

# **ALAS: Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success**

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*Dropout prevention and intervention project  
targeting middle school youth with learning  
disabilities and emotional/behavioral  
disorders at risk for dropping out of school.*

**Project Evaluation  
1990 – 1995**

University of California, Santa Barbara

By Katherine Larson and Russell Rumberger

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Katherine A. Larson  
Russell W. Rumberger

University of California, Santa Barbara

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## SECTION I

### Who Are the Students? How are They at Risk?

ALAS (pronounced ah'-lahs), which means WINGS in Spanish, is an acronym for **Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success**. The purpose of the ALAS project was to develop and test promising approaches for educating and graduating disabled and highest-risk youth of Mexican descent who live in urban neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty. The urgent need to improve educational outcomes for these youth is clearly found in the growing numbers of Latinos who are immigrating to America as well as in the growing and youthful population of American Latinos.

This document describes the ALAS intervention model, components of the program, the research design and participants and empirical results of the project. Additionally, an overview of issues relating to educating highest-risk Latino youth and where appropriate a review of relevant literature or background statistics are presented.

#### Structural Characteristics of the Community and School District

##### Community

ALAS students live in a circumscribed community located in Los Angeles County. Within the community boundaries are 22,000 residents of which approximately 83% are Latino, 1% are Black, 15% are Anglo and 1% are other races. This community was selected for the project because it is representative of the economically deprived metropolitan life style of Latinos living in Los Angeles as well as in other U.S. cities.

As is the case with the majority of Latino citizens, community residents are essentially segregated from other races and cultures.<sup>1</sup> Neighborhoods within the community could be classified as tracks of concentrated poverty with per capita income half that of the state and county average -- approximately \$8,000 versus \$16,000 (see Table 1). Nearly half of all immigrants to the United States come to Los Angeles and the community represents an immigration end point with 44 percent of the population foreign born. Sixty-seven percent of the community families report they do not speak English in the home and nearly 75 percent of the adults in the community report they do not speak English very well. Essentially all daily living transactions in the community shops, restaurants, and gas stations are conducted in Spanish.

The neighborhoods are primarily small, fenced single family homes with a mix of large apartment units. The public streets are not well kept and often have illegally dumped trash or waste along the roadside. A large weed infested train track runs throughout the middle of the community. The community is blighted with graffiti marking virtually every sign, wall and building. Burning in the 1992 Los Angeles riots took place within the community neighborhoods. The Department of Health reported in 1993 that HIV/AIDS rates of infection are increasing faster in this community than in other areas within the Los Angeles basin. Needless to say, high crime and gang activity

characterize the neighborhoods. In a 1994 report issued by the Los Angeles Police Department, some neighborhoods within the community were characterized as one of LA's ten top crime "hot spots".

**Table 1**  
**Demographic Profile of State, County, and Community for ALAS Project**

	State	County	Community
Population	29,760,021	8,863,164	22,580
Hispanics (%)	25.8	37.8	82.7
Foreign born (%)	21.7	32.7	44.4
Persons 5 years and over who don't speak English at home (%)	31.5	45.4	74.9
Dropouts, 16-19 year olds (%)	14.2	17.6	23.7
Dropouts, 25 years old and over (%)	23.8	29.1	59.3
Per capita income (1989 dollars)	16,409	16,149	8,876
Children under 18 years living below poverty (%)	17.8	21.4	22.5
Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 1990 Census: <u>Summary Population and Housing Characteristics</u> , CPH-1-6 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office), Table 3; U.S. Census Bureau, 1990 Census: <u>Summary Social, Economic, and Housing Characteristics</u> , CPH-5-6 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office), Tables 1 and 3.			

Illiteracy and poor education of adults in the community is widespread. Sixty percent of the residents over 25 years of age report they did not graduate from high school (see Table 1).

### **School District**

The intervention took place in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). LAUSD is the second largest in the United States, enrolling more than 600,000 students. Like many large, urban school districts, LAUSD enrolls primarily minority students. In 1990, only 14 percent of the students were White, 13 percent were Black, and 63 percent were Hispanic (see Table 2).

### **Target School**

The school serves about 2,220 students in grades 7, 8, and 9. Average class size in the school ranges from 25 to 28 students in academic subjects. The classroom interiors are in disrepair with water stained and punctured

ceilings, broken and boarded windows, carved and graffiti "tagged" desks and chairs. Custodial service is minimal and classrooms are dirty and unswept.

Approximately 96% of the students are Latino, 2% are Anglo, and 2% are African American (see Table 2). Seventy percent of the students participate in the federal school lunch program. A three year analysis of the cohort who entered the school as 7th graders in 1990 showed that 62% spoke Spanish as a first language.<sup>2</sup> Many of the cohort did not complete three full years at the school -- only 60% of the 1990 cohort remained in the target school for grades 7, 8, and 9. Of the students who remained enrolled in the school for all three years, only 65% accrued all possible high school credits during the 9th grade. In fact, 16% of the boys and 7% of the girls in the 1990 cohort failed *more than* half their classes during the 9th grade.

Students in the school are representative of well documented Latino under achievement.<sup>3</sup> As is the case with other predominantly Latino schools, students in the targeted school test below state and school district norms.<sup>4</sup> However, even when controlling for such demographic factors as SES, student transience, race and parent education level, according to California Assessment Program data of student reading achievement, the target school ranks only in the 17th percentile of all California schools.<sup>5</sup> Not taking these demographic factors into account, the target school student reading achievement scores rank in the 4th percentile of all California schools.

Under achievement is also present in the school's learning disabled resource specialist students (LD). In 1989, LD students who had sufficient skills to participate in the state testing, scored below the school district LD average in academic areas.

Unit of Analysis	CTBS Scaled Scores				
	Reading	Math	History	Science	
Target Jr. High LD Students	57		163	126	94
LA City Jr. High LD Students	115		152	149	159

**Project Participants**

The ALAS project specifically focused on youth of Mexican descent. Mexican Americans or Chicanos represent two-thirds of the Latino population in the United States, by far the largest of the Latino sub-groups.<sup>6</sup> Only about 25% of Mexican Americans are foreign born.<sup>7</sup> Mexican Americans are a diverse group who differ in such ways as language use, immigration status, and their own ethnic identities.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, Mexican Americans as a whole have the lowest socioeconomic status, the lowest level of educational attainment and the highest dropout rate of all the Latino sub-groups and, consequently, their educational and economic circumstances warrant particular attention by researchers and policy makers.<sup>9</sup>

## Selecting Students

Two types of students were targeted for the ALAS study. One type was students *formally* identified by the school district as Learning Disabled (LD) or Severely Emotionally Distributed (SED). The other type was students who were *not* identified by the district as LD or SED but who exhibited characteristics similar to identified LD or SED students and who on the basis of risk could be reliably differentiated from other students in the regular program. We refer to these subjects as highest-risk (HR) students. The primary reason for including non-identified students is that previous studies have shown schools have difficulty reliably differentiating between low-achieving LD secondary students, especially among Hispanic students.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, Los Angeles identifies a smaller proportion of students as handicapped compared to other large urban districts.<sup>11</sup>

(1) **LD and SED Students.** Entering seventh grade students who had an active IEP from sixth grade identifying them as either LD or SED were included in the study. These students had been identified through a multidisciplinary process using federal and state guidelines.

(2) **Highest-risk students.** To identify HR students from the general population of low-income Latino students living in the targeted community, HR subjects were assessed in sixth grade using a five-item teacher rating scale evaluating (1) need for supervision, (2) level of motivation, (3) academic potential, (4) social interaction skill, and (5) difficulty-to-teach, and (6) need for special education services. In a previous study, Larson showed that this rating system was able to reliably differentiate low-income Latino youth into highest-risk and lowest-risk groups.<sup>12</sup> Categorization into highest and lower risk groups based on these ratings predicted 73 percent of the variance in eighth grade classroom expulsions, 80 percent of the variance in truancy, 50 percent of the variance in cooperation grades, 67 percent of the variance in whole day absences, 30 percent of the variance in work habit grades, and 50 percent of the variance in grade point average. That is, two years after students were rated, the sixth grade teacher ratings explained a significantly large proportion of variance in middle school performance.

Students were identified as HR if their teacher had rated them below their classroom average on most of the six items. For example, on average, each HR student was rated below the class average on 4 or 5 of the 6 items whereas the remaining students in each classroom were rated below the class average on less than 1 of the 6 items. All sixth grade students attending 11 elementary schools (approximately 625 students from 23 classrooms) surrounding the middle school were rated by their teachers on the six-item scale. Approximately 30 percent of the students from each classroom were targeted as highest-risk using this method and, of these, 60 percent were male. All other students were targeted as lower-risk (although compared to state and national criteria, such as poverty, there were also at risk of dropping out).

## Assignment of Students to Experimental Groups

**Random assignment.** Of the sixth grade students originally rated, 149 highest-risk students entered the middle school as seventh graders in the Fall of 1990. Of these, 55 students were excluded from consideration because they spoke no English and could not be provided the intervention as designed. The remaining 94 students were randomly assigned to a HR control (n = 48) or HR treatment group (n = 46). Gender was equated in both

groups with each being about two-thirds male. In addition, we randomly assigned 60 students within gender groups from the “lower-risk” (LR) comparison group (n = 60) to match the gender composition of the highest-risk control group.

**Cohort assignment.** We aggregated students with IEP designations of LD or SED into single cohort groups. The reason is that previous studies have shown that schools have trouble reliably differentiating among LD and SED students and that more than one-third of LD students and two-thirds of SED students would be classified differently depending on where they lived.<sup>13</sup>

All seventh grade students with an active IEP indicating a learning disability or a serious emotional disturbance who entered the targeted junior high school in the Fall 1990 were assigned to *Special Education Treatment Cohort I* (n = 33). All seventh grade students with an active IEP indicating a learning disability or a serious emotional disturbance who entered the targeted junior high school in Fall 1991 were assigned to *Special Education Treatment Cohort II* (n= 44). All seventh grade students with an active IEP indicating a learning disability or a serious emotional disturbance who entered the targeted junior high school in Fall 1992 were assigned to *Special Education Control Cohort* (n = 55).

