

## BEST PRACTICES: A CROSS-SITE EVALUATION

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For well over a century, there have been boarding schools for American Indian children. During the last decades, the long history of these boarding schools has increasingly come under the review of historians and social scientists. The reviews making the biggest splash focused on those boarding schools having misguided policies or run by incompetent administrators. But often overlooked in these post-hoc assessments of boarding schools is the complexity of the issues they have faced and continue to face. There are no perfect boarding schools that have gotten everything "right," just as there are no other perfect social organizations. The situation each boarding school faces is complex; each has achieved some sort of functional equilibrium of key factors which form a unique constellation: staff, administration, resources, programs, current state and federal policy, community of location, communities of origin, families, and tribes. The unique configuration that makes up each boarding school's environment attempts to meet the needs of as many students as possible, and tries to maximize positive outcomes. Recognizing that there is room for improvement, the Office of Indian Education Programs (OIEP) provided several years of funding to a group of schools in order to enhance their services to children. Respecting the diversity of the schools, the OIEP invited boarding schools to submit proposals that enhanced their extant strengths and linked "clinicians, counselors, and mental health professionals with academic program personnel in a culturally sensitive residential program tailored to the particular needs of Indian students" in order "to achieve positive changes in attitudes, behavior and academic performance of Indian youth attending boarding schools." (Improving America's Schools Act of 1994). The selected boarding schools were provided Therapeutic Residential Model (TRM) funding to carry out their proposals. To determine each site's accomplishments as well as the efficacy of this approach, the OIEP concurrently implemented a cross-site evaluation. The evaluation was designed to (1) provide a record and evaluation of the characteristics of each site's environment prior to funding, (2) document the course of planning and implementation of changes during TRM funding, (3) collect data on incoming students and outcome data agreed upon by all sites, (4) provide ongoing analyses of the data to the sites so that administrators could make program changes, and (5) use process and outcome data from these diverse sites to draw cross-site conclusions.

Retention is the clearest and most basic indicator of success in a boarding school because it represents the convergence of a number of factors: the ability of the system to meet the particular needs of each child, the capacity of the system to stabilize children emotionally and to socialize them into acceptable behavior patterns, the comfort level of children with the environment provided, and parents' perception that staying in the system is in the best interests of their children. Conversely, major reasons why children leave the system are homesickness, belief that they are needed at home, failure to adjust to the demands of the system, perturbation of the system to the extent that it rejects them, and removal by parents who need them at home or are either unhappy with or unimpressed by what the system has to offer. Simply put, high retention means that the system is working for the students entrusted to its care. Two of the 5 sites involved in the TRM program achieved high levels of retention; one did so in the years prior to TRM funding, and the other site made impressive gains during the study. Section 1 of this cross-site evaluation identifies the factors that were common to sites that achieved high retention, and it describes the prevailing situation at those sites that were not successful at retaining students.

Section 2 examines the process and outcome indicators that presumably impacted the retention rate at each TRM site. Table 1 shows key characteristics of at-risk youth and characteristics of the healing environment as defined by Reclamation Theory (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002, pp. 4-8) in comparison to process and outcome indicators used in this evaluation, focusing primarily on grades all sites had in common.

**Table 1**  
**Indicators and Reclamation Theory**

At Risk Factors	Healing Environment	Indicators
"DESTRUCTIVE RELATIONSHIPS, as experienced by the rejected or unclaimed child, hungry for love but unable to trust, expecting to be hurt again."	"Experiencing belonging in a supportive community, rather than being lost in a depersonalized bureaucracy."	<u>Social Bonding</u> - School Bonding (ADAS) - Inclusion (Jessor) - Interpersonal (BarOn)
"CLIMATES OF FUTILITY, as encountered by the insecure youngster, crippled by feelings of inadequacy and a fear of failure."	"Meeting one's needs for mastery, rather than enduring inflexible systems designed for the convenience of adults."	<u>Achievement</u> - School Achievement - Adaptability (BarOn)
"LEARNED IRRESPONSIBILITY, as seen in the youth whose sense of powerlessness may be masked by indifference or defiant, rebellious behavior."	"Involving youth in determining their own future, while recognizing society's need to control harmful behavior."	<u>Responsibility</u> - Reliability (Jessor) - Stability (ADAS)
"LOSS OF PURPOSE, as portrayed by a generation of self-centered youth, desperately searching for meaning in a world of confusing values."	"Expecting youth to be caregivers, not just helpless recipients overly dependent on the care of adults."	<u>Meaning &amp; Identity</u> - Cultural Pride (Index) - Meaning (Jessor) - Identity (Jessor) - Social Responsibility (Jessor)

Each of the preceding chapters described the philosophy, staff, resources, programs, outside stakeholders, and outcomes of a single site. It became evident during the study that the diversity of sites provided examples of how system characteristics impeded positive change or decreased ability to meet the needs of children, as well as examples of best practices. Section 3 compares and contrasts the sites to provide a perspective on what qualities and conditions likely contributed to their ability (or lack of ability) to meet the needs of children. Areas addressed are staff, management, and administration; their relationship with families and communities; and their methods of transitioning students into the boarding school, dealing with the students' emotional problems, and aiding their socialization and academic proficiency. In addition, Section 3 examines each boarding school's ability to establish a data feedback loop to guide dynamic system change.

Section 4 is entitled *Elephants in the Living Room*, and deals with common issues across sites.

### Methodology

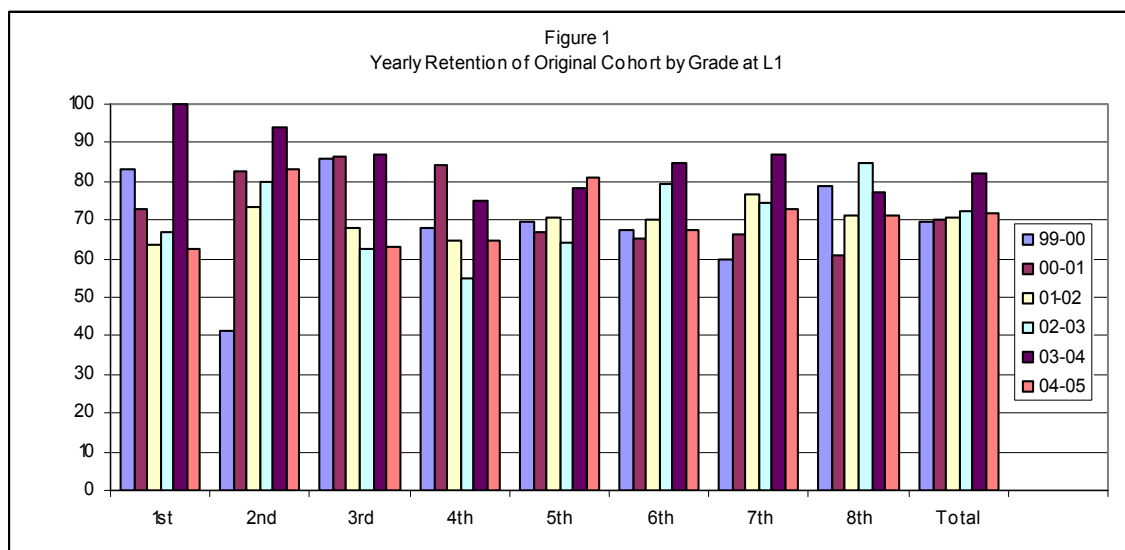
Staff and student surveys provided the basis for data comparison among boarding schools. The Prevention Planning Survey section of the American Drug and Alcohol Survey (ADAS), the Jessor Alienation Scale, The BarOn Emotional Quotient Inventory (BarOn), and a cultural pride inventory were measures used across sites for student surveys. Qualitative data from staff interviews, comments on questionnaires, evaluator observations, student interviews, and focus groups with students were also data sources. Staff ratings on staff questionnaires used a scale of 0 (*not a problem here*) to 4 (*a major problem*) to rate items according to "Your opinion of the current level of the problem at your institution and its effect on students." Staff ratings were inverted and transformed to a 100-point scale to provide an overall approval rating on each item for each site for comparison purposes. Staff surveys at one of the sites may have been compromised after the initial round of data collection: A number of staff at L3 reported that they had received heavy pressure from supervisors to provide only positive perspectives in future surveys.

The approach used in this cross-site evaluation is not that of a classical research study, but rather that of a field study patterned on chaos theory (DeJong, 1995). Data were collected in the course of complex changes occurring in systems. Some changes were due to increased funding brought by TRM; others occurred as a result of extraneous factors, many of which evolved during the TRM project. Therefore, the adopted approach was to collect as much pertinent data as possible at each site on what seemed to be relevant factors, and then backtrack from outcome results to possible causes. This data feedback loop was used extensively at sites that made numerous mid-course program changes.

### Section 1. Retention Issues

Sites had differing approaches to retention.

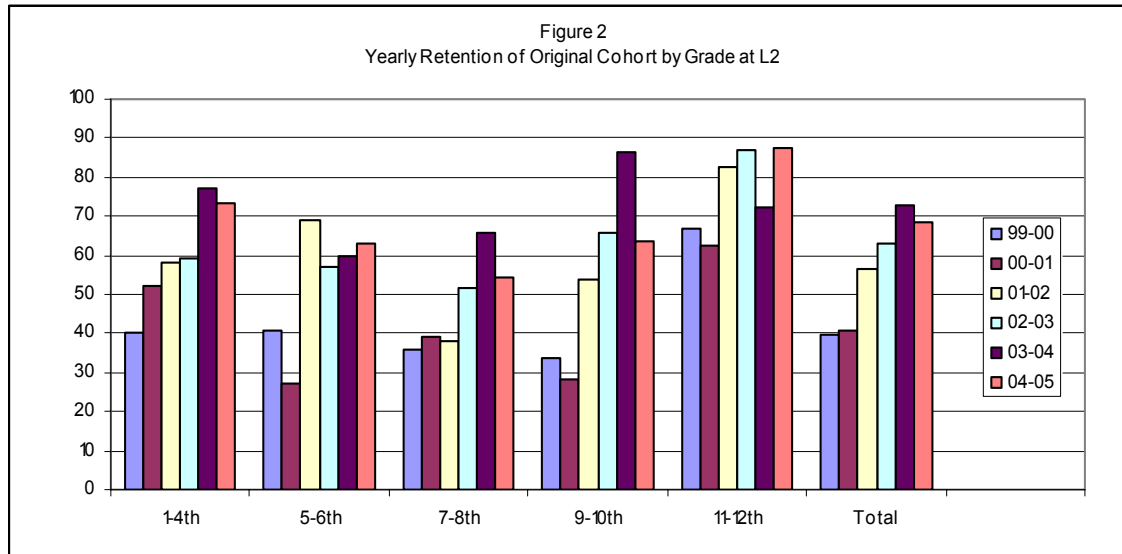
L1. L1 had the highest retention; Figure 1 shows percentage of students retained for each year over a six year period, before and during TRM funding.



L1 paid a great deal of attention to the transition process. Positive first impressions were generated by the attractiveness of the campus and the friendliness and involvement of all adults on campus. The first several weeks at the school emphasized assessment of incoming students. To promote peer bonding, arriving students were placed in small peer groups and assigned to rooms with one or more returning students who assisted them in acclimating to residential routines. Student participation in highly structured group activities provided staff opportunities to closely monitor peer interactions and to identify students in need of assistance with their social skills. The highly structured schedule quickly involved students, leaving them little time to experience homesickness.

L1 also developed policies aimed at limiting mid-year losses. The site attributed some of its retention success to its policy of limiting trips home during the school year to the Christmas holidays. This decision was reached after observations that student losses often occurred when students failed to return from trips home for Thanksgiving and spring break. While family members were allowed to visit their children and take them out for a day of activities, students had to be returned to the dormitory in the evening. The site also emphasized structure, stability, and security. Recognizing the disruption caused by the influx of new students, the site opted to maintain equilibrium by not replacing students who left during the academic year. While other schools brought in students throughout the year to bolster head counts, L1 took in mid-year students only under extraordinary circumstances. The institution of a high level of monitoring and structure, and emphasis on involvement of all staff, begun in school year (SY) 1998-1999, was associated with a drastic decline in incidents of assault. Incidents of physical assault dropped from 697 in SY 1998-1999 to 8 in SY 2002-2003, 12 in SY 2003-2004, and 2 in SY 2004-2005.

L2. L2 initially had a low level of retention. But as can be seen in Figure 2, this peripheral dormitory significantly increased retention by addressing the problem on multiple levels. In the first year of funding, the site identified alienation issues arising during the first few days of school. For example, a number of new students had always arrived without the paperwork necessary to begin classes at local schools. As a result, they missed the critical first days of school. Therefore, the site made a concerted effort to obtain paperwork for all students prior to their arrival. Staff paid additional attention to new students. A staff member developed a Rites of Passage program and ceremony for sixth grade boys to help them transition into the older boys' dorm.

