High School Completion
Provincial Research Review


ALBERTA INITIATIVE FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT (AISI)

For further information, contact:

Alberta Education
School Improvement Branch
12th Floor, 44 Capital Boulevard
10044 – 108 Street
Edmonton, AB T5J 5E6

Telephone: (780) 427–3160
or toll-free in Alberta by dialing 310–0000
Fax: (780) 415–2481

This document is available on the Internet at http://www.education.alberta.ca/aisi.

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FOREWORD

This research review was conducted to provide information to inform Alberta Kindergarten to Grade 12 school jurisdictions and Alberta Education on the nature and status of high school completion AISI projects within the province. Although direction was given to the researchers and writers to establish parameters for the task, the content of this document reflects the writers’ perspectives on topics and subjects reviewed, and do not necessarily reflect the position of Alberta Education.

We are pleased to recognize the research team of Dr. Thelma M. Gunn, Dr. David W. Chorney and Dr. John C. Poulsen for its work conducting this specific research review of AISI projects, with a focus on high school completion.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Forward</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive Summary</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review Data</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose for the Review</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Selection Criteria</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review Limitations</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Findings</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Descriptive Statistics</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Categorical Analysis</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Thematic Analysis</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Effective Outcomes</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Challenges</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. Recommendations</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehensive Review Document</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context for High School Completion Projects</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Completion as Seen in the Literature</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors Associated with Non-completion</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socioeconomic and Regional Considerations</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student-and School-based Issues</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Completion Symposium</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Retention</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task Force Recommendations</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method of Analysis</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descriptive Statistics</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Categorical Analysis</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thematic Analysis</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional Modifications</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative Programming</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social/Psychological Support</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Development</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental/Home Environment</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tabulations Concerning Summary Outcomes</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group Analysis</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion and Limitations of the Review</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 1</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 2</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Since 1999, the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) has provided funding to Alberta school authorities for projects designed to improve student learning and performance (http://www.education.alberta.ca/aisi). Divided into cycles, AISI has successfully established a community of trust, enthusiasm and professional commitment between participating partners. To date, Cycle 1 (2000–2003) and Cycle 2 (2003–2006) projects have been completed, while Cycle 3 (2006–2009) projects have been selected and initiated.

The Cycle 2 (2003–2006) projects identified for review are categorized as differentiated learning, character education/behavior/school climate and high school completion. The University of Alberta, University of Calgary and University of Lethbridge were asked to complete a review of the final reports submitted by the respective project affiliates. The following review will focus upon the 18 studies categorized as high school completion by Alberta Education.

Review Data

Two sources of data were analyzed for this review:

- qualitative AISI project annual report (APAR) data from 18 successful high school completion projects from Cycle 2 (2003–2006)
- findings from a focus group of representatives from four schools and districts drawn from the above noted sample.

Quotations found in this review are from the project participants in their annual reports or as put forward, in a verbatim fashion, within the focus group session.

Purpose for the Review

The purpose of this review is to fulfill one of the AISI university partner and School Improvement Branch’s (SIB) mandates to work with learning system partners and stakeholders to share, integrate and sustain successes and effective practices from AISI projects.

Project Selection Criteria

SIB determined project selection upon receipt of the final project reports. (See Appendix 1 for a SIB authored description of its process selection process and criterion.)

Review Limitations

Although data was triangulated and the findings of this review were consistently validated, researchers recognize the limitations of this work. The work’s exploratory nature lent itself to a qualitative approach; thus, findings are descriptive rather than predictive in nature. Findings provide insight into the wide range of opinions held by study participants, not a population at large, and, while these findings are helpful for setting general directions or goals, specific details provided may not be applicable in other contexts or offer specific predictive value.
Key Findings

a. **Descriptive Statistics**

Cycle 2 high school completion projects were typically conducted in settings that:
- involved less than 10 schools (55% of the projects)
- targeted grades 9 to 12 (50% of the projects)
- targeted student populations under 1000 (55% of the projects).

b. **Categorical Analysis**

Each of the 18 high school completion projects can be grouped into one or more categories that best describe the primary purpose and focus of each project:
- **Instructional/Academic Support** – projects that provided specific academic assistance to help students acquire the academic skills and training necessary for graduation
- **School Retention** – projects that were primarily focused upon providing additional assistance to ensure that students remain in school/coursework until graduation
- **School-based Mentorship** – projects that focused upon mentorship to create vital personal connections between a caring educator and students
- **Transition** – projects that were designed to assist students in transitioning into post-secondary education and/or a career.

c. **Thematic Analysis**

Upon review, each of the 18 projects exhibited one or more of five broad themes.

Themes were ascertained on the basis of being influential foci, i.e., success, influence, primary importance, as reported in the project reports.
- **Instructional Modifications** – Successful projects adopted one or more instructional strategies that targeted the greatest academic potential of students at risk. Learners were considered active partners, not recipients in the learning process.
- **Alternative Programming** – In an attempt to meet the complex needs of students at risk, alternative programs were established to accommodate the academic, social and psychological differences of each individual.
- **Social/Psychological Support** – The desire to complete high school is perhaps the most critical factor. Successful projects made concerted efforts to instill the motivation and support structures necessary to achieve goals.
- **Parental/Home Involvement** – Attempts were made to forge partnerships with the students’ home to increase learner investment, commitment and the accountability necessary for high school completion.
- **Professional Development** – Professional development was integral to the success of the projects as the knowledge and commitment required from the faculty, administration and staff of a school and district are critical for program change and implementation.
d. **Effective Outcomes**

The most commonly reported reasons for a project’s success were:
- the level of commitment and support amongst staff and administration
- positive student outcomes that resulted from psychological supports and opportunities
- flexible program structure and instructional approaches
- ease and success of project implementation strategies
- gains experienced from professional development activities
- ease of transition for students going on to the next level of education and/or career
- creation of an optimistic future for students at risk.

e. **Challenges**

When asked to report those aspects of the project that did not work well, the most commonly reported reasons were:
- Parents were neither as involved nor as communicative as hoped.
- Staff commitment to the project was lacking, partly due to staff turnaround and attrition.
- There were difficulties keeping students in school and on track, academically and socially.
- Time commitments associated with a large scale project as well as completion deadlines were difficult to meet.
- There were difficulties associated with the selection of appropriate data instruments and analyses of outcomes.

f. **Recommendations**

Several recommendations for future high school completion projects/programs arose as a result of the review. They included:
- Greater attention should be given to improving high school completion rates amongst Aboriginal student populations. By assisting Aboriginal students reach graduation, not only will there be a significant impact on the economic, social and psychological well-being of the individual’s life, but there will also be a significant impact on the economic and social conditions of Alberta.
- High school completion projects/programs should be implemented at the elementary school level. Attention toward academics and social/psychological supports are critical in the early stages of formal schooling. The investments incurred by early education programs have immeasurable long-term economic and social implications.
- The creation and implementation of projects/programs that encourage parental involvement in a child’s academic life must be encouraged. Parents are one of the strongest predictors for adaptive psychological and academic successes.
- When students feel supported, both academically and personally, they are more invested in school. Therefore, mentorship programs, school counselling centres and academic support centres, to name a few, should continue to be established and supported.
HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION AISI PROVINCIAL RESEARCH REVIEW, CYCLE 2 (2003–2006), COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW DOCUMENT

Background

The Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) has provided funding to Alberta school authorities for projects designed to improve student learning and performance (http://www.education.alberta.ca/aisi) since 1999. Cycle 1 (2000–2003) and Cycle 2 (2003–2006) projects have been completed, while Cycle 3 (2006–2009) projects have been selected and initiated.

