

**The School Success Profile:
Students Voice Their Concerns**

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Preface

In the 1995-96 school year, 665 middle and high school students told educators and researchers how they felt about themselves, their schools, and their neighborhoods on a survey instrument called the School Success Profile (SSP). These students, from 19 schools in North Carolina and Florida, were participants in Communities In Schools (CIS), the nation's largest dropout prevention program. Their first-hand perspective gave social workers, teachers, and other professionals much more information than is typically available about the magnitude of the problems in these students' lives—information that provides a strong data-based starting point for helping these students cope in their difficult social environments.

The SSP was developed by researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation has supported the survey's field-testing and dissemination. Additionally, in 1996, Knight Foundation funded the polling firm of Harris and Associates to administer the SSP to a nationally representative sample of 2,099 sixth- through twelfth-graders in 93 schools across the country. These responses established national norms against which to compare the responses of CIS students.

While the views of the students who responded to the SSP survey are intended to help the professionals who work with these students provide more effective interventions, the data are also useful to others who work with youth or develop policies that foster youth development.

This document describes the research reported to date on the SSP. First, it summarizes the findings as they were presented to Knight Foundation and local and national CIS program directors in an oral presentation in June 1998. Included in this summary are snapshots of SSP activities in four communities in which Knight Foundation is supporting the administration and field testing of the SSP survey instrument.

This summary is followed by a more detailed synthesis of SSP research findings. Other programs that are interested in collecting similar data from their youth are invited to contact the SSP's developers for more information. Contact information appears at the back of this document.

SSP Research Findings in Brief

In many American communities, poverty, crime, alienation, and other personal and environmental obstacles are ripping apart young people's lives. Many of these youth, besides being at risk of failing in school, experience other personal hardships, including depression and addiction. But other youth in similar circumstances throw off the stamp of underprivilege. They succeed in school, graduate, and move into productive adulthood. Why do some students succumb to the odds stacked against them while others succeed in spite of them? And what can communities and schools do to spot the conditions that lead students to failure and do so early enough to intervene?

The School Success Profile is a survey instrument developed for the Communities In Schools program. Its purpose is to inform professionals, including teachers and social workers, who work with the young people in this program about students' perceptions and attitudes toward their schools, neighborhoods, and homes.

Research on the SSP has examined student responses to this survey instrument in three different ways. Some studies looked at the responses of at-risk students in the CIS program only; others compared the responses of CIS students with those of the national sample in the Harris study; and some analyzed the responses of the national sample only.

These studies examined how students felt about:

- Neighborhood and school safety
- Peer group acceptance
- School coherence
- School satisfaction
- Social support
- Home academic climate

The data revealed sharp differences between the young people in the CIS program and those in the national sample, with CIS students having many more characteristics that place students at risk. CIS students were more apt to be members of racial or ethnic minority groups, to live in a one-parent home, to live with a parent who did not complete high school, and to qualify for a free or reduced-price lunch (a measure of poverty). Unsurprisingly, the higher students' level of risk, the poorer their school performance, the lower the amount of support they reported receiving, and the fewer the internal assets they said that they had to draw upon.

While these same students also had lower attendance and more behavioral problems than those in the national sample, most of them, despite their circumstances, said they did try to succeed in school.

But the picture became considerably more hopeful when researchers looked at the influence of social supports. Social supports clearly protected students from risk factors. Over and over again, the researchers found a direct link between social support and students' health, well-being, and personal adjustment to their circumstances. And where did such supports come from? CIS students indicated that parents were their chief social support, followed by neighborhoods, and then teachers.

Parents: Children's Main Support

That parents make their imprint on their children's learning is by no means a new finding. Even adolescents rebelling against the rules and structures their parents lay out for them have traditionally perceived their parents as the strongest influence in their lives. The SSP research, however, brought home the depth of this finding. One of the SSP studies distinguished among eight kinds of social support, including listening support, emotional support, and reality confirmation support, among others. It found that students turned to different sources depending on the type of support they were seeking at the time. Making this situation even more complex is the finding that middle school students didn't always rely on the same sources as did high school students.