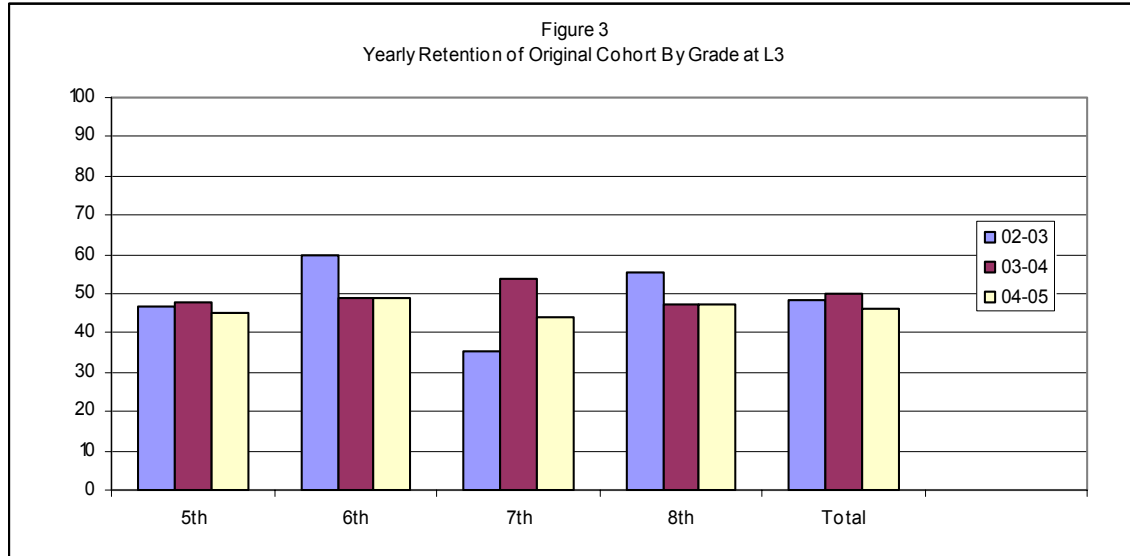


Each year, an L2 evaluation team worked with the cross-site evaluator to review the circumstances surrounding the loss of each student and brainstormed ways to avoid such losses in the future. The advent of TRM was accompanied by upgrades to the physical appearance of the site, inspiring student and parent pride in attendance. The site elected not to follow the example of L1 in curtailing visits home and continued to encourage students to visit their families on weekends and holidays; however, it allocated increased staff resources to track students when they went off site and to retrieve them when necessary. The site used TRM funds to increase the number of activities and services so that students had additional incentives to return after visits home. Finally, the site provided a strong support system, making all of the arrangements – including financial aid packages – for graduating students to continue with post-secondary education.

The commonalities between the two sites that had high retention rates at the end of the TRM funding were:

- Both sites examined the dynamics of the retention problem, and recognized that students were coming in with problems related to family situations and past and present life stressors that needed to be addressed.
- Both sites believed in the students. They assumed that students would do well if provided with an optimal environment, and utilized grassroots problem-solving to optimize their environments.
- Both sites took responsibility for student retention. When confronted by adverse outcomes, these sites did not blame the students or their backgrounds. Instead, both sites modified their systems.
- Both sites used the feedback from the ongoing evaluation as a basis for effective problem solving.

L3. L3 was unable to impact its retention rate. As can be seen in Figure 3, this boarding school continued to lose one-half of its original cohort each year.



Each year, L3 lost a significant number of its 200+ students during the first month of school. Females, particularly in the middle school group, were more likely than males to leave the school. In contrast to the other two TRM sites which modified programs based on evaluation results, staff and administrators at this site resisted recommendations for increasing structure and stability in the dormitory and academic settings, arguing that their students came from homes with no structure, so imposing structure and residential continuity was not necessary or not advisable.

Other factors probably also contributed to this site's poor retention rate. Despite having the best student-to-staff ratio of any site (approximately 1:1 and double that of other sites), most staff worked 8 a.m.–4 p.m. As a result, the students had little supervision after school and on weekends. When the ongoing evaluation process identified this shortcoming, administration and staff resisted making any changes to the staffing pattern, maintaining that students wanted and needed free time outside of school.

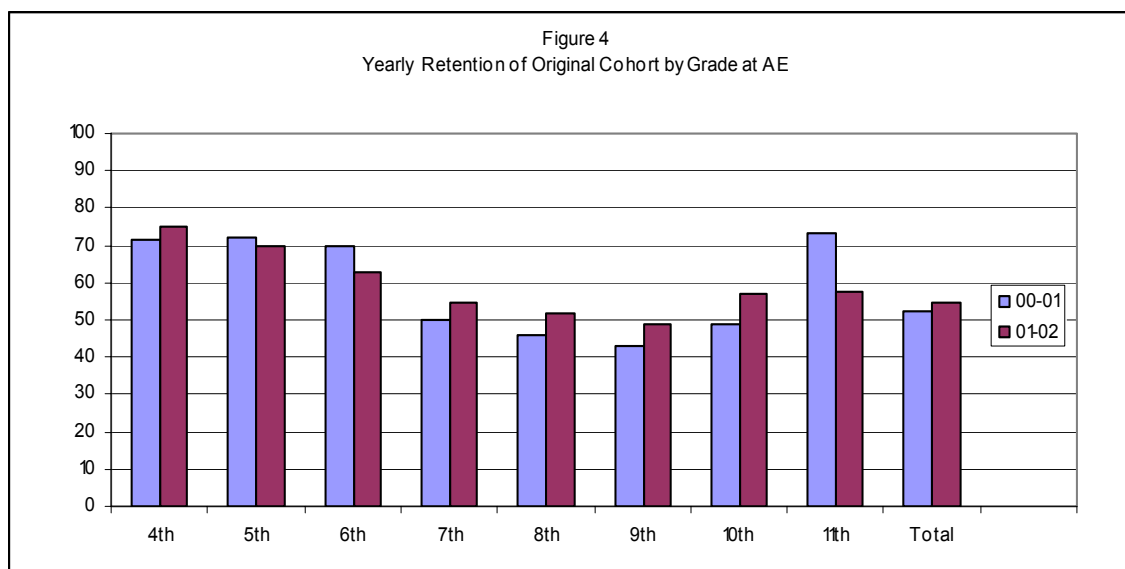
This site also had high level of reported violent physical assaults (719), sexual assaults (57), and incidents of harassment (402) during SY 2004-2005. It is likely that these numerous incidents of aggression prompted many students to leave the school because they did not feel safe. To some degree, the discrepancy between retention of boys and girls, which was over 20 percentage points for the seventh and eighth graders, may have been related to the differential effect of sexual assault and harassment for the two genders.

Conditions at L3 also discouraged development of peer relationships. In the academic situation, students had individual trajectories. As a result, they were pulled from classrooms to spend hours or weeks in resource rooms, Responsible Thinking Classrooms, detention, alternative classrooms, sessions with mental health providers, and gifted and talented programs. After school, students were shuttled between dormitories and segregated based on their recent behavior. Good students with potential as positive peer leaders were segregated into an honor dormitory. Students with behavioral problems were placed in after-school detention and/or housed in a locked therapeutic dormitory, and sometimes experienced periods of solitary confinement. In order to keep student counts high, L3 brought in replacements from a waiting

list during the school year. The resultant disruption of peer group equilibrium further destabilized social development.

The reliance on medication at L3 may have also impacted retention outcomes. During the first year of funding at this site, the FDA began publishing its concerns over the use of many psychotropic medications for the treatment of children and adolescents. In addition, the press noted a lack of studies regarding the effects of these medications on American Indians and other minority group members. These medications were extensively used at L3, and there appeared to be a number of adverse reactions in its population. Of 248 students enrolling in L3 during SY 2003-2004, 8.5% (21) were committed to inpatient treatment facilities during the year. In 18 of these cases, students were hospitalized for suicidal or aggressive behavior while on medications carrying FDA black box warnings regarding such outcomes. Of an incoming cohort of fifth graders, all of whom entered without prescriptions for medication, 72% had received a clinical diagnosis within months of their entrance. Of the students in this cohort who were removed by parents, the majority were removed shortly after receiving a diagnosis or after medications were either prescribed or increased. Unlike the sites which successfully addressed retention issues, this site reacted very differently from L1 and L2 when asked to scrutinize reasons for poor retention. The site responded by generating extensive clinical case studies to support their contention that psychiatric problems of the students, rather than characteristics of the system, were responsible for attrition.

AE. This site used TRM monies to increase personnel and programs related to the academic proficiency of its students. As shown in Figure 4, this approach did not significantly improve retention.



Two promising strategies proposed by AE had the potential to impact retention and other positive outcomes for students. The first proposed strategy was to use paraprofessional Counseling Techs (CTs) to provide assessment, case management, and advocacy for students. This strategy resulted from the recognition that serving a student body of over 500 students necessitated a bureaucracy that, almost by definition, was not nurturing and supportive of

individual students. The CTs acted as caregivers who made a personal connection with each student and performed as parental surrogates in negotiating with the bureaucracy. As these CT case managers were stretched thin by average caseloads of 50 students, it was proposed that TRM funds be used to decrease this ratio. However, when funds were received, the site added classroom personnel rather than CTs, diminishing the CTs' role.

A second AE proposal with the potential to reduce attrition was the utilization of special environments to provide short-term intensive services in specialized residential settings to students at risk for dropping out. Implementation of this strategy had begun in the year prior to TRM funding, and the proposal contained a detailed description of the programming necessary for each component. But this initiative also lost, rather than gained, momentum during TRM funding due to the loss of the student services director, who had provided key leadership.

NTDS. This site organized activities during count week to ensure maximum student attendance at that key time. However, little attention was paid to long-term retention. When parents and the police force organized an initiative to deal with truancy, school officials responded that they did not want unwilling students in their classrooms.

## **Section 2. Process and Outcome Indicators**

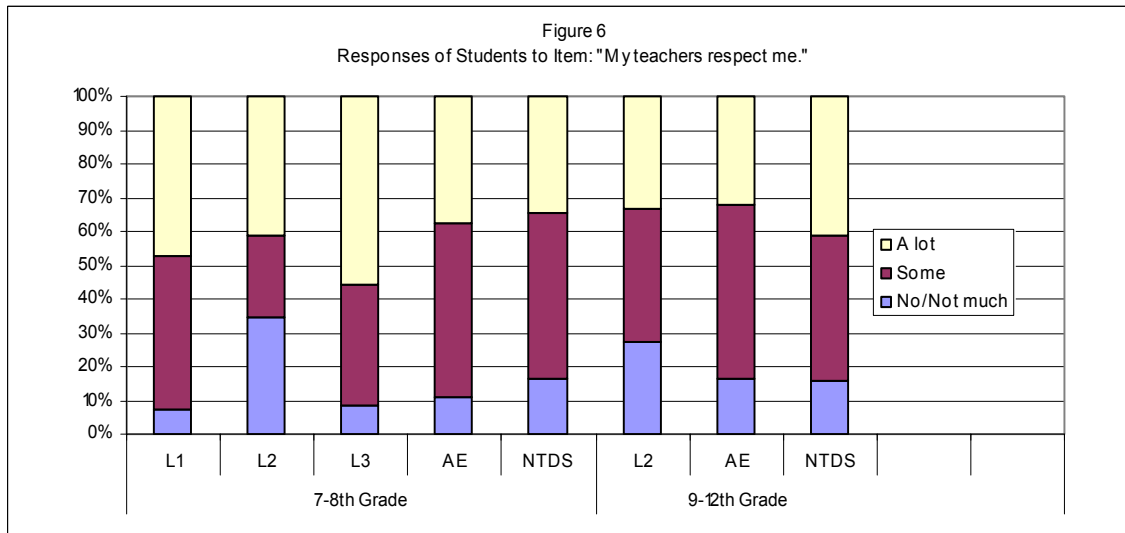
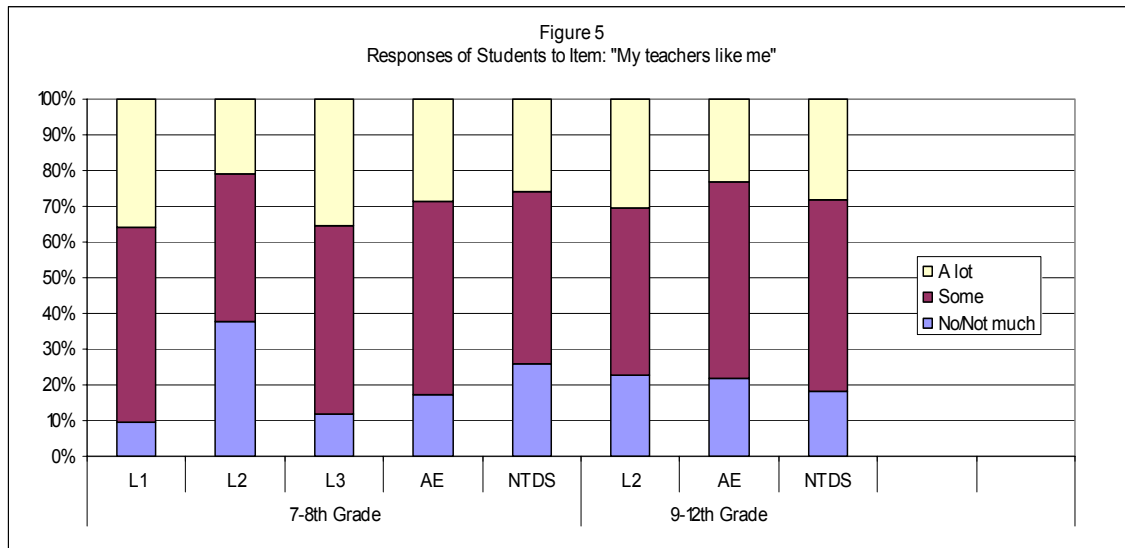
The data from each site used in cross-sectional analysis primarily came from two time points – the spring before TRM funds were substantially used to support program changes, and the spring of the final year of TRM funding. For L1 and L3, the time points were spring 2003 and spring 2005. For L2, the time points were spring 2001 and spring 2005. For AE and NTDS, the time points were spring 2001 and spring 2002. In all sites other than L3 (where funding was largely used to continue existing programs and the number of staff did not noticeably increase), TRM funding provided more staff available to spend time with students and the addition of some pro-social peer group activities.

