6) the psychosocial risk composite score was entered instead of the 12 psychosocial risk factors as in Equation 5. Results indicated that the overall model of 29 predictors, which included the psychosocial risk composite score instead of 12 risk indicators, was not statistically reliable in determining between children who were and were not on time for their grade. Model statistics showed that the Wald statistic was not significant, indicating poor model fit for the data, $Wald = .577, df = 1, p = .448$.

For Equation 6, 29 predictors were directly entered into the model. Three control variables were first entered into the model: DPS, lead agency, and poverty index. Two demographic variables were entered (gender and race) and four variables measuring school-related characteristics (previous grade retention, special education status, number of suspensions, number of unexcused absences) and one psychosocial risk variable (psychosocial risk composite score). Variables measuring 18 completed TASC-referred services were entered (ADHD screening, child protection agency, clothing assistance, counseling, crisis intervention, financial

support services, home visits, hygiene education, Medicaid/LaChip, medical referral, mental health assessment, mentoring, other service, parenting education, recreational activity, SBLC services, TASC-summer camp, and tutoring). One variable measuring TASC readmissions (number of times admitted) was entered.

Post Hoc Analyses: Examining TASC-Referred Service Variables

After examining the results of the previous analyses and to gain more information about TASC-referred services and on time grade attainment at 3 years out, three additional direct binary logistic regressions (Equations 7, 8, and 9) were conducted.

Equation 7

Logistic regression was conducted to determine which independent variables best predicted on time grade attainment among at-risk elementary children at 3 years out, except one dichotomous service variable (completed service) was entered rather than the 18 completed TASC-referred service variables. The completed service variable was computed to indicate whether the child completed one or more services (0 = no, 1 = yes).

Twenty-three predictors were entered directly into the model, including 3 control variables were first entered into the model: DPS, lead agency, and poverty index. Three demographic variables (gender, race, grade at referral) and four variables measuring school-related characteristics (previous grade retention, special education status, suspensions, number of unexcused absences) were entered. Variables measuring 12 psychosocial risk factors were entered (aggressive, attention seeker, defiant, developmental issues, emotional response, hyperactivity, isolated, manipulative, parental attitudes, risk-taking behaviors, unmotivated, unstable home life). One dichotomous variable (completed service) was entered measuring TASC-referred service that was completed (See Table 18).

Results indicated that the overall model of 23 predictors was statistically reliable in distinguishing between children who were and were not on time for their grade at 3 years out; however model statistics indicated that the overall fit was questionable. Model fit was confirmed by significance of the Wald chi-square test (Wald = 86.76, df = 1, $p < .001$). The Nagelkerke r-square statistic indicated that inclusion of the 23 independent variables explained approximately 9% of the variance in the dependent variable. The large -2 log likelihood (-2 Log Likelihood = 2388.653) indicated questionable model fit of the model to the data. Goodness-of-fit indexes showed significance of model fit, $X^2(23, N = 1888) = 139.801, p < .001$, indicating that the predictors differentiated between children who were either on time or behind for their grade level at 3 years out. H-L X^2 statistic was not significant, indicating goodness-of-fit of the model, H-L $X^2(8, N = 1888) = 3.057, p = .93$. According to the classification table, the model correctly classified about two thirds (64.2%) of the cases. Regression coefficients are presented in Table 18.

As seen in Table 18, the odds of a child being on time for grade level at 3 years out were negatively associated to the poverty index and with being assessed as unmotivated; whereas the odds of being on time for grade were positively associated to race and grade at referral. However, odds ratios for poverty index, race, and grade at referral indicated little difference in the likelihood of being on time for grade.

Children with higher levels of poverty in their communities were less likely to be on time for their grade than children residing in communities with lower poverty rates. However, the odds for those living in communities with higher poverty rates and being on time for grade at 3 years out were nearly the same (OR = .974) for those residing in communities with lower poverty rates. The odds of being on time for grade at 3 years out only decreased slightly (0.974) as the poverty rate increased.

Children who were not of African-American descent were more likely to be on time for grade than African-American children. However, the odds of being on time for grade at 3 years out were 1.331 times greater for non-African American children than for African-American children, a modest difference.

Children in higher elementary level grades at referral were more likely to be on time for grade than children in lower grades at 3 years out. The odds of being on time for grade was only 1.189 times greater for every one unit increase in grade level; therefore, the higher the grade at referral, the greater the likelihood that the child would be on time for grade at 3 years out, a modest difference.

Children who were assessed as unmotivated by their teachers were less likely to be on time for their grade than children who were not assessed as unmotivated. The odds of being on time at 3 years out for children assessed as unmotivated were about half that (OR = .531) as the odds of children who were not assessed as unmotivated.

Table 18

Equation 7: Binary Logistic Regression Model With Dichotomous Completed Service Variable Classifying Children As On Time or Not On Time for Grade

Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	Wald	<i>p</i>	Exp(<i>B</i>)
Constant	.178	.717	.063	.8	n/a
DPS	.009	.006	2.250	.12	1.009
Lead Agency	.155	.108	1.990	.13	1.168
Poverty	-.027	.014	3.975	.05*	.974
Gender	-.127	.105	1.478	.27	.232

(Table 18 continued)

Race	.286	.115	6.829	.02*	1.331
Grade	.174	.031	33.528	.001***	1.189
Prev Retained	.157	.127	1.689	.21	1.170
Special Ed	-.003	.114	.001	.98	.997
Suspension	-.215	.174	1.647	.20	.807
Unexcuse Ab	-.006	.011	.350	.56	.994
Aggressive	.051	.170	.093	.76	1.048
Attention Seek	-.091	.137	.450	.50	.913
Defiant	-.015	.181	.008	.93	.985
Devel Issues	-.206	.130	2.562	.10	.814
Emo Response	-.061	.138	.206	.66	.941
Hyperactivity	.008	.446	.000	.99	1.008
Isolated	.152	.145	1.074	.28	1.165
Manipulative	-.234	.154	2.477	.12	.792
Parental Attitude	.005	.137	.002	.96	1.005
Risk-Taking Beh	.261	.214	1.678	.20	1.299
Unmotivated	-.633	.123	27.128	.001***	.531
Unstable Home	-.046	.140	.135	.73	.955
Completed Service	-.090	.110	.74	.40	.914

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Equation 8

Logistic regression was conducted to determine which independent variables best predicted on time grade attainment among at-risk children 3 years out, except 8 TASC-referred

service variables (basic needs, child protection, educational, enrichment, family-related, medical, mental health, and other services) were entered rather than the 18 completed TASC-referred service variables as in Equation 1.

The basic needs services variable was composed of 3 of the 18 TASC-referred service variables (clothing assistance, financial support services, and hygiene education). The child protection services variable was identical to 1 of the 18 TASC-referred services (child protection). The educational services variable was composed of 2 of the 18 TASC-referred services variables (tutoring and SBLC services). The enrichment services variable was composed of 3 of the 18 TASC-referred services variables (mentoring, recreation, and TASC-summer camp). The family-related services variable was composed of 2 of the 18 TASC-referred services variables (home visits and parenting education). The medical services variable was composed of 2 of the 18 TASC-referred services variables, (Medicaid/LaCHIP and medical referral services). The mental health services variable was composed of 4 of the 18 TASC-referred service variables (ADHD screening, crisis intervention, counseling, and mental health assessment). The other services variable was identical to 1 of the 18 TASC-referred services (other service). Only TASC-referred services that were completed comprised the 8 service variables. The basic needs, child protection, educational, enrichment, family-related, medical, mental health, and other services variables were measured at the nominal level. Each of the 8 was dichotomously coded as either (0) for no or (1) for yes.

Thirty predictor variables were entered into the model, including three control variables: DPS, lead agency, and poverty index. Three demographic variables (gender, race, grade at referral) and four variables measuring school-related characteristics (previous grade retention, special education status, number of suspensions, number of unexcused absences) were entered. Variables measuring 12 psychosocial risk factors were entered (aggressive, attention seeker,

defiant, developmental issues, emotional response, hyperactivity, isolated, manipulative, parental attitudes, risk-taking behaviors, unmotivated, unstable home life). Eight TASC-referred service variables (basic needs, child protection, educational, enrichment, family-related, medical, mental health, and other services) were entered measuring completed TASC-referred services (Table 19).

Regression results indicated that the overall model of 30 predictors was statistically reliable in distinguishing between children who were and were not on time for their grade at 3 years out. Model fit was confirmed by significance of the Wald chi-square test (Wald = 86.766, $df = 1$, $p < .001$). The Nagelkerke r-square statistic indicated that inclusion of the independent variables explained approximately 10% of the variance in the dependent variable. The large -2 log likelihood (-2 Log Likelihood = 2376.20) indicated questionable fit of the model to the data. Goodness-of-fit indexes showed significance of model fit, $X^2(30, N = 1888) = 152.255$, $p < .001$, indicating that the predictors differentiated between children who were either on time or behind for their grade level at 3 years out. H-L X^2 statistic indicated goodness-of-fit, H-L $X^2(8, N = 1888) = 4.575$, $p = .802$. According to the classification table, the model correctly classified about two thirds (64.1%) of the cases. Regression coefficients are presented in Table 19.

As seen in Table 19, the odds of a child being on time for grade level at 3 years out was negatively related to poverty, being assessed as unmotivated at referral, and completing educational services. The odds of being on time for grade were positively related to race and grade at referral. However, odds ratios for poverty, race or grade at referral indicated little difference in the likelihood of on time grade attainment (OR = .974, 1.331, and 1.189, respectively).

Children with higher levels of poverty in their communities were less likely to be on time for their grade than children residing in communities with lower poverty rates. However, the

odds of living in communities with higher poverty rates and being on time for grade at 3 years out were nearly the same (OR = .969) as the odds of residing in communities with lower poverty rates. The odds of being on time for grade 3 years out decreased only slightly (0.969) as the poverty rate increased.