**Student Demographics.** The demographic characteristics of the two types of treatment groups and their respective control groups were similar to the characteristics of the target school population generally and that of the larger district (see Table 2).

	District	Target School	Special Education Treatment	Special Education Control	High Risk Treatment	High Risk Control	Low Risk Control
<u>Ethnicity:</u>							
Anglo	14%	2%	0%	2%	4%	2%	2%
Black	15%	3%	13%	7%	0%	2%	2%
Latino	63%	94%	91%	93%	96%	96%	96%
Other	8%	7%	5%	8%	0%	0%	0%
<u>Language background:</u>							
English only	40%	37%	39%	25%	45%	40%	37%
Fluent English Proficient (FEP)	21%	23%	8%	26%	32%	35%	46%
Limited English Proficient (LEP)	39%	40%	53%	49%	22%	25%	17%
<u>School lunch</u>	58%	72%	94%	75%	92%	91%	
Total number	620,447	2,245	77	55	48	46	60



Additional comparisons show all the treatment groups with very low reading scores (Table 3). The special education groups had reading scores in the bottom quintile nationally, while the highest-risk treatment group had reading test scores in the bottom quartile nationally. IQ scores were also extremely low for these groups. Clearly the targeted students in the ALAS programs were at-risk both by their demographic characteristics, poverty and language background, and by their ability and achievement levels. But as we explain below, ALAS students were at-risk in larger and more pervasive ways.

<b>Table 3 Group Characteristics</b>												
	Special Ed. Treatment Cohort 1		Special Ed. Treatment Cohort 2		Special Ed. Control Cohort 3		High Risk Treatment		High Risk Control		Low Risk Control	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
<b>GROUP SIZE<sup>a</sup></b>	33	100	44	100	55	100	46	100	48	100	60	100
<b>GENDER</b>												
male	24	73	29	66	45	82	30	65	30	63	25	42
female	9	27	15	34	10	18	16	35	18	37	35	58
<b>ETHNICITY<sup>b</sup></b>												
Anglo	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	4	1	2	1	2
Black	3	9	3	7	4	7	0	0	1	2	1	2
Latino	30	91	40	91	51	93	44	96	46	96	58	96
Native American	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>AGE</b>												
mean (yr. & mo.)	12 yr. 11 mo.		12 yr. 9 mo.		12 yr. 8 mo.		12 yr. 8 mo.		12 yr. 6 mo.			
sd(months)	6 mo.		6 mo.		6 mo.		5 mo.		5 mo.			
<b>READING *</b>												
mean ss (sd)	6.12 (2.41)		5.84 (2.46)		5.35 (2.65)		7.71 (1.63)		7.22 (2.17)			
mean % rank (sd)	16.45 (16.80)		13.48 (11.37)		?		24.98 (16.47)		22.63 (21.41)			
<b>IQ**</b>												
mean ss (sd)	72.24 (32.63)		71.84 (31.28)		?		82.67 (18.56)		?			
<sup>a</sup> There is no significant difference between the High Risk groups. <sup>b</sup> There is no significant difference between the Special Education Groups * Test of Reading Comprehension - <sup>t</sup> $n = 42$ ; <sup>tt</sup> $n = 33$ (Brown, Hammill, Wiederholt) ** Culture Fair Intelligence Test (Cattell)												

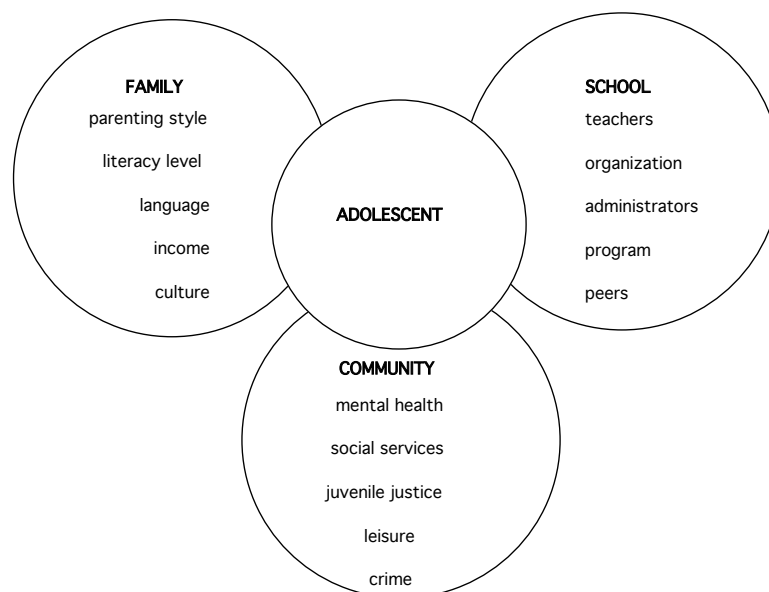
## How Are Students At Risk

### The Importance of Context as an Influence on Behavior

Partly as a result of the medical model perspective and partly as a result of valuing individual difference, the field of special education has historically focused diagnostic and remedial efforts on the characteristics or attributes that an individual youth presents while essentially ignoring or diminishing the importance of the setting or context in which the youth lives and functions. Although individual attributes, disabilities and skills are important, it is of course true that behavior is a reflection of the interaction between individual characteristics and context.

Several studies have shown that a student's ability and race do not completely account for school success and in special education it is not the most "severely" handicapped students who are at greatest risk for school failure. For example, in a group of lowest-achieving Hispanic adolescents attending the same school, Larson<sup>14</sup> found that achievement level accounted for almost none of the variance in truancy, attendance, misbehavior or school grades. Thornton, Morrow and Zigmond<sup>15</sup> found that achievement levels did not differentiate LD students who dropped out from those who stayed. And finally, Alpert and Dunham,<sup>16</sup> found that not all high-risk youth with a GPA below 1.0 thought they were unsuccessful in school. Some of these students had many friends, got along with teachers and attended extracurricular activities and rated themselves as successful in school despite their low GPA. The point is that there are other factors over and beyond personal characteristics which influence a youth's behavior. These "other" factors comprise the settings in which an adolescent lives and functions- including the people, the resources and the experiences within those settings.

### CONTEXTS INFLUENCING YOUTH



During the past two decades, for more and more young people, especially young people of color living, there has been a catastrophic decline in the ability of the contexts in which they live to provide adequate resources, support, and opportunities that are fundamental for growth and development into productive adulthood. These settings include the school context as well as the family and community contexts (see figure above).<sup>17</sup> Within these contexts, of course, are the influence of school resources, policies and programs; the influences of family configuration, income, education, and functionality as well as the influence of the neighborhood, peers, health and mental health resources, the juvenile justice system and the resources for transition into the world of work. Major influences within these contexts are discussed below.

### **Poverty**

Many factors shape the contexts in which an adolescent lives but none so powerfully as does family income. Neighborhoods, housing, schools and both private and public resources and the quality of service linked to those resources are largely controlled by family income level.<sup>18</sup> In 1990, more than 4 of every 10 children lived in low-income households.<sup>19</sup>

Poverty affects children directly by reducing the family's ability to purchase adequate safety, food and educational materials and by reducing the parent's ability to engage in health promoting activities.<sup>20</sup> Family income stands as the single strongest predictor of success and well being in adolescents. Adolescents from low-income families are more likely to experience depression, mental health problems, poor physical health, school failure, delinquency, arrest and early sexual intercourse.<sup>21</sup> And income is a powerful influence on shaping the most critical context - family life itself. Family stress is exacerbated by financial anxiety. There are strong links between economic deprivation and neglect or abuse of children within the household<sup>22</sup> and low-income parents, especially urban parents, report a greater degree of worry than more affluent parents about their children's health and education.<sup>23</sup>

In order to maintain earnings during the last two decades, families have had to have both parents enter the workforce which has increased family stress and limited direct supervision of adolescent children. In 1970, 39 percent of children had mothers in the workforce; by 1990 the proportion was 61 percent. Furthermore, between 1979 and 1989 mothers increased their weekly work hours by 32 percent.<sup>24</sup>

Disabled students are far more likely than non-disabled students to be economically disadvantaged. The NLTS data reveal that nearly 70% of all disabled children live in poverty.<sup>25</sup> From these data we can infer that disabled youth live in poor households at twice the rate of non-disabled children.

The NLTS also found that poverty predicts virtually every negative secondary and post secondary outcome for disabled students. Poverty in the disabled population is related to dropout rates, lack of earned high school credits, failed classes, high absence, limited parent involvement, residential dependence, limited community participation, lower pay, and diminished enrollment in vocational or college courses.<sup>26</sup>

**. . . a snapshot of ALAS. . . poverty. . . the story of Joe**

Joe first came to our attention because he failed to show up for school after the first day when he had enrolled as an entering 7th grader. In the end, we learned that tracking Joe down proved to be as challenging for us as finding a place to sleep each night was for Joe.

Joe ostensibly lived with his mother and three younger siblings at a specific address. In reality, however, because they had no place of their own, Joe, his mother and siblings moved each night between various relative's houses. Joe's father was not in the picture; he had been killed in a shooting incident shortly after Joe's birth.

As we got to know Joe and his life circumstances better, we learned that the reason Joe was frequently absent from school or came without notebooks and materials, including homework, was because he never knew from day to day where he was going to eat dinner or sleep. We experienced Joe's dislocation firsthand when we tried to pick him up for school in the morning. Three days out of five Joe was not where he told us he was going to be. At first we thought Joe was giving us inaccurate information as to his whereabouts. We eventually realized, however, that decisions about Joe's location were often made in the evening and impromptu after the various relatives had assessed who had room that night for Joe and his family members. Very often Joe did not sleep where his mother or siblings slept. Needless to say, during these moves Joe would frequently forget to gather up all of the things he needed for school the next day -- PE clothes, math homework, notebook, library book, wood shop project, etc. This would often result in the school assigning Joe some form of punishment the next day, usually detention or "sentences," because he had forgotten some item he was to be responsible for.