Several factors differentially impacted the ability to make clean cross-sectional comparisons. With its high retention rate, L1 allowed for the most valid pre-post comparisons because their policy was not to replace students lost to attrition. L2 changed its intake criteria after the start of the study. Believing that the enhanced mental health services purchased with TRM funds obligated them to accept students at higher risk, L2 accepted increasingly difficult students. At L3, the population surveyed at the end of each school year included only about one-half of the original cohort of 200 students, and was further diluted as a number of students were brought in to replace those who had left. Thus, many of the students completing the L3 survey at the end of the year were not the same students who completed the survey at the beginning of the year. However, the admission and replacement policies at L3 did not change over the two comparison years, so there should be little differential bias between the two time points. AE and NTDS cross-sectional time points appear to be equivalent at baseline and outcome. However, lack of information about the community in which the NTDS students spent the majority of their time made it difficult to attribute plausible causality for outcome data. For L1, L2, and L3, individual tracking of student scores on a number of the survey instruments allowed pre-post comparisons of scores for students present throughout the year.



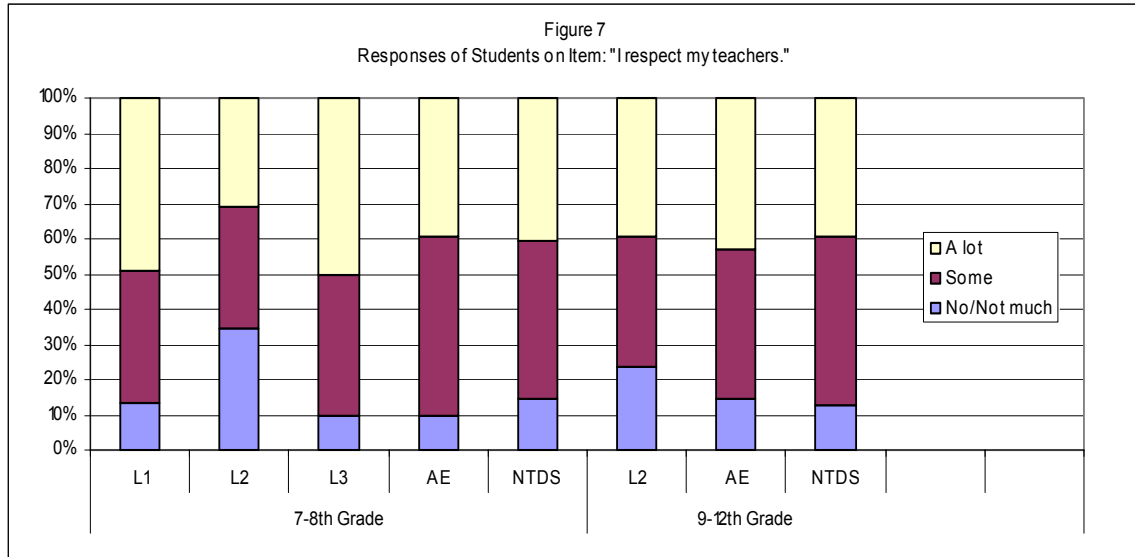
**1. Social Bonding**

School Bonding. At the end of the last year of study for each site (L1, L2, L3 in 2005; AE and PR in 2002) students were asked about their perception of their teachers. Figures show responses on two ADAS items: "My teachers like me" (Figure 5) and "My teachers respect me" (Figure 6).

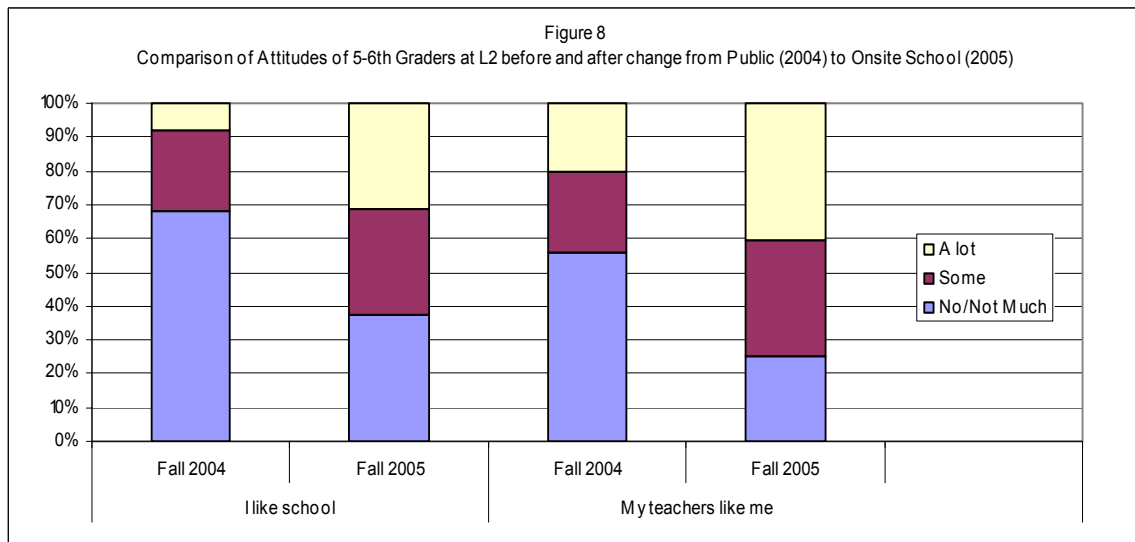


The site with the poorest ratings of teacher liking and respect for grades 7 and 8 was L2. While one-quarter of L2 high school students were able to attend an alternative school on campus, all seventh and eighth grade students had to attend the local public school. There was a 20-point difference between the L2 student ratings on this variable and the student ratings at all of the boarding schools in the seventh and eighth grade group. As can be seen in Figure 7,

there was also a 10-point difference between the L2 high school group and other schools in their responses to "I respect my teachers."

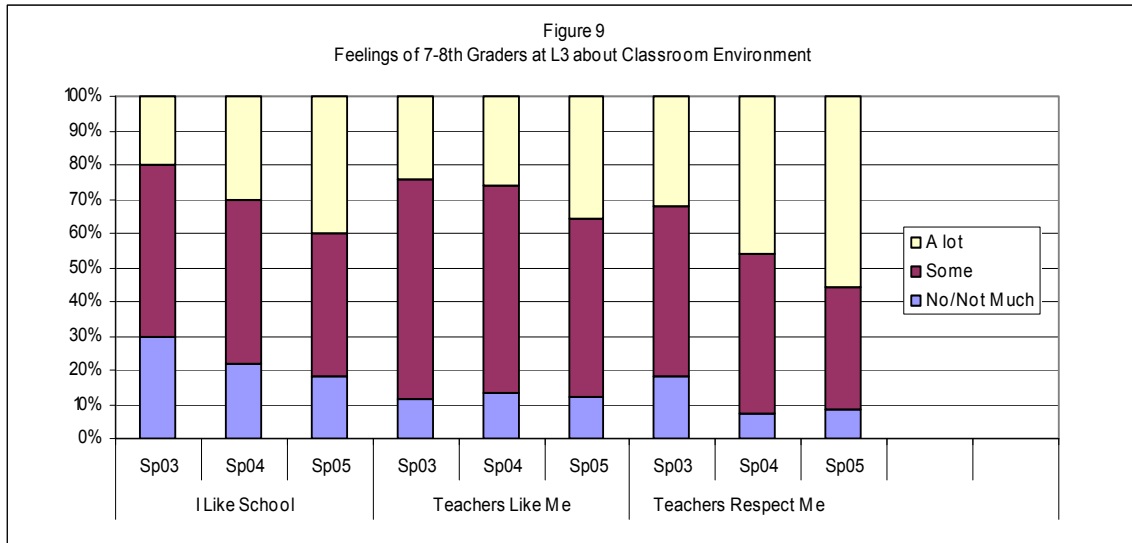


In the final year of funding, L2 moved its fifth and sixth grade classes onto campus. As Figure 8 indicates, there was a sharp improvement in the percentage of students who said they liked school and felt their teachers liked them.

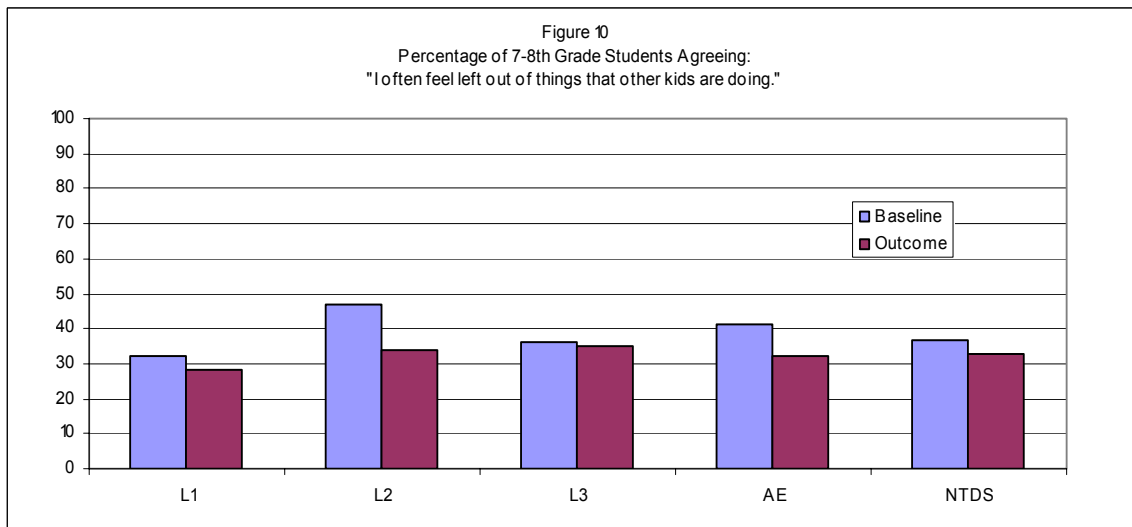


The data indicate that American Indian schools are doing a good job at helping students feel liked and respected by their teachers, and it suggests that boarding schools may be preferable to placing Native students in public schools where they perceive discrimination.

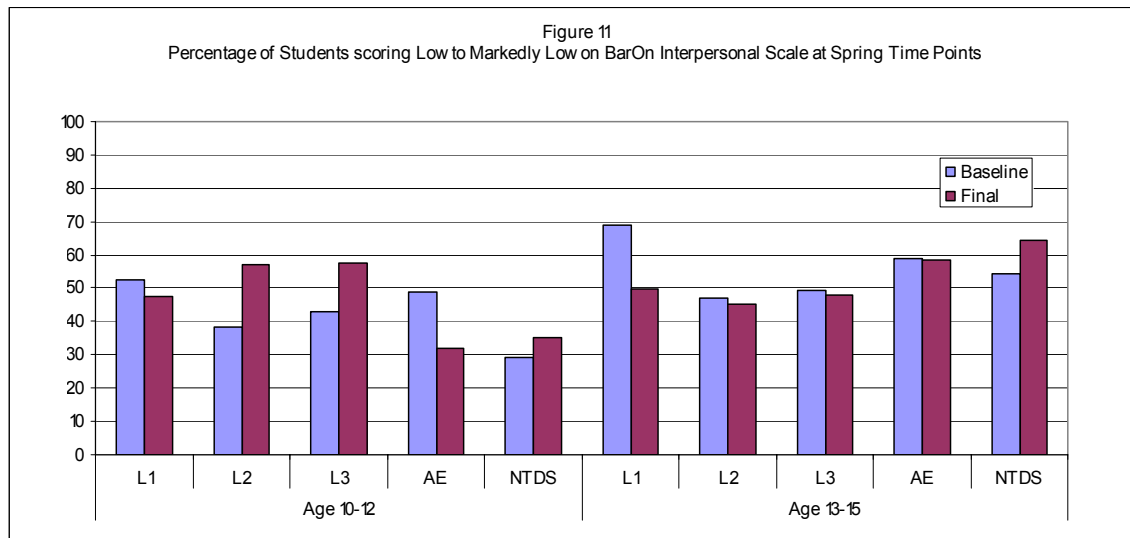
Creating a mechanism for student advocacy seems to improve school bonding. As can be seen in Figure 9, at L3 the percentage of students who liked school and reported feeling liked and respected by their teachers increased when designated caregivers acted as advocates for them with their teachers.



Inclusion. One of the items on the Jessor Alienation Scale asked students about the statement "I often feel left out of things that other kids are doing." Figure 10 shows the percentage of seventh and eighth grade students at each site agreeing with this statement at beginning and ending time points. There was a trend in the general student body toward a decrease in agreement with this statement at all sites except L3.