The Cycle 2 (2003–2006) projects identified for review are categorized as differentiated learning, character education/behaviour/school climate and high school completion. The University of Alberta, University of Calgary and University of Lethbridge were asked to complete a review of the final reports submitted by the respective project affiliates. The following review will focus on the 18 studies selected and categorized as high school completion by Alberta Education.

Its purpose is to fulfill one of the AISI university partner and School Improvement Branch’s (SIB) mandates to work with learning system partners and stakeholders to share, integrate and sustain successes and effective practices from AISI projects.

This review is divided into several sections: a brief discussion regarding high school completion, as seen in literature; results of the review of all 18 final project reports as well as the focus group meeting; a discussion of the results and findings from the review; concluding thoughts; and recommendations for future AISI high school completion projects.

Context for High School Completion Projects

No one can question the importance of high school completion. The 21st century has ushered in a need for greater technological comprehension, occupational training and intelligent consumption of global issues. Like most industrialized countries, Canada is a nation that acknowledges these changes and, therefore, places significant value on education and its means of training future professionals and citizens. Such sentiments are strongly echoed in Canada’s most prosperous province. The need for a highly skilled workforce is mounting and shows no sign of decline.

According to Statistics Canada (2003), Alberta showed a 9% increase in post-secondary educational qualifications amongst working age citizens from 1991 (47%) to 2001 (56%). However, there is no indication about whether these numbers include individuals educated in Alberta or whether the educated members of the workforce are imports. Given staggering provincial statistics that indicate that approximately 25% of students entering Grade 10 do not complete high school within five years, we know that Alberta is falling below the national average and may suffer serious economic, political and social consequences as it forges further into the 21st century. Therefore, it is the goal of the Alberta Commission on Learning (ACOL) to have 90% of Alberta’s youth complete high school within four years of starting Grade 10 (http://education.alberta.ca/department/ipr/commission/report.aspx, p. 63).
This sentiment was reiterated and accepted in the Alberta Learning 2004–2007 Business Plan (http://www.education.alberta.ca/media/589308/bp2004-07.pdf), under Goal Two–Excellence in Learning Outcomes, Strategy 2C, to work collaboratively with learning system partners to increase high school completion rates (p. 7). The Alberta Commission on Learning (ACOL) has identified several strategies that may help accomplish this goal. Most notably, and pertinent to this discussion, is that there must be greater opportunity to pilot and evaluate new approaches through the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI). With only moderate effects demonstrated by the 2001–2002 AISI projects focused on high school completion, ACOL recommended that innovative strategies to keep students in school be considered a top priority for funding and that all results be shared for further growth and benefits. However, prior to reporting on the outcomes of Cycle 2 (2003–2006) AISI projects and their potential impact, it is important to examine the factors associated with non-completion.

High School Completion as seen in the Literature

High school completion is a topic of considerable interest in industrialized countries. The economic and sociocultural health of a nation is often intrinsically linked to the importance of education. In a report released by the Centre for the Study of Living Standards (2007), there are significant correlations between educational attainment and labour market outcomes, labour force participation rates and the employment rate as well as poverty, crime and health. Most notably, the negative impact on these linkages is most evident in the absence of high school completion. Much research has been conducted in North America, with several emerging factors correlating with withdrawal. But how is high school completion defined?

Typically, high school completion is reported quantitatively. Statistics Canada, government registries and provincial departments of education measure high school completion rates using enrollment data along with student age. Depending upon the stakeholders, high school completion may be calculated differently, making it difficult to accurately capture. In Alberta, completion status is based on those who complete high school within a prescribed number of years after entering (Alberta Learning, 2004; Satchwell, 2004). Other methods of calculation include using Grade 12 enrollment statistics, bracketing age ranges of graduates and including students who wrote General Educational Development (GED) exams (Satchwell, 2004; Warren and Halpern-Manners, 2007). Taken together, it is clear that, depending upon the method of calculation, it is difficult to define high school completion and even more difficult to determine whether it is increasing or decreasing nationwide. Nevertheless, it is an urgent social problem in North America and a genuine area of concern in Alberta.

Factors Associated with Non-Completion

To better understand the factors leading to non-completion in Alberta, Dr. Karla Satchwell (2004) conducted a literature review for Alberta Education. Its primary purpose was to assist in the development of an action plan to improve high school completion rates. The main factors that Satchwell identified for further exploration in Alberta include gender, First Nations/Métis/Inuit (FNMI), socioeconomic and regional considerations, and student- and school-related issues.

Gender

According to the literature, those at greatest risk for leaving school early are boys (e.g., Bushnik, Barr-Telford and Bussiere, 2004; Satchwell, 2004). Male students are more susceptible to
substance abuse, learning/reading disabilities, acting out in school, diagnoses of ADD and ADHD, delinquency and the effects of poverty and physical abuse, to name a few; e.g., Centre for the Study of Living Standards, 2007, Satchwell, 2004. These and other devastating consequences often cause male students to either fail or to be retained at grade level. Unfortunately, grade retention is the strongest predictor of non-completion, with nine out of every 10 dropouts having repeated at least one year (Bushnik, 2003; Levine, 2003) (as cited in Satchwell, 2004). When these conditions are compounded with beckoning job opportunities, male students are likely to leave school early, flush with the possibilities of economic benefits and feelings of success (Blackmore, 2007).

Unlike their male counterparts who typically cite academic reasons, female students report personal reasons for withdrawal (Bushnik, et al., 2004; Satchwell, 2004). Pregnancy, familial obligations and poor home life lead many young women to leave school early (Bushnik, et al., 2004). The consequences for female dropouts are even grimmer with higher risks of poverty (Centre for the Study of Living Standards, 2007; Samuelson and Antony, 2003), involvement in prostitution (Schissel and Fedec, 2001) and part-time causal jobs with few opportunities for long-term advancement (e.g., Blackmore, 2007).

First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI)

Aboriginal students are perhaps the highest risk for non-completion. Statistics indicate that only one in five Aboriginal students who enroll in Grade 8 will receive his or her high school diploma. Of those enrolled, approximately 17% will not make it to Grade 9. This staggering trend continues throughout secondary school, suggesting that there is only an approximate 46% chance that an Aboriginal student enrolled in Grade 12 will make it to graduation (Centre for the Study of Living Standards, 2007; Cowley and Easton, 2004; Satchwell, 2004; Statistics Canada, 2001). Given the difficulties in finding employment without a high school diploma, for either Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal peoples, the severity of the situation is exacerbated by secondary social problems, such as poverty, substance abuse, rapid population increases, criminal involvement and racism, to name a few (Satchwell, 2004).

Like many minority and indigenous populations throughout the world, Aboriginal students feel marginalized within the school setting (McPartland, 1994). They report poor relationships with teachers and fellow students, a lack of care and concern, and a perceived expectation of failure (Heffernan, Beaudin, Gunn and Tailfeathers, 2004; Sinclair, Christenson, Lehr and Anderson, 2003). These sentiments are coupled with the negative impact of former residential schools on Aboriginal culture and family structure. Consequently, Aboriginal students and their families have had a difficult experience adapting to contemporary school settings.