Communities In Schools of Charlotte-Mecklenburg

Wilson Middle School in southwest Charlotte enrolls 800 students. They are, in the main, low performing and poor. Their homes are in neighborhoods riddled with crime. After 59 percent of the students scored below grade level on state reading tests and 79 percent scored below the statewide average in math, the North Carolina Department of Education designated Wilson a "low-performing school."

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Schools, in which Wilson Middle School is a part, was the first site in the country to test the SSP. Well-versed in the benefits of having the types of information that the survey yields, district and CIS staff collaborated to administer the SSP to Wilson's entire student body. With the results, CIS staff set out to identify student needs and develop interventions to improve student performance as well as the culture and climate of the school.

The activities they developed included family involvement and engagement programs as well as summer programs to help students make a smooth transition from eighth grade to high school. The SSP will be readministered to monitor the effects of these programs on students and their families.

But in every case—for every kind of social support—high school students viewed parents as their major source of support. Middle schools students looked to parents for six of the eight kinds of support. For them, friends and neighbors were also major support sources.

Further, when neighborhood danger was a factor, students named parents as the number one influence on their physical health, psychological well-being, and personal adjustment.

The research also made clear the relationship between home academic climate and student achievement in school. It revealed that this influence was more indirect than direct. Or, another way to put it is that there was a two-step process at play. In this process, when others in the home—parents, grandparents, older siblings, or other caregivers—conveyed to children that education was important and that they held high expectations for them, students strived to do well in school. In addition, students' survey responses indicated that the more they valued education, the more time they spent doing homework and the less time they spent watching television.

For educators, social workers, or other adults who work with families, these findings reinforce the need to help parents and other family members to get involved in children's education. But simply telling families and caregivers that they should promote higher expectations and standards for student performance seldom goes far enough. They need to be shown how to express interest and support their children's education. Stressing the benefits of education—and the consequences of school failure—are other ways parents can help, if someone shows them how.

An alternate route for promoting positive parent-child interaction about education, no less important, is to help students initiate conversations with their parents.

Neighborhoods: Sources of Both Stress and Support

Neighborhoods were the second most important source of support for the young people in the SSP field test. Sadly, neighborhoods also persist as a major source of stress. Almost 60 percent of the students in one analysis of the Harris data said that young people in their neighborhood were likely to act out some kind of risky behavior, with the use of alcohol and drugs at the top of the list. Given a list of six violent crimes and illegal drug sales, almost 40 percent of those students said that one or more of those crimes recently occurred in their neighborhoods.

Neighborhood crime and violence and issues of school safety levy tremendous academic and psychic costs on students. Almost a third of the students in the Harris study said that three or more of 11 types of crime and violence loomed large in their school. Another 30 percent identified two of the 11 types of crime and violence as having hit their school.

Fear for their own safety prevents students from participating in learning programs and other enrichment opportunities. If students think that their safety is threatened, they won't take part in these activities. They stay home or go someplace else. Four of the SSP studies looked at this issue. They found that students who perceived danger in their neighborhood or at school attended school less, had poorer school behavior, and earned poorer grades. Whether the danger was in the neighborhood or at school, school achievement suffered.

But neighborhoods exert powerful positive influences in the lives of young people as well. Students perceived that when their neighbors exerted a high degree of informal social control—when adults placed a premium on keeping crime out of neighborhoods and were willing to intervene to discourage young people from engaging in delinquent behavior—there was less neighborhood crime and young people like themselves were better behaved.

The issue is how to make such neighborhoods commonplace. The research suggests several promising avenues. First and foremost is unleashing the creative energy in communities themselves. Social workers and others dedicated to neighborhood improvement can help by offering their skills in community action and political organization to get things going. They can bring in employers, local governing bodies, and neighborhood social networks as powerful allies, and eventually to take things over so that changes are made from the inside out. Social workers can encourage residents to build a culture that expects young people to behave and expects adults to enforce norms of appropriate behavior.

Communities in Schools of Miami

Three CIS organizations in South Florida are getting ready to administer the SSP a second time to find out if the programs and services they have been offering students on the basis of first-round SSP data are making a difference in the lives of participants.