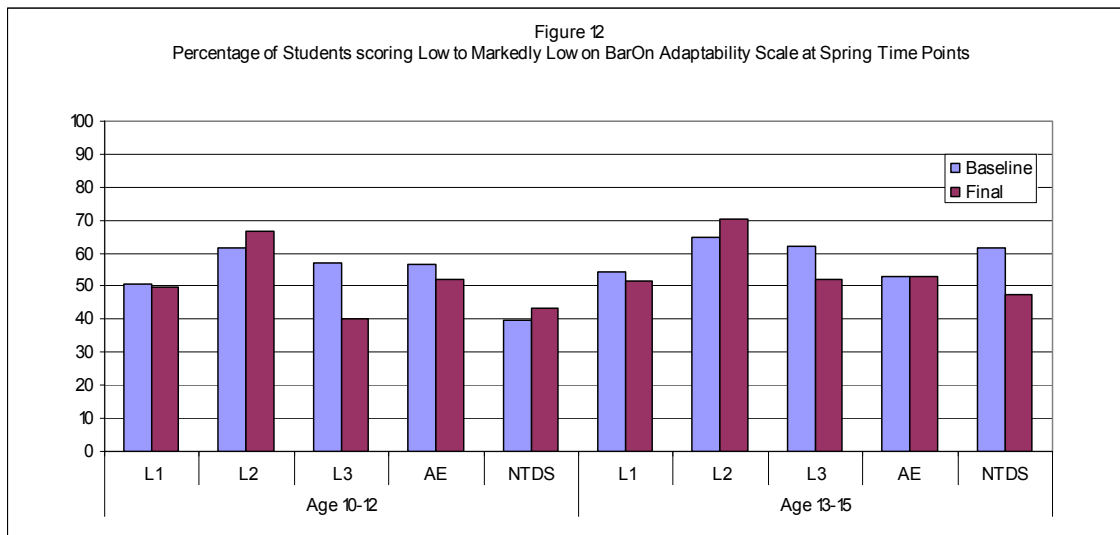
**Interpersonal.** The percentage of students scoring in the range of low to markedly low on the BarOn Interpersonal scale is shown in Figure 11. Students at L1, where efforts were made to provide maximum peer group continuity and focus on the development of social skills, showed statistically significant improvement in interpersonal scores when the pre- and posttest scores of students present at both time points during SY 2003-2004 were analyzed. At L2, comparability was compromised both by the site's decision to take in increasingly troubled students after mental health resources were increased by TRM and by its increased success in retaining its student body. There was no evidence at L3 of a change in intake criteria to account for the shift upward in the younger group. The small number of students in the younger group at AE ruled out statistical comparisons at that site.



## **2. Achievement.**

**School Achievement.** According to Beiser et al. (1998), interactions with teachers affect children's assessments of their own competence, a factor that predicts school performance. Based on the data just presented, students at American Indian schools generally have positive relationships with their teachers. Therefore, it would be expected that school achievement outcomes would show improvement over time. However, when TRM funding began, the effects of the No Child Left Behind initiative were beginning to be felt. Teachers in BIA boarding schools found themselves dealing with an increasingly higher percentage of students with histories of school failure. Faced with declining budgets and pressure to increase proficiency ratings, public schools in the sites' catchment areas reportedly began encouraging students with special needs to leave their local schools, resulting in an influx of these students into BIA boarding schools. Faced with this dynamic, only L2 was able to increase the academic proficiency of its students. L2 accomplished this by strengthening its tutoring system; providing an alternative, on-campus school for students who did not fit in regular classrooms; and continuing strong support for college-bound students.

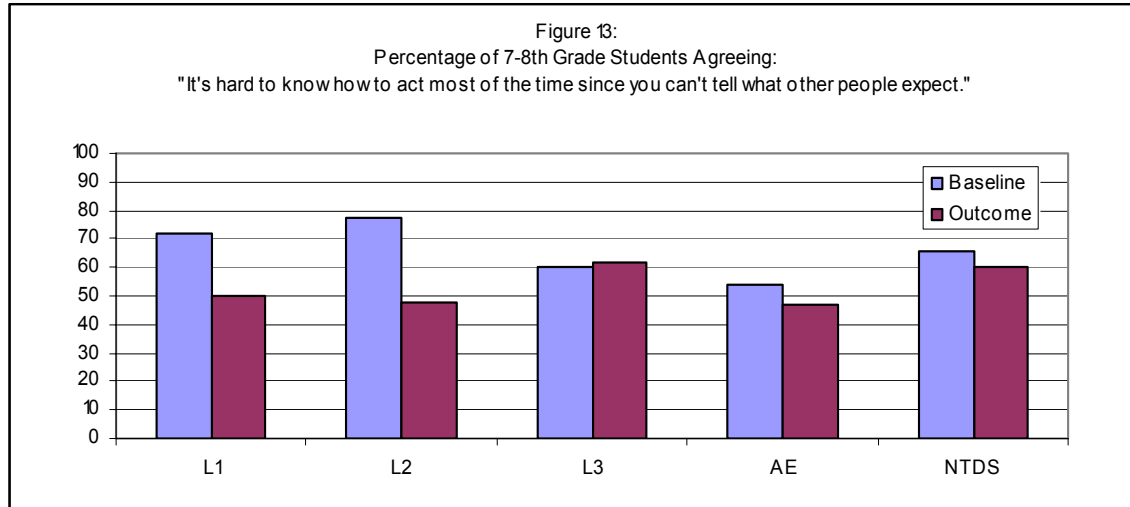
**Adaptability.** The BarOn Adaptability scale is based on items assessing students' confidence in their ability to solve problems and meet challenges. Figure 12 shows baseline and outcome spring time points. While there appeared to be shifts between percentages at time points, none were statistically significant; at sites with high attrition and a student replacement policy, these factors would have generated additional extraneous factors. Pre- and posttest comparisons of individual student scores found a significant improvement during the year only at L1.



Concerned that its students were not being equipped for life outside its highly structured environment, in SY 2004-2005 L1 had implemented a privilege-responsibility system called the gold card system. The gold card system allowed students who displayed age-appropriate responsible behaviors to enjoy age-appropriate privileges. One privilege was the right to go off campus to places in town such as restaurants, the local Boys and Girls Club, and the shopping mall. Pre-post comparisons of scores on adaptability for this school year showed significant improvement at this site. Analyses of pre- and posttest scores at L2 and L3 did not find significant changes in either direction.

### **3. Responsibility.**

**Reliability of the Social Environment.** Several elements need to be in place in order for students to subscribe to pro-social norms. Many students coming from high-risk environments have acquired learned helplessness as a result of having to deal with situations that they do not understand and cannot control. They need to feel that the environment around them obeys a structure they can rely on, so that if they invest themselves in understanding it and subscribing to it, they can determine their own future. Students were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the Jessor Alienation Item indicating learned helplessness: "It's hard to know how to act most of the time since you can't tell what other people expect" (Figure 13).



Several sites made changes that should have impacted this indicator. At L1, Applied Humanism was implemented over the course of TRM funding, shifting from a system of punishments for infractions toward one in which staff utilized infractions as opportunities to help students take responsibility for their behavior. Agreement with the reliability item at L1 dropped from 72% in the 7-8<sup>th</sup> grade group in spring 2003 to 50% in spring 2005. At L2, where an intense effort was made to increase consistency and the environment was restructured on multiple levels, a chi square comparison of the overall percentage of students agreeing at baseline in spring 2001 with those agreeing in spring 2005 showed a significant decrease, from 64% to 47%. At L3, the spring 2003 cross-sectional percentage of 61% was similar to the spring 2005 percentage of 64%. However, in pre- and posttests at L3, a paired *t*-test showed that the mean level of agreement with this alienation item *actually increased significantly* during the course of a year for surviving students from the original cohort.

Stability. In addition to perceiving a reliable world that acts according to understood patterns, students need to feel that they are going to be fairly treated, and that the environment around them is physically safe. In the ADAS survey, seventh and eighth grade students were asked questions about the school environment. One question had to do with the fairness of enforcement of school rules. As can be seen in Figure 14, the extreme responses came from the students at L1 and AE. The majority of students at L1 had confidence in the fairness of the rule enforcement at their school. AE, a site at which enforcement was undermined by athletic status, had the smallest percentage of students indicating that it was "very true" or "mostly true" that school rules were fairly enforced. Students at the L2 peripheral dormitory, who were forced to attend local public schools where they experienced discrimination, were only slightly less likely than AE students to be cynical with regard to fairness of enforcement.

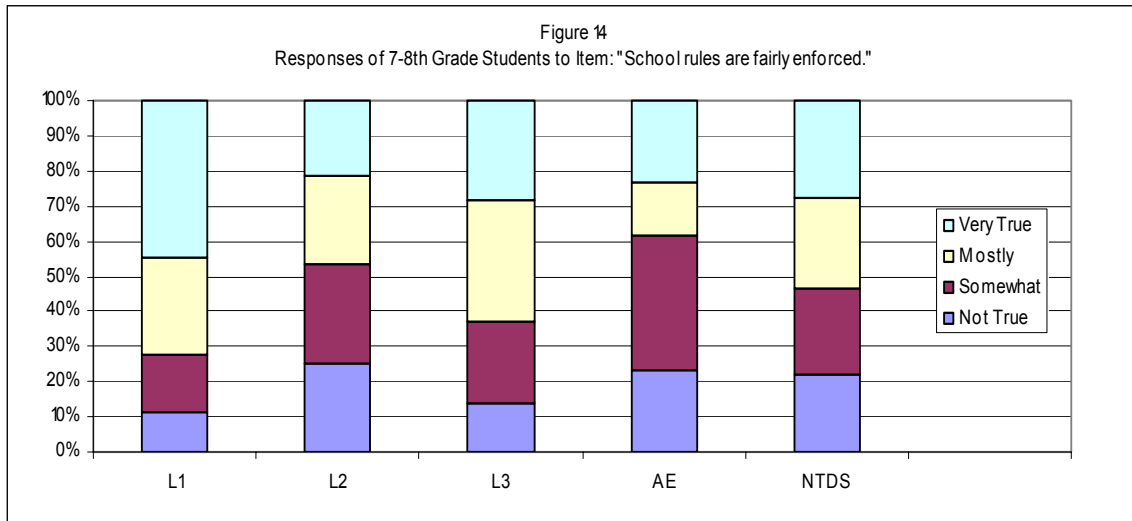
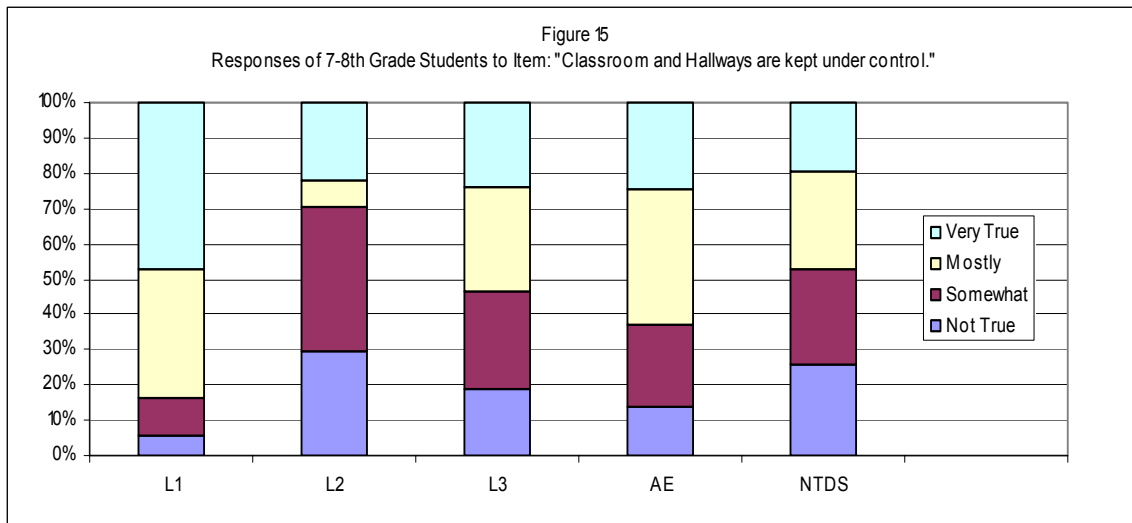


Figure 15 shows how the seventh and eighth grade students responded when asked how true it was that classrooms and hallways were kept under control. At L1, 83% of the students responded with "very true" or "mostly true." Only 30% of the L2 students attending public schools selected those responses.