Non-African American children were more likely to be on time for grade than African-American children. However, the odds of being non-African American and on time for grade were only 1.345 times greater than the odds for African-American children.

In relation to grade, the higher the grade at referral, the greater the likelihood that the child was on time for grade at 3 years out; however, the odds of being on time for grade was only 1.195 times greater and increased only slightly as the grade level increased by one year.

For children who were assessed by teachers as unmotivated at referral, odds ratios showed that children assessed as unmotivated were less likely to be on time for their grade at 3 years out. The odds of having been assessed as unmotivated and being on time at 3 were about half (OR = .536) that of not being assessed as unmotivated.

Examining completed TASC-referred educational services, children who completed this type of service were less likely to be on time for their grade at 3 years out. The odds of completing educational services and being on time for grade were about half (OR = .636) that of not completing educational services.

Equation 9

Logistic regression was conducted to determine which independent variables best predicted on time grade attainment among at-risk children 3 years out, except 18 TASC-referred service variables entered into the model were *recommended* by the TASC case managers at the family service conference and recorded on the family service plan, rather than services that were recommended and completed as in Equation 1. At family conferences, 18 TASC-referred

services were *recommended* ($n = 9233$), with over one third *completed* ($n = 6202$, 67.7%), and these latter *completed* services were examined (Equations 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8). The analysis in Equation 9, each of the 18 TASC-referred services recommended was coded as recommended (0 = no, 1 = yes).

Table 19

Equation 8: Binary Logistic Regression Model With 8 Completed Service Variables Classifying Children As On Time or Not On Time for Grade

Predictor	<i>B</i>	SE <i>B</i>	Wald	<i>p</i>	Exp(<i>B</i>)
Constant	.406	.745	.310	.59	n/a
DPS	.007	.006	1.351	.24	1.007
Lead Agency	.184	.111	2.635	.09	1.201
Poverty	-.031	.014	5.083	.02*	.969
Gender	-.122	.105	1.348	.25	.886
Race	.296	.117	7.239	.01**	1.345
Grade	.178	.031	34.544	.001***	1.195
Prev Retained	.169	.129	1.919	.18	1.184
Special Ed	-.020	.116	.036	.87	.980
Suspension	-.228	.179	1.816	.19	.796
Unexcuse Ab	-.007	.011	.447	.50	.993
Aggressive	.042	.173	.064	.79	1.043
Attention Seek	-.072	.139	.282	.58	.930
Defiant	-.004	.183	.001	.98	.996

(Table 19 continued)

Devel Issues	-.209	.131	2.590	.09	.812
Emo Response	-.059	.140	.189	.68	.943
Hyperactivity	.020	.464	.002	.96	1.020
Isolated	.177	.147	1.426	.21	1.193
Manipulative	-.231	.155	2.386	.13	.794
Parental Attitude	.016	.139	.015	.91	1.016
Risk-taking Beh	.274	.220	1.814	.20	1.315
Unmotivated	-.624	.124	26.124	.001***	.536
Unstable Home	-.032	.143	.065	.80	.968
Basic Needs	-.124	.195	.441	.53	.883
Child Protection	-.217	.413	.279	.56	.805
Educational	-.448	.196	5.767	.01**	.639
Enrichment	.048	.212	.054	.83	1.049
Family-Related	.021	.131	.027	.87	1.021
Medical	.357	.204	3.770	.06	1.429
Mental Health	-.132	.133	.995	.33	.876
Other Service	-.152	.152	1.059	.31	.859

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Forty independent variables were directly entered into the equation. Three control variables were entered into the model: DPS, lead agency, and poverty index. Three demographic variables were entered (gender, race, grade at referral), and four variables measuring school-related characteristics (previous grade retention, special education status, number of suspensions, number of unexcused absences) were entered. Variables measuring 12 psychosocial risk factors

were entered (aggressive, attention seeker, defiant, developmental issues, emotional response, hyperactivity, isolated, manipulative, parental attitudes, risk-taking behaviors, unmotivated, unstable home life). Also, variables measuring 18 TASC-referred services that were *recommended* were entered (ADHD screening, child protection agency, clothing assistance, counseling, crisis intervention, financial support services, home visits, hygiene education, Medicaid/LaChip, medical referral, mental health assessment, mentoring, other service, parenting education, recreational activity, SBLC services, TASC-summer camp, and tutoring; See Table 20).

Regression results indicated that the overall model of 40 predictors was statistically reliable in distinguishing between children who were and were not on time for their grade at 3 years out. Model fit was modest and confirmed by significance of the Wald chi-square test (Wald = 86.766, $df = 1$, $p < .001$). The Nagelkerke r-square statistic indicated that inclusion of the independent variables explained approximately 12% of the variance in the dependent variable. The large -2 log likelihood (-2 Log Likelihood = 2350.60) indicated questionable fit of the model to the data. Goodness-of-fit indexes showed significance of model fit, $X^2(40, N = 1888) = 177.854$, $p < .001$, indicating that the predictors differentiated between children who were either on time or behind for their grade level at 3 years out. H-L X^2 statistic indicated goodness-of-fit, H-L $X^2(8, N = 1888) = 3.717$, $p = .802$. According to the classification table, the model correctly classified about two thirds (65.4%) of the cases. Regression coefficients are presented in Table 20.

As seen in Table 20, the odds of a child being on time for grade level at 3 years out was negatively related to being assessed as unmotivated at referral and being recommended for tutoring, and SBLC and other services. The odds of being on time for grade was positively related to being enrolled in a TASC program with a court-administered lead agency, race, and

grade at referral. However, odds ratios for lead agency, race, and grade at referral indicated little difference in the likelihood of on time grade attainment at 3 years out (OR = 1.256, 1.333, and 1.199, respectively).

Children enrolled in TASC programs where the lead agency was a court-administered program were more likely to be on time for their grade than children enrolled in a non-court administered TASC programs. However, the odds of being enrolled in a court-administered program and on time for grade was only 1.256 times greater than those in a non-court administered program.

Non-African American children were more likely to be on time for grade than African-American children. However, the odds of being non-African American and on time for grade were only 1.333 times greater than the odds for African-American children.

In relation to grade, the higher the grade at referral, the greater the likelihood that the child was on time for grade at 3 years out; however, the odds of being on time for grade was only 1.199 times greater and increased only slightly as the grade level increased by one year.

For children who were assessed by teachers as unmotivated at referral, odds ratios showed that children assessed as unmotivated were less likely to be on time for their grade at 3 years out. The odds of having been assessed as unmotivated and being on time at 3 were about half (OR = .546) that of not being assessed as unmotivated.

Children who had SBLC, tutoring, and other services recommended to them at the family conference by case managers were less likely to be on time for their grade at 3 years out. The odds of being recommended for SBLC, tutoring, and other services and being on time for grade were about half (OR = .482, .492, and .691, respectively) than the odds of those not being recommended to these three service types.

Table 20

Equation 9: Binary Logistic Regression Model With Referred Service Variables Classifying Children As On Time or Not On Time for Grade

Predictor	<i>B</i>	SE <i>B</i>	Wald	<i>p</i>	Exp(<i>B</i>)
Constant	.151	.796	.038	.83	n/a
DPS	.008	.006	1.768	.19	1.008
Lead Agency	.228	.115	3.783	.04*	1.256
Poverty	-.025	.015	3.018	.08	.975
Gender	-.119	.108	1.248	.27	.888
Race	.287	.122	6.530	.02*	1.333
Grade	.182	.032	35.098	.001***	1.199
Prev Retained	.176	.131	2.021	.16	1.192
Special Ed	-.036	.117	.110	.76	.965
Suspension	-.036	.184	1.621	.23	.802
Unexcuse Ab	-.008	.011	.483	.48	.992
Aggressive	.072	.178	.178	.68	1.074
Attention Seek	-.062	.143	.205	.63	.940
Defiant	.028	.186	.026	.87	1.028
Devel Issues	-.194	.135	2.182	.13	.824
Emo Response	-.087	.143	.405	.55	.916
Hyperactivity	.032	.473	.005	.96	1.032
Isolated	.207	.152	1.909	.15	1.231
Manipulative	-.226	.160	2.219	.15	.798

(Table 20 continued)

Parental Attitude	.030	.142	.054	.82	1.031
Risk-taking Beh	.264	.224	1.644	.22	1.302
Unmotivated	-.606	.126	24.104	.001***	.546
Unstable Home	-.044	.147	.118	.77	.957
ADHD	.009	.249	.002	.96	1.009
Child Protect	-.104	.408	.070	.76	.902
Clothing	-.057	.358	.028	.85	.945
Counseling	.000	.131	.000	.99	.999
Crisis Interv	-.214	.483	.231	.59	.807
Financial	.429	.331	2.166	.17	1.536
Home Visits	-.148	.194	.680	.43	.862
Hygiene Ed	-.107	.288	.182	.70	.898
Med/LaChip	.180	.357	.312	.61	1.197
Medical Ref	.121	.190	.501	.50	1.129
MH Assessment	-.271	.257	1.537	.26	.763
Mentoring	-.181	.380	.301	.60	.835
Other Service	-.369	.143	7.522	.01**	.691
Parenting Ed	.136	.136	1.168	.29	1.146
Recreation	.067	.291	.060	.79	1.069
SBLC	-.730	.227	12.096	.01**	.482
TASC-Summer	.103	.188	.324	.55	1.108
Tutoring	-.709	.252	9.477	.01**	.492

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, the results of the current study are first summarized and then reviewed in the context of relevant literature. Implications for social work practice, education, and research are delineated. This chapter concludes with a discussion of how the current study contributes to the knowledge base about elementary children with truancy problems and about how risk factors influence progressing in school.

This retrospective, exploratory-descriptive study examined risk characteristics of elementary children at low and high of risk for continued truancy. Services that children received while enrolled in a truancy intervention program were examined. The study assessed interrelationships among risk characteristics and whether children were on time or behind for their grade at 3 years out. Finally using multivariate analyses, this study identified correlates that best predicted on time grade attainment of elementary children with truancy problems.