Socioeconomic and Regional Considerations

The location and condition of a student’s life can impact the decision to remain in school (Blackmore, 2007). As indicated in the literature, students living in poverty are more likely to drop out (Bushnik, et al, 2004; Satchwell, 2004) as are students living in low income families (Satchwell, 2004; Schargel and Smink, 2001; Suh and Suh, 2007). Low socioeconomic status is also strongly correlated to inner city locations, where the greatest number of early school leavers reside (Centre for the Study of Living Standards, 2007; Schargel and Smink, 2001; Suh, Suh and Houston, 2007). Inner cities are typically laden with poorer living conditions and understaffed and overcrowded schools as well as higher crime rates and increased potential for illegal activity. For many, this type of environment often leads to a sense of hopelessness and, in turn, increases the risks of non-completion.
Student and School-based Issues

Several student- and school-based issues are predictive of non-completion. Poor relationships with teachers, feelings of isolation, behavioural disorders and achievement-related factors are strong contributors to early school leaving (Satchwell, 2004; Suh, Suh and Houston, 2007). Other factors include poor family structures and support, increased student mobility (South, Haynie and Bose, 2005) and conduct disorders (Suh and Suh, 2007).

While academic risk, e.g., low grade point average, is considered to have the greatest impact on dropout rates, it is intensified by a combination of predictors. Therefore, while it is critical to intervene with students who are struggling academically from the earliest of grades, it is the addition of other risks that is most detrimental (Suh, Suh and Houston, 2007).

While it has been noted that dropping out is not an event but a process that begins early in a child’s academic life (Christenson and Thurlow, 2004), alienation from school may not truly manifest until students reach high school (Finn, 1989; Suh, Suh and Houston, 2007). Consequently, programs that target students who exhibit only one risk factor may be prevented from dropping out. Moreover, it is never too late to implement high school completion projects, although early intervention is crucial. Several studies have demonstrated that younger students are not only more open to assistance and change, they are less likely to sustain a defeatist approach and subsequent pathway (Edmondson and White, 1998; Entwisle, 1990; Suh and Suh, 2007).

High School Completion Symposium

Although the literature has delineated many of the primary factors for non-completion, it is the voice of the students, themselves, that may warrant the greatest attention. In September 2006, a symposium was held in Edmonton to discuss personal experiences, success stories and student perspectives about high school completion. According to the Summary Report (2006), students, along with parents, school administrators, educators, businesses, post-secondary institution representatives and community representatives, identified three key factors for early leaving: an unsupportive home environment, behavioural problems and difficulties, and the absence of social and psychological support, both within and from the school.

There is no question as to the importance of a supportive home life. When students feel that there is no one who is concerned for their well-being or if the home environment is unhealthy, maladaptive psychological and motivational outcomes manifest. Students often slip into negative behavioural patterns, such as delinquency, substance abuse and truancy. This is exacerbated when the school climate is unsupportive or unprepared. In the absence of positive peer networks, trained counsellors and/or psychologists and caring staff, i.e., administration, teachers, students at risk are more likely to drop out.

Interestingly, several factors typically believed to contribute to early school leaving were rarely mentioned. They included “lack of motivation, working long hours and learning-related issues, such as uninteresting or not relevant curriculum, high expectations, insufficient one-on-one time with teachers and teaching styles not matching students’ learning styles” (p. 3). Therefore, while academics are certainly important factors when addressing high school completion, what appears to be more important is whether the students feel connected to the most influential people in their lives; i.e., peers, parents, teachers.
School Retention

In relation to the thoughts and suggestions emanating from the High School Symposium, there is sufficient literature to suggest that student retention is primarily encouraged by a culture of community and care. In 2003, Lehr, Hansen, Sinclair and Christenson reviewed 45 prevention and intervention studies conducted between 1983 and 2000 that addressed dropout or school completion. Lehr, et al. concluded that successful programs begin with a personal affective focus, i.e., teaching interpersonal relations, providing individual counselling, with a later shift to an academic focus; i.e., tutoring, specialized courses.

The literature also suggests that dropout rates are diminished where there is a strong school-based commitment to address specific student needs. Needs are categorized under the headings of home, community, peers and school (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr and Godber, 2001). With respect to home or family life, parents who provide greater academic support, supervision and educational expectations (Comer, Haynes, Joyner and Ben-Avie, 1996), positively increase academic engagement. Community involvement and activities also cultivate a greater sense of belonging, accountability and commitment to the school environment. This is especially important in schools that have a significant number of poor and minority students (McPartland, 1994) who already feel alienated from their peers and their local culture. By building a sense of trust and mutual respect amongst all participating members of the community and school, students are more committed to their education.

Peer influences must also be integrated into a high school completion program as peer aggression and social networks can positively or negatively affect school experiences and expectations to graduate (Sinclair, et al., 2003). Helping students build strong positive alliances and making good life choices is essential.

Finally, the school, itself, must find ways to enhance students' interest and enthusiasm for school, motivation to learn and sense of belonging (Christenson and Thurlow, 2004). This includes an emphasis on academic and behavioural engagement (e.g., attention to and completion of academic work, regular attendance, and appropriate conduct) and cognitive and psychological engagement (e.g., accrual of metacognitive knowledge, skills and strategies; commitment to task completion; positive relationships with peer and teachers). The student must understand that there is "someone who is not going to give up on them or allow them to be distracted from school; that there is someone who knows them and is available to them throughout the school year, the summer and into the next school year; and that caring adults want them to learn, do the work, attend class regularly, be on time, express frustration constructively, stay in school, and succeed" (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004, p. 38).

Task Force Recommendations

In 2005, a representative body of stakeholders, ranging from Alberta Education and the Alberta Teacher’s Association and School Board Association to various educational and community associations (i.e., Alberta Home and School Council, the College of Alberta Superintendents, Edmonton Chamber of Commerce, Federation des conseils scolaires francophone de l’Alberta, Métis Nation of Alberta, First Nations, NorQuest College) formed a task force. They created a number of recommendations in response to The Alberta Commission on Learning (ACOL) Report: Every Child Learns, Every Child Succeeds (released October, 2003). Twenty-five recommendations were grouped into five categories: Success for All Students, Classroom and School Climate, Career Exploration and Planning, Student Supports and Research and Ongoing Improvement Initiatives.
The success for all students category is based upon the notion that each individual has unique needs. In assisting students to graduate, assessment, instruction and programming must be tailored to the individual. Moreover, it is imperative that student and parental voices be heard and that barriers be removed, particularly for those groups of students who are at the greatest risk for non-completion.

In addressing classroom and school climate, the task force highlights the importance of the affective domain. While core subjects and academic knowledge are clearly important, it is also necessary to promote an interest in non-core subjects. Furthermore, creating a safe and caring environment is critical for students at risk to ensure attendance and engagement. This is especially important for those students who feel marginalized due to ethnic, socioeconomic and psychosocial factors.

Knowing that there are career opportunities upon completion is integral to keeping students in school. Career information and planning must be encouraged and established. A collaborative relationship between schools, government departments and public industries would ensure that students are kept apprised of possible career pathways in addition to specific post-secondary and apprenticeship programs and subsequent eligibility requirements.

Ensuring that students at risk receive the services needed to complete school is the aim of the providing student supports recommendation. As highlighted in the task force report, a critical juncture for dropping out is around Grade 8 or Grade 9. This suggests that funding for school-based supports should increase at the middle or junior high school level. Sources include more counseling and administrative staff, student health initiatives and other locally developed programs.

Finally, the task force strongly supports research and ongoing improvement initiatives, such as those put forth by AISI. By funding projects that target teacher professional development, classroom resources and areas of interest, such as early literacy and high school completion, both the province and its citizens will experience significant benefits.