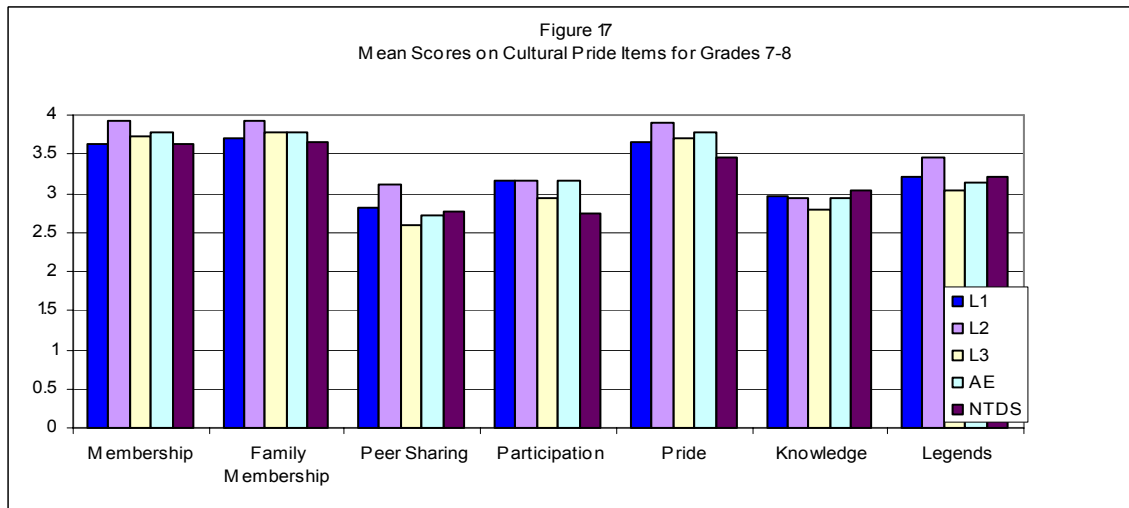
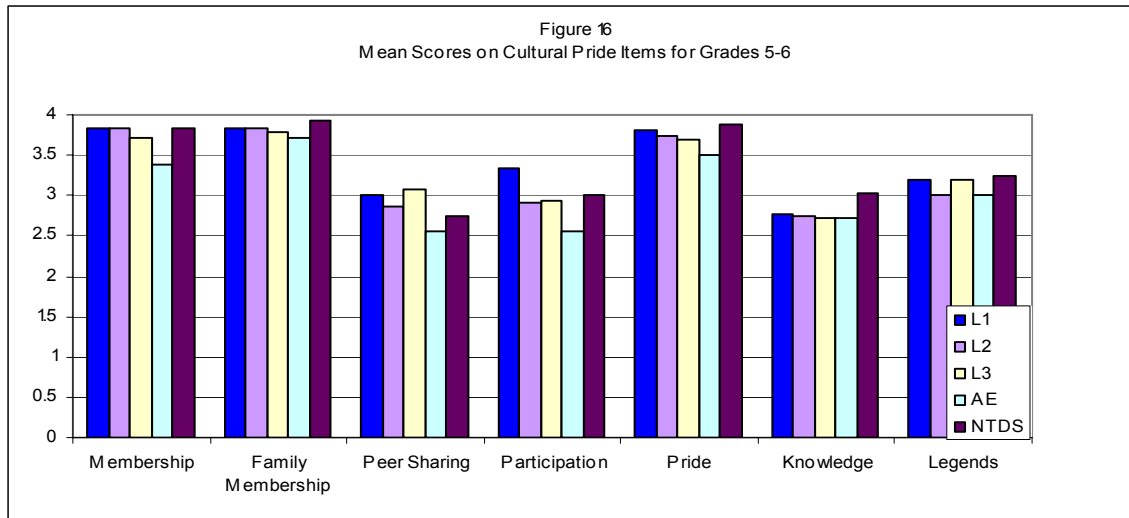
#### **4. Meaning and Values.**

Cultural Pride. By the conclusion of TRM, all of the sites had well-developed cultural components. L2 was initially identified as having weaknesses in the cultural area, but quickly implemented a number of elements. Students from NTDS benefited from cultural elements found in the surrounding community. A variety of cultural elements were found at other sites. Facilities at all sites were decorated with cultural motifs, banners, and posters. Students from all

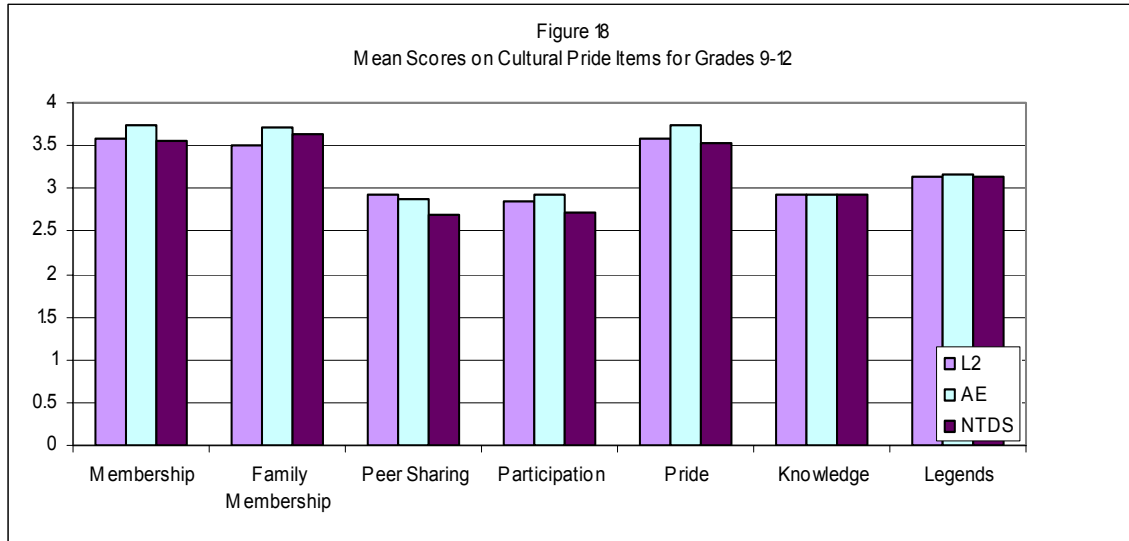
sites with the exception of L2 had the opportunity to participate in drum groups. All sites had dance groups, and students at all sites were involved in making traditional crafts. Sweat lodges were used by students at AE, L3, and NTDS. All sites other than L2 offered courses in traditional culture; however, residential staff at L2 assisted students in gathering information about their tribes and ancestors over the Internet. There were artifacts and a large number of books by and about American Indians in the libraries at all sites, and all had guest speakers, pow wows, and an elders program. All sites encouraged students to wear clothing bearing American Indian motifs. A staff member at L2 made American Indian flutes for all graduating seniors. A staff member at L3 published books with American Indian stories that were used at that site.

Students at some sites were encouraged to attend traditional religious services. All sites except L3 provided opportunities for students to learn and practice traditional languages.

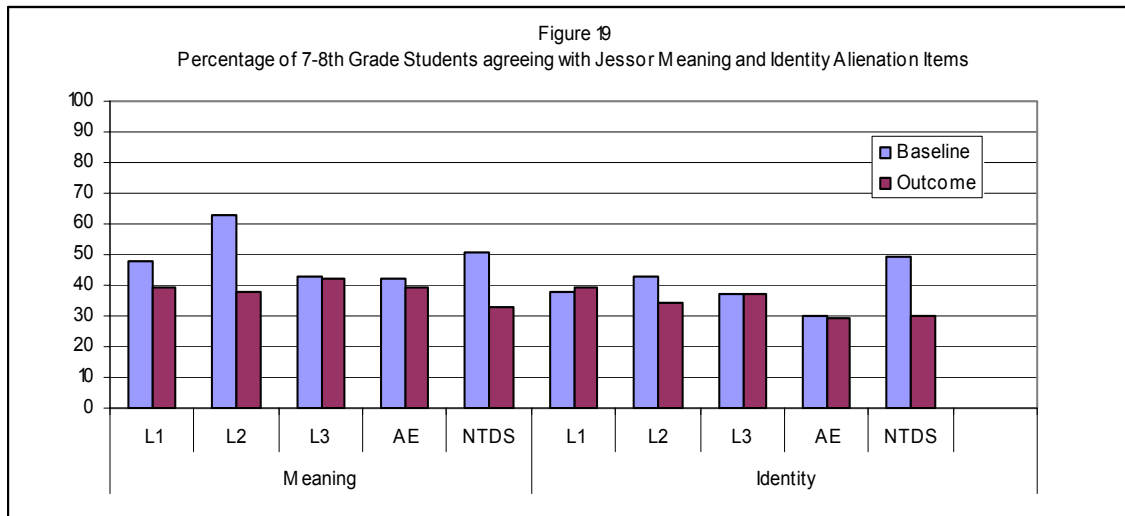
As Figures 16-18 show, the mean scores on cultural pride items were similar across the sites for the different age groups.





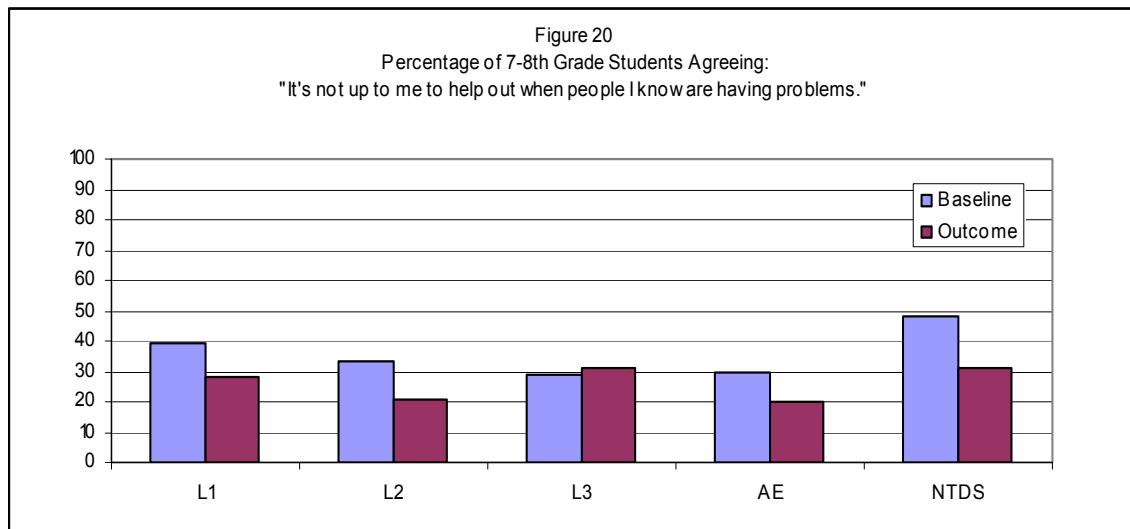


Meaning and Identity. Figure 19 shows the percentage of students at each site agreeing with the statements “Hardly anything I’m doing in my life means very much to me” and “I sometimes feel unsure about who I really am.”



In the L2 cross-sectional analysis there was a trend ( $p < .06$ ) toward a decrease between spring baseline and the final spring outcome on the meaning item. A pre- and posttest comparison of all means for L2 students present in both fall 2004 and spring 2005 confirmed a highly significant shift ( $p < .001$ ) toward disagreement with this negative statement. An apparent shift at the NTDS in both meaning and identity items cannot be attributed to TRM changes, and may be related to events in the community.

**Social Responsibility and Caregiving.** A Jessor Alienation item asks students for their agreement with the statement "It's not up to me to help out when people I know are having problems" (Figure 20). The percentage of students agreeing with this item trended downward for four of the five sites when spring baseline and outcome time points were compared, suggesting a cross-sectional increase in social responsibility. L1 promoted some elements of caregiving by expecting students to look after others in their group, implementing a social skills development program, using equine therapy, and assigning campus maintenance or food service responsibilities to each group to involve them in positive contributions to the general welfare. L2 promoted responsibility through an extensive agricultural program involving students in raising show hogs, paying students for campus maintenance and food service duties, and expecting them to work off any damage they did to campus.



### Section 3. Organizational Issues: Structural Barriers and Best Practices

The focus of a boarding school must be the children. This includes the children's health, safety, emotional health and maturity, their inner spiritual core of identity and meaning, and development of their minds. Many at-risk children enter boarding schools. When they graduate, these children need to be able to walk in beauty and to have acquired the skills that will allow them to shoulder the responsibilities required to succeed in relationships, careers, and life. Organizational decisions must be made with this outcome at the foreground.

The social bonding of children with emotionally healthy adults is key to their healthy development in all other areas. If children cannot love and trust, they will not have the emotional balance necessary to perceive the world as it is, the energy and focus for educational curiosity, and the pro-social investment in others that nourishes the individual and holds the society together.

If they are to fulfill their developmental potential, children must bond with caring adults. Thus, the staff with whom children interact daily must be good role models and have the potential for bonding with children. This is particularly important for direct-care staff. In the children's eyes, direct-care staff represent all authority, the source of feedback that forms their self-concept, the givers of all nurturing, and the mediators of the larger world that they must

learn about. The influence that direct-care staff have on children is unequalled by any other personnel at a boarding school. The staff in regular interaction with children are, therefore, central to the mission of the school. Staff that children interact with daily in the dormitory, in the classroom, and on the sports field are both role models and potential bonding sites. These staff on the line, like soldiers in battle, are (or should be) considered second in importance only to the children. In reality, many of these staff are underpaid, underappreciated, and considered expendable.

Management and administration were examined to see how well their activities provided support to frontline staff and kept them oriented to producing positive student outcomes. Managers are generally judged on how well they coordinate their teams to carry out objectives. Analysis here also looked at how well they handled staff (i.e., how well they recruited and retained the best staff possible, kept them happy and functional, supplied them with the tools they needed to do their jobs, and kept them focused on long-term objectives).

The idea of total quality management involving all stakeholders is also important. In an optimal situation, all stakeholders in the process and all members of the organization need to understand what their roles are and to understand the roles and needs of the children and the staff that serve them. Outcomes of children at these sites were varied. This section will focus on how well the sites as organizations aligned themselves with the needs of the children they served.