Joe typifies the acute poverty and accompanying daily disorder and dismal prospects many youth experience as the result of being the children of an adolescent mother who is a school dropout with virtually no skills and who subsequently never marries or never receives child support from the father.

A year after we first met Joe, his mother was able to move into an apartment with Joe and his brothers and sisters. Even though the rent and utilities were average for a two bedroom apartment in a low-income neighborhood, Joe's mother had only \$15 plus food stamps left over each week from the welfare and social security money she received. The family's welfare stipend had been reduced because the mother had failed to meet the requirements of California's welfare-work program (go to school or get a job). The \$60 each month went to pay for clothes, bus fare, food and supplies for the four children and the mother. They had no furniture or beds. They did have mattresses on the floor and a refrigerator and stove. However, when the first winter came with heavy rains, as a result of the mother's brother having gone berserk and punching in the ceiling and walls in a drunken rage some months before, the apartment leaked so badly that the carpets and mattresses were soaked and later mildewed. Joe's mother reported that she could not move out because she was two months behind on rent and had no where to go except back to her various relatives. Joe's mother refused to apply for public housing because "the projects" were dangerous and crime ridden. At any rate, there was a three year waiting period for public housing.

### **Ethnicity/Race**

Adolescents of color are unequivocally at greatest risk for negative life outcomes in virtually every arena. Negative life prospects are primarily the result of high concentrations of poverty in minority populations with three times as many black youth (45%) and more than twice as many Latino youth (38%) living in poverty as Anglo youth (15%).<sup>27</sup>

Racial and economic stratification exposes Black and Latino youth to neighborhoods with the highest rates of crime, violence, drug dealing, fires, AIDS, unemployment, and diminished recreational programs.<sup>28</sup> In turn, in response to the settings in which they live, minority adolescents are more prone to engage in high rates of delinquency, gang involvement and sex with the tragic consequences of incarceration, pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, or death.<sup>29</sup>

**... a snapshot of ALAS... ethnicity... the story of Ramon**

Ramon was a seriously learning disabled adolescent who functioned academically at the 2nd grade level when he entered 7th grade. His parents were immigrants who came to the U.S. from Mexico a few years before Ramon was born. Ramon's mother was a housewife who spoke little English. Ramon's father worked 60 hours each week as a landscaper. He spoke a good deal of English. The family spoke Spanish in the home and observed traditional customs with food, holidays and social norms. Both parents could read and write Spanish but neither parent could read or write English. Ramon's parents encouraged their children to do well in school and their 11 year old daughter was an A student.

Ramon had been in a special day class since 3rd grade and yet he had made little progress in reading or spelling. When he was in the 6th grade, his parents requested that the school retain him but the school overruled the parents request and told the parents he would learn best in junior high school.

Ramon's parents came to the school whenever they were asked. Ramon's mother attended each yearly IEP meeting. Ramon's younger sister accompanied the mother as a translator. The father did not attend. He said he was afraid to take time off from work and expressed that he couldn't chance losing his good job.

Ramon remained in a special day class throughout junior high school. Ramon's mother reported that she was never called to the school for any parent conferences during the three years Ramon attended the junior high school. She felt this was because "Ramon was such a good boy who behaved and didn't give his teachers trouble."

The mother said that she and her husband never lodged a complaint about Ramon's lack of progress. Ramon's mother said they were frustrated that Ramon couldn't read but they knew he had a "mental" problem because he "never learned his colors as a child". The parents expressed a great concern and protectiveness for Ramon's self-esteem and were concerned that Ramon felt so bad about not being able to read. The mother reported that she had signed and accepted the written IEP each year because that was what the school personnel said was best for Ramon. She reported that she and her husband knew that Ramon had a problem and that surely the school professionals knew best -- especially since she and her husband were not educated in American schools and didn't know how decisions were made. All she had to go on she said was what she and her husband had learned in Mexico -- that *consejeros* and *maestros* were to be honored and respected for their status and knowledge.

Ramon was given a three year reevaluation before going into 10th grade. His parents were informed that he was still reading and writing at the 2nd grade level and had made no progress in three years. Ramon's parents received this information with anger and resentment. They felt they had trusted their child to the school and their child had been hurt. They felt they had done their part by encouraging Ramon, having his attendance excellent and teaching him to behave and obey. The parents sought out an advocate.

Ramon's parents requested a mediation hearing to obtain private special schooling. Ramon's mother reported remembering that the school at each IEP meeting had told her she could challenge the IEP decisions-- she said that she never knew what part of the IEP to challenge -- and who is she to challenge the school?

It is not surprising that holding race and family background constant, teen pregnancy is more likely to occur in poor neighborhoods where options, alternatives and hope are in markedly limited.<sup>30</sup> Thus, because children of color are likely to live in poor neighborhoods, the possibility that they will have or become teen mothers is greatly increased. Indeed, the *majority* of Latino and Black children are now being raised by unmarried mothers who were high school dropouts.<sup>31</sup>

Youth of color are also at greatest risk for school failure with 65 percent of Black and Latino youth compared to 25 percent of Anglo youth of the sophomore class of 1980 either dropping out before graduating or graduating with a grade point average below C.<sup>32</sup> Minority youth are also most likely to attend the nation's poorest school with 75 percent of Black students and 46 percent of Latino students attending schools ranked in the lowest 20 percent economically.<sup>33</sup>

Not unexpectedly, the NLTS found that disabled children of color who live in poverty have the poorest outcomes of *all* children in the nation during both secondary school as well as post secondary school.<sup>34</sup> Just as in

the general population, disabled children of color do more poorly in school than Anglo disabled children. The NLTS found that 34 percent of Latino and 38 percent of African American disabled students drop out of school which is a significantly greater rate than the 25 percent dropout rate of disabled Anglo youth. Moreover, in a separate analysis of the NLTS data, Wagner, Blackerbee, and Hebbler,<sup>35</sup> report that failing classes is significantly related to a disabled student being Latino. These authors report that even when controlling for poverty, disability category, parent involvement and gender, Latino disabled students fail 16 percent more classes in grade nine and 14 percent more in grade eleven than Anglo disabled students.

According to parental reports the NLTS data, although most disabled young adults of all ethnic groups are not receiving needed services 2-5 years post high school, far greater proportions of Latino and African American disabled young people compared to Anglos are not receiving vocational assistance, life skills training, tutoring, personal counseling and physical therapy.»

### **Family Background**

Family background or structure is widely recognized as one of the most or even *the* most important contributor to the successful development of youth. Family background effects educational outcomes. For example, parent education or literacy level is a powerful predictor of school achievement and dropout behavior and other research has shown that family configuration impacts school performance and adolescent behavior.<sup>36</sup>

Since 1970, the proportion of children living in single parent households has doubled.<sup>37</sup> When controlling for socioeconomic level, students from single-parent households are more likely to drop out of school than students from two-parent families<sup>38</sup> and are also more likely to engage in health compromising or deviant behavior.<sup>39</sup>

Risk is especially great for children living in female headed households and this risk has dramatically increased. Over the past two decades there has been a 40 percent increase in the number of female-headed households with children. In 1960, 15 percent of teens giving birth were unmarried, by 1989 over 67 percent of teenage mothers were unmarried.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, the prevalence of poverty among these female-headed households is seven to eight times higher than among married couples with children. Not unexpectedly, the adolescent children of adolescent mothers are far more likely to do poorly in school and engage in high-risk behaviors.<sup>41</sup>

Dysfunctional parental attributes such as alcoholism, drug addiction or other mental health problems as well as violence in the home or high stress and over crowding constraints within the household that often accompany poverty limit a parent's ability to provide adequate emotional support and stimulation to their children which results in increased risk for academic and social behavioral problems.<sup>42</sup>

Given the persuasiveness of poverty in disabled youth, it is not surprising that the NLTS<sup>43</sup> found that nearly twice as many disabled children (41%) compared to non-disabled children (22%) have parents who are not high school graduates and more disabled children live in one parent households.

**... a snapshot of ALAS... some family backgrounds**

*Marisela* ran away at age 13 because her father beat her. She went to live with her 17 year old sister who had also run away from the father. The sister called the school to find out if she could become Marisela's guardian. The sister said that, "Marisela had always gotten the brunt of the father's rage because Marisela would stand up to him and say 'it may hurt now but it won't hurt forever'."

*David* lived in five different relatives homes by the time he was 12 years old. When asked about the frequency of moves his response was, "My brothers and I are too hard to take care of, we make too much noise and that's why we have to go to another house."

*Eddie's* mother was a paranoid schizophrenic who was delusional, incoherent, volatile and violent. She refused medication. She could not be hospitalized for treatment because the father's medical insurance only paid 75% and the father could not pay the remaining fees. The mother lived at home and terrorized the family.

*Joe's* mother was 15 years old when he was born. His parents never married. His father was killed in a gang shooting when Joe was an infant. Joe lived with his mother, a 14 year old half sister whose father who was also deceased from a shooting, and two younger half brothers whose father was in prison. Joe's mother was an alcohol abuser and drug addict during his early years and a binge drinker during his teen years. Since the age of eleven, Joe was often required to protect his mother from physically abusive boyfriends.

*Roberta* was 10 years old when she was abandoned with her five younger siblings. Roberta took care of these siblings alone for two weeks until the police discovered them. Both her mother and father are heroine addicts who are imprisoned periodically. Roberta and her five brothers and sisters live with their maternal grandparents who also have guardianship of three other grandchildren. The nine children and two grandparents receive \$1205 per month from the government to cover food, housing, clothes, and other expenses.

*Giovanne* lived with his mother and sister in a single car garage that had no plumbing or heating. They paid rent with cash. His mother worked long hours in a garment factory. Because the family had no utility bills in their name, Giovanne could not prove his residency when he applied for the federal youth summer job program. Having lost his U.S. birth certificate, Giovanne could not prove he existed and was not permitted into the job program for disadvantaged youth.