RESULTS

Method of Analysis

Upon receipt of the 18 studies from Alberta Education’s Student Improvement Branch (SIB), all identifying information was removed. The studies were then distributed to researchers for a triple blind review.

Descriptive statistics were calculated on demographical information and categorical and thematic frequencies. However, the primary method of analysis was a qualitative, metasynthesis research design.

With respect to categorical analysis, the primary focus and purpose for each study was ascertained and coded into one or more categories. Descriptive statistics were calculated to determine the percentage of projects that fell into each category. An exploratory approach (Ogawa and Malen, 1991) was employed for the thematic analysis. The researchers read each project report in search of constructs that represent the major and minor themes. These themes lead to hypotheses about causal linkages regarding project
effectiveness. Consequently, reports were also read to determine effectiveness for student outcomes and impact on the school and community as well as project design. Descriptive statistics were also calculated to determine the percentage of projects that fell into each of the major themes.

### Descriptive Statistics

As indicated, 18 project reports were selected for analysis. Descriptive statistics were calculated on the number of students involved in each study (Table 1), the number of schools participating (Table 2) and the targeted grades (Table 3).

#### Table 1

*Frequencies and Approximate Percentages of Projects Involving Specific Student Populations in AISI High School Completion Projects*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Students Involved in the Project</th>
<th>Frequency*</th>
<th>Percentage**</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0 &lt; 99</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100 – 199</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>300 – 399</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500 – 599</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<td>600 – 699</td>
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<td>7000 – 7999</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9000 – 9999</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Note: Total number of projects = 18  
*Frequency = the number of projects involving this number of participating students.  
**Percentage = the percentage of projects involving this number of participating students.
Table 2

Frequencies and Approximate Percentages of the Number of Schools Involved in AISI High School Completion Projects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Schools Involved in the Project</th>
<th>Frequency*</th>
<th>Percentage**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0 &lt; 4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 – 9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 – 14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 – 19</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 – 24</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Total number of projects = 18.
*Frequency = the number of projects involving this number of schools.
**Percentage = the percentage of projects involving this number of schools.

Table 3

Frequencies and Approximate Percentages of the Number of Grades Involved in AISI High School Completion Projects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>Frequency*</th>
<th>Percentage**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>K - 12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 – 12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 – 12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 – 12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 – 12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 – 12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Total number of projects = 18.
*Frequency = the number of projects involving these grades.
**Percentage = the percentage of projects involving these grades.
Categorical Analysis

Each of the 18 high school completion projects can be grouped into one or more categories that best describe the primary purpose and focus of each project (Table 4). Category titles are as follows: instructional/academic support, school retention, school-based mentorship and transition.

Table 4

*Categorical Frequencies and Percentages of AISI High School Completion Projects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Frequency*</th>
<th>Percentage**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instructional/Academic Support</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Retention</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School-based Mentorship</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Total number of projects = 18; projects could fall into one or more categories.
*Frequency = the number of projects that were classified as falling within this category.
**Percentage = the percentage of projects that were classified as falling within this category.

The category of instructional/academic support included projects that provided specific academic assistance through special course offerings, differentiated instruction and a desire to raise Provincial Achievement Test scores. Projects characterized as instructional/academic support were committed to providing students with the academic skills and training necessary for graduation.

School retention projects were primarily focused upon providing additional assistance to ensure that students remain in school/coursework until graduation. There were several different approaches included in this classification, all making attempts to improve the school climate and provide alternative/flexible programming. In doing so, the project reports indicate that they were hopeful students would experience a sense of belonging, commitment, support and flexibility, with respect to their academic well-being.

Many of the projects can be categorized as school-based mentorship. By definition, effective mentorship programs clearly demonstrate that each student is provided with a caring environment comprised of mentors who provide emotional, psychological and academic support. Those projects that focused upon mentorship typically had after hours academic support, teacher mentors, student centres and outreach programs, to name a few. Most importantly, they were projects that focused upon the vital personal connection between a caring educator and the student.

Finally, several projects were designed to assist students in transitioning into post-secondary education and/or their career. The focus was upon meeting eligibility requirements, making suitable career choices and finding pathway opportunities. This category was entitled transition.
Thematic Analysis

The University of Lethbridge research team conducted a triple blind review of the 18 high school completion projects. Several meetings were held to determine primary themes emerging from the project reports. The five main themes include instructional modifications/support, alternative programming, social/psychological support, professional development and parental/home involvement. Themes were ascertained on the basis of influential foci; e.g., area(s) of success, influence, primary importance, as reported in the project reports.

Table 5

<p>| Main Theme Frequencies and Percentages of AISI High School Completion Projects |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency*</th>
<th>Percentage**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instructional Modifications</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative Programming</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social/Psychological Support</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Development</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental/Home Environment</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Total number of projects = 18; projects could fall into one or more themes.
*Frequency = the number of projects that were classified as exhibiting this theme.
**Percentage = the percentage of projects that were classified as exhibiting this theme.

Instructional Modifications

The most predominant theme amongst the projects was instructional modifications. Differentiated learning, the adoption of more effective and diverse learning strategies, one-on-one/small group support, motivational strategies and the targeting of subject specific needs were the most frequently identified methods of modification. Their primary purpose was to supplement basic classroom instruction and provide specific methods of support for students at risk. In all cases, it was hoped that students would not only improve their current academic standing, but also acquire the knowledge, strategies and skills to become better long-term learners. Offerings were both individualized and group focused.

Differentiated learning was frequently reported. Several projects employed this method of instruction to help students approach the curriculum in personally meaningful ways. Assessment methods, learning materials and classroom experiences were tailored to the needs of the students. All projects indicated that this was a successful means of engaging those students in danger of leaving early. As stated in one project report, "Using various teaching strategies and focusing on different learning modalities has kept students motivated and interested in achieving. For example, one student talked to me about being able to present her project in an alternate format. She discussed her learning style and her interest in making brochures. We discussed what components of the content needed to be shown. She created a colourful brochure incorporating research, phrases from another language and a photo essay as well as a very realistic portrayal of the social issues we were studying in our English theme. This wonderful brochure was created by a student who previously believed she was NOT able to achieve in English class."
The adoption of effective and diverse learning strategies was evidenced in a significant number of projects. According to the reports, both current and research supported strategies were carefully selected, practised and deployed. Because traditional methods of instruction had not proven to be successful with students at risk, alternative strategies were in much need. Examples include brain-based learning strategies, accommodating multiple intelligences and using advanced technology in the classroom. Some of the reported comments included:

- “Any reluctant writers were given the option of presenting evidence of learning by various means: PowerPoint, Web pages, taped audio presentation (could be Podcast in the future), telephone interviews. This resulted in a greater number of students who completed my courses.”
- “Not one, but a variety of well founded strategies were employed to reach students’ individual learning styles. Learning style and Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences were discussed with the students at the outset of the semesters to make them aware of their own learning styles.”

Many project reports highlighted the benefits associated with one-on-one or small group instruction. Students at risk require additional attention and assistance to succeed and feel connected to their learning environment. Having peers and attentive adults work directly with the student provided both academic and psychological support for those at risk.