### **Direct-Care Staff**

Parenting is one of the hardest jobs in the world to do well. It requires the emotional maturity to see what is in the long-term interests of children and the knowledge and compassion to do it. At-risk children add a whole new layer of complexity to the job of parenting. While professional staff can be helpful, the work cannot be done in occasional counseling sessions by a professional, facing a silent or rebellious child who has been pre-convicted of misbehavior by adult reports. At-risk children who have learned that adults cannot be trusted will bond with adults only after what may be an extended period of testing to ensure they can be trusted to care, to act in the children's best interests, and to continue to be there. Boarding school staff are asked to become familiar with children who may have bonding issues, repair the damage, and provide guidance and boundaries to those children while maintaining the tenuous bond that functions as a lifeline to the children. Staff able to do this consistently, fairly, and with multiple children in a group with its own dynamics are hard to find. Boarding school salaries vary, but are seldom generous. At one site, TRM gave a tremendous boost to the range of potential job applicants when the site was able to use funds to increase the starting hourly rate for dormitory personnel from \$6.00 to \$7.50 per hour. In order to serve in this most crucial of roles, many residential staff have to make personal sacrifices and live near or below the poverty line. This creates life stressors and makes them – and their ability to be present and focus on their charges – vulnerable to failures in transportation, loss of daycare, and problems with housing situations. Those best able to understand the situations from which many of these students come may have similar personal histories which may have scarred them emotionally and left them vulnerable to addictions. Residential staff also need training; like parents everywhere, their parenting skill sets are a mixture of parenting practices they grew up with, combined with reactions to what they perceive as having been wrong with those practices. While boarding school teachers are paid near or at the level they could receive elsewhere, they face the same daunting challenges handled by residential staff, providing remedial help for students, who in addition to bonding issues, often come with histories of academic failure. The key hiring criteria for boarding schools

often is the default of availability and no criminal history. Positions often open unexpectedly, especially on the residential level; if a site is already stretched thin with only the bare minimum number of staff positions necessary to provide coverage, a less than optimal candidate may be hired. A range of nepotism appeared at sites (traces at some sites, a significant factor at others). The assurance that an individual is a known quantity and can be trusted is a positive for personnel managers scrambling to fill positions, but negatives of preferential treatment for relatives and friends often impact workplace functioning.

Perception of staff roles differed across sites. Staff were considered central to the therapeutic mission of L1 and L2. L1 put into practice its philosophy that in order to optimize outcomes, it was of critical importance that children form bonds with caring adults. L1 maximized the number of potential nexus sites by requiring that all staff members, regardless of position, make themselves available to bond with students. Under TRM, the L1 philosophy was taken to a new level when a hiring process was instituted that tested prospective staff for characteristics indicating a child-centered perspective. L2 provided the most homelike setting, complete with a variety of staff who filled the roles of parents and extended family members, and who appeared in multiple support roles in the stable social environment around the students. All L2 students received a preventive level of counseling support on common issues and additional, customized mental health and life skills interventions coordinated by a Level Two gatekeeper in 24/7 contact with the site. Both L1 and L2 recognized that life stressors had impacted students, but acted under the assumption that, given a team effort to provide appropriate handling, students could be put back onto a track which would allow them to meet developmental challenges. Both sites required that staff exercise a high level of responsibility in dealing with their charges, and both demanded that frontline staff deal respectfully with children and use de-escalation tactics and group management skills rather than physical coercion. AE and NTDS were the most laissez-faire of the sites in their approach, concentrating on presenting programs and expecting students to either rise to the challenges or drop out. L3 concentrated on obtaining and maintaining funding for programs. A clear hierarchy of staff existed at L3, topped by professionals. L3 home living staff, who spent the majority of time with students, were in the most marginalized positions. L3 staff at lower levels deferred responsibility to those at higher levels. Rather than taking responsibility and redirecting students in situations with the potential for confrontation or other violations of norms, lower-level staff called in CPOs. CPOs often arrived after situations had escalated, which contributed to a high assault rate and necessitated frequent use of physical restraint techniques. The clear message to students at L3 was that the adults around them did not trust them.

The number of staff members at a site was seen to be a factor. With 75 staff members, L2 had maximum flexibility and a team approach to meeting needs of children, with little interference from interdepartmental rivalries or territorial issues. With 135 employees, L1 utilized staff members in multiple roles which crossed over organizational boundaries and enhanced communication. The other sites exceeded the "Rule of 150." Gladwell (2000) describes Dunbar's sociological dynamic called the "Rule of 150" as applied to number of people in organizations: Up to this size, he explains,

orders can be implemented and unruly behavior controlled on the basis of personal loyalties and direct man-to-man contacts. With larger groups, this becomes impossible... At a bigger size you have to impose complicated hierarchies and rules and regulations and formal measures to try to command loyalty and cohesion. (p. 180)

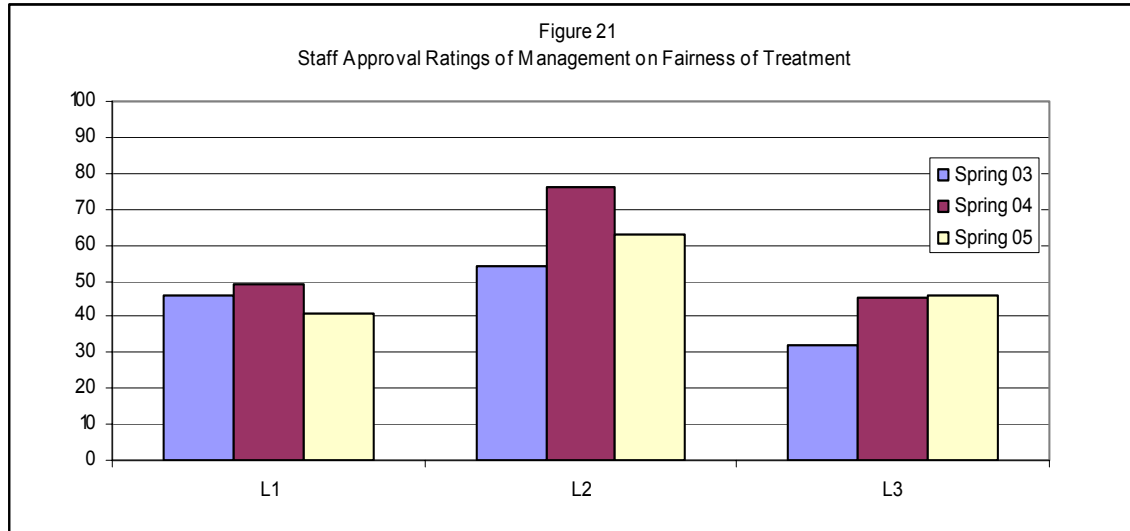
Dissention increased when the number of staff exceeded 150. Staff ratings of the level of dissention were inverted and transformed on a 100-point scale to provide an index of staff affinity for the final year of funding for each site. At an affinity level of 30 and buffeted by political and family factions inside and outside the school, NTDS had the lowest level of staff affinity. AE scored 44. L2, with the smallest staff, had the highest rating with 57, only slightly ahead of L1 at 52. While these sites showed stable ratings across time on this measure, L3 showed a huge shift. In spring 2003, L3 had a low affinity rating of 40, exceeding only NTDS. After pressure was applied to staff by management to increase its positive ratings on the survey, the L3 spring 2005 ratings increased to 52.

**Best Practices in Staffing.** L1 addressed retention and training issues. The site implemented the Applied Humanism job interview process and hired only staff that scored well on it, indicating that their ideas of childrearing were compatible with the site's philosophy. Because TRM had expanded the number of positions available from the bare minimum required for safe staffing, the site was under less pressure to fill positions with unsuitable candidates. L1 maximized the number of potential nexus sites by requiring that all staff members at the boarding school, regardless of position, make themselves available to bond with students. Staff were trained using the Applied Humanism model which helped them examine their own preconceptions about parenting and to align their ideas with the site's philosophy. Wing counselors were utilized in a double role, serving the children and providing ongoing feedback to staff on how their interactions with children could be more therapeutic. Program divisions were minimized when residential and academic staff met to discuss how best to deal with individual children, and academic staff participated in after-school and weekend activities.

### **Supervision and Management**

In a business, managers are judged by the production of the team they supervise. A manager is only as good as the team he or she directs; a team is made better by a manager's skillful coaching: encouragement, direction, and strategic placement of players in positions optimally matched to their circumstances and skills. As previously noted, good staff are hard to find in the boarding school situation, and the team a manager has to deal with may not have optimal skills. Ideally, in this situation, managers' behavior toward their team members needs to mirror the treatment staff are to give the children – an attitude of respect, guidance, and seeking out the potential in the individual.

An item on the staff survey asked staff at L1, L2, and L3 to rank the item "Management is inconsistent, not all staff are treated equally," according to how much it did or did not create a barrier at their site. Staff ratings were inverted and transformed on a 100-point scale to provide an index of management fairness for each site. Figure 21 shows overall ratings.



L2 consistently had the highest ratings of management fairness. Score increases at L3 may again be an artifact of pressure applied to staff at that site to provide more positive assessments.

Like the frontline staff who walk a delicate line between nurturing and enabling students, the manager walks a delicate line between nurturing and enabling staff. There were a range of management styles which created barriers. Some of these barriers were:

- An overemphasis on nurturance of staff in some situations crossed the line to the extent that staff members were enabled and permitted to not do their jobs. At some sites, nonperforming staff were shuffled between departments and programs, leading to tension and discouragement of other staff required to carry their load. When persons shuffled were relatives, the problem was exacerbated.
- Top down managers discouraged creative innovations by their team members rather than recognizing and affirming them.
- At several sites, dormitory managers imposed shift schedules designed for their convenience. In one case, an inexperienced manager created a multi-week schedule that forced all staff to work different days each week in order to provide his adherents with four-day stretches off. The schedule wreaked havoc on child-care arrangements of single parents, exhausted staff who were forced to work stretches as long as eight days in a row, and destabilized the routine for the dormitory residents.
- While Anglo managers were expected to act as bosses, it was noted that some American Indians in management positions were under pressure due to their own or others' expectations of conflicting roles. Serious repercussions emerged at two sites where managers used the traditional joking pattern of communication despite evaluation feedback that the "Indian way of communicating" was being misunderstood by some employees. At one site, employees dismissed for nonperformance sued the supervisor alleging verbal and sexual harassment. At another site, employees characterized the joking as "demeaning," "foul language," "laden with sexual innuendo," and "shaming." In response to the latter manager's style, a number of good employees resigned. Another clash occurred when a

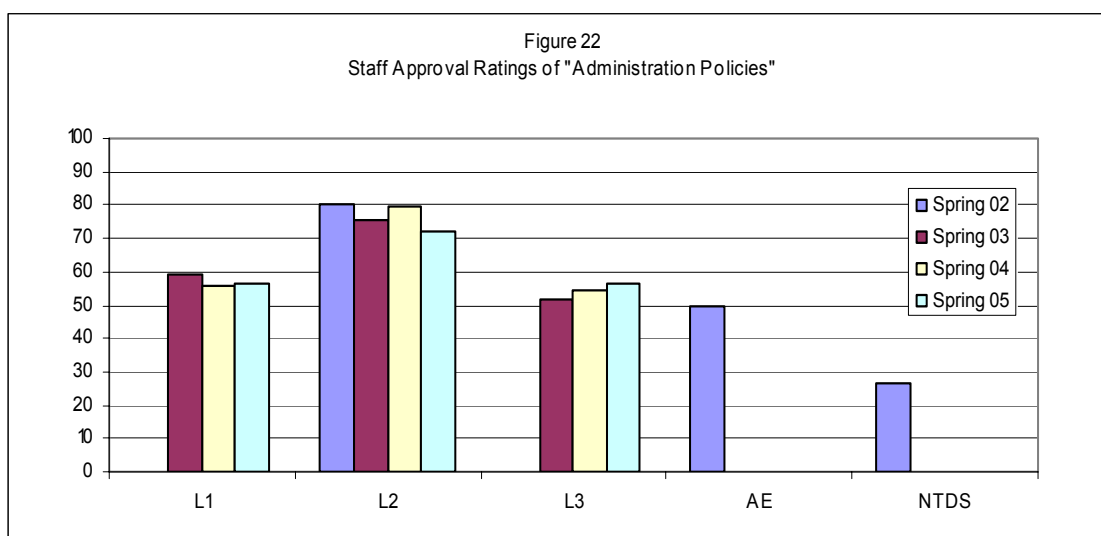
residential director regularly dropped off his teenaged granddaughters to be “babysat” by dormitory personnel, and the teenagers flouted staff authority.

- While some managers took responsibility when under pressure from above and buffered their staff, others deflected responsibility for problems onto the direct-care staff.

**Best Practices in Management.** At many of the sites, managers engaged in supportive practices, role-modeled commitment to children, gained the respect of their teams by putting in long hours, worked shoulder to shoulder with direct-care staff, provided affirmation and emotional support to staff, understood their employees’ life circumstances, accommodated scheduling and child-care needs, and shielded their people from outside pressures.

**Administration**

“The Leader is the Servant of the People.” The National Indian Youth Leadership Program relates its leadership program to American Indian traditions such as Gadugi, which defines the leader’s role as that of a servant to the people (Hall, 1999). This principle is at odds with a concept in the mainstream society that allocates to administrators and managers a higher status, benefits, and privileges of control over those under their authority. If staff are recognized as the foot soldiers on the front lines, and managers and administrators as service leaders, then managers and administrators should be considered their logistics and supply center. Management would then be judged by how well they obtain and allocate the resources needed to optimize staff efforts, provide training to optimize staff aptitudes, and motivate and support their staff. Administration would be evaluated both on management and coordination of the supervisory structure under them. The administrator’s additional roles, however, include being the public face of the system, working with a governing board to set a steady course for the school, and interacting with funding agencies to obtain maximum resources. Figure 22 shows approval ratings of “Administration policies” derived from staff surveys.