*Enrique* was born addicted to drugs. The hospital never knew his mother used drugs. He went through withdrawal without medical help because his grandparents, who had taken him away from his mother, did not know better. He received a great deal of love from his grandparents, however, his grandfather was an alcoholic and his grandmother was an invalid through out his life. When Enrique was 14 years old, the school counselor discovered he regularly used amphetamines and sniffed whatever he could find. His grandfather was outraged and not supportive of treatment because he felt that Enrique could quit if he wanted to.

## Neighborhoods

A neighborhood is both a social network and a spatial unit and is a strong predictor of a variety of outcomes for youth. Household poverty and segregation by race are fundamental elements of neighborhoods, especially in metropolitan centers. High poverty neighborhoods have much higher concentrations of single parent families, unmarried teenage mothers and under employed young adults.<sup>44</sup>

Ricketts and Mincy<sup>45</sup> define underclass neighborhoods as *high* in 1) under employed working age males, 2) households headed by women, 3) households receiving welfare, and 4) dropouts among the school age population. Underclass or concentrated poverty neighborhoods are defined as those with 40 percent or more residents having poverty level incomes. Ricketts and Mincy argue that many low-income neighborhoods have

deteriorated since the 1970s into underclass neighborhoods. These researchers found that between 1970 and 1980, there was a 331 percent increase in the number of underclass neighborhoods in America.

Concentrated poverty is associated with many social problems such as drug selling and use, gang activity and violence, crime, AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases, limited youth recreational and development programs, and diminished opportunities for employment.<sup>46</sup>

### **Health Services**

Evidence is strong that during the past two decades the health status of adolescents has deteriorated,<sup>47</sup> yet, communities typically have limited physical and mental health services for adolescents and this is especially so for underclass *working* families who do not have employer provided or private health insurance.

In particular, adolescents have low rates of visits to doctors offices. Moreover, their problems are poorly represented in medical data bases. Inadequate care is related to the fact that conventional concepts of health care rooted in biological determinants of disease are less applicable to today's teens whose physical and mental health care needs are related to patterns of behavior adopted as a response to the settings in which adolescents live and to current times. For example, between 1965 and 1988, death by cancer, heart disease and influenza decreased among adolescents whereas adolescent deaths by suicide and homicide nearly tripled<sup>48</sup> and AIDS became the fastest growing cause of death among teenagers and young adults.<sup>49</sup> Substance use and abuse, sexually transmitted disease, depression, suicide, physical or sexual abuse, and disorders of self-image are among the most commonly reported adolescent health problems described in research, yet, these health problems do not appear among the most commonly reported reasons for doctor office visits. This is because these health problems are behavioral not biological and require a different approach to adolescent health care than currently exists. Irwin found that the average length of doctor visit by adolescents was ten minutes.<sup>50</sup> Perhaps this explains why the socially sensitive health problems which adolescents experience are not being adequately addressed.

Moreover, the rise in teenage homicide and suicide suggests an increase in high levels of hopelessness, grief and anger among adolescents. Nearly a quarter of all adolescents are predicted to have emotional or psychiatric problems that warrant mental health treatment.<sup>51</sup> However it is estimated that 75 percent of adolescents who require mental health services do not have contact with a provider.<sup>52</sup>

When provided, services are available through special education in the schools, in non profit community centers and community mental health centers but these services are fragmented with little coordinated case management activity. Services for adolescents often fall under special short term funding such as the FEMA provided earthquake funds in Los Angeles which provided counseling funds to the community for one year. Youth receiving the services have no place to continue treatment after the FEMA funds run dry.

Seventh grade assessment of ALAS students shows that they experience a significant number of stress events such as family illness or death, family breakup, parent lost job, threatened by gang, mother began working, breakup with boy/girlfriend, trouble at school (Table 4). ALAS students also reported a clinically significant



number of depressive symptoms such as tired, headaches, trouble sleeping, loss of appetite, feeling unhappy, feeling nervous, sad or worried.

**Table 4**  
**Stress and Depression Among ALAS Students**

<b>Proportion of students who experience stress events</b>	
2-5 events per year	53%
6-9 events per year	30%
10-15 events per year	6%
<b>Proportion of students who experience depressive symptoms at least twice per month</b>	
3-7 symptoms	47%
6-9 symptoms	15%
10-15 symptoms	8%

### **The Juvenile Justice System**

During the last decade, juvenile justice systems have assumed an increasingly greater role in the lives of adolescents, especially adolescents of racial and ethnic minorities and adolescents living in poverty.<sup>53</sup> More recently there has been a shift away from treatment and prevention to deterrence and punishment. In many communities the juvenile and adult justice systems are blended with increasing numbers of adolescents being tried and sentenced as adults. Between 1986 and 1991 arrests for juveniles between 10 and 17 years for rape, robbery, homicide or aggravated assault increased by 48 percent.<sup>54</sup> Adolescent of color who are also poor are most victimized by crime and also most adjudicated for criminal behavior. Arrest rates of minority youth are not simply a function of rate of criminal activity on the part of adolescents but also the interaction effects between police and minority adolescents. For example, police have been shown to act more suspiciously, more aggressively and more preemptively in low income neighborhoods with high concentrations of minority youth.<sup>55</sup>

## School

Although education has been historically perceived as the means by which individuals disadvantaged by poverty and life circumstances can reduce and even eliminate negative influences and increase their adult prospects, for many students, schools do not now provide this redress. Indeed, social and economic stratification influence almost all structures and activities that take place at school.

Just as they face inadequate community contexts, children of color face the most dismal schooling circumstances. Because they are generally from low income neighborhoods, most children of color attend schools characterized by relative lack of safety, unsightly and unkempt school buildings, limited curricular resources and peers with high rates of school dropout and low achievement scores.

Because most children in America attend schools that are homogeneous by race, income and ethnicity they do not receive equivalent educational programs or resources.<sup>56</sup> Differences in funding rates between schools with high concentrations of poverty and those with low determine differences in availability of textbooks, laboratory equipment, resource rooms, library books and other educational resources.<sup>57</sup>

Students attending economically disadvantaged schools receive relatively lower expectations from school staff. The Commission on Chapter 1 found that "The *low* expectations in our suburban high schools are *high* in comparison to expectations in urban schools and rural schools with concentrations of children in poverty . . ." <sup>58</sup> Although schools have been charged with "dulling the minds and dashing the hopes of millions of America's children"<sup>59</sup> it is only fair to note that school personnel in schools with large numbers of low-income students have not been prepared to face the challenges these students present educationally and behaviorally.

Unfortunately, most reform efforts do not reflect the profound systemic changes in *attitude* and *philosophy* that educators must adopt if schooling is to be the leavening factor in American society.<sup>60</sup>

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## ALAS: SECTION I

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## SECTION II

### How Did We Intervene?

Traditionally, dropout prevention efforts have not addressed the contexts in which youth live and function. Instead, the personal characteristics of students have been the focus of investigations seeking to explain school failure. This line of research led to targeting student attributes or student background characteristics -- income level, race, ethnicity, home language, parent education, immigration status -- as "the cause" of school failure and school dropout.

Thus, the student and not the contexts which influence the student were viewed as the problem in need of reform. In turn, intervention efforts were directed toward "fixing" students by enticing or coercing them to accommodate or submit to the existing school program and policies. Many argue that this exclusive focus on reforming students has led to limited success in developing successful dropout prevention efforts because the contexts which influence youth performance are not addressed.<sup>1</sup>

Consequently, recent dropout prevention efforts have shifted the focus of reform to the school as a context of influence on the youth. During the last decade a plethora of "school reform" efforts have reflected this change of focus. With this perspective, the definition of the school as a context has been expanded beyond curriculum to include school climate, teacher behavior and most recently school management and organization structure. Thus, school reform efforts are described as "restructuring" schools so that all of the sub-contexts within the school are brought into the process of reform. Unfortunately, evaluations of school restructuring efforts have been disappointing.<sup>2</sup> However, what has emerged from the school restructuring efforts and the focus on school-as-context is a further expansion of the concept of context.

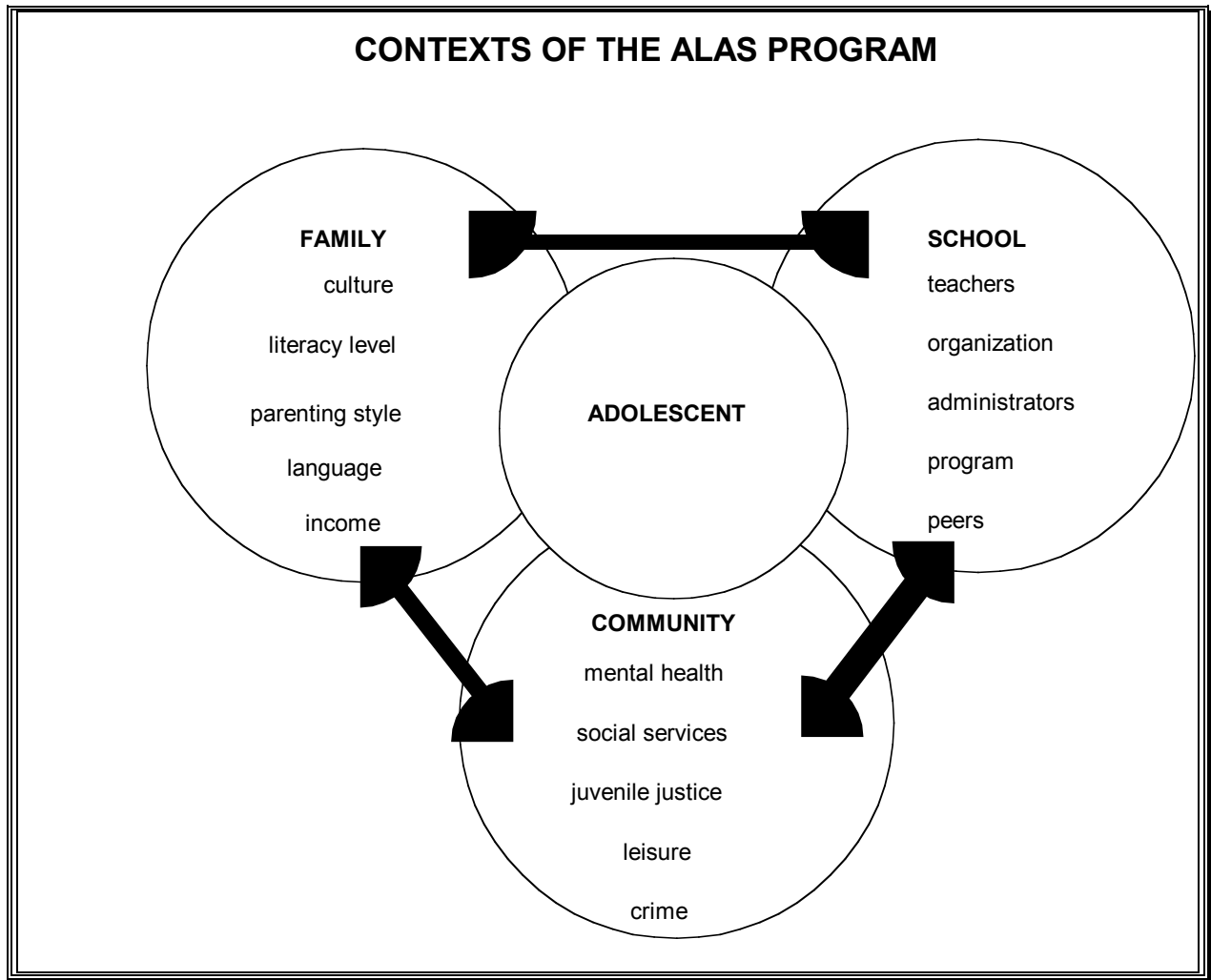
Educators and other stakeholders have come to recognize that the school context and all its complexities is inextricably bound to the *other* contexts of influence on youth achievement. That is, the achievement of a child in the school context is now acknowledged to be significantly influenced not only by school variables but also by the other contexts in which the youth functions - - the family and the community. The robustness, intactness and effectiveness of school, family and community contexts determine degree of "risk" for undesirable life outcomes as surely as do a youth's own innate characteristics. Few would now argue with the conclusion "so goes the contexts in which a youth functions, so goes the youth."