- “Assistance was readily available – one-on-one or small group sessions. Cooperative learning and peer assistance also became effective strategies. Through the support of the school counsellor and the community liaison worker, these students were guided through turbulent times (often associated with the home situation).”
- “The small group environment permitted the instructor to provide individual student assessment in a format that was more appropriate to the student’s abilities. Many students were provided opportunities to complete tests or quizzes orally or using adaptive technologies. This practice does occur in traditional classrooms; however, it is more difficult to monitor in a class of 30 students.”

Targeting domain specific difficulties was frequently reported. Many students in jeopardy of leaving school early have historical difficulties with one or more academic subjects, most notably language and/or mathematics. Several projects made explicit attempts to identify and remedy such difficulties with additional programming, coaching/mentoring and tutorials.

Successes were reported in the following comments:

- “New and innovative ways to assess student writing were set up, with the focus on the student becoming more aware of his or her errors and how to avoid them. Students reviewed returned assignments, checked teacher comments and correction symbols to determine the most frequent writing errors and wrote specific goals for improvement. Each student developed personal goals for improvement in consultation with the teacher. For example, a long-term goal could be to improve appropriate verb usage that could lead to a short-term objective, such as committing to using correct verb tense throughout a literary essay with an accuracy rate of 70% during a one month period.”
- “Models for support, e.g., learning centres, homework hotel, classroom support, smaller class sizes, math clubs, homework lunch clubs, classroom workshops, classroom teacher professional development, support, helped mitigate the effects of learned helplessness in some students.”
Alternative Programming

Over half of the projects reported the importance of providing alternative programming to ensure completion. Students who were identified as at risk, below average or who had already dropped out were provided with alternative opportunities to complete the necessary course work for graduation. Typically, this involved student learning centres, online academic programs or career incentive programs.

Student centres were created in several schools to provide additional instructional support, individualized academic assistance, a safe and caring environment in which to work and a source for finding internal and external sources of mental and financial aid. According to the projects that utilized centres, students responded positively with comments, such as:

- "Staff is great with finding information on universities and scholarships. I learned of at least three more scholarships, thanks to the student centre."
- "The student centre is an influential part of our school. It has continued to provide help and assistance to me and my peers throughout our high school career. It has helped me form superior study habits and organizational skills."
- "The student centre is a great atmosphere to write a missed test or quiz. There is a lot of information in the student centre and the teachers working there always have time to answer any questions."

Teachers and administration articulated similar sentiments as they noted the importance of centres within the school and community:

- "Students fill the student centre each time it is open. The flexible schedule allows staff to notify and arrange for supervision of tests and projects."
- "Most of my students are non-academics and many have special needs. The student centre has been the best support system I have had the opportunity to work with. It is an essential part of my courses."
- "Without publicizing the presence of our Independent Learning Centre, it became known within our community. We would field unsolicited requests to access the program, some from students who required curriculum of instruction at the Integrated Occupation Program (IOP) level and some who did not."

Online programming and course completion offerings were also commonly utilized. In providing this source of alternative programming, students were able to complete graduation requirements with greater flexibility and creativity. Students could either take courses offered through their own school or school division, or enroll in externally-based programs. This type of programming was most suitable for those students who found regular attendance challenging, who were working full- or part-time, or who needed to pick up missed courses. As stated by one project, the need to include this type of programming was to "assist students to find alternative or flexible means of completing course work...Funds from this AISI project have been used to support the development and adaptation of both online and paper format modules with flexible entry points, which can be used to support students in regular courses at traditional schools or in outreach settings."

Career incentive programs were created to help students understand the opportunities available to them after graduation. Post-secondary requirements, career counselling and career choices were highlighted by way of programs offered through the school or external bodies, or through supplementary information found in student centres. While many of the projects provided crucial information for transitioning into a post-graduation life, one project focused upon an
alternative arts-based program connection with the community. Contact was made with local media and artists. In doing so, the project coordinators were pleased with “the honesty and sincerity of some of our extremely marginalized students”, claiming that their responses were both “refreshing and surprising.” In a most poignant comment, they write, “Students that came and became involved in these projects would turn up for rehearsal on days when they did not know where they would stay that night. Performances and practice became more important than finding drugs or some of the necessities of life.”

Social/Psychological Support

Social/psychological support was a prevalent theme in over half of the AISI high school completion reports. Many projects recognized the importance of a safe and caring environment when assisting students toward graduation. It was noted that the connection a student feels toward his or her academic community, teachers and peers is critical when deciding whether to remain in school or to drop out. In response, counselling supports, cross-cultural awareness initiatives and mentorship programs were frequently established.

Counselling supports ranged from the provision of links to the community for additional psychological assistance, to helping students identify and adopt adaptive emotional/psychological approaches. According to the project reports, such inclusions were well received and successful.

♦ “When students arrived, they took part in a sharing circle and developed an understanding of respect, consensus and cooperation in decision making through drama, games and exercises...The games in the circle of trust building worked really well. We were amazed that 70 people doing group building games together could do so well. The games made students more comfortable with each other and were instrumental in increasing student learning. Community was built in places that was extremely difficult before.”
♦ “Students who have been working on the positive citizenship aspect of the project have been showing the use of common language when dealing with others. This shows that it is becoming a part of the way we do things at these schools. This is exciting for the schools involved because it is becoming part of a culture that will be perpetuated.”

Several projects were strongly committed to enhancing cross-cultural awareness within their school(s) and community. For many minority populations, the feeling of isolation is a leading cause of early school leaving. By identifying the contributions and inherent strengths of each culture, students at risk and their peers were able to create an inclusive academic environment.

♦ “Integration of Aboriginal perspective, content and resources into curriculum and instruction and the use of Elders, Aboriginal storytellers, role models, guest speakers...allowed students to see their culture reflected in the curriculum. This increased the pride in the Aboriginal population and understanding in the non-Aboriginal population.”
♦ “Although the formal language of the Circle of Courage philosophy was not strictly adhered to, the basic tenets of this powerful way of walking in the world provided the framework for the project. Native students in year one of the project performed a sacred ceremony to acknowledge the borrowing of native beliefs.”

Mentorship programs were often established, with the intention of assisting students at risk with academic and socioemotional issues. Teachers modelled effective academic strategies and were available advocates and counsellors.

♦ “…boosted students’ self-esteem by helping them become more independent and responsible for their own learning...assisted students to become more independent and self-
sufficient; students learned to self-advocate and became more self-aware, confident and responsible learners.”

“...it was pleasing to see the number of students actively participating in the mentorship program. Some real gains were made in getting students to complete course work and, indeed, in just staying connected to the school itself. Many of the students assigned to mentors would not have been at the school if not for the program.”

**Professional Development**

Another major theme emanating from the project reports concerned professional development. For many of the high school completion projects, the primary focus and reported source(s) of success, was the professional development component. The training, workshops and seminars that teachers and administrators received were critical for the establishment and maintenance of a three-year project as well as for future sustainability. Professional development also aided in building collaboration and commitment amongst teachers and schools. The comments found within the reports attest to these sentiments.

- “Professional development gives educators a gift that cannot be taken away after the...AISI project no longer exists.”
- “Between the books and the presentations, I gained a greater understanding of the need to reconsider the need for redesigning our approach to teaching.”
- “The overall outcome of our focused and directed professional development (PD) was that teachers had a larger repertoire of strategies to keep more students at risk at the school site, which, in turn, contributed to more appropriate instruction and, hence, improved student learning and achievement.”
- “Professional development is the most important element in this AISI project. It permeates throughout the implementation of the project and spans several levels, from just in time professional development, with individual teachers working with school or division lead teachers, to division professional development days where speakers address the issues in a more theoretical, large picture fashion.”