The elementary school children in this study ($N = 12622$) were enrolled in Louisiana public schools during the 2004-2005 school year and admitted to a truancy intervention program after accumulating five unexcused absences. Similar proportions of children in the study were assessed at low risk ($n = 6500$, 51.8%) and at high risk ($n = 6089$, 48.1%). Case managers employed with the intervention program either assessed participants for the low- or high-risk intervention. Depending upon their level of risk, participants received either notification by letter of compulsory attendance law and attendance monitoring (low-risk intervention) or intensive case management services (high-risk intervention).

With over 12,000 participants, the current study was unique in that it utilized a much larger sample size than in other truancy intervention studies. For example, Ford and Sutphen (1996) had nine participants in an elementary school study in Kentucky. The sample sizes used in other studies ranged from less than 50 participants (Mueller et al., 2006) to several hundred

(McCluskey et al., 2004). In the current study, the large sample size permitted examination of 40 variables, namely risk (demographic, school-related, and psychosocial) and service variables.

For the current study, a referral to the truancy intervention program was made when the child had accumulated five unexcused absences. This is similar to the criterion used by the Early Elementary Truancy Initiative (EETI; McCluskey et al., 2004) that defined truancy as 20% of days during the prior 6-week base period (which was 6 days); however, children in EETI could accumulate a higher number of days, overall, if the 20% of days were missed later in the school year. Other studies used wide ranges to determine eligibility for intervention, such as 10 unexcused days in the current year (Baker & Jansen, 2000), any 20 days in the prior year (Ford & Sutphen, 1996), or any 25 or more days absent in the prior school year (Fantuzzo et al., 2005). The Check & Connect (Lehr et al., 2004) set program eligibility at 12% of days absent or tardy from the first school day; therefore, after the first month of school, children would be absent or late for 2.4 days, but children would have to be absent or late for 7.2 days after the first 3 months of school. The Countrywide Program (Mueller et al., 2006) defined truancy as 10% of days missed during the school year.

Gandy and Schultz (2007) and Sutphen et al. (2010) who undertook comprehensive reviews of truancy intervention studies concluded that in order for truancy to be used as a reliable outcome measure, it must be clearly and consistently defined and conceptualized to calculate the rate of truancy. A consistent definition will establish the baseline measure and criteria by which an outcome can be evaluated. The current study defined truancy as five unexcused absences, thus creating a clear and efficient way to identify children at risk of truancy and its associated problems. Defining truancy at five unexcused absences allows early and rapid identification, allowing intervention before patterns of unexcused absences are established (OJJDP, n.d.). In the current study, the designation of five unexcused absences required for

referral to the intervention program provided an earlier time frame to examine at-risk children compared to other studies; moreover, the findings in current study showed substantial risks among children at referral.

The current study was similar to other truancy intervention studies (Gandy & Schultz, 2007; Sutphen et al., 2010) in that unexcused absence criterion was used as the primary risk factor that precipitated a referral. The current study was similar to longitudinal dropout prevention research (Kemple & Snipes, 2000; Tierney et al., 2005) in that the risk factors of children were examined in relation to grade level attainment at 3 years out. Similarly, dropout prevention research used student risk factors to identify and predict dropout (Hammond et al., 2007; Kemple & Snipes). Other truancy intervention programs (Gandy & Schultz; Sutphen et al.) provided only one intervention for students identified as truant. The current study was different in that it described children both at low and at high risk for continuing truancy, and then the current study examined the high-risk children's characteristics in relation to grade attainment.

Demographic Characteristics

The proportion of boys (55%) was slightly larger than that of girls (44.9%), which was similar to the gender distribution of children in other truancy prevention programs (McCluskey et al., 2004; Lehr et al., 2004). Previous literature posits that more male than female children exhibit truant behavior (Garry, 1996; Teasley, 2004). The gender distribution of both the low- and high-risk subsamples was similar to that of the overall sample. A large proportion of truancy studies sample children from middle and high school grades (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Gandy & Schultz, 2007), the children sampled in the current study were younger with an average age of 8 years. The young age of participants may explain the similarities in gender distribution of the current sample. Because the children were early in their school careers, gender differences may not have had time to emerge. Similar to the participants in the current study, Fantuzzo et al.

(2005) found that just under half (48%) of the participants in kindergarten through 12th grade who were enrolled in Project S.T.A.R.T. were male. Alternatively, the gender distribution in the current study may be understood in light of observations that a changing pattern of truancy and delinquency may be emerging among girls (Bimler & Kirkland, 2001; Bloom et al., 2009).

Chi-square analyses were conducted to examine the joint distribution of gender and grade attainment. Results showed a significant association with proportionately more girls (63.2%) than boys (55.7%) being on time for grade at 3 years out. These latter findings are consistent with literature suggesting that more boys than girls experience school-related problems (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Teasley, 2004), and that girls (72.2%) ultimately graduate from high school at a higher rate than that of boys (64.9%; Education Week, 2009a). The results of the current study suggest that such gender differences may begin to emerge as early as elementary school.

In terms of race and ethnic differences, the largest proportion of participants was African American (63.4%), which was similar to the proportion of African-American children comprising the low- (62.8%) and high- (64%) risk subsamples. The proportion of African-American children in the current study is higher than that of the overall representation of African-American children (47.7%) in Louisiana public schools in kindergarten through 12th grade during the 2004-2005 school year (LDOE, 2006). Yet the proportion of African-American children in the current study was similar to the proportion of minority children enrolled in both Big Brothers/Big Sisters (BBBS) at 60% (Tierney, 1998) and to Project S.T.A.R.T. at 63% (Fantuzzo et al., 2005). The overrepresentation of African-American children is consistent with research showing that minority ethnicity and African-American, in particular, is a risk factor for poor academic outcomes (Brooks-Gunn et al., 1993; Education Week, 2009b; Glanville & Wilhagen, 2007; Rumberger, 1987). This suggests that although the proportion of African-American children in the current study is greater than that of African-American children, overall,

in Louisiana schools, young African-American children are experiencing truancy problems early in their school years, and the truancy intervention is serving children who would be considered at great risk for poor school-related outcomes (Education Week, 2010; Fram et al., 2007; Ratts et al. 2007).

Additionally, chi-square analyses were conducted to examine the joint distribution of ethnicity and grade attainment at 3 years out. Results showed a significant association, with proportionately more White children and those of other ethnicities (66.1%) than African-American children (53.9%), being on time for grade at 3 years out. This latter finding is consistent with research showing that more African-American than White students experience school-related problems (Education Week, 2010) and that White youth (77%) ultimately graduate from high school at higher rates than children from minority groups, particularly African-American children (54%) (Education Week, 2010). Although the rate of children who progress in school is conceptually distinct from the rate of students who graduate from high school, a large body of research shows that grade retention is strongly associated with eventual school dropout (Alexander et al., 2001; Bridgeland et al., 2006). Results in the current study suggest that the rate of progressing in school among children ethnic minorities in elementary school is similar to the rate of high school graduation among ethnic minority groups.

In order to contextualize the grade attainment rates among children in the current study, the Louisiana public school retention rates are shown here. The retention rate, or rate at which children fail to progress to the next grade, for children in kindergarten through 12th grade in Louisiana was approximately 9% each year from 2004 through 2008 (LDOE, 2006; LDOE, 2007; LDOE, 2008; LDOE, 2009). According to these retention rates, approximately three fourths of children in Louisiana public schools would be on time for their grade at 3 years out. Fewer children in the current study, overall, were on time for their grade (58.9%) than children

in kindergarten through 12th grade in Louisiana. This difference is not surprising in that the intervention employed in the current study targeted at-risk children who were among those most at risk for poor school outcomes. It would be improbable that children at risk would demonstrate grade promotion rates comparable to those of all children in kindergarten through 12th grade in Louisiana public schools.

School-Related Characteristics

The largest proportion of children in the overall sample is kindergarteners (21.7%), which was similar to the proportion of kindergarteners in the low- (23%) and high-risk (20.4%) subsamples. The next largest proportion of children in the overall sample is 4th graders (18.5%) with proportions in the low- and high-risk groups at 17.3% and 20.5%, respectively. The sample in the current study is dissimilar to that of other studies reviewed in the literature (Gandy & Schultz, 2007), due to the fact that the current study examined kindergarten through 5th grade children, providing a snapshot of truancy problems across all grades in elementary school children. Few studies were conducted with elementary school children.

A significant association emerged between grade level at referral and grade level attainment at 3 years out, showing that the higher the grade level the greater the proportion of children who were on time for their grade. Among kindergarteners referred to the intervention during the 2004-2005 school year, approximately half (49.5%) were on time for their grade and enrolled in the 3rd grade during the 2007-2008 school year. Fewer than 60% of children (59.2%) referred during their 1st grade year were on time for their grade (i.e., 4th grade) at 3 years out. Among 2nd graders referred during 2004-2005 school year, over half (53.6%) were on time for their grade and enrolled in the 5th grade at 3 years out. The largest proportion of children who were on time for their grade at 3 years out was 3rd graders (68.3%) who were enrolled in the 6th grade, the first year of middle school, in 2007-2008. At 3 years out, two thirds of both 4th and 5th

graders (66.0%) were enrolled in 7th and 8th grades, respectively. Results show that participants in the earliest grades (i.e., K, 1st, 2nd) were more likely to be retained than children in the higher grades (i.e., 3rd, 4th, 5th); however, findings do not indicate the reasons why (e.g., developmental readiness, academic, or behavioral problems). Nevertheless, these findings suggest that truancy problems in the earliest grades may influence grade level attainment more than truancy problems in the latter grades.