The number of staff is one factor affecting administration policy ratings. L2, with 75 staff, had the highest ratings. Ratings were 15 to 20 points lower for L1 (135 staff), L3 (200 staff), and AE (219), and 50 points lower at NTDS. The "Rule of 150" was apparent here. While there was clearly person-to-person contact and personal loyalty between administration and staff at L2, it was less evident at the other sites where there was little connection between ground-level staff and the administration.

A strong administrator is an asset. However, the administrator's strength must be judiciously and supportively used. At two sites, mid-level managers were reluctant to discuss problems with a strong administrator for fear of retaliation. In both cases, the resultant negative dynamic trickled down the system. The administrators remained uninformed about issues, and their considerable experience was not optimally utilized to head off emerging problems. When problems surfaced, managers resorted to blaming their predecessors, other departments, or the quality of the staff under them; and coordination between departments eroded as departments unleashed preemptive attacks against each other. Administration policies created in a vacuum of objective data, disconnected from frontline staff and relying on self-protective management reports, then affected the quality of care given to the children.

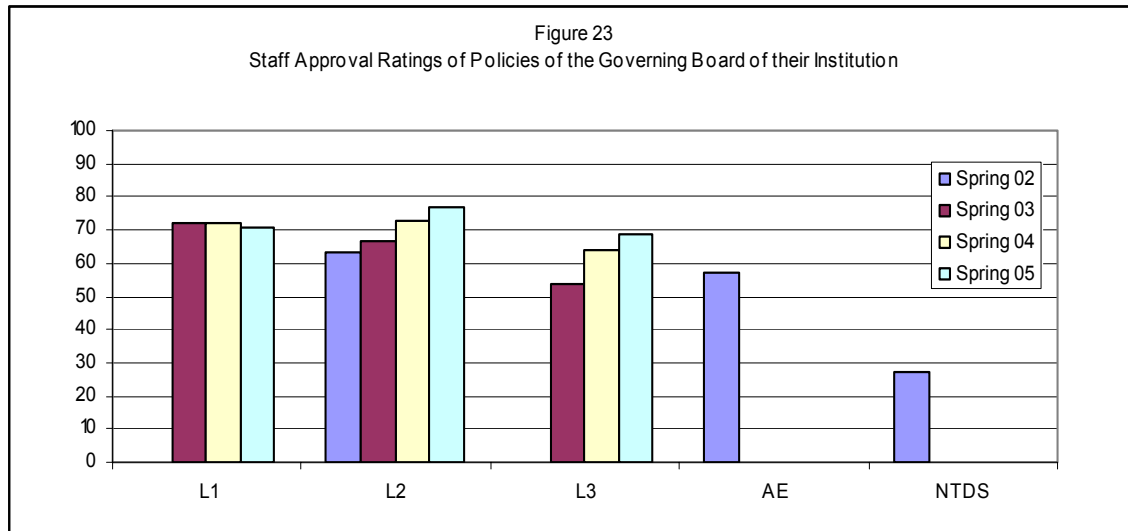
Several sites had weak administrators at the highest levels, resulting in lack of direction and coordination between departments. The day school (NTDS), showing the lowest approval of administration policies, was a formidable challenge for an administrator, buffeted by factions within and outside the school.

**Best Practices in Administration.** The highest ratings on administration policy came from L2, the peripheral dormitory that in SY 2004-2005 had only one-quarter of its students attending school on campus. The administrator at this site personified service leadership. With an average of 75 staff members during the years of funding, the administrator had an open-door policy and involved himself with the nurturance and guidance of staff. By putting in long hours and working shoulder to shoulder with staff, he role modeled a high level of dedication, and demonstrated an understanding of the perspective and issues of staff at all levels. Response to disagreement was respectful, and the administrator and staff members customarily addressed each other formally as "Mr." and "Ms." Consensus-building was used in making decisions, and the administrator showed the respect due to elders to the experienced managers under him without compromising either their authority or his. There was optimal alignment with outside entities; the administrator worked cooperatively with the school district, had a high level of support from the tribe, and negotiated the intricacies of the funding environment to maximize support for his organization while protecting its autonomy.

### **School Boards and Governing Bodies.**

The school board or other governing body has the responsibility of providing guidance and oversight to the school. The governing bodies generally took their responsibilities seriously. Figure 23 shows staff approval ratings of their institutions' governing bodies. Under the same pressure as the administrator, the governing board of NTDS received the lowest ratings from staff. Approval was highest at L1 and L2. L3 staff ratings are again difficult to interpret, as staff at this site were pressured by their administration in later years to give high ratings.





While most school boards were supportive, staff at other sites complained that school board members and children from their families expected special treatment. At one site, staff complained that they were unable to discipline children related to school board members, and school board members resisted any changes which would remove special housing and privileges their children received.

**Best Practices.** At L1 and L2, there was evidence of good communication between sites and their governing bodies. Evaluation results were shared with board members, who reciprocated by supporting changes designed to utilize the results. At both L1 and L2, members of the governing board were seen on campus and involved in TRM activities. At L1, supported and governed by a single tribe, financial support was quickly forthcoming and generous for needs identified.

### Families and Communities

The sites differed in how they worked with families, communities of origin, and the surrounding community.

L1 has worked hard and successfully managed to upgrade the image of the school in the surrounding community from what it was in past decades. The administrator has been active in community leadership and aggressive in challenging discrimination against Native students and the school. Use of the school's new gymnasium by community organizations, and a partnership with the local community in using school athletic fields, have done much for community relations. A mentoring system which pairs police recruits with students has benefited both recruits and students. The school has a Web site which provides ongoing information to parents, and online videos show student activities. However, the site strictly limits student visits home to Christmas holidays, a policy which appears to have resulted in increased retention and daily attendance. Parents are encouraged to visit the school for other holidays, such as Thanksgiving. Many parents come to visit the school at this time and enjoy a holiday dinner with their children. While students can be checked out by visiting parents, such visits cannot be overnight. The site relied on a social worker for ongoing contact between children and families; the social worker visited communities regularly and made home visits as necessary.

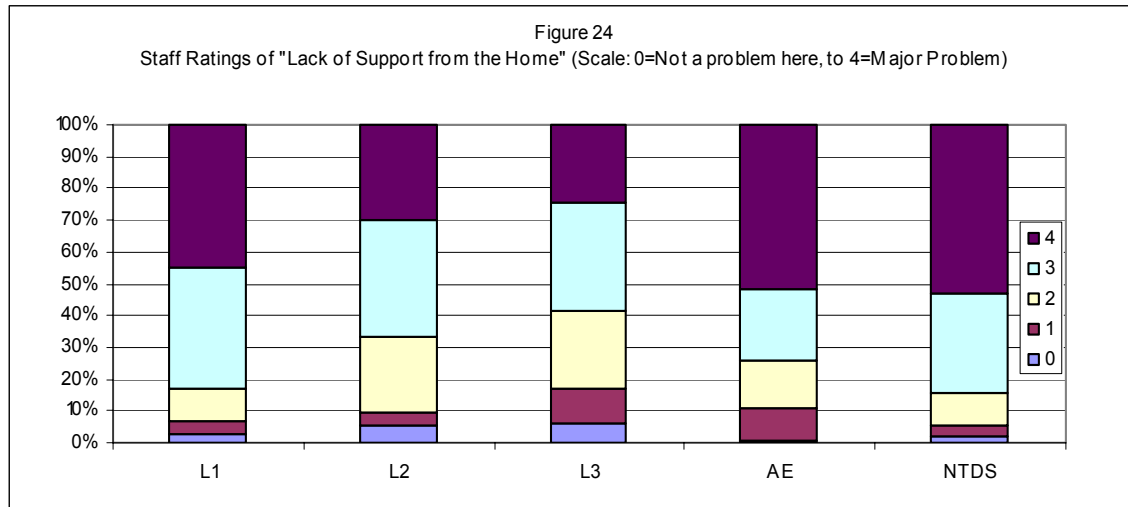
At L2, licensed counselors and social workers were the staff primarily involved in ongoing contact between children and families, making home visits as necessary. These knowledgeable professionals met with parents and social service representatives and were available for court hearings, home studies, and home visits. They were present for IEP meetings for students with special education needs. As professionals, they were able to bring weight to their advocacy for students and to work with social workers in the home communities of students to address family situations. Students were assisted by residential staff in writing letters home to parents and were able to communicate with family and friends using e-mail from the library's computer lab. A "Parent Compact," part of the L2 application, designated respective areas of accountability among students, parent/guardians, and school. All students were provided with trips home for Thanksgiving, Christmas, spring break, and summer. Parents, many of whom live in state, were encouraged to take their children home for visits at least once a month. Rooms in the dorms were reserved for parents of students who wished to visit L2. Parents were asked to come in for disciplinary consultations, or were connected to proceedings via conference calls. Parents and other family members were invited to Parent Day and a Christmas play. During the course of funding L2 began creating yearbooks and sent out a video/DVD to parents. Traditional dance groups begun during TRM funding performed in the surrounding community and at traditional gatherings. However, reports indicated continuing discrimination against American Indian children at the public schools they attended.

Many of the L3 students living in the local area returned home for weekends. While special education case managers had been contacting parents regularly with regard to academic progress, the addition of TRM paraprofessional case managers increased the amount of contact between L3 and students' homes, calling each home on a biweekly basis and providing a central contact person for parents' concerns. At the beginning of the final school year studied in the evaluation, family members of one in six students attended family activities. Using questionnaires, statistics on the number of families sending representatives to family days were compiled, and concerns were solicited. A video and CD-ROM package was produced for distribution to families and stakeholders. Students were involved in representing the school in the wider community: They have won the state chess championship, done well in Tae Kwon Do competitions, and collaborated with the community in Earth Day activities. Reports from students and staff indicated that some discrimination against students still exists in the surrounding community.

Recognizing the centrality of the family to students' emotional problems, AE proposed to undertake the difficult task of doing family therapy. However, because most families involved were located a long distance from the school, this element was not implemented. Paraprofessional parent liaisons were added by the TRM program, but again, distances limited their effectiveness.

At the NTDS site, families of all students lived in the surrounding reservation. Many staff members viewed involvement by family members in school operations as negative and unsupportive. Therapeutic Residential Model staff members hired as parent liaisons were not successful in developing much interaction with families due to logistical problems, and the social worker found little acceptance of, or resources for, family therapy.

Staff perceptions of parental support are shown in Figure 24. At all sites, most staff considered families to be a problem. L2 and L3, which tried hardest to involve parents, showed the least negative view of family support.



At several sites, child abuse reporting proved to be a complex issue. Administrators saw abrupt decreases in the number of children sent from certain communities soon after charges of child abuse were filed against parents living in those communities. There were indications that conscientious social service workers were subjected to political backlash when allegations of child abuse were investigated.

While many students returned home each summer to family situations which were not optimal, approximately one in ten students had no home to go to. These students ended up in homeless shelters or other situations where they were warehoused for the summer. Progress made during the year was often set back by these intervals. Schools struggled to find funds to keep such children through the summer; in the past, some staff had resorted to taking students home with them. Summer programs running on shoestring budgets were created at L1, L2, and AE, which managed to keep a number of students in the dormitories for an extended period of time during the summers. These sites used some mixture of academics, work, and recreation to assist students. According to staff reports, bonding was considerably improved by the opportunity to work more intensively with these students.

### Funding Agencies

Many children coming into boarding school situations suffer from learned helplessness as a result of being subjected to circumstances outside their control. Indian boarding schools, like Indian people, have long been subject to the whims of federal control, and demonstrate similar symptoms. Administrators are expected to work out budgets for the following year and to award contracts to teachers each spring without knowing how much money they will be given to work with. As late as April, millions can be shaved off expected budgets. Sites are expected to transport, house, feed, clothe, educate, and provide mental health and medical services to students who often have significant mental health or social problems, neglected medical and dental needs, and special education requirements. During the TRM project, the federal offices determining funding and policy were constantly reshuffled, and federal officials directing programs were shifted out of them just as they were becoming familiar with program and site complexities. Sites which had spent months or years educating an official regarding their program had to start over from scratch when another official was handed the reins. The advent

of ISEP (Indian Student Equalization Program) funding, designed with grassroots input, has provided some promise of stability across the next several years; however, other sources of funding continue to fluctuate.

### **Establishment of Data Feedback Loops**

Responses to evaluation varied between sites. While several sites participated vigorously in the evaluation, others resisted it. At one site, "evaluation" was done by a highly developed public relations apparatus accustomed to grant-writing and distributing lists of accomplishments and fact sheets to prep staff members before funding agencies' site visits. At this site an internal evaluator was briefly contracted but received little cooperation and an on-staff evaluator who took over focused on producing justifications for maintaining the status quo. Changes in response to the external evaluation were watered down, ineffective, and amounted to minor reshuffling of staff and students; problems were consistently attributed to difficulties of working with students rather than to system flaws. A second site did not respond to evaluation results; however, a response from the community to the evaluation, combined with other external factors, eventually led to a reorganization of the school. Two sites took action against staff believed to have communicated criticism to evaluators.