Students in Miami-Dade, Broward, and Palm Beach counties first responded to the SSP during the 1998-99 school year. In all, 1,455 students responded to the survey's questions about themselves and their schools, neighborhoods, and families. On the basis of their responses, SSP developers generated both individual and group profiles. Individual profiles became the basis on which CIS staffs counseled and matched their programs and services to students and families; group profiles were presented to teachers, parents, administrators, and state legislators. CIS staffs are now using the data to improve their services and allocate resources, often working together across counties to develop ideas and broker resources.

The reapplication of the SSP will tell CIS staffs in the three counties if their interventions had an effect on students, and if so, what kind. This information will then help them decide whether or not to make the SSP part of their routine operations.

Schools and Teachers: Other Potential Supports

Schools are obviously another important influence on students' lives, especially when, rather than being threatened in school, students regard school as a comfortable and worthwhile place to be—something the researchers call school coherence—and they receive social support from peers and the adults who work there.

School coherence appeared as an important factor throughout these studies. The more support students felt they got from teachers, the more they felt a sense of school coherence. Conversely, when students felt their teachers weren't really interested in them—and especially if they sensed danger in school—students' sense of school as a comfortable and worthwhile place waned.

Large schools, especially, tended to exert a negative influence on middle school students' academic performance. Middle school students in schools with enrollments of 800 or more students reported lower levels of school satisfaction, teacher support, and school safety than students in smaller schools.

Similar findings about the influence of teacher support showed up again and again. But usually, teacher support didn't appear in isolation. Young people regarded teacher support as a critical element in setting them in the right direction, but it was only one of several critical elements that had to work together. In other words, it still took the combination of support from parents, neighbors, friends, and teachers to shape positive school outcomes.

Students who perceived a high degree of support from parents, friends, and teachers said that they attended school more, spent more time studying, avoided trouble, got better grades, demonstrated greater self-efficacy, and were more engaged in and satisfied with school.

One finding, however, was especially jolting. This finding showed that teachers expressed less support for students who needed it the most—those students whose home academic culture and

Communities in Schools of Philadelphia

Teens in Philadelphia are taking their fellow students to court for violations such as truancy, fighting, and petty theft. Only in this case, the court is a mock court and the judges, prosecuting and defense attorneys, clerks, bailiffs, and jury members are students in the Law and Public Safety Program operated by Communities in Schools of Philadelphia (CISP).

The program has a dual aim: to deter poor behavior and to give high school students the opportunity to explore careers in the legal and judicial systems. Students who are found guilty perform community service, attend conflict resolution programs, or serve on a jury.

Results from the SSP will tell CISP staff whether students' experiences in the teen court program and other CISP activities have influenced students' social, psychological, and academic progress over time. Staff will then adjust their interventions accordingly.

Staff will also administer the SSP to students in CISP's Transitional Opportunities Promoting Success Program, a program for older students who return to school after pregnancy, incarceration, or other circumstances.

demographics placed them most at risk. What to do about this is one of the most important problems emerging from this research. Even given the importance that students ascribed to neighborhoods, society is largely set up for schools to be the place where young people can turn when all else fails them.

But here, too, the research provides some directions. One approach is to help students recognize their needs and help them get the kind of support they need from wherever they can get it. Another way is to redouble teacher development efforts. Social workers, community members, and parents can all work side by side with teachers in professional development programs that help teachers to convey warmth, encouragement, and trust to all of their students, and raise teachers' awareness of different cultures in their schools and classrooms.

Similarly, because school safety is a major concern, communities can help teachers develop conflict resolution strategies, or better yet, teach vulnerable young people to recognize and resolve potential conflicts before they become full-blown crises.

In the study that distinguished among eight kinds of social support, students who indicated receiving no or little social support experienced very different lives from students who reported receiving an average amount of social support. They moved more often, worked more hours for pay, attended school less, spent less time studying, felt less accepted, had fewer friends, and shared other characteristics that appeared to signal social isolation.

While the amount of peer group acceptance did not appear to directly affect academic performance, it did so indirectly, just as home climate did. This means that peer acceptance appears in the research as a major factor in students staying out of trouble, and it is staying out of trouble that directly correlates with students' academic performance.

The SSP research also points out why students feel isolated from their peers. The most frequent cause is lagging social skills. The message for adults is that students who have a difficult time developing peer relationships must be helped to get over those difficulties and build strong, healthy bonds. This means creating comfortable settings where students can learn to read social cues, to initiate and maintain a conversation, or to respond appropriately when others bait them. In schools, disciplinary procedures that shut students who misbehave out of extracurricular activities—a common response to poor behavior—may just exasperate the very problem that they are trying to solve.