Enrollment in special education is a risk factor for dropout and a correlate of truancy (Fraser, 2004; Richman et al., 2004); however, only the Check & Connect study (Lehr et al., 2004) examined truancy among children with diagnosed learning and emotional disabilities. The vast majority (87.2%) of participants in the current study were not enrolled in special education classes; therefore findings for the current study cannot be compared to those of the Check & Connect study. Less than one in ten participants (8.4%) in the current study were enrolled in special education programs, which was a smaller proportion than all kindergarten through 12th graders (12.7%) in the state enrolled in special education programs during the 2004-2005 school year (LDOE, 2006). However, a large proportion of kindergarteners and 1st graders (39.2%) comprised the overall sample, and generally, it was too early in their school careers to be assessed and admitted to special education programs.

Grade retention is also a risk factor for dropout and a correlate of truancy (Alexander et al., 2001; Entwisle et al., 2004). Previous grade retention of participants rarely is included as a correlate in truancy intervention research (Gandy & Schultz, 2007). Nearly one third of all participants (32.3%) in the current study had been retained at least one grade. Over one fourth of low-risk children (26.7%) and over one third of high-risk (38.3%) children had been previously retained. The difference in proportions suggests that case managers employed in the intervention program recognized previous grade retention as a risk factor and provided the intensive case

management intervention, accordingly. This finding suggests that children were already experiencing academic problems at admission to the truancy intervention.

Behavioral problems are a risk factor and often result in school discipline measures such as detention, suspension, and expulsion (Brown et al., 2008; Richman et al., 2004). The number of previous suspensions was recorded by teachers on the referral form for each participant. Number of suspensions was seldom included as a correlate of truancy in other studies (Gandy & Schultz, 2007). The vast majority of participants in the current study had not been suspended (82.9%). Less than one in ten low-risk children (8.1%) had been suspended, as compared with 3 times as many high-risk children (24.3%) who had been suspended. A significant association emerged between previous suspensions and grade attainment at 3 years out. This difference suggests that case managers employed in the intervention program recognized that previous suspensions placed children at higher risk for continuing truancy. However, suspension is a consequence of a variety of behavior, including risk characteristics (i.e., defiant, aggressive) assessed by teachers and recorded on the RISK-I. In addition, suspension is a consequence of school-related problems, such as excessive absences and tardies (Balfanz, 2007; Bloom et al., 2009). Prior to truancy intervention referral, proportions of both groups of children assessed as low- and high-risk had experienced behavioral and school-related problems that resulted in suspensions suggesting that behavioral and educational patterns had begun early in elementary school that are associated with poor academic outcomes (Chang & Romero, 2008; Lindstadt, 2005).

The current study differentiated between children's excused and unexcused absences. Case managers employed in the intervention program examined the number of unexcused absences as indicated on the referral form along with other teacher identified risk factors to determine whether children were screened at low or high risk for continued truancy (OSSRD,

2010; Rhodes et al., 2010). Some studies of truancy prevention programs used total number of excused and unexcused absences and tardies to determine eligibility for admission (Ford & Sutphen, 1996; Lehr et al., 2004). However, Project S.T.A.R.T. (Fantuzzo et al. 2005) and the attendance group study (Baker & Jansen, 2000) used unexcused absences only to determine eligibility for the intervention. In addition to the number of unexcused absences, the current study examined demographic, school-related, and psychosocial risk factors, which case managers used to assign children to either the low- or high-risk groups. Research posits that truancy is an indicator of multiple problems in a child's life, and the multiple risk factors examined among children in the current study showed how truancy and these risk factors influence grade level attainment (Fraser, 2004; Teasley, 2004).

Psychosocial Risk Characteristics

The current study described psychosocial risk characteristics in 12 broad categories (e.g., aggressive, attention seeker, defiant, developmental issues, emotional response, hyperactivity, isolated, manipulative, parental attitudes, risk-taking behaviors, unmotivated, and unstable home life) among participants in the overall sample, and among those in the low- and high-risk subsamples. These 12 broad categories were composed of 55 items that described risk. No other truancy intervention studies described in the literature included information about psychosocial risk factors other than demographic data, such as age, race, and gender, (Fantuzzo et al., 2005), and school-related characteristics, such as previous grade retention and grades (Sheldon, 2007a). However, the current study collected family risk factors (i.e. e., unstable home life, negative parental attitudes), which was similar to dropout prevention studies that collected information about family risk factors, such as living in a single-parent headed household and receiving public assistance to predict dropout (Kemple & Snipes, 2000).

The most frequently reported psychosocial risk factor among participants in the overall sample and in the low- and high-risk subsamples was the category *unmotivated*, which is a category composed of four items rated by teachers including, *no desire to learn, not prepared daily, frequently has no homework, exhibits little curiosity*, and *other unmotivated characteristic* (OSSRD, 2010). Children who are unmotivated are also characterized as being disengaged from school and are demonstrated to be at risk for poor academic outcomes (Bimler & Kirkland, 2001; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Glanville & Wilhagen, 2007). Numerous studies report that being uninterested or bored in school is the primary reasons that students drop out (Bridgeland et al.; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Rhodes, 2007; Richman et al., 2004; Rumberger, 1987). The psychosocial risk factor of being assessed as unmotivated was found in over one third of participants in the current sample (34.9%) suggesting some students display a risk, early in their school careers, that is strongly associated with not completing school. This latter finding is similar to those of the longitudinal study conducted by Alexander et al. (2001), which showed that aggressive behavior, low academic functioning, and poor attendance in as early as first grade predicted dropout. This finding also may suggest a link between truancy and school disengagement and that reasons children may not attend school is lack of interest in schools. However, because the current study examined young children, the lack of interest may be attributed to parental and family lack of engagement with school, which was shown in family-related psychosocial risks, such as negative parental attitudes and having an unstable home life. Research shows that children with poor school outcomes are from families with negative experiences with school (Crosnoe, Mistry, & Elder, 2002; Golden et al., 2005; Jerald, 2006). More study is needed to determine individual, family, and school circumstances associated with low academic motivation in young school children.

For 5 of the 12 psychosocial risk categories (i.e., aggressive, defiant, negative parental attitudes, risk-taking behavior, and unstable home life), twice as many of the 5 aforementioned categories were demonstrated by children deemed at high risk for continued truancy, as compared with children deemed at low risk.

Additionally, chi-square analyses showed significant associations among nine psychosocial risk categories and being on time for grade at 3 years out. Among the nine categories (i.e., aggressive, attention seeker, defiant, developmental issues, emotional response, manipulative, negative parental attitudes, unmotivated, and unstable home life), larger proportions of students not on time for their grade were assessed as demonstrating the particular risk factor, as compared with those who were on time for their grade. For example, among those assessed by teachers as having an unstable home life, a smaller proportion of children (52.9%) were on time for their grade at 3 years out, than those children (61.1%) who were not assessed as having an unstable home life and on time for grade.

Conceptually, it appears that teacher's assessment of the nine psychosocial risk factors associated with grade attainment demonstrated patterns of externalizing, internalizing, and family-related risk characteristics (Achenbach, 1991; Eisenberg et al., 2001; Miller-Lewis et al., 2006). Externalizing problems in children are described as problems associated with under-control, such as fighting, aggressive behavior, and hyperactivity (Achenbach; Eisenberg et al.; Miller-Lewis et al.), and three of the nine risk categories reflect externalizing behaviors (i.e., aggressive, defiant, manipulative). Internalizing problems in children are described as problems associated with over-control, such as loneliness, anxiety, shyness, and social withdrawal (Achenbach; Eisenberg et al.; Miller-Lewis et al.), and four of the nine suggest internalizing behaviors (i.e., attention seeker, developmental issues, emotional response, unmotivated). Family-related problems associated with elementary children in school are described as poverty

status, low educational level of parents, and low parental support for children's academic experiences (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002), and two of the nine psychosocial risks associated with on-time grade attainment reflect family-related behavior (i.e., negative parental attitudes, unstable home life). These patterns suggest that some of the psychosocial risk factors that teachers perceive as problematic are indeed influencing children's ability to progress in school.

The current study utilized a composite risk score created by assigning points ranging from 0 to 5 (with 0 points indicating no risk and 5 points indicating high risk) to items on the RISK-I. The points were summed in each of the 12 categories for each of the 55 items to yield a risk composite score. The average risk composite score was 8.1 points, overall, and the average risk composite score was 5.2 points for low-risk children, and twice as much at 11.2 points, on average, for high-risk children. This latter finding suggests that children demonstrating greater levels of risk, as indicated by higher risk composite scores, were provided with the intensive case management intervention. The current study is unique in that a measure of composite psychosocial risk was included in the analysis that showed a quantitative gradation of risk. The risk composite score allowed for risk to be examined in the analyses as a scale measure.

Over one third (35.9%) of the study sample was assessed as having no psychosocial risk factors, with nearly half of low-risk children (47.7%) assessed as having no psychosocial risk factors by teachers. However, just over one fourth of high-risk children (27.4%) were assessed as having no psychosocial risk factors by their teachers. This finding suggests that the five unexcused absence referral criterion is not associated with psychosocial or behavioral problems but perhaps with low academic functioning in a subset of children. More study is warranted.

Number of Readmissions for Kindergarteners

Among kindergarteners who were referred to the truancy intervention during the 2004-2005 school year, over one fourth (26.8%) were readmitted to the truancy intervention at least one time during the 3-year follow-up period. Results showed that a larger proportion of children assessed at high risk (30.6%) for continued truancy were readmitted for truancy problems with truancy than children assessed at low risk (23.5%) during the 3-year follow-up period. The literature suggests that a subset of children with truancy problems is chronically truant (Chang & Romero, 2008; Newsome et al., 2008). Chronically truant children have on-going attendance problems throughout their school years that may be associated with family difficulties such as unemployment, high mobility, and chronic health, academic, and behavioral problems (Richman et al., 2004). No other truancy prevention studies identified a subset of participants with chronic truancy problems, mostly due to the fact that truancy intervention studies are cross-sectional and do not examine the experiences of children over time.