Consistency of data collected within and between sites creates a problem for evaluation. Two sites, with similar-size populations, submitted yearly assault totals of 719 and 2, respectively. While the latter site clearly maximized factors which would limit such occurrences, and the environment of the former was rife with factors which would result in them, staff perception of what constitutes an assault also contributed to the number of incidents reported. Staff committed to optimizing children's potential are less likely to interpret horseplay as assault, while staff looking at children for evidence of psychopathology or sociopathology are more likely to interpret it as such.

**Best Practices in Evaluation.** The two sites that effectively utilized evaluation information had the best student outcome data. At L1, the school contracted a highly qualified internal evaluator who worked closely with staff to implement a data feedback loop that systematically addressed the areas identified by the cross-site evaluation, as well as exploring additional areas internally identified as needing improvement. At L2, an evaluation team worked closely with the cross-site evaluator, and evaluation results were shared with staff, who were then involved in developing strategies to improve outcomes. Under the CSAP funding phase of the development of AE, implementation of a computerized tracking system increased the site's ability to respond quickly and flexibly to student performance and behavior, which contributed to a dramatic improvement in behavior. Prior to the implementation of this system, AE students were in a situation similar to that of NTDS students, who experienced few consequences for misbehavior and lack of attendance.

## **Section 4. Elephants in the Living Room**

### **Communication**

Every ethnic group has its own communication style. In many groups, it is joking and playful insults that express affection and belonging. Members of the group effortlessly read the linguistic markers at an emotional level. Boarding schools are multicultural settings which bring together students and staff from many different backgrounds. The common use of the English language merely makes it less apparent that miscommunication of words and actions between members of different tribes or between tribal and non-tribal individuals is ongoing. Gestures or words intended to be inclusive and friendly may be interpreted by some as hostile. Students who expect others to share freely may be perceived as extorting or stealing.

Operation in a mainstream multiethnic culture requires care in use of language and understanding of how gestures and words may be interpreted by a listener from a different background. Effective communication in a multiethnic culture often requires use of language from which ethnic markers have been carefully screened, exaggerated to underline their use, or eliminated. Few staff and even fewer students are consciously aware of these undercurrents and how they and their listeners are reacting to them. When there is a power differential between students and staff, or between staff and managers, the lower-status person can feel humiliated, shamed, or victimized at a conscious or subconscious level.

### **Religion**

At several sites, there was a level of religious tension. Some Christian staff members were motivated to serve students with an idea of saving them, and some viewed traditional cultural practices with suspicion. While Christian religious services were welcomed at some sites, some staff members hesitated to include elements from American Indian religious traditions. There were also inter-tribal tensions. At a school serving students from multiple tribes, multiple sweat lodges had to be constructed to satisfy the traditions of the different tribes.

### **Race and Nepotism**

At several sites, issues of race and nepotism impacted staff unity. In general, staff from different tribes and Anglo staff worked harmoniously together. However, there were complaints at some locations that American Indian staff were cut more slack than Anglo staff and promoted over Anglo peers with better qualifications. On the other hand, the idea that "a prophet has no honor in his own country" sometimes appeared operative, as American Indian professionals complained that opinions of credentialed Anglos were given more weight than theirs. While the presence of relatives either as fellow students or staff was a major comfort for students, the "relative" factor could cause problems. Nepotism was clearly evident on multiple levels in one grant school and became a focus for staff discontent. Staff complained that relatives of school board members and supervisors flouted discipline and received favors and considerations that other students or staff did not receive. Staff members who were less than totally scrupulous about interacting with students who were relatives or from their home communities, could be accused of favoritism. Staff reported that many fights were sparked by younger siblings complaining about squabbles to older siblings, who then involved themselves in the situation.

### **Internal Dynamics: “Diagnosing the Social Situation”**

Many at-risk students in boarding schools have grown up in dysfunctional families. In *The Politics of the Family*, R.D. Laing (1969) describes the functioning of every family as a multigenerational drama:

The actors come and go. As they die, others are born. The new-born enters the part vacated by the newly dead. The system perpetuates itself over generations; the young are introduced to the parts that the dead once played. Hence the drama continues. The dramatic structure abides, subject to transformations whose laws we have not yet formulated and whose existence we have barely begun to fathom. (p. 29)

The child whose temperament does not fit his or her role, or for whom the stress of the role is too much, can become the target of scapegoating by the family unit. Due to either the stress of the role on the child or the stress of the behavioral reactions to an environment that does not promote positive development, the child can internalize this failure by exhibiting mental health problems or externalize opposition to this pressure with rebellious behavior. The family then blames the child for its problems. Laing proposed a model of healing based on “diagnosing the social situation” that has generated the behavior, and addressing the problem by altering that situation. Each boarding school, like the families Laing studied, was a social system with its own complex set of dynamics, some of them dysfunctional. Accordingly, before boarding schools can heal children, it may be necessary to heal the boarding school’s social environment. This is hard to do. While most individuals working at Indian boarding schools are highly motivated to adopt methods to help children, they are reluctant to deal with system dynamics. The first step toward recovery is recognizing the problem and being willing to change. The two sites which posted high retention asked for help in defining the problem and were willing, to some degree, to change. The other three were generally unwilling or unable to address system barriers. One site would not acknowledge there was a problem to be addressed. A second site was too locked in internal dissension to take action to solve systemic problems. A third blamed the children for their failure.

### **The evaluator as a change agent**

Evaluation of these projects is not easy, either for the evaluator or the site. The more deeply the evaluator gets into the dynamics of the project through the process of seeking out the roots of barriers, the more interpersonal dynamics emerge. Researchers prefer the illusion that antiseptic conditions required by the experimental method can exist in the field, i.e., that they can flawlessly implement a pristine intervention, applicable across sites, which – if properly implemented – will improve outcomes. The evaluator emerges with glimpses of the real story of why a project fails or succeeds, but can rarely paint the complete picture, just as a family therapist cannot divulge the personal secrets of family members without tearing apart the very social unit he or she is working to improve. Acting in ignorance of those systemic problems leads to meaningless data that account for only peripheral factors. By becoming involved in the system and tweaking relationships, either intentionally or blindly, the evaluator changes the equilibrium of the social unit, hopefully – but not necessarily – for the better.

## Medication

Issues with medication emerged. All sites agreed that some students were in need of medication to function appropriately or securely. The disagreement was in how many of them needed it. Two sites provided little in the way of triage for mental health services, reflecting administration belief that mental health issues were either not serious, or not the business of the school to address. A third site, L1, utilized the insights of a team of frontline staff to develop and monitor individualized approaches to student issues, addressing them so successfully that Level Three, medication triage, was seldom utilized. At L2, the effort to address mental health issues was centered on in-house counselors, who provided proactive prevention activities, utilized an early warning system provided by dormitory staff, and acted as gatekeepers to the third level of triage, a psychiatrist. At L3, the dysfunction of the system appeared to amplify the dysfunction of students, and Level Three solutions of clinical diagnosis and medication were applied to an extraordinary number of students, without the moderating influence of a knowledgeable gatekeeper.

While the FDA has applied black box warnings to many of the drugs used at L3 (FDA, 2004; Hammad, Laughrin, & Racoosin, 2006), the situational factors at L3 which may have precipitated the need to medicate students placed them at further risk when medicated. Parents who are familiar with the range of their children's behavior are more likely to recognize behavior changes signaling the emergence of side effects. Overworked frontline staff, whose only contact with children has been in the throes of their transition into the school environment, are not as likely to provide such knowledgeable monitoring.

Ideally, a system would have a balance between the three levels of triage. A number of children entering the boarding school system are headed for development of the chronic depression rooted in an early traumatic event. As conceptualized by the Cognitive Behavioral Analysis System of Psychotherapy, due to derailing of the developmental process, adults with this chronic form of depression have an egocentric worldview which does not allow them to appreciate that their actions have consequences (McCullough, 2005; Glasser, 1989). With its emphasis on communicating logical consequences to the child, the Applied Humanism system (Hall, 1992) may have been successful because it addressed the root causes of this depression. While such cognitive therapy has been shown to be as effective as medication in adults, the skillful combination of the two has been shown to maximize the results in chronically depressed adults (Keller et al., 2000). While L1 and L2 data indicate that triage at levels one and two may preclude the need for medication for almost all at-risk youth in this population, more rigorous study needs to be done. Given the extreme stance of L3 and its clear overemphasis on medication rather than support, it is not a good test case for addressing the medication issue in this pediatric population.

## Conclusions

The survey data indicated that students coming into the boarding school or peripheral dormitory sites had similar risk factors. The outcome data indicated that some of the sites successfully met most of their students' emotional and developmental needs, but others did not. The sites that had the best student outcomes were those that focused on the needs of the children rather than the provision of services. These sites used the evaluation process to scrutinize their systems and make systemic changes.

The boarding schools that were the most successful at retaining students created a caregiving culture where staff acted as parents. L1 and L2 demonstrated that when children



were given structure and support, when behavior expectations were clear and consequences were logical rather than punitive, and when children were treated with respect, they were resilient. In contrast, L3 indicated that in the absence of structure and the lack of positive expectations from adults, children will revert to defensive survival patterns that are, in the long term, dysfunctional.

The differences in group management dynamics at L1, L2, and L3 were striking. Staff members at L1 and L2 were a constant presence, leveraging ratios of one employee to two students to successfully redirect situations before they got out of control. Staff members relied heavily on early intervention. Since many students were believed to have been victims of abuse and violence in the past, staff scrupulously avoided reawakening trauma by using physical restraint. Assaults became a rarity at these sites, virtually eliminating the need for physical restraint of students. In contrast, 200 L3 employees could not protect 200 fifth through eighth graders from each other. Abrogating responsibility to L3's professional hierarchy, the disempowered direct-care staff stood by while situations escalated out of control, resulting in an average of 20 violent assaults per week in SY 2004-2005. This inaction also had a cost to the aggressors. By the time designated professionals arrived, situations were often at the point where children were "taken down" and physically restrained by adults who were, in turn, modeling the utility of physical coercion.

Behavioral infractions were treated differently at the sites. L1 staff utilized misbehavior as an opportunity for a positive learning experience. Students who disrupted the L1 classroom participated with the teacher in a decision to go to a red card room, where they were assisted in settling down and exploring alternative ways to handle situations before returning to the classroom. L2 utilized the bonds students had created with adults, relying heavily on communicating communal disappointment in the behavior of the student, and requiring the student to work off damage he or she had done. At L3, children were punished by being placed in detention or a locked ward with other miscreants, fostering a banding together and internal support of the "tough kids." L3 students who caused problems for teachers experienced the rejection of a quick dispatch to alternate classroom settings (either short or long term), and were often sent to the psychiatrist – where they were told their brains would not work properly without the use of medication.

Students at L1 and L2 were encouraged to engage in age-appropriate activities. L1 students, male and female, regularly participated in evening baking sessions and small group sessions oriented to life skills, inclusive athletic activities, and a variety of other activities where they had the opportunity to bond with role models. L2 students raised and trained show hogs in the afternoon and evening, and participated in cultural, athletic, scouting type activities and group counseling sessions. At L3, middle school students were locked out of their dorm rooms to get them to attend weekly dances, regularly wore heavy makeup, and were exposed to movies and video games with adult content. While sexual assaults were rare at L1 and L2, at L3 there were 1.6 sexual assaults reported per week in SY 2004-2005.

Structure, stability, and presence of adults also appeared to reduce occurrence of emotional stress. Medication and Level Three professional help were rarely used at L1. Instead, considerable effort was put into providing a supportive, structured, nurturing environment. L2 had the services of a tribally contracted psychiatrist one day a week, but recommendations for use of medication were reviewed and often turned down by the gatekeeper, a licensed counselor committed to making minimal use of medication. L1 and L2 both adopted a strategy of counseling "on the hoof" and scheduled duty hours after school and on weekends. L1 and L2 documented a reduction in the need for Level Three services as their systems evolved over the years of TRM funding. Students in the stressful environment of L3, on the other hand, were



disproportionately labeled with psychiatric diagnoses, medicated, and hospitalized with emotional breakdowns by a half-time psychiatrist. Unlike the after-school "on the hoof" model of counseling at L1 and L2, mental health sessions at L3 required extraction of students from class, interrupting the academic process and returning a distracted child to the classroom.

The two sites with the highest retention conformed most closely to the four elements described in *Reclaiming Youth at Risk: Our Hope for the Future* (Brendtro et al., 2002):

- (1) Experiencing belonging in a supportive community, rather than being lost in a depersonalized bureaucracy.
- (2) Meeting one's needs for mastery, rather than enduring inflexible systems designed for the convenience of adults.
- (3) Involving youth in determining their own future, while recognizing society's need to control harmful behavior.
- (4) Expecting youth to be caregivers, not just helpless recipients overly dependent on the care of adults. (p. 4)

A shift in the configuration of factors at a site can affect results. The sites that accomplished gains in retention and other positive outcomes had nearly optimal alignments of administration, staff, governing bodies, and funding. This chemistry is fragile. At one site, the loss of a charismatic leader brought the momentum for positive change to quick halt. At another site, the replacement of a nurturing residential supervisor with a top down manager who lacked those characteristics led to a hemorrhaging of residential staff with whom students had bonded.

Beginning in SY 2006-2007, all of the sites will lose their TRM funding. In preparation, programs are already being trimmed back and exiting staff are not being replaced. There is evidence that the quality of care provided by even the successful sites is already eroding, as sites prepare to shift back from a proactive to a crisis management mode. Of course, the extent of this erosion of services one year out, and its impact on the children, is not yet known. It can only be hoped that these sites will find a way to continue their recently adopted proactive strategies.

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