**Parental/Home Environment**

The final major theme arising from the project reports concerned parental/home environment. Many of the high school completion projects made overt attempts to forge adaptive links to the home life of students at risk and to incorporate the positive influences of parents and guardians. It was often stated and always understood that, in order for students to understand the importance of education, parents must be active participants, advocates and mentors. To this end, communication strategies and partnerships were the most commonly reported methods of collaboration. They included Parent Advisory Councils, Web sites, newsletters and open door policies, to name a few.

For those projects that successfully incorporated parental involvement, support was evident. For instance,

- “We received enormous positive feedback from parents as their children had never been recognized before for their academics, citizenship or school involvement. During our first ceremony to mark the end of semester one, a parent ran up to the stage to collect the prize for his daughter!”
- “Parental support remained a critical factor for the success of the student centre. Communication between parents and schools was imperative for a positive relationship to exist and for this program to flourish.”

"Parental involvement and communication is one of a
multitude of keys to improving student learning since communication and involvement, of the type listed above, leads to understanding and commitment to what the school is trying to accomplish, which can lead to parents helping and influencing their children to meet the school goals and targets and hence do better in school."

Tabulations Concerning Summary Outcomes

Based on the summary section of the project reports, tabulations were calculated for the headings, What Worked Well (Table 6) and What Did Not Work Well (Table 7). The most frequently occurring responses were categorized and tabulated.

The most commonly reported reason for a project’s success concerned the level of commitment and support amongst the staff and administration. It was recognized that a project of such duration and magnitude could only be undertaken where there is school-based and district-wide backing. Also commonly reported was the recognition that project success was found within the students themselves. By being given appropriate psychological supports and opportunities for a second chance, student outcomes were positive. Other commonly reported reasons for project success involved the flexibility of the program structure as well as instructional approaches, the ease and success of project implementation, the gains experienced from professional development activities, the ease of transition for students going on to the next level of education or career and the creation of an optimistic future for students at risk.

Table 6

What Worked Well—Frequencies and Percentages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency*</th>
<th>Percentage**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Staff were supportive/committed ** to the project</strong></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Students were given a second chance/ good psychological support</strong></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Flexibility of the program/ flexibility for instruction</strong></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Program was successful/ implementation was successful</strong></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Success of the professional development activities/focus</strong></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Students were better able to transition into the next level of school/into a career</strong></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The project created hope for the future</strong></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Total number of projects = 18; projects could report one or more themes.
*Frequency = the number of projects that reported this theme.
**Percentage = the percentage of projects that reported this theme.

With respect to the reported reasons concerning what did not work well, the most common response was that parents were neither as involved nor as communicative as hoped. Many projects made concerted efforts to involve parents. While some were successful in their attempts, many reported falling short of anticipated parental involvement. This same sentiment
was echoed in the second highest reported reason. Although some projects stated that what worked best in their project was staff commitment, many reported that it was lacking. Specifically, it was often indicated that this was partially due to staff turnaround and attrition. Other commonly reported reasons for a project not working well included problems associated with keeping students in school and on track academically and psychologically, the time commitments associated with a large scale project as well as completion deadlines and the difficulties associated with the selection of appropriate data instruments and the subsequent analyses of outcomes.

Table 7

What Did Not Work Well— Frequencies and Percentages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What Did Not Work Well</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents were not involved enough/did not communicate enough</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff/school commitment was not strong/too much staff turnaround</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was difficult keeping students in school/on track</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The time commitment was too great/the time limits were too tight</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collecting data was difficult/not always appropriate to the project design</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Total number of projects = 18; projects could report one or more themes.
*Frequency = the number of projects that reported this theme.
**Percentage = the percentage of projects that reported this theme.

Focus Group Analysis

Upon review of the 18 high school completion projects, six were selected for a focus group session to discuss successes and challenges associated with project design, implementation, recommendations or suggestions for future projects and overall reflections regarding the project (Appendix 2). The six projects were selected on the basis of being well designed, effective in achieving their goals and clearly reported. Criteria included the provision of a clear description of the identified variables being studied; appropriate selection of instruments, according to the stated project goals; achievable time lines; reported successes in achieving project goals; a clear description of project methods; and clearly reported project outcomes, to name a few. Of the six projects selected for participation, four projects were represented at the focus group by seven attendees.

With respect to project design, several important comments and themes arose. It was quite clear that despite the origins of the project, i.e., school-based, school division initiative), all agreed that high school completion is a growing concern that must be addressed. At no time did the participants feel that the project was an imposition. Each agreed that the urgency of the topic is what made the design and implementation easy. However, there were challenges associated with project design. The constraints of time lines were strongly voiced. Submission dates and completion dates were perceived as occasionally problematic and, in a naturalistic
environment, such as a school (e.g., calendar, student body), they were, at times, perceived as unrealistic. As stated by one participant, “It would have been nice to have time to create the baselines and infrastructure before we got going”.

Other challenges were in relation to design expertise. All agreed that it is difficult to design a project that can be effectively measured. Therefore, having external support, with respect to measures selection and proposal submissions, would have been helpful. These sentiments were embodied in the comment that “…they were going as they went and learning as they were going. If we would have had some people who were in the know, it would have been advantageous”. Perhaps even more poignant, one participant stated, “…projects need to be based on solid research before you can make any changes.”

When asked what changes they would make if they could do it again, the participants reiterated that they would have appreciated more preparation time (e.g., to select a design and build an infrastructure), that they would have liked to have had a chance to learn from previous cycles without overlapping time constraints and that external expertise about project design and implementation would have been helpful.

Many of the challenges associated with project implementation involved staffing issues. Building responsibility within the school and school division was, at times, difficult. As stated by one participant, the problems of “…ownership…getting staff on board and the appropriate use of staffing…” prevented a smooth implementation of the project. After all, many staff regarded the project as the newest fad. One participant felt that this was partly indicative of how cycles are formatted. Simply, the first year involves some confusion regarding design, time lines and approval processes, to name a few. The second year is the most exciting. Everything is in place and the staff understands the intent of the project and their role within it; everyone is on board. However, by the third year, there are concerns regarding sustainability and whether the project can and will continue. Therefore, the participant who made this comment felt that it could be difficult to get people on board when effective projects are not funded or sustained for subsequent years, through the school, the school division or through subsequent AISI projects.

In spite of these difficulties, a recognized strength in the implementation process was the staff. Those who did participate in the project were passionate and committed. Additional strengths included the involvement and support of parents. As one participant stated, “Parents were totally on board…they saw it as a safety net to help and catch their child.”

When asked whether the project could be implemented at another school and be as successful, the response was that there are aspects that are transportable, but it requires committed people and strong relationships. Each of the four projects identified that it was fortunate enough to have specialized individuals who met, listened to and recruited other committed individuals. Therefore, the projects cannot be packaged and/or deployed in the same manner each time. Instead, they are unique to their context, but with some transferable components.

Perhaps the most interesting comments were in response to a reflection question. When asked to look back over their three-year involvement and decide whether it was worth the money, effort and time, participants answered with a resounding “yes”. Not only were students positively impacted, the school community and the community at large also benefited. This is in keeping with responses to an earlier question that asked, who benefited the most from the project? The unanimous consensus, at that time, was the students. Therefore, while it is evident that students were the greatest beneficiaries, it is interesting to note how strongly the project representatives felt that all stakeholders were positively impacted. Comments included,
“It was well worth it because of the synergy of the staff and then coming up with strategies...to help students achieve” and “Some didn’t complete high school, but keeping them there longer helped them to find the necessary services. If they had left earlier, I’m not sure where they would be.”

DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS OF THE REVIEW

A triple blind review was conducted on 18 AISI Cycle 2 (2003–2006) high school completion projects. Descriptive statistics concerning demographical data were calculated and reported. In addition, each project was reviewed for categorization and thematic purposes, project effectiveness and project design. The six projects that demonstrated the greatest reported successes regarding effectiveness and design were asked to participate in a focus group. Results from their discussion guided the development of future recommendation strategies.

With respect to project descriptions, the Cycle 2 high school completion projects were typically conducted in settings that involved less than 10 schools (55%), that included grades 9 to 12 (50%) and that targeted a student population under 1000 (55%). Therefore, it appears that the project leaders were generally selective and focused upon those students deemed to be at the highest risk for early school leaving.

While many of the reports were clear in their descriptions and provided a rationale for the measures and the activities involved, others were less clear. Program effectiveness was analyzed in several ways. Student outcomes, effects on teachers and school districts (i.e., instruction, professional development, job satisfaction) and program sustainability within the project school(s) were the primary foci.

A number of positive student outcomes were reported. Measurements were calculated both quantitatively and qualitatively. With respect to quantitative measures, projects reported calculating data using high school completion rates, course completion rates, attendance rates and academic achievement. For those projects that directly measured and provided completion and attendance rate outcomes in the APAR (83%), nearly all stated that there had been an improvement from baseline statistics. In reference to those studies that included academic achievement (44%), outcomes were measured using course grades and/or standardized measurements. For the few studies that provided follow-up data in the APAR (38%), there was some improvement, although not as much as anticipated.

So why were there so few academic gains? While academic achievement was certainly of importance, according to all of the final reports, it was not the primary purpose for each project. As identified in the categorical and thematic analyses, instructional supports and modifications were emphasized, but only in so far as to assist students in attaining the necessary levels of success and self-efficacy required to stay in school. Support for this type of approach can be found in the literature that suggests academic success is only one component of school retention. Therefore, significant increases in academic achievement should not be expected, as they were not central to the project mandate.

The most likely reason for the lack of increases in academic achievement was the manner in which it was measured. Many projects reported using Provincial Achievement Tests (PAT) as a measurement tool (28%). According to the design structures of the 18 AISI high school completion projects, which included a considerable focus upon senior high school students,
there was little rationale for the inclusion of PAT scores. Moreover, because PATs are only administered to grades 3, 6 and 9, the data cannot be analyzed for statistical changes in academic achievement for senior high school students. Consequently, it is inappropriate to draw conclusions about a project’s effectiveness to generate academic increases on the basis of PAT results. The more appropriate method of ascertaining academic change would involve the calculation of teacher determined academic achievement. Although it is not a standardized method of assessment, it is the best estimate of change, where academic achievement is not the primary focus. After all, the focus was not on cognitive psychological structures, but social psychological perceptions. Interestingly, 38% of the projects did discuss nonstandardized academic changes, but primarily anecdotally. There were few statistics reported. In all cases, the conclusions were that students had made academic gains as a consequence of the project.

As previously indicated, student outcomes were also measured qualitatively. The most common method of data collection was the survey method (78%). Students, parents and teachers were queried for perceptions of program impact and effectiveness. Other forms of qualitative data collection included interviews and anecdotal records. The overall consensus of those projects that did utilize qualitative measures was that their programs were well received and effective. The most commonly reported benefits resulted from scheduling flexibility, instructional supports and mentorship.

Project reports also provided program effectiveness outcomes for participating teachers, schools and their school districts. Again, survey instruments and anecdotal reports were the primary sources of data. By way of these data collection methods, the critical perceptions of those implementing each project were validly assessed. Interestingly, what was perceived as a great strength in many of the project reports was also reported as being a limitation. The commitment required from the staff of a school, i.e., teachers, support staff, and school district was immense. While this frequently helped to bring committed stakeholders together via goal setting, goal accomplishment and collegiality, it was also a source of contention as not every project felt that it was consistently sustained by all participants. Staff turnover, a lack of like mindedness and strict time lines were often cited as unpredictable variables.

In spite of such difficulties, there was general, overwhelming support for the project from participating school staff. The benefits incurred from professional development activities were underscored in each report. Teachers acquired knowledge, skills and strategies that assisted not only the students at risk, but also the entire student body, throughout the duration of the project and into the future. There was also a sense that positive links were made within the school, amongst schools within the district and to the community at large.

Perhaps the strongest endorsement for any project is that stakeholders believe it should be sustained. Whether the Cycle 2 projects discussed herein have continued is outside the scope of this review as there are no follow-up measures included in final project reports. In the absence of such data, the perceptions of the project participants are considered to be important evidence as to potential sustainability. As such, an overwhelming 94% of project reports stated that the projects would continue in some manner. While some reports indicated that specific aspects of program implementation would be retained, others stated that the knowledge, skills and strategies acquired throughout the three-year cycle would have immeasurable, long lasting effects in their classrooms, schools and school districts. Moreover, 61% of the project reports stated that there was a strong commitment on the part of the teachers, staff and/or school district to continue with the project. In fact, 39% of the project reports identified specific aspects of the implemented program that are now inextricably woven into the participating classrooms.
and schools. With respect to funding, 28% of the reports stated that funding for project sustainability had either been secured or would be sought.

On the basis of these results and the focus group responses, it is clear that the AISI Cycle 2 high school completion projects impacted the participating students, staff and administration enough to warrant continuation and sustainability.

CONCLUSION

According to literature, high school completion is impacted by several critical factors. Gender, First Nations/Métis/Inuit (FNMI), socioeconomic and regional considerations, and student- and school-based issues, both individually and collectively, influence whether a student decides to leave school early or to continue until meeting the requirements for graduation. While these factors are formidable, they can be mediated through careful prevention and intervention strategies. There is sufficient evidence to suggest that by attending to the social/psychological needs of each student, e.g., developing strong interpersonal connections between students, peer, teachers and parents; providing counselling services; creating mentorship programs and alliances, and then shifting toward academic needs, e.g., tutoring services, flexible programming, differentiated instruction, early school leaving can be prevented. These same sentiments were echoed in the High School Completion Symposium (Summary Report, 2006) and the Task Force Report (2005).

Upon review of the 18 projects, many either attended to social/psychological issues prior to academic issues or placed more emphasis on social/psychological issues as compared to academic issues. Of those that focused more heavily on academic issues, there was still considerable attention directed toward social/psychological issues. Therefore, it appears that all of the 18 selected projects from Cycle 2 were aligned with the literature regarding prevention and intervention. However, this was not the case with respect to several of the factors associated with early school leaving.

Although the literature states that male students tend to be at higher risk for early school leaving, no project tailored its program toward this specific population. Nor did any project focus upon female students. While such a focus may not have been warranted by any of the projects for Cycle 2, it may be a consideration for future projects.

Similarly, for First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) students, there was only one project that focused exclusively on an Aboriginal population. A few studies made mention of Aboriginal issues and the importance of cultural awareness within the school, but it was not a primary focus. Given the staggering statistics regarding non-completion by Aboriginal students, there is no question that more projects focusing upon Aboriginal student retention need to be created, supported and deployed.