Characteristics of the large sample of young, mainly ethnic minority, elementary school children in the current study exhibited considerable demographic, school-related, and psychosocial risks. Much of data about the children's risk factors as assessed by teachers reflected the children's past academic (i.e., previous grade retention, special education status), behavioral (i.e., previous suspensions), and current psychosocial characteristics. Associations among risk characteristics and on-time grade attainment confirmed previous findings that ethnic minority children are having more difficulty progressing in school than their non-ethnic minority peers, and that children showing psychosocial risks are less likely to be progressing in school than children who do not exhibit those risks as perceived by teachers. Even though the children were referred to an early intervention program in schools, the children represented a clinical sample, meaning that many children already had multiple problems in need of intervention at

program referral.

Service Interventions for High-Risk Children

Best practices for truancy intervention programs include referral to community-based supports and resources, in conjunction with intensive case management (OJJDP, n.d.). The current study reported that two thirds of children at high risk (66.7%) received at least one referral to address identified needs. Other truancy interventions described in the literature that referred participants to community-based services included Check & Connect (Sinclair et al., 1998), Project S.T.A.R.T. (Fantuzzo et al., 2005), and the School Attendance Enhancement Programs (SAEP; Elizondo et al., 2003), the Early Elementary Truancy Initiative (McCluskey et al., 2004), and the Countrywide Program (Mueler et al., 2006).

Although the case managers employed by the intervention program provided service referrals, little information is known about the referred services beyond if they were *completed* by participants by the end of the school year as indicated in the TCMDS. The service most frequently *completed* was home visits (95.9%), which is a service provided by case managers employed by the intervention program (OSSRD, 2010). Services that were most frequently *recommended* included parenting education (29.6%) and counseling (26.9%), with over half of each service recorded as being completed by participants and families at 53.5% and 59.3%, respectively. Truancy and dropout prevention studies in the literature (Fantuzzo et al., 2005; McCluskey et al., 2004; Sinclair et al., 1998) have not reported the specific types of services, nor the extent to which *referred* services were *completed* by participants, as demonstrated in the current study.

Chi-square analyses showed significant associations among 3 of the 18 services categories that were *completed* (i.e., ADHD screening, mental health assessment, and SBLC services) and grade attainment at 3 years out. Proportionately, more children were on time for

their grade at 3 years out, if they did not receive ADHD screening services. In a similar vein, a larger proportion of participants were on time for their grade if they did not complete a mental health assessment or if they did not receive SBLC services, as compared with those who were not on time. These results suggest that children who were assessed as having problems that required an ADHD screening, mental health assessment, and SBLC services were also having problems that interfered with on time grade attainment. These latter findings also may suggest that type, frequency, and duration of services may not have alleviated problems that impeded progressing on time in school.

On the other hand, the findings may be the result of measurement error. During the time when these service data were collected (2004-2005), no information was available regarding the frequency and intensity of services or the service providers' qualifications. Regardless of the appropriateness and quality of the services, the services may not have been sufficient to effect change, especially if the academic functioning of the children who received these services was too low for the children to progress to the next grade level. In other words, services may not have been substantial enough to overcome the level of risk posed by demographic and other psychosocial characteristics associated with disadvantaged populations.

Omitted variables contribute to measurement error. Specific case management practices of individual case managers are unknown. For example, the number and type of child, family, teacher, and service provider contact is not included in the current study. Screening procedures for low- and high-risk designations of children is unknown, for example, whether children are screened by individual case managers or by staffing processes. Procedural differences among program sites and individual case managers contribute to unknown variability and omitted characteristics of the program.

Services were not *recommended* for nearly one third of high-risk children (34.3%) provided with the intensive case management intervention. Possible explanations for this finding include that either a need was not identified for the child and family, or that services that were needed were simply not available, perhaps due to lack of community resources. In addition case managers may not have recommended participants to services because of known barriers such as lack of transportation or time constraints due to family work schedules.

Associations Among Risk Characteristics and Grade Level Attainment

Building knowledge about children in the earliest stages of their academic years may lead to more responsive practices that increase children's ability to be successful in school, including staying (attendance), progressing (on-time grade attainment), and completing (graduation) school (WWC, 2008). Previous research has primarily focused on demographic characteristics that place children at risk (e.g., gender and ethnicity; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Teasley, 2004) and on proximal outcomes (e.g., decreased truancy) of truancy interventions (Gandy & Schultz, 2007).

The current study is unique in that it examined whether or not children were on time for their grade at 3 years out, while other intervention studies solely examined changes in truancy rates in 4 months (Baker & Jansen, 2000), 1 month (Ford & Sutphen, 1996), and 2 years (Lehr et al., 2004). The current study is more similar to longitudinal dropout prevention studies that examine risk factors associated with eventual dropout (Kemple & Snipes, 2000; Sinclair et al., 1998). The Check & Connect study examined correlates of truancy and dropout (Gandy & Schultz, 2007; Hammond et al., 2007; Lehr et al.; Sinclair et al.; Sutphen et al., 2010; WWC, 2008).

Multivariate analyses were undertaken with the subsample of high-risk children for whom grade level at 3 years out was recorded in the LDOE database. Six equations were

developed to identify the model that best fit these data. Only one equation (Equation 1) generated statistical fit for the data, showing that few variables (race, grade level at referral, unmotivated psychosocial risk, and SBLC service intervention) predicted on-time grade level attainment.

Subsequently, three post hoc analyses (Equations 7, 8, and 9) were conducted to better understand the predictive ability of service interventions on grade level attainment at 3 years out. Among these latter post hoc analyses, Equation 8, in which the 18 service categories were aggregated into 8 categories (basic needs, child protective services, educational, enrichment, family-related, medical, mental health, and other), findings showed that only *completed* educational service interventions were negatively and significantly associated with on-time grade level attainment. (The educational service variable was composed of SBLC and tutoring services). This means that children who were recommended to and completed educational services were not on time for their grade at 3 years out. This suggests that high-risk children, even though they completed educational services, may still have had academic problems that were either not adequately remediated or academic problems that were too difficult, to enable children to remain on time for their grade at 3 years out. These findings suggest that services, as measured in the current study, were not associated with promoting on-time grade attainment at 3 years out.

When examining 18 services that were only *recommended* (in Equation 9), rather than recommended and *completed* (as examined in Equation 1), findings showed that SBLC services, tutoring, and other services were negatively and significantly associated with on time grade level attainment. These results, examining only recommended services, which captured a better representation of the children's risk as assessed by case managers, were similar to equations examining completed services (in Equations 7 and 8). The category of other service recommended services was also significantly and negatively associated with on-time grade

attainment.

Ethnicity emerged as a predictor (Equations 1, 7, 8, and 9), with African-American children less likely to be on time for grade at 3 years out than children who were not of African-American ethnicity. This finding suggests that African-American ethnicity was a risk factor for grade retention as consistent with previous research (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Teasley, 2004)

Grade at referral (Equations 1, 7, 8, and 9) was associated with on-time grade attainment. Results showed that children in the earlier grades were less likely to be on time at 3 years out than children in the latter grades. One factor possibly affecting children's on-time grade attainment is the federally mandated, high-stakes accountability tests, which are administered in the 4th grade. In Louisiana, children cannot progress to the 5th grade unless the 4th grade Louisiana Educational Accountability Program (LEAP) benchmark scores are met. Reading, social studies, science, and math scores are determined by each individual state. This mandatory academic testing requirement affects all 4th graders attending public schools, and the consequences of the testing may be negatively associated among at risk children's ability to progress in school. For the current study, only children who were in 2nd, 3rd, and 4th grades during the 2004-2005 school year would have taken LEAP Tests by the 2007-2009 school year. Therefore, effects of high-stakes testing on grade attainment are inconclusive for the study sample.

Only the psychosocial risk termed, 'unmotivated,' emerged as a predictor for on-time grade level attainment (Equations 1, 7, 8, and 9). Children who were assessed as unmotivated by their teachers at referral were less likely to be on time for their grade at 3 years out than children who were not assessed as unmotivated. Previous research shows that children who are unmotivated are also often disengaged from school and are at risk for poor academic outcomes (Bimler & Kirkland, 2001; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Chang & Romero, 2008). Chang and Romero

found that chronic early absenteeism is associated with later school dropout.

Findings of the current study showed that receiving SBLC services (Equations 1 and 9) was predictive of on-time attainment among high-risk children. SBLC is a school-based committee, organized to ensure students are provided instruction that meets the students' needs. According to the Louisiana Pupil Appraisal Handbook, Act 1508 states the functions for SBLC and all school procedures and requirements for children subject to the federal Individual Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) legislation. The major functions of SBLC are to enhance implementation of regular education practices in addressing students with difficulties, to promote communication among school staff on behalf of children with school difficulties, to support teachers implementing differential instruction for children in their classroom, and to ensure that parents are included in decision-making for their children's academic needs. (LDOE, 2010). Other key functions of SBLC are to serve as the gateway committee for children referred to Response to Intervention (RTI) and Section 504 for disabilities and dyslexia program eligibility, to provide screening protocol for student referred for special education status, and to review all kindergarten through high school students being considered for retention, making recommendation for promotion or retention (LDOE).

The finding that SBLC services were negatively and significantly associated with children being on time for their grade at 3 years out suggests that children who received these services may have had academic problems that were difficult enough to warrant either differential instruction, specific accommodations, or admission to special education programs and that these problems impeded children from progressing on time in school. Case managers appropriately recommended SBLC services for children who demonstrated educational problems.

In the post hoc analysis that examined services that were recommended, rather than recommended and completed (Equation 9), the control variable (lead agency) emerged as a significant and positive predictor being on time for grade. This suggests that children in programs administered by the courts were more likely to be on time for their grade at 3 years out than children who were enrolled in a non-court sponsored program. This finding lends support to the recommendations provided by OJJPD (n.d.) that truancy intervention should include court sanctions for children and their families. However, the lead agency predictor did not emerge in Equation 1 when only services that were completed were examined. It is also possible that court directed programs had more resources available than non-court programs. More study is warranted to discern these differences.