However, this sentiment is profoundly troubling given the deteriorated and insufficient support many youth of today receive from family, school and community as described in Part One of this report.

#### Program Design: Mediating Multiple Contexts of Youth

ALAS was founded on the premise that the youth and contexts of influence must be addressed simultaneously if dropout prevention efforts are to be successful. A central assumption of the model is that each context needs individual reform to increase its positive influence on youth and, additionally, barriers which reduce

or prevent communication and coherence between contexts must be bridged. Thus, ALAS consisted of a series of specific intervention strategies focused on the adolescent as well as on the three contexts of influence on achievement--the family, school and community adolescent. The intervention strategies were designed to increase the effectiveness of each context as well as to increase collaboration between contexts.



Providing dropout intervention in all contexts in which the adolescent functions is predicated on two notions. The first is understanding that child behavior and development is an interaction between multiple contexts of influence and the individual characteristics of each child.<sup>3</sup> The second is acknowledging that many high risk youth and their parents require ongoing, comprehensive and integrated services from the fields of health, social and legal services, employment, juvenile justice and education.<sup>4</sup>



### **Intervention Strategies and Rationale**

ALAS consisted of a series of specific intervention strategies focused on the adolescent as well as on the three contexts of influence on adolescent achievement--the family, school and community. The intervention strategies of ALAS were designed to increase the effectiveness of each context as well as to increase collaboration between contexts.

**Strategies focused on the *adolescent* included** social problem-solving training; counseling; student recognition; enhancement of school affiliation.

**Strategies focused on the *school* included** frequent teacher feedback to students and parents; attendance monitoring.

**Strategies focused on the *family* included** use of community resources; parent training in school participation; training to guide and monitor their adolescent.

**Strategies focused on the *community* included** enhancement of collaboration among community agencies for youth and family services; enhancement of skills and methods for serving the youth and family.

The specific interventions and their rationale are:

#### **1. Remediate the student's deficient social and task-related problem solving skills**

To positively enhance students' social and task-related behavior, the student intervention strategy used in the ALAS project was a social metacognitive problem solving training program previously developed and tested by Larson.<sup>5</sup> ALAS students received ten weeks of problem solving instruction and two years of follow-up problem solving prompting and counseling. The training also taught school survival problem solving.

In a prior study, the problem solving strategy training reduced gang involvement and delinquency<sup>6</sup> in adjudicated youth and reduced school truancy and misbehavior incidents in highest-risk junior high school students.<sup>7</sup>

The need for dropout prevention efforts to focus on a student's school and classroom behavior is predicated on the fact that disruptive social and task-related behavior is the student characteristic which most disturbs teachers and school staff.<sup>8</sup> Social and task-related behavior and problem solving skills have been consistently reported as problematic for low-achieving youth of all ethnic backgrounds. Indeed, social and task-related behavior problems are found to correlate with school failure over and above IQ and academic achievement.<sup>9</sup>

School behavior problems have been shown to be clearly related to dropout and low grades.<sup>10</sup> Low-achieving high-risk "stayers" have been distinguished from dropouts primarily on the basis of degree of misbehavior in school.<sup>11</sup> Schwartz found that low-track students identified with an anti-academic subculture that based social status on defiance of school and teacher norms.<sup>12</sup>

Latino dropouts report more trouble than other students in getting along with teachers.<sup>13</sup> In several studies, Larson found that lowest achieving Latino junior high students, those students who were at greatest risk to drop out of school, had four times the rate of classroom expulsions than other Latino students.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, projections of her figures showed that the lowest-quartile subgroup of students ( $n = 500$ ) in this Los Angeles Latino school would have generated nearly 25,000 disciplinary contacts during seventh and eighth grades! Larson concluded that this

disproportionate use of staff time for disciplinary events for a minority of students was a major *disincentive* for school staff to try and keep these highest-risk students in school.

### Elements of the Social Thinking Skills Training<sup>15</sup>

- Σ how to recognize when a problem first begins
- Σ how to identify and define problems clearly
  - Σ how to control impulsive reactions
- Σ how to overlook irritations that are best ignored
  - Σ how to identify emotions
- Σ how to set clear and realistic goals for the short and long term
- Σ how to evaluate one's own competence for solving a problem
  - Σ how to think of a variety of potential solutions
  - Σ how to develop a step-by-step plan
- Σ how to anticipate the roadblocks and pitfalls when taking action
- Σ how to be assertive and socially appropriate when facing peer pressure or criticism
  - Σ how to sustain persistence and effort when frustrated
- Σ how to control anger and express emotions appropriately and effectively

## 2. Provide recognition and bonding activities

To increase school affiliation and status within the school organization, students in the ALAS project were given frequent positive reinforcement such as praise, outings, recognition ceremonies, certificates, and positive home calls to parents for meeting goals or improving behavior, attendance, and school work. Students were allowed to "hang-out" in the ALAS lounge during lunch or after school and were encouraged to bring friends to ALAS parties.

The importance of *actively* working to increase highest risk student's sense of membership is made clear by studies showing that dropouts and ethnic and racial minorities report feeling much less of a membership or bonding to school than do other students. Wehlage and Rutter found that dropouts feel alienated from school as indicated by their perceptions of lack of teachers interest in them, expressed belief of poor effectiveness of school discipline and unfairness of school discipline.<sup>16</sup> In another ethnographic study, Wehlage and his associates found that virtually every student dropout they interviewed expressed the feeling that schools and teachers did not care about them and that they had no adult at school to turn to for help.<sup>17</sup> Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, and Rock also concluded that

compared to non-dropouts, dropouts are alienated from school life as indicated by feeling less important and less popular and feeling that other students see them as troublemakers and by lower levels of participation in extracurricular events and self-reported low interest in school.<sup>18</sup>

Historically, low SES and ethnic and racial minority students show less affiliation for school than middle class or Anglo students. Latino students are often found to have a difficult time crossing sociocultural boundaries and consequently feel alienated from the norms and values of mainstream education.<sup>19</sup> This alienation and resultant poor achievement is not merely a matter of new immigrant status. Studies by Hayes-Bautista, Schienk and Chapa and Fernandez and Nielsen found that the longer the residence in the United States the lower the academic achievement and school success.<sup>20</sup>

Lack of affiliation to school in Latino students is suggested by various student behaviors. Latinos are found to participate less often in class and to report that teachers disapproved of them and felt they lacked ability.<sup>21</sup> Lack of affiliation with school is also sadly seen in the data showing that Latino dropouts have higher self-esteem than Latino adolescents who remain in school!<sup>22</sup>

Wehlage and his colleagues suggest that for a student to become socially bonded to school he/she must feel attachment, commitment, involvement and belief.<sup>23</sup> When the student feels personal concern and caring from at least one significant adult in the school and when adults express belief in the student and provide ways for the student to feel successful, then the student will become bonded to the school and its goals.

<b>Student Bonding Activities Included</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>∑ An open office for ALAS students and their friends to hang out before and after school and during lunch                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>∑ Holiday school parties allowing friends to be invited</li> </ul> </li> <li>∑ Certificates and small rewards for improving grades or attendance                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>∑ Occasional evening or weekend outings for achievement</li> <li>∑ Positive notes and calls to parents</li> </ul> </li> <li>∑ After school “boys” and “girls” groups to discuss teen issues</li> <li>∑ Hot chocolate mornings before school or order-in pizza lunch                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>∑ After school and in school tutoring</li> </ul> </li> <li>∑ Home wake-up or reminder calls if requested by the teen</li> <li>∑ Frequent public acknowledgment of student improvement</li> </ul>

### 3. **Maintain intensive attendance monitoring**

Students were monitored for period-by-period attendance. Parents were contacted daily about student truancy or extended absence. Students were required to make up missed time and were provided with positive adult contacts communicating a personal interest in the student's attendance.