Finally, while there is evidence to suggest that it is never too late to address the risk factors associated with early leaving, there should be an even greater focus on elementary school students (Edmondson and White, 1998; Entisle, 1990; Suh and Suh, 2007). Several of the projects cited population parameters beginning in Kindergarten, but there was little data derived from or reporting of students younger than Grade 10.
Overall, the 18 selected Cycle 2 projects regarding high school completion were designed, deployed and reported with the utmost integrity. The project reports clearly exhibited the dedication and commitment of teachers, staff and administrators in Alberta schools and this was further confirmed during the focus group discussion. While the gains were not always as significant as the project coordinators had hoped, they were critical first steps toward future outcomes. The knowledge, skills and strategies acquired through Cycle 2 will likely have an impact for many years. As the literature suggests, early school leaving is a process, not an event. The same can be said for reversing this formidable trend. To assist in this endeavour, several recommendations regarding future AISI projects and high school completion projects are provided below.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. In accordance with the literature, projects/programs focusing upon the most commonly cited factors for early school leaving warrant additional attention. In particular, given the staggering statistics regarding FNMI high school completion rates, future AISI projects should focus upon Aboriginal students when attempting to improve high school completion outcomes. By helping an Aboriginal student reach graduation, there will be a significant impact on the economic, social and psychological well-being of the student’s life and on the economic and social conditions of Alberta (Centre for the Study of Living Standards, 2007).

2. While vital decisions are being made to either stay in or to leave school during junior and senior high school, the perceptions of feeling valued and academically competent are sown as early as Kindergarten. There is considerable evidence to suggest that early in a child’s academic life, decisions are being made regarding the utility of education and its emotional impact (Edmondson and White, 1998; Entwisle, 1990; Suh and Suh, 2007). It is, therefore, critical to implement high school completion projects/programs at the elementary school level (Centre for the Study of Living Standards, 2007). Attention toward academic proficiencies in core subjects, alongside social/psychological supports for students and parents is critical in the early stages of formal schooling. The investments incurred through the implementation of early education programs have immeasurable long-term economic and social implications.

3. The inclusion of parents and guardians in a child’s academic life has significant long-term implications. Parents are not only able to support, supervise and encourage adaptive academic experiences (Comer, Haynes, Joyner and Ben-Avie, 1996), they are best able to provide the psychological foundation for enhanced academic engagement. Consequently, the creation and implementation of projects/programs that encourage parental involvement in a child’s academic life must be encouraged.

4. In partnership with a child’s home life, projects/programs with an emphasis on the personal affective components of education must be supported. There is considerable evidence to suggest that when students feel supported, both academically and personally, they are more invested in school. Thus, mentorship programs, school counselling centres and academic support centres, to name a few, should continue to be established and supported.
REFERENCES


Satchwell, K. *Literature Review for the High School Completion Rate Project.* 2004.


APPENDIX 1

BACKGROUND AND SCOPE OF AISI

The goal of AISI is to improve student learning and performance by supporting initiatives that address unique needs and circumstances within school authorities. AISI funding is targeted, which means it is provided to school authorities for specific local initiatives that focus on improving student learning. This funding is in addition to basic instruction funding. All provincially funded school authorities in Alberta participated in Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 of AISI, including 77 public school authorities (e.g., public, separate and Francophone districts, charter schools) and 231 private school authorities (e.g., 115 private schools, 116 ECS private operators). Over 800 AISI projects were developed and implemented during the first cycle (2000–2003) and approximately 460 projects were approved for the second cycle of AISI (2003–2006), which began in September 2003.

Cycle 1 of AISI established a foundation of trust between government and education stakeholders and created a model for collaboration that has been employed in other government initiatives. It established accountability measures and criteria to provide evidence that the initiative works and set the stage for continuous improvement. Cycle 2 of AISI consolidated emerging knowledge and synthesized what works. It built on the enthusiasm and commitment from Cycle 1 and expanded AISI’s sphere of influence to more Alberta teachers and students. During Cycle 2, there was greater focus on collecting the right data, in-depth analysis of promising practices and further dissemination of findings, all of which are fundamental to the future success of AISI.

AISI, currently in Cycle 3 (2006–2009) with about 400 approved projects, continues to build on the accomplishments of the first two cycles. Characterized by collaborative inquiry, it emphasizes innovation and research, extends what has been learned, through in-depth analysis of project outcomes, enhances professional practice, focuses on professional development and expands knowledge sharing and dissemination.

PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

The purpose of this report is to gather and synthesize findings from AISI projects that made successful use of high school completion strategies and to identify effective and promising practices that school authorities can use to improve student learning in Kindergarten to Grade 12 environments.

PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA

The following sources of data were used to determine projects selected for this review.
Differentiated Instruction
AISI Cycle 2 projects related to differentiated instruction that had statistically significant effect size, e.g., small, medium, large, on any of the following student learning measures:
♦ project measures, based on Provincial Achievement Tests (PAT) or Diploma (Dip) Examination (Dip) results
♦ project measures, based on results of standardized tests or locally developed student achievement measures.

Character Education/Behaviour/School Climate
AISI Cycle 2 projects related to character education, behaviour or school climate that had statistically significant effect size, e.g., small, medium, large, on any of the following measures:
♦ student learning; e.g., PAT/Dip, standardized tests, locally developed measures
♦ student behaviour, satisfaction or attitude
♦ parent satisfaction.

High School Completion
AISI Cycle 2 projects related to high school completion that had statistically significant effect size, e.g., small, medium, large, on any of the following measures:
♦ student learning; e.g., PAT/Dip, standardized tests, locally developed measures
♦ student behaviour, satisfaction or attitude
♦ parent satisfaction.

1 Effect Size Calculation

An effect size of 1.0 indicates an increase of one standard deviation, typically associated with advancing children’s achievement by one year, improving the rate of learning by 50% or a correlation between some variable and achievement of approximately 0.50 (Hattie 1992, pp. 5–6).

All data on student learning, both baseline and results, were converted to a common scale, e.g., standard score, that permits comparison of improvement, regardless of the type of measure school authorities used. An effect size expresses the increase or decrease in standard deviation units.

For each measure, the baseline and annual result were converted to standardized (z) scores with a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one. The effect size for each measure was determined by the difference between the z scores for the baseline and the actual annual results and then averaged over the measures for each project and weighted by the number of students involved in each measure. These average effect sizes were grouped into four categories: no effect (less than zero or not significant), minimal (.01 to less than less than 0.2), small (0.2 to 0.3), medium (0.4 to 0.7) and large (0.8 or higher).
APPENDIX 2

Leading Question: What was the impetus for this project? Was it your idea or was it presented to you?

Research Design

1. Who designed your study? If you designed your study, would you have liked external assistance?
2. What were some of the challenges in designing your study?
3. What was the easiest part of designing your study?
4. How would you change your design if you were to conduct your study again?
5. How did you decide upon your design? Who and what did you consult? Would you recommend doing it your way again or how would you change things?

Deployment at the School/Division Level/Student Outcomes

6. What were some of the challenges in implementing your study in your school/division?
7. What was the easiest part of implementing your study?
8. What would you do differently if you could implement your study again?
9. Who do you feel benefited the most – administration, teachers, students, parents or school community?
10. Do you think this study, implemented at another school, would have achieved similar results?

SIB/AISI Directed

11. What kinds of suggestions would you have for SIB regarding future projects – directions, ideas concerns?

Overall Reflection

12. Looking back on the three years and possible year(s) before and after the project, was it worth it? Were the gains sufficient to warrant the work, worry and money?
13. Was this a sustainable project in your school/division?