In summary, nine multivariate analyses were conducted to examine associations among a subsample of high-risk children of study variables and on time grade attainment at 3 years out. Few significant associations were found. Measurement problems with the 18 service variables may have confounded the findings. Analysis in Equation 7, that dichotomized the services into any service completed or not, did not yield any additional information; therefore, next steps may include examination of these data without the services variables. Additionally, examination of these data by program site may uncover associations among study variables and grade level attainment.

Limitations of the Current Study

There are several limitations to the current study, mainly due to measurement, external validity, and representativeness. The major sources of measurement error were contributed by instrumentation, omission of salient variables, the use of secondary data, and site differences.

Measurement

The instruments used to collect data in the current study contributed to measurement issues. While the intervention referral and service plan forms appear to have face validity and program audits suggest that case managers were correctly utilizing the forms, thus increasing reliability, (Ruben & Babbie, 2005) only the RISK-I form has been validated (Kim & Barthelemy, in press). The risk indicators of the RISK-I are moored in the literature (Bimler & Kirkland, 2001; Hammond et al., 2007; Teasley, 2004); however, no information was collected about how well the teacher was acquainted with the child, and the teacher may not have had sufficient information to correctly gauge children's risks. Other reasons the RISK-I forms may include measurement error, include possible teacher bias to show higher or lower levels of risk to influence evaluations and expectations in their schools, which is a social desirability bias (Shadish et al., 2002). For example, children in classrooms with disruptive behavior could be interpreted as a teacher's poor classroom management skills.

In research, secondary data limits measurement (Shadish et al., 2002). A number of variables examined in the current study may have been measured differently, as recording practices and policies may have varied across sites. For example, the manner in which the number of unexcused absences is recorded may differ across school districts, for example some school districts accept a parental note and other districts only accept a doctor's note for an absence to be excused. Additionally, some school districts count the accumulated number of tardies among unexcused absence occurrences and other school districts may not (Lindstadt, 2005). For example, some schools count three tardies as one unexcused absence.

Many measurement problems pertain to the way services were recorded in the TCMDS. Only the 18 broad service categories were recorded in the TCMDS, not the individual services. Intensity, frequency, and duration of service referrals were not recorded in the TCMDS.

Moreover, much is unknown about the services as they were provided from among community-based agencies in the 16 truancy prevention sites and from among school-based services in over 20 school districts with hundreds of schools. An additional limitation is that qualifications of service providers and are unknown. Similarly, qualifications about case managers and their specific practices are unknown.

The outcome measure of grade attainment at 3 years out also had limitations. Multiple factors affect a child's progression in school, including academic functioning and school policies regarding attendance, retention, and discipline. The data examined in the current study were selected from the archival TCMSD database during the 2004-2005 school year and the most current data available to track participants was during the 2007-2008 school year. The storms of the 2005 historic hurricane season occurred squarely during the timeframe of the current study and the effect of the storms most certainly impacted some students' progression in school, but the extent is not fully known.

Many factors contributed to differences in the truancy intervention sites such as types of communities (e.g., urban, rural, suburban), unemployment rates, types and availability of community resources, and size of school districts and number of schools within those districts, to name a few. In attempts to control for variability across sites, three control variables (i.e., lead agency, District Performance Score [DPS], poverty index) were included in the current study. The lead agency control variable (either court or non-court) was included to hold constant differences in administrative offices that operated the truancy intervention. The DPS variable was used to control for school district site differences; however, the DPS measure was limited as it incorporates attendance, test score, and graduation rates for all elementary, middle, and high schools within a school district. Finally, a parish-level poverty rate from the 2000 Census was used to control for the difference in poverty rates across the different geographical areas in which

participants attended school. The three control variables measured community-level differences, which were a different unit of analysis than the child-level variables, a limitation in the current study. Lastly, regarding secondary data, the validity of data is dependent upon how closely the questions of the current study resemble the intent for the initial data collection (Rubin & Babbie, 2005).

Representativeness and External Validity

There are limitations due to the design of the current study. Only experimental designs can show causality (Shadish et al., 2002), and because this study is descriptive, findings are limited to associations and interrelationships among sample participants. Representativeness is limited and findings can only be generalized to children with similar demographic, school-related, and psychosocial risks enrolled in a similar truancy intervention program. Generalizability of findings is further limited by the study setting (viz., one state in the Deep South). However, given the problems inherent in accessing and studying young children experiencing truancy problems and the prohibitive costs associated with analyses, the limitations are not atypical for the current study. Findings of the current study may serve as a basis for further investigation of truancy and associated problems that are correlated with dropout.

The rate of attrition for the current study for children who were and were not located in the LDOE database in 2007-2008 was examined, and nearly half (48.4%) of children referred during 2004-2005 were located in the LDOE database at 3 years out. There were no significant differences in the attrition groups in terms of risk composite score, number of suspensions, and gender. Significant differences emerged in terms of ethnicity and numbers of unexcused absences at referral. Differences in ethnicity may have been due to the overrepresentation of African-American children in the study sample. Differences in the numbers of unexcused absences may have been an artifact of attendance recording practices across the school districts.

Merits of the Current Study

The literature on truancy problems in children is largely limited to studies examining proximal outcomes (Gandy & Schultz, 2007). Researchers are calling for truancy to be explored over time, especially as it is closely associated with high school dropout (WWC, 2008). The ways that this study extended knowledge on the topic in content and design are discussed.

The majority of literature on children with truancy issues examines the reduction of absenteeism for periods during one school year (Gandy & Schultz, 2007). The current study examined children with staying in school problems (chronic absenteeism) and progressing in school (on-time grade attainment; WWC, 2008).

The current study included a large statewide sample of elementary children in a community-based truancy intervention program. The majority of participants was African American and most truancy intervention research has not oversampled from ethnic minority groups (Hammond et al., 2007; Lehr et al., 2004). In addition, the sample was drawn from children attending Louisiana public schools, which enroll a large proportion of children living in poverty (Council for a Better Louisiana [CABL] 2011). Individual poverty-level measures were not available for the sample in the current study; however, at the time of the study, nearly two thirds of children (61.6%) attending Louisiana public schools in kindergarten through 12th grade received free and reduced lunch, an estimation for poverty (LDOE, 2006). Additionally, Louisiana has one of the highest rates of private school enrollment nationally, and this suggests that families with adequate resources send their children to private schools and that Louisiana public schools are attended by the most impoverished and vulnerable children in the state (CABL).

Additionally, the current study utilized multivariate analyses to examine the demographic, school-related, and psychosocial risk factors among elementary children, a population underrepresented in the literature (Gandy & Schultz, 2007). Most truancy intervention studies limit findings to simple frequencies of demographic information and to truancy reduction within one school year (Gandy & Schultz). While the finding of the study showed few statistically significant associations, much information was generated regarding the risk characteristics of children who were assessed at low- and high-risk for continuing truancy. In sum, merits of the study include utilizing multivariate analysis among a large sample of at-risk elementary children, the majority of whom were poor and of minority ethnicity.

Implications for Social Work Practice, Education, and Research

Understanding the factors that contribute to at-risk children progressing in school advances the knowledge base of social work. The discovery of how risks affect school functioning is especially valuable for disadvantaged students. More research is needed about at-risk children in the elementary school years including children's development, academic success, and school related difficulties, especially among disadvantaged populations.

Implications for Social Work Practice

This section examines the implication of the current study for social work practice and policy, including assessment, teacher partnership building, macro-practice in community change, and school reform. Assessment is a key part of social work practice. The current study examined variables of demographic, school-related, and psychosocial risk characteristics among at-risk children and the associations of those variables with on-time grade attainment. The findings confirm what is currently known about how the unalterable characteristic of race is a predictor for poor school outcomes (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). However, risk-focused intervention is part of public health models (Catalano et al., 2004), and an expanded profile of at-risk children,

including risk characteristics for school-related problems, assists in development of interventions at point of risks. The risk profile provides information to guide assessment to identify different levels of risk to best match intervention to children's needs.

This study examined at-risk children in a intervention program that referred children at five unexcused absences, and the assessment included a variety of risk factors. Other truancy intervention studies admit children with more absences. Because so many school-related and psychosocial risks were associated with the children in the current study, findings suggest that five unexcused be used for referral. Findings of this study suggest that the seeds of low academic attainment begin in the early grades (Chang & Romero, 2008). The findings are sobering in the light of the current study demonstrating that of the 2861 children located in the LDOE database, 58.9% were on time for their grade at 3 years out.

The finding that African-American children were less likely to be on time than the non African American children suggests that culturally competent practice is critical for school social workers engaged with ethnic minority populations. More study is needed to determine whether school social work practices are culturally suitable for the needs of their clients.

One finding that emerged in the current study was that children who were assessed as unmotivated were less likely to be on time for their grade than children not assessed as unmotivated. The construct of school disengagement focuses children's school problems away from strictly individual problems to issues of the school environment (Datnow & Stringfield, 2000; Glanville & Wilhagen, 2007). In order to engage children so that they desire to attend and do well in school, the finding suggests that school social work practices should extend beyond amelioration of individual problems and toward enabling partnerships between teachers and their students and families to promote school engagement (Finlay & Heilbrunn, 2006; Kelly et al., 2009). Helping to build bonds between the child and school is rooted in the social development

model that informs practice efforts to promote pro-social bonds among children with their school peer groups and schoolteachers (Catalano et al., 2004). The findings of the National School Social Work Survey (Kelly et al., 2009) found that school social workers indicated the desire to engage more in primary intervention and that they used family engagement as a prevention strategy. Kelly, Raines, Stone, and Frey (2010) report that school social work interventions typically target individual risk factors through counseling and intervention with individuals and groups. The researchers (Kelly et al., 2010) posit that the emphasis on micro-level intervention presents a mismatch between school social work practice and social work's historic commitment to the ecological perspective, intervention research, and school-based prevention; and that school social workers' main focus on clinical interventions neglects critical macro-level issues. School social work practice should extend to the multiple domains of a child's life, linking school and home, teachers and family, an approach more consistent with social work's ecological perspective (Bowen, 2007).