Clearly all dropout research shows that dropouts have poor school attendance prior to dropping out.<sup>24</sup> In many large secondary schools, attendance is not closely monitored and students quickly get the message that school staff do not really care whether they are in school or not. The National High School and Beyond data show that twice as many Latino dropouts admit to cutting classes compared to non-dropout Latinos.<sup>25</sup>

Patterns of truancy are gradual, occurring over an extended period of time beginning in junior high school. Larson found that highest-risk junior high school Latino youth started out seventh grade with no worse truancy or absences than peers; however, by the end of the first semester of seventh grade the highest-risk students had more than doubled their truancy and absence rate (from 12% to 27%) and throughout the remainder of junior high school these students never returned to their entry level attendance patterns.<sup>26</sup>

#### **Attendance Monitoring Included**

- ∑ Student circulates teacher signature card to each class and then to ALAS office for monitoring
  - ∑ Student escorted to classes if chronically “cuts”
  - ∑ Parent escorts student to first class or to school office
    - ∑ Parent notified the a day a student is absent
    - ∑ Transporting student to school
  - ∑ Locating truant student and returning him or her to school
- ∑ Arranging for teacher to send note if the student is absent from class
  - ∑ Visually checking to see if a student is in class
  - ∑ Daily notes home to parent about student’s attendance
- ∑ Filing report with the School Attendance and Review Board, Probation Officer, or Social Services

### 4. **Provide frequent teacher feedback to the parent and student**

The ALAS intervention provided weekly and, if needed, daily feedback reports to students and parents regarding classroom comporment, missed assignments, and missing homework. Students were taught to use this teacher feedback for focusing thinking and decision making during problem solving maintenance training. The ALAS project sent home regular notes (or telephone calls) to parents on a daily, weekly, or bimonthly basis

informing them about their child's school progress. Teachers were regularly informed by the ALAS counselor about how teacher comments and evaluations were addressed with the student and parent.

The need to provide highest risk students with feedback regarding their school performance is predicated on the fact that a basic principal of behavior change is specific and frequent feedback to the performer. Low-achievers particularly need clear and frequent feedback regarding their performance--what they are doing well and what they need to improve.

The traditional feedback system in secondary schools is report card grades every quarter semester. However, lowest-achieving, high-risk students require feedback and progress reports much more frequently. Larson found that lowest-achieving junior high school students were not able to accurately predict school grades at five-week intervals without interim feedback reports from teachers.<sup>27</sup>

Larson's previous work found that students who received feedback with parent notification improved classroom performance and attendance.<sup>28</sup> However, students who received weekly feedback without parent notification did not improve attendance or school performance. Larson found that low-income Latino parents in this study consistently expressed appreciation for being informed weekly and the students reported that the teacher feedback reports and home notes made a positive impact on their school behavior. Similarly, Delgado-Gaitan found that Latino parents were angry when the school did not notify them of their adolescent's poor school performance, even though the parents did not initiate any school contacts themselves.<sup>29</sup>

<b>Student Feedback Included</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>∑ Student-circulated teacher evaluations to each class daily</li> <li>∑ Academic grade monitoring from teachers weekly</li> <li>∑ Missing assignment monitoring from teachers daily, weekly, or monthly as needed</li> <li>∑ Homework monitoring daily</li> <li>∑ Daily note to parent listing homework assignments</li> <li>∑ Daily, weekly, or monthly notes home to parents as needed regarding behavior or school work</li> <li>∑ Daily or weekly telephone calls to parents if needed</li> <li>∑ Weekly parent conference if needed</li> </ul>

**5. Teach parents school participation and teen management**

The ALAS intervention program trained parents in two skills: (1) parent-child problem solving, and (2) parent participation in the schools. Parents in the project received direct instruction and modeling in how to reduce

their child's inappropriate or undesirable behavior and how to increase desirable behavior. Parents were specifically monitored for follow through and prompted to use newly learned parenting skills. Additionally, parents received instruction in how and when to participate in school activities, how to understand report cards and school credits and when and how to contact teachers and administrators.

<b>Parent Training Included</b>	
Σ	Premises and assumptions of American educators
Σ	Practices and procedures of American schools
Σ	When and how to contact school personnel
Σ	Reading and interpreting report cards and graduation credits
Σ	Social and identity needs of adolescents
Σ	Due process and legal rights of students and parents
Σ	How to make requests of school personnel and get action
Σ	How to request special education services and program adaptations
Σ	Differences between Mexican and American cultures and mores
Σ	Red flags of teen behavior
Σ	When and how to monitor adolescent behavior
Σ	How to manage and direct a recalcitrant teenager at home
Σ	How to make and use home contracts
Σ	How to monitor the adolescents school behavior and performance
Σ	How to work with the courts, probation, and mental health services

The fact that parental values and attitudes play an important role in academic achievement has long been substantiated by researchers.<sup>30</sup> For adolescents, parental monitoring of their behavior had a marked positive impact on grades and homework.<sup>31</sup> Rumberger et. al found that parents of school dropouts are less involved in their child's education than other parents including parents of graduating low-achieving students.<sup>32</sup> These researchers also found that parents of dropouts had a more permissive parenting style, were less involved in their child's life-decisions, used negative sanctions and emotions when reacting to poor academic performance and contacted the school less often.

Social class has a powerful influence on parent school participation. For example, between 40% and 60% of low SES parents fail to attend parent-conferences compared to 20% to 30% for middle class.<sup>33</sup> Low-income

parents attend school events less, make fewer complaints to the principal and enroll their child less in summer school than middle class parents.<sup>34</sup>

Not surprisingly, in Latino students, parental involvement is also found related to achievement.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, research has clearly shown that Latino parents interact significantly less than non-Latino parents with teachers and school personnel.<sup>36</sup> However, the stereotyped belief that Latino parents give little value to education has been recently challenged by research findings which show that values, attitudes, and aspirations concerning education are not very different in Latino and Anglo households.<sup>37</sup>

It appears that Latino parents fail to participate in their child's school due to lack of understanding the role that parents can and are expected to play in their child's school, lack of confidence due and skills in how to interact with teachers and other school staff and due to home-school cultural mismatches.<sup>38</sup>

The need for parent training for highest-risk Latino youth is supported by several factors. Many of these parents are immigrants, and are often from rural backgrounds, and have limited knowledge and no direct experience with parenting a child in an urban, high crime, gang oriented, American barrio. Many parents have low literacy skills and do not receive mainstream information, tips and cautions that are regularly directed to parents by the media, schools, political and community organizations. And finally, for a variety of reasons a substantial proportion of these parents lack effective parenting skills. For example, Rumberger et. al (1990) found that parents of dropouts and "least adjusted" adolescents participate less with their child in decision making or joint problem solving and use authoritarian or laissez faire parenting styles.

#### **6. Integrate school and home needs with community services**

The community component of the ALAS intervention functioned to directly facilitate youth and parents' use of community services such as psychiatric and mental health services, alcohol and drug counseling, social services, child protective services, parenting classes, gang intervention projects, recreation and sports programs, probation, work programs, etc. Parents and youth were not simply referred to these community agencies by ALAS staff but were directly helped with making appointments, transportation, letters of reference, reminders, and so forth. Parents were given knowledge and rationale about how a particular service could benefit them or their child and were monitored for keeping commitments to participate in the community service.

The need to go beyond the presenting behavior of the youth and address larger issues within the family is predicated on the fact that families living at the margin of society; families whose primary language is different from the majority culture; families which are dysfunctional due to substance abuse and or mental health problems; and families living below the poverty line are families which, in general, do not have the skills or strategies for seeking out and getting help from community services such as parenting classes, family counseling, special youth programs, and training programs.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, these families are not helped by simply being given a referral or name and phone number. Rather, the parents and youth need specific guidance and liaison support to make contact with and begin participation in a community program.

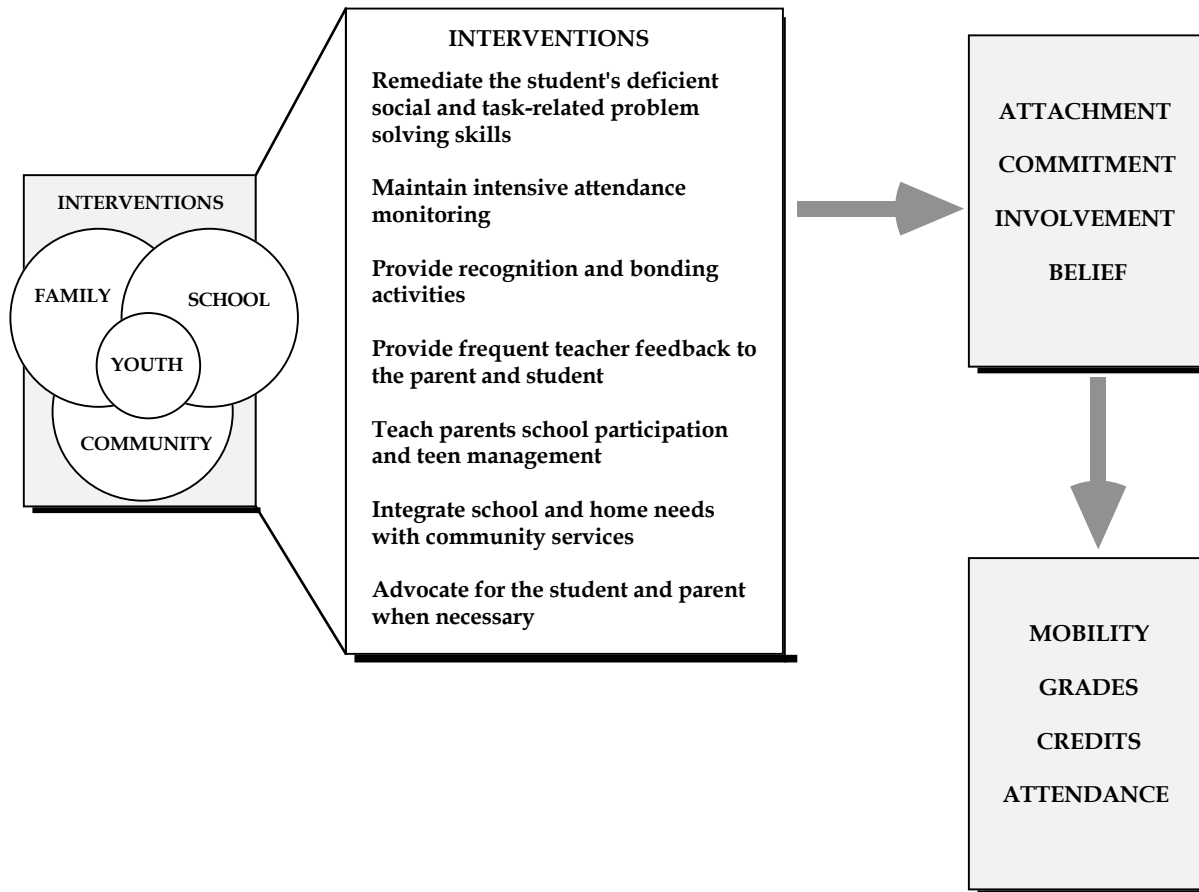
The figure below a sample of the kinds of service integration between school, family and community contexts that was performed as part of the ALAS intervention program.