Policy Implications

Additionally, the findings of the current study suggest that issues of social justice due to disparate educational outcomes for ethnic minority children need to be integral to social work practice (Fram et al., 2007). Social workers should be cognizant of reform efforts that reinforce the status quo, for example, efforts are underway to change funding allocations associated with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (currently titled the No Child Left Behind Act), which result in funding inequalities within and between states; advocates for children propose, new formulas to more equitably fund school districts, especially among communities with high levels of poverty (Edelman, 2010). Regarding school policies, child advocates state that zero tolerance school discipline policies that mandate out-of-school suspensions and expulsions are practices that eventually promote school dropout (Kozol, 2005). Disparities among ethnic groups

are well documented, for example the USDOE (2003) reported disproportionate rates of school discipline practices among ethnicities, with 14.6% of White students ever being suspended, as compared to over one third (35.5%) of African-American children.

Educational efforts to address school disengagement require school reform that makes schools more responsive to children and their futures (Balfanz, 2007, McPartland, 1994). The emergence of high poverty-high performing schools is being examined to understand how certain practices, such as reducing class sizes, increasing teacher and student incentives, and providing social supports in schools, enable children with high-risk characteristics to regularly attend and succeed in school (LDOE, 2010; Ratts et al., 2007). Findings in a recent white paper published by Harvard economists demonstrated evidence of closing the historic Black-White achievement gap in 4th and 8th grade math and reading achievement in the Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ) Project (Dobbie & Fryer, 2010). Cornerstone practices of HCZ include social supports from birth through college, such as parenting courses for expectant parents and early childhood educational programs; HCZ's academically rigorous charter schools include physical and mental health services (Dobbie & Fryer). It is important for social workers in schools and those in policy-making areas to be informed about findings from innovative practices that are informing reform efforts.

Future macro practice efforts should include community needs assessments to determine the scope and amount of resources available to children and their families. The current study examined at-risk children residing in 16 different locales in Louisiana. Social workers, with their knowledge about the interrelationships among systems, can work with community stakeholders to address deficits in resources that hinder efforts to improve life outcomes of disempowered individuals and families (Bowen, 2007).

Federal NCLB legislation has created profound economic and school authority repercussions for schools at the state, district, and local levels because of its primary focus on the education debate on accountability measures (USGAO, 2005). In order to identify children with truancy problems and its correlates, definitions and formulas utilized to measure truancy need to be standardized at local and state levels. In the same way that NCLB imposed the cohort definition of dropout (i.e., the proportion of 9th graders who fail to graduate in 4 years), and subsequently unveiled dropout rates of up to 50% in some schools, clear definitions and policies regarding attendance-keeping will enable a consistent measure of truancy and aid in the identification of children at risk (Balfanz, 2007).

It is important for social workers to tailor practice to meet client's need, partner with teachers, and collaborate for school and community reform initiatives that address the needs of at-risk children and their families. The effects of low literacy and education attainment have profound effect on the individuals, families, groups, and communities served by social workers (Pace, 2008). School reform efforts become work on behalf of social justice issues whenever increasing awareness and changing policies benefit disadvantaged individuals, families, groups, and communities (Reisch, 2002).

Implications for Education

Social work educators are responsible for preparing social work students for professional and competent practice. The current study focused on the school as a setting for social work practice. Broadly, the scope of school social work practice includes intervening with children and families to alleviate school-related problems that impede successful academic outcomes (Kelly et al., 2010).

High school dropout is strongly associated with a plethora of adverse life circumstances, including low earning and workforce potential, criminality, social service dependence, poor

mental and physical health outcomes, and substance abuse (Dillon et al., 2003; Fraser, 2004; Hallfors et al., 2002; Harlow, 2003; Lochner & Moretti, 2004). Students preparing for careers in social work need to understand the multifaceted issues that affect a child's ability to navigate successfully from early childhood education to high school and beyond. For example, issues of literacy, school readiness for young children, and parenting education are pertinent areas of knowledge for social workers (Pace, 2007). Findings of the current study suggest that social workers need to acquire knowledge about at-risk populations and the intervention programs available in school social work settings.

Content about the dynamics of how children, families, and school systems are interrelated, and how systems work to help or hinder the child and family, fits squarely in human behavior and the environment courses. Social work practice courses can incorporate risk information about characteristics and assessment practices for children and their families. Training in culturally competent practice to understand and intervene with diverse cultural groups is essential for social work students. Elementary, middle, and high schools are increasingly looking to school social workers to impact the social spheres of their students, and educators are realizing that children need assistance and skills beyond educational curricula to succeed in school, especially with evidence-informed frameworks for school social work practice (Allen-Meares, 1994; Astor, Benbenishty, & Meyer, 2003; Kelly et al., 2010). Other opportunities to enhance the education of social work students are in social work diversity courses, which expose social work students to how children from minority ethnic groups and children from low socioeconomic status are disadvantaged and at risk for school failure. According to Kozol (2005) disparities in education among ethnic and low socioeconomic groups are emerging civil rights issues of the 21st century. In social work policy courses, issues related to school success are impacted by policy mandates at federal, state, and local levels. Currently,

the NCLB Act is poised to be reauthorized or reconfigured as the Race to the Top educational initiative that places states in competition with one another for federal education monies (Obama, 2011). Social workers need to understand the consequences that education policies and reform efforts will have on resources and on the individuals, groups, and communities they serve. School social work in elementary, middle, and high schools is an emerging discipline (Kelly et al., 2010). Electives in school social work are important to prepare social workers to practice in schools. Findings in the current study regarding risk profiles for children with truancy problems in schools, individual and family assessment, and community needs assessment skills can be incorporated in many social work education classes, including human behavior and the social environment, practice, diversity, policy, and school social work electives.

Implications for Research

Social work research encompasses understanding how the application of practices and policies of social work impacts individuals, families, groups, and communities. This section addresses the next steps for the current study to extend the knowledge base regarding truancy and its correlates, which impact grade attainment.

More study is needed to understand the differences in children who were and were not on time for their grade at 3 years out. To extend the current descriptive study, the study should be replicated in one site. This would lessen problems with the current study due to site differences. Additionally extending the time period over which the children were tracked would allow progression through high school and graduation. Access to yearly LDOE data would allow for time series analysis, which allows for time-varying explanatory variables and examination in changes in outcome variables over time (Shadish et al., 2002).

One rigorous statistical procedure that could be utilized for these data is regression discontinuity, a quasi-experimental method that infers causality (Shadish et al., 2002; Thomas,

2011). This would require assigning membership to low-risk and high-risk groups and to subsequent intervention according to a pre-assignment score. The pre-assignment score would be composed of risk factors collected at referral to the intervention program. Children assigned to the low-risk group would receive the low risk intervention (i.e., notification of compulsory attendance law by letter and attendance monitoring) and serve as the control group. Children assigned to the high-risk group would receive the intensive case management and serve as the treatment group. Both groups would be tracked yearly via the LDOE database to determine if they were on time for grade level and if they eventually graduated on time.

Variables of importance, as cited in the literature, were missing from the current study (AFEE, 2008). A child-level poverty measure could be included by using children's free and reduced lunch eligibility as a proxy for poverty. Free and reduced lunch variables were not available in the archival TCMSD during the 2004-2005 school year, but free and reduced have been consistently collected for children entered since 2008 (OSSRD, 2010). LDOE collects both free lunch and reduced lunch child-level variables (LDOE, 2006).

One of the most problematic issues in the current study was the unknown characteristics of services that were referred to the child and family. Improved research designs require clear measurement of type, frequency, and duration of services, including information about qualifications about service providers. Because there is wide variability among the types of community-based services, this is a difficult task. More information also needs to be collected about case management practices and procedures to assess and motivate children and families. The findings in this study suggest that improving reliability of instruments is needed. While the RISK-I has been deemed valid and reliable by factor analysis (Kim & Barthelemy, 2010), study to develop and validate instruments to collect service and case management practices is needed.

Because of the few significant findings shown in the current study, more information could be gained by qualitative methods to understand the dynamics of practices that may help or hinder at-risk children progress through school. Currently, perspectives of case managers, teachers and school staff, and parents and children are not known and may lead to insightful knowledge about how practices and intervention approaches affect at-risk populations. Qualitative research may yield important information about how social work practice in schools help children and their families.

Contributions to the Knowledge Base

Social work is an interdisciplinary field, in which early identification and risk assessment is particularly important to address issues before they develop into more acute problems. Truancy, as an indicator of other problems, is an intersection for social workers to intervene in the lives of at-risk children and their families. Because truancy is a school-related issue, social workers need to be knowledgeable about not only the child and family, but also about the system of the school. This study extends the knowledge base by examining children at differing levels of risk. Additionally, because most truancy intervention studies have been conducted among older children in middle and high school, this study provides information about young children in elementary school (Hammond et al, 2007; WWC, 2008).

Most truancy prevention studies are cross-sectional and longitudinal research is most appropriate to determine whether early intervention can reduce high school dropout rates. This study extended the knowledge base by examining more distal outcomes at 3 years out. However, longitudinal research tracking elementary students for up to 12 years is challenging, as demonstrated in the large proportion of children not located within the LDOE database at 3 years out.

Few statistically significant findings were found among variables examined, and model fit was modest; however, findings of the current study confirmed that the unalterable African-American ethnicity places children at risk for low academic functioning. This study extends the knowledge base by finding that children who were not on time for their grade at 3 years out, were assessed as unmotivated by their teachers. This demonstrates that school disengagement is occurring early in a child's school experience and more effort is needed for school social workers to intervene with children manifesting school disengagement behavior. The findings of this study confirm that children who are uninterested in school are also often truant from school, and this is consistent with the literature that children who are uninterested in school are at risk for dropping out of school (Glanville & Wilhagen, 2007).

Findings about services were inconclusive, except for those services closely aligned with educational supports. Children who received educational services were less likely to be on time for their grades than children who did not receive these services. This confirms that school social workers need to work closely with teachers to promote school-related behavior that will maximize a child's ability to learn. This finding supports school social workers providing behavioral and psychosocial interventions in schools that allow a child to participate in school learning activities (Kelly et al., 2010).

The findings in the current study are reflective of a trend noted by national educational researchers. Patterns among the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) funded studies are mostly showing no effects (Viadero, 2009). As reported by Viadero in Education Week, few significant findings among well-funded experimental studies are causing researchers to question how research fits in the real world of classroom and school settings. Concerns include differences in treatment groups, fidelity of program treatment, measurement issues, and problems in discerning long-term effects (Viadero). IES studies are better at detecting effects of highly specific

interventions (e.g., remedial reading curriculum intervention) rather than broader intervention approaches (Viadero), which are more similar to case management practices. For example, in an IES funded random controlled trial of a school-based mentoring program among 4th through 8th grade children ($n = 2573$) during one school year, overall, no statistically significant effects were found for any of the 17 measured study variables (IES, 2009).

Despite the limitations of the current study, this study contributes to the knowledge base generating information about children at risk for truancy and its correlates. Even at referral, the level of risk among the children varied widely with some children exhibiting no psychosocial risk characteristics, suggesting that the children were referred due to school-related risks, such as number of unexcused absences and previous suspension and grade retention history. The current study suggests that the construct of school disengagement is an important concern for school social workers in practice with elementary students, and that poor academic functioning among school social work clients places children at grave risk for future school related problems, such as grade retention and resultant school drop out. School social workers need to work collaboratively with teachers and schools to promote academic success, a key indicator for their clients' future life trajectories.

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APPENDIX A: TASC PROGRAM SITES

Acadia

Caddo

Calcasieu

Bossier, Webster

East Baton Rouge

Hammond City Court

Iberia, St. Martin, St. Mary

Jefferson

Lafayette

Lincoln, Union

Orleans

Ouachita, Morehouse

St. Landry

St. Tammany, Washington

Tangipahoa, Livingston, St. Helena

Vermilion

APPENDIX B: TASC REFERRAL FORM

TRUANCY ASSESSMENT AND SERVICE CENTER REFERRAL FORM

Referral Date: _____	
Name of person making referral: _____	Referral Person's Position: _____
Referring School: _____	Primary Grounds of Complaint: _____
Contact Phone: _____	Secondary Grounds of Complaint: _____

Child's Information

Name: _____	SSN: _____	
DOB: _____	Gender (circle): M F	Race: _____
Caregiver's name: _____	Relationship to Child: _____	
Mailing Address: Street _____	Home Phone: _____	
City _____	Alternate Phone: _____	
Zip code _____	Free/Reduced Lunch? (circle) Yes No Unknown	

School Information

Current Grade: _____	Absences at Referral: Unexcused: ___ Excused: ___ Tardies: ___
Has student ever failed a grade? (circle): Yes or No	If yes, please circle each grade failed: PK K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Unknown
Student in Special Education? (circle): Yes or No	If Yes, which status? _____
Number of current year Suspensions: _____	
Number of Expulsions (all time): _____	

FOR TASC USE ONLY

Date Complaint Received _____	Function Status Assigned: _____
Date Complaint Screened: _____	Initials of Person Assigning _____
Date Function Changed: _____	Status: _____
Function Change Explanation: _____	New Function Status: _____

APPENDIX C: RISK INDICATOR SURVEY I INSTRUMENT

Compiled by: ___ School staff

___ TASC staff

Defiant

- ___ Argues with authority figures
- ___ Uses obscene language or gestures
- ___ Other _____

Aggressive

- ___ Bullies/threatens/intimidates others
- ___ Hits/Bites peers or teachers
- ___ Breaks or throws object
- ___ Other _____

Parental Attitudes

- ___ Minimizes child's problems
- ___ Blames others for child's behavior/performance
- ___ Unresponsive to attempts to make contact
- ___ Other _____

Emotional Response

- ___ Inappropriate response to correction
- ___ Lack of empathy
- ___ Flat affect – just stares
- ___ Does not express joy
- ___ Other _____

Risk Taking Behaviors

- ___ Harms self intentionally
- ___ Sexual acting out
- ___ Suspected substance use/experimentation
- ___ Risky physical behaviors
- ___ Steals
- ___ Other _____

Developmental Issues

- ___ Sucks thumb
- ___ Enuresis
- ___ Sleeps at inappropriate times
- ___ Eating problems
- ___ Speech/language/hearing problems
- ___ Other _____

Comments: _____

Manipulative

- ___ Sneaky
- ___ Distorts truth
- ___ Blames others for mistakes
- ___ Other _____

Isolated

- ___ Ignored by peers
- ___ Rejected by peers
- ___ Withdrawn
- ___ Other _____

Attention Seeker

- ___ Wants teacher's undivided attention
- ___ Causes class disruptions
- ___ Talks at inappropriate times
- ___ Other _____

Unmotivated

- ___ No desire to learn
- ___ Not prepared daily
- ___ Frequently has no homework
- ___ Exhibits little curiosity
- ___ Other _____

Unstable Home Life

- ___ Poor hygiene
- ___ Regularly complains of hunger
- ___ Inappropriate clothing for weather
- ___ Suspected substance abuse by adult in home
- ___ Chronic illness/ lack of medical care
- ___ Lack of school supplies
- ___ Other _____

Hyperactivity

- ___ Can't sit still
- ___ Short attention-span for age/grade
- ___ Other _____

APPENDIX D: INFORMAL FAMILY SERVICES PLAN AGREEMENT FORM

Informal Family Services Plan Agreement (IFSPA)

In the interest of: _____ **SS#** _____ - _____ - _____

School: _____

TASC Site: _____

Pursuant to the provisions of LA.CH.C. Art. 743-45, a Pre-Adjudicatory Conference was held on ____ day of _____, _____. At this time the FAMILY agreed to enter into an Informal Family Services Plan Agreement. This Agreement suspends the proceedings on the conduct charged provided the terms of this Agreement are satisfied by the family. This contract will expire on the ____ day of _____, _____.

Grounds / Identified Problem(s): _____

Service	Ordered For	Provider	Person(s) Responsible	Time Frame To Start

Conditions of Informal Family Services Plan

1. The child is to attend school regularly: do not be TRUANT, SUSPENDED or EXPELLED.
2. Parents or guardians will notify TASC of change of address and telephone number.
3. The child and parents or guardians are to obey all local, state, and federal laws.
4. The child is to obey all reasonable and lawful demands of his/her parents or guardians.
5. The child and parents or guardians will cooperate fully with all services, if required, until successfully completed.
6. Other Condition(s): _____

TASC's Responsibility for the Implementation of the Informal Family Service Plan Agreement

Case Management Activity	Responsible Party	Frequency of Contact
School attendance monitoring		
Service referral monitoring		
Parent case management contact		
Child case management contact		
Other:		
Other:		

_____ **Parent /Guardian initials**
 _____ **TASC officer initials**

Additional Comments:

We understand that:

- If this agreement is kept, the charge before TASC will be dismissed at the end of six months and may be extended for an additional six months, for a total of one year.
- If the agreement is **not** kept, the matter may be set for a formal court hearing before an appointed judge.
- We have a right to request this matter be set before a judge in lieu of this agreement.
- This Informal Family Service Plan Agreement is **VOLUNTARY** and is in the best interest of the child, and we agree to cooperate fully with the persons who will monitor this agreement and provide services.

Compulsory School Attendance Law (La. R.S. 17:221)

In compliance with the **Louisiana Revised Statute 17:221**, it is the policy of the Parish School System to require that a child from his seventh birthday to the eighteenth birthday attend a public or private day school in regularly assigned classes during regular school hours or participate in an approved home study program. Any child below the age of seven (7) who is legally enrolled in school is subject to the compulsory school laws.

Whoever violates the provisions of the subsection shall be **FINED** not more than \$250 or **IMPRISONED** not more than 30 days or both.

IT IS UNDERSTOOD AND ACKNOWLEDGED that a violation of any one of the terms and/or conditions set forth herein may, at the option of TASC, void this agreement and will result in a referral to the FINS Committee and/or to the District Attorney for Juvenile Court Proceedings and further disposition.

This SIGNED AND EXECUTED at _____ (City), _____ (Parish), Louisiana, on this ____ day of _____, 20 __, after due reading of the whole.

Signature of Parent/Guardian _____	Date _____
Signature of TASC Officer _____	Date _____
Other Agency representative or _____	Date _____
Concerned Party _____	Date _____
_____	Date _____
_____	Date _____

IFSPA revision

Signature of Parent/Guardian _____ Date _____

Signature of TASC Officer _____ Date _____

IFSPA extension: Extended Expiration Date _____

Signature of Parent/Guardian _____ Date _____

Signature of TASC Officer _____ Date _____

VITA

Judith Lee Falgout Rhodes was born in Japan in 1960. Judith received a Bachelor of Arts degree in arts in sciences in 1985 from Louisiana State University. She worked in the educational field as a Chief GED Examiner and home educated her children from kindergarten through high school completion. During these years, she also served as a volunteer in Baton Rouge philanthropic organizations and the performing and visual arts communities. In 2005, she returned to LSU to pursue a Master of Social Work degree when her daughter was an LSU freshman studying graphic design and her son was completing his engineering degree. In 2007, Judith was awarded an Economic Opportunity Development Graduate Assistantship in Truancy Studies for doctorate studies. Judith plans to continue working on behalf of at-risk children and their families in Louisiana.