<b>Community Interventions Included</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>∑ working with public defenders and investigating probation officers to determine most effective disposition or placement               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>∑ advocating for youth in court--preparing written reports and testifying in court</li> <li>∑ working regularly with probation officers to modify behavior</li> </ul> </li> <li>∑ arranging through the system to meet youth in juvenile hall and transitioning between public school and correctional school</li> <li>∑ working with parent and California work-welfare program to get family food stamps or social security benefits               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>∑ helping government agency and family to obtain federal, county or city summer jobs for disadvantaged and disabled youth</li> <li>∑ referring parent to potential jobs or school training program</li> <li>∑ helping family move and seek food, shelter and government help after earthquake</li> <li>∑ getting free city bus pass for student to get to and from school</li> <li>∑ advocating for child and parent at a school IEP meeting</li> </ul> </li> <li>∑ working with county mental health and school district to get child into nonpublic school or extra tutoring</li> <li>∑ working as advocate for child and parent in state special education mediation hearings</li> <li>∑ working with public agencies and parent to get child committed to emergency psychiatric facility               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>∑ getting handicapped child enrolled as independent minor MediCal program</li> </ul> </li> <li>∑ working with child protective services to provide services to family and/or initiate removal of child from home               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>∑ helping admit youth or parent into drug rehabilitation program</li> <li>∑ arranging for family to join psychiatric support group</li> <li>∑ arranging to get parent transported to for AA support meeting</li> <li>∑ arranging to admit youth into hospital adolescent weight loss program</li> </ul> </li> <li>∑ helping facilitate the establishment of youth leisure programs in the local community through park service, boy scouts, teen programs, etc.</li> </ul>

#### **Treatment Duration**



Beginning in the 1990-1991 school year, treatment and control students enrolled in the target junior high school. Treatment students received the intervention program in conjunction with the regular school program for all three years of junior high school. Treatment staff were based at the school site every day for three years and accessed the community and home contexts as needed. All treatment students received all of the intervention strategies. The control groups received only the regular (i.e., traditional) school program during junior high school.



**Key Principles of the ALAS Intervention**

Crossing the borders of student culture was a primary challenge of project staff. Working with students directly was such a significant aspect of our effort that, in one sense, it could be said that ALAS staff spent most of their time with students in "building relationship." Even during many of the interactions that are directed toward teachers, school staff and parents, the primary intent was to build a stronger bond between students and ALAS staff

by enhancing the school and family system for them. These activities also built stronger bonds between students and parents and between students and educators.

The ALAS program attempted to develop a sense of school membership and affiliation in students by developing a strong bond between students and the ALAS program. Our intervention components, described earlier, served as vehicles for enhancing the student bonding and for creating nurturing and positive adult-student relationships.

Affiliation was evidenced when participating students spontaneously brought friends to "join" ALAS. Students throughout the school eventually recognized ALAS as a program that helps youth and non-ALAS students often recited a long litany of "problems" for justification of joining. Students, also without prompting, began to refer to themselves as members of ALAS and even designed a membership card.

In our attempts to cross student culture boundaries, we derived four principles that describe how our project structured student-adult relationships and thereby increased student affiliation, instilled hope and promoted empowerment.

### **1. Be accountable for student's growth and progress**

This principle is primary and drives the remaining three principles. Our dedication to the concept of holding ourselves responsible for student performance was reflected in our use of the word *intervention* to describe our efforts.

Webster defines *intervene* as "to come in between by way of modification". We held ourselves accountable for coming in between and modifying effectively the interface of disadvantaged youth with academic learning. It was our mission and the way we found and defined professional success.

Consequently, we interpreted poor student performance as our failure. Failed classes, truancy, fighting, parent no-shows were not viewed as characteristics of the kinds of students and families we work with. Rather, we viewed these failures as indicators that we must recast our approach, change what we were doing with this particular child and parent so they could perform optimally. This does not mean that the student or parent were not asked to change or assume responsibility for their performance. Quite the contrary. It simply meant that we needed to change our approach so that the student and parent could also change and be held accountable and function optimally within an institutional learning environment.

Having staff hold themselves accountable for student performance automatically sustained motivation to be creative and to deliver maximum effort. After all, ALAS staff egos were impacted by how well "the kids did".

It also required an ongoing assessment of student performance and frequent feedback. We checked student indicator variables compulsively on a weekly and even daily basis--that is, we checked attendance, tardies, trancies, student behavior, classroom behavior, notes home, etc. We monitored, monitored, monitored students and changed our behavior based on this feedback.

On the other hand, it was our experience that most secondary schools, including the one in which we worked, make no on-going and systematic evaluation of school-wide student attendance, no recording of proportion

of failed classes by teacher and subject, no accounting of number of students removed from class or why, no recording of the number of teacher-parent phone communications, no pre-post evaluation of learning per class, and so forth. For the most part, there is little or no accountability on the part of adults in the school for student performance. And in instances when these variables are measured by schools, the information is not generated in order to change adult behavior toward students. It seems that the only ones held accountable for change are students, and, if they don't measure up, they fail or are suspended.

Accountability for student performance automatically created the need for our second principle in building effective child-adult relationship.

## **2. Accept students as they are**

In order to be accountable for change or performance it is essential to embrace the current reality that most urban students are not middle class Anglos. Surprisingly, most adults in schools with high proportions of minority children living in poverty appear to respond to the students as if they were middle class Anglos.

For example, in our school, assignments were given with little acknowledgment or accommodation to the fact that: few of our students have calculators, rulers, magazines or newspapers, etc. in their homes to aid homework; few of the parents know English and therefore cannot help with homework; few of the parents read or write Spanish and therefore do not read school bulletins or letters home; many of our students sleep in the living room and have no place to keep two-month projects and papers "safe" in multiple family households; many of our students have an alcoholic or drug using parent or dysfunctional families; and violence, unpaid utility bills, cockroaches, gangs and illness occupy family dynamics and clinically depress many of our students. And for many low-income minority secondary students, there's the additional problem of reading, writing and computing 3 or 4 years behind grade level.

Students must be accepted and valued for who they are and for what skills and assets they bring to the school task. For example, Juan slept in a different house every night. Whether he should have been able to or not, Juan simply could not keep track of his school materials and was frequently sent out of classes for no supplies. Our solution was to personalize the environment for Juan--have extra supplies for Juan and have him keep important school work in our office. (School lockers are not a viable solution because break-in, theft and vandalism are rampant.)

Another example of accepting students as they come and the need for personalization of school is the case of Enrique. Enrique refused to come to school because he needed hourly eye drops and was too embarrassed to go to the nurse's office. The school district rule requires that a nurse administer all medication. Our solution was to convince the school to get parent permission to let him borrow a faculty bathroom key each day from us and put in his own drops in privacy just as he did at home.

Once one accepts students' unique needs and their life circumstances unconditionally and stops blaming them for their background, or, in some cases, the disabilities they embody, then it is a small and inevitable step to recognizing the third principle of creating an effective child-adult relationship.

### **3. Attend to students' many needs and their complex situations**

Our students were not only economically needy, but often psychologically needy as well. Compassion must flavor the behavior of educators who work with disadvantaged children. Many are fragile. We found for the most part that explaining a child's life circumstances, even the most heart-wrenching examples, engendered little empathy from adults at the school. Indeed, to our despair, explanations of the child's background often caused the student to be rejected even more--the child's life circumstances were used as reasons for "why the student should not be in this school."

For example, Angela frequently responded sarcastically or with hostility to adults, especially men, yet when it was explained that she was a victim of child battering by her father and had gone to live with an 18 year old unmarried sister and 17 month old niece at age 14 in order to get away from the home, there was no mitigating the suspensions for "disrespectful" behavior. Elizabeth, at the beginning of her eighth grade year, discovered that both her parents were heroin addicts. Her father was jailed for selling and her mother left Elizabeth and her five younger siblings in the care of the grandparents. Elizabeth became very depressed and despondent and fell into a pattern of not completing classwork. She began having nosebleeds and was frequently absent. Yet, there was no accommodation extended to helping her complete the work or reducing the work load. Elizabeth was labeled by most of the adults at the school as "getting an attitude." Perhaps it is resignation on the part of adults in schools or a sense of being overwhelmed that make them appear so indifferent or uncaring toward children who are suffering.

High-risk low-income students require a great deal of attending to. One third of ALAS students required daily monitoring of their school performance in order to experience success in following through on their responsibilities. About 25 percent of the ALAS students circulated teacher feedback forms throughout their school day so that their behavior and assignments could be monitored daily by ALAS staff. This feedback was used to communicate nightly with parents. Given current school resources and organizational structure, school staff cannot be expected to provide this degree of monitoring. Auxiliary personnel such as ALAS appear to be sorely needed.

Additionally, we have found that to solve students' school problems often requires attending to their home or family problems, such as welfare, legal matters, medical problems, or siblings. Again, although we can certainly expect school staff to be empathic and to demonstrate emotional and psychological support for students; given current resources, they cannot be expected to provide the necessary social work services that high-risk students need. Yet these services are sorely needed.

Attending to the whole child as a high-need and highly complex individual forces one to adopt the fourth principle for creating effective adult-child relationships within the school environment.

### **4. Alter and individualize procedures and policies**

Flexibility requires that school staff take the time to really listen to individual students. High-risk students often have difficulty identifying a problem and expressing clearly what they need to have happen to succeed in the school. A significant task of the listening adult is to filter the confusion, frustration and often anger of the student and to determine whether the student or the system, or both, need to adjust in order for the student to succeed.

Flexibility and individualization are the key to successfully working with high-risk students. We have found that it is impossible to succeed with these most difficult-to-teach students if the school context is not tailored to their individual psychological needs and skills. Flexibility permits personalization of the educational experience for students.

We have found that success often requires only minor adjustments of school-wide procedures. We refer to this as tinkering with the system or advocating for students. However, as presently structured, large secondary schools are rarely malleable to even minor adjustments in policies or procedures for individual students. Student advocacy serves primarily to "free-up" and personalize the system for each student.

The degree to which an institution must respond flexibly varies with each student. Sometimes students simply want preferences to be met. We have found that, for the most part, student preferences are discounted by school staff as nonessentials. We think this is incorrect educational practice and that it contributes significantly to student alienation. ALAS staff did not require students to justify individual preferences, to justify why the system should be changed for them. If it was possible and practical to change the system, we made every effort to get the system to accommodate individual preferences of students. We regarded this as simply a form of nurturing.

Because of our "creativity" in accommodating students, ALAS project staff were frequently labeled as unorthodox. For example, Amanda was scheduled into a music class during the second semester of seventh grade. On the second day of the semester, Amanda was referred out of class by the teacher and arrived at the ALAS office fuming. This was not particularly unusual for Amanda who had a tendency to get into power struggles with adults. The problem was that in certain power struggles with adults at school, Amanda would rather be suspended or kicked out of school than give in. We soon realized that music was one of those times. The school was prepared to suspend Amanda and require her to "take music" because that is what every 7th grader did. We were able to solve the problem by convincing the school counselor to schedule Amanda to repeat an art class in which she had done well. State guidelines for fine arts credits would still be met with this option. As simple as this solution appears, it was viewed by school staff as very unorthodox. Part of the challenge for reformers is to help insiders recognize that orthodox has not worked for many disadvantaged students.

Another example of being flexible is the case of Camilo. Because of excessive truancy in the seventh grade when he did begin to attend regularly, Camilo was unable to comprehend eighth grade math. Our solution was to keep him in all eighth grade classes except math and, instead, give him 7th grade math (this was considered unorthodox because traditional policy dictated that a student was either retained or passed across all subject areas). The problem was that the 7th grade math teacher on his track (it is a year round school calendar) was not willing to take him as an eighth grader. We then negotiated with another teacher on a different track (therefore, different calendar year) to take him and when her off-track (vacation) time came we scheduled him with yet another teacher who used the same book. The final solution meant that Camilo was on two different grade levels with teachers from three different track calendars! Camilo learned his math. This solution was indeed unorthodox but it is representative of the kinds of flexibility needed to accommodate high-risk students to large systems. Personalizing

schooling seems important for all students; however, in order to succeed with the 25-30 percent most-difficult-to-teach students will always require that the school system be "tweaked" to meet their individual needs.

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## ALAS: SECTION II

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- <sup>37</sup> Delgado-Gaitan, 1988. Op. cit.
- <sup>38</sup> Casas and Furlong, 1986, Op. cit.; Delgado-Gaitan, 1988, Op. cit.; Delgado Gaitan, 1992, Op. cit.

- <sup>39</sup> National Research Council, op. cit.; Natriello, G., McDill, E.L., & Pallas, A.M. (1990). Schooling disadvantaged children: Racing against catastrophe. New York: Teachers College Press.



## **SECTION III**

### **How Did The Intervention Work?**

In this section we examine how the intervention worked. We focus on student outcomes, since that was the primary focus of the project. But we also examine the impact of the program on parents and teachers because having positive impacts in those two areas were thought to help improve student outcomes.

#### **Student Outcomes**

Typical of low achieving adolescents everywhere, students in ALAS had for a very long time experienced policies and practices as well as engaged in behavior leading to school failure. More often than not these students had not performed successfully since entering first grade. Consequently, from the outset of the ALAS program, it was assumed that long-standing school-related behavioral patterns in both students and parents would change slowly and develop over time as new skills were learned and integrated into existing life experiences. Thus, the full impact of the ALAS program as designed was not expected to be realized until the students and parents had received the interventions for at least two years.

But all the students who remained in the target school received the ALAS program for the full three years they were enrolled in the school. In general, our hypothesis was that the longer students were exposed to the program, the better the outcomes of the program would be. Thus the first evaluation of students outcomes for the program was performed when students completed their 9th grade year. Although students remained in the junior high school during the 9th grade, the 9th grade is officially the first year of high school and critically important for accruing credits toward high school graduation.

But we were also interested in finding out if the effects of the program could be sustained beyond the 9th grade, when the students had moved on to senior high school and were no longer receiving any intervention services. For the first cohort of students, 7th graders who entered the treatment school in the fall of 1990, we have thus far tracked their performance through the 1994-95 school year, when they should have completed their 11th grade of high school. We refer to these outcomes as long-term outcomes because they represent the sustained or long-term effects of the program, at least up until the time this report was written. However, the ultimate success of the program will have to be measured in terms of if and when program participants graduate from high school, which was the ultimate goal of the program.

Below we report student outcomes in two sections, one dealing with treatment outcomes at the end of 9th grade and the other dealing with long-term outcomes at the end of 11th grade. In each case, we examine a variety of outcomes across groups, including enrollment status, credits, grades and attendance.

**General Data Analysis**

Information was collected on a variety of student outcomes which previous research suggests are associated with school performance and dropping out. They include school enrollment, school persistence, school performance, psycho-social adjustment, family relations, and social behavior. Within each of these major categories, we examined a number of specific student outcome measures. The data were collected from a variety of sources, including school records, standardized tests, teacher and staff ratings of students, and a student survey about parenting practices designed and refined by Dornbusch and colleagues that has been shown to predict school performance and dropout behavior.<sup>1</sup>

**Table 5  
Student Outcome Measures and Sources of Data**

<b>Student Outcome Measures</b>	<b>Sources of Data</b>
<p><b>Progress Toward Graduation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enrollment status</li> <li>• High school credits earned</li> </ul> <p><b>School Persistence</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School attrition</li> <li>• Program recovery rates</li> <li>• School mobility</li> </ul> <p><b>School Performance</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attendance</li> <li>• Academic grades</li> <li>• Cooperation grades</li> <li>• Work habit grades</li> <li>• Classroom behavior</li> </ul> <p><b>Psycho-Social Adjustment</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-efficacy</li> <li>• Cultural orientation</li> <li>• Depression</li> </ul> <p><b>Family Relations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• parent/child communication</li> <li>• parental supervision</li> </ul> <p><b>Social Behavior</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incarceration</li> <li>• Teenage pregnancy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School records</li> <li>• School records</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School records</li> <li>• School records</li> <li>• School records</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School records</li> <li>• School records</li> <li>• School records</li> <li>• School records</li> <li>• Gresham &amp; Elliott’s Social Skills Rating Scale</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory</li> <li>• General Survey (Dornbusch)</li> <li>• General Survey (Dornbusch)</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General Survey (Dornbusch)</li> <li>• General Survey (Dornbusch)</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School records</li> <li>• Telephone survey</li> </ul>

Data were collected for all ALAS students, both in treatment and control groups, beginning the year before intervention, when students were still enrolled in the 6th grade. Data were then collected each year students were enrolled in the ALAS program as well as the years after the intervention ended in order to assess the longer-term outcomes associated with the program. An overview of the data collected for the project is shown in Table 6.

The data collection efforts for this project were ambitious. Generally, two types of data were collected: (1) archival data routinely collected by the school and district, and (2) original data collected by the ALAS project staff. Collecting both types of data presented challenges.

Accessing and using school archival data was difficult for several reasons. First, the data and the Student Information System (SSI) used by the school and the district to collect them were not designed to be used by researchers. Thus, considerable effort had to be taken to learn about the system and how to access and interpret the data. Second, school staff were not always knowledgeable or helpful in getting access to the data, in part, because of other demands on their time and the perception that projects such as ALAS were of a secondary concern to them. Finally, over the time we spent in the school we discovered that the school data were not always accurate. In particular, we discovered that the vice-principal of the school often used informal or unofficial suspensions rather than formal ones that required following official district procedures. As a result, official school records could not be used to monitor student suspensions. Despite these difficulties and limitations, however, the school data proved to be rich source of information that is generally not well used by educational researchers.<sup>1</sup>

Collecting original data presented other challenges. The primary one was the difficulty in administering surveys and instruments to students during class time. As stated above, teachers and school staff often viewed the ALAS project as secondary to their primary concerns of dealing with students. Thus they did not always cooperate in providing class time to administer surveys and instruments. And as the project proceeded, with ALAS counselors becoming advocates for students, cooperation was reduced even further. (We will discuss this issues further in the final section of the report). Finally, it was difficult to administer surveys and instruments to the control students, since these students did not the ALAS staff and thus were less willing to cooperate.

Due the limitations with both the archival and original data, less data was collected in this project than originally anticipated. Nonetheless, a rich and comprehensive array of data was collected that was more than sufficient to evaluate the impact of the ALAS program.

The analysis of student outcomes were based primarily on comparing similar groups of students on the various outcome measures. That is, Special Education Treatment Groups 1 and 2 were contrasted with the Special Education Control Group, and the High Risk Treatment Group was contrasted with the High Risk Control Group. Results of the Low Risk Control Group are also shown for many outcomes just to see differences between high risk and non-high-risk students.

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<sup>1</sup> Burstein, L. (1984). The use of existing data bases in program evaluation and school improvement. Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 6(3), 307-318.