Using the SSP as an Entry Point for Change

The overall picture that emerges from these student responses abounds with lessons for schools, social service agencies, neighborhoods, and families to take to heart as they rally around their young. First, there are dynamics in students' lives that help them survive. Foremost among them are having a caring adult, being able to set goals for themselves, and having somebody to help them reach those goals.

Participation and pressure from the broader community influence young people even as they rebel against it. Neighborhoods are full of naturally forming networks for helping. Social service agencies and other organizations that strive to help youth are one kind of network. Another consists of neighbors, aunts and uncles, siblings, grandparents, and peers. What matters is the interaction—service worker and client, teacher and student, parent and child, peer and peer. One direction for future work is to change interactions between people, helping them to create social bonds by, for example, linking families with strong parenting skills with families whose parenting skills are weaker. That's a very different agenda from creating new interventions, important as those interventions are.

Such an agenda, though, is full of tough questions. How do we help people in the neighborhood do this work? How do we generate more capacity? How can we make it acceptable to put our noses into other people's business without being neighborhood busybodies? If six problems are going on in one adolescent's life at the same time, where should we begin?

Communities in Schools of Wichita/Sedgwick County

CIS staff in Wichita/Sedgwick County are banking on a well-structured evaluation system to help them retain the strong support they have gleaned from parents, teachers, and the school board. Such a system, they maintain, will bolster their ability to make decisions about individual students, allocate resources effectively, and increase their accountability to a variety of stakeholders. And at the heart of this evaluation system: SSP.

CIS staff are administering the SSP to students in four Wichita high schools. They are then adding these results to other detailed data about students in their Program Information Management System, a database program designed by the national CIS office to give CIS staffs information about the schools, students, and local service agencies with whom they work. Ready access to this information enables them to track individual students' progress, produce effective and detailed reports, and share information with other local agencies and CIS affiliates.

Funds from the Knight Foundation support a staff position whose duties are to organize and conduct the evaluation project, purchase computer equipment, administer the Program Information Management system, administer and analyze SSP data, and train staff.

The real beneficiaries of this evaluation system, however, are CIS students. As data allow CIS staff to target students' needs more accurately, the expectation is that students will begin to experience more effective interventions which, in turn, will help them cope in the often turbulent environments in which they live.

The researchers are frank about the SSP's limits. SSP is a point of entry for services; it doesn't purport to reform systems. But it is an instrument with which to create a shared picture of the problems, to find out what's really going on with young people, and to help create a common vision about what to do. The SSP is about adults getting smarter about our young.

A Review of Research Using the School Success Profile

Using data collected by the School Success Profile, two professors at the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill have looked into questions of why some students succeed and others fail and what communities and schools can do to help. They are convinced that many of the answers lie not in the shortcomings of students but in the conditions that govern students' neighborhoods, schools, and homes. This section reviews the development of the SSP and summarizes the research that the UNC team and their colleagues have conducted using this student assessment instrument. It concludes with implications for social work professionals, educators, and others who work with youth.

What Is the School Success Profile?

The School Success Profile is a questionnaire that asks middle and high school students about themselves and about their environments in terms of family, school, peers, and neighborhood. It also asks students about their adaptation to these environments and their school behavior and performance. Student responses to the SSP provide an informed, data-based starting point for social workers, teachers, and other professionals planning interventions to help students cope in difficult environments. SSP responses can also help track both student and program progress over time.

SSP was developed by Gary Bowen and Jack Richman, professors at the UNC School of Social Work, under a grant from BellSouth Foundation in 1992. Too many youth workers, Bowen and Richman observed, found it necessary to intervene with students who were at risk of failure without any data on the conditions in which these students found themselves. The professors' purpose was to help youth workers in the Communities In Schools program take stock of students' strengths and areas of risk so that they could develop interventions based on sound data about student needs. Working with CIS representatives at the national, state, and local levels, they developed and field tested the questionnaire and evaluated its effectiveness in planning interventions for youth. Since then, SSP has attracted the attention of other public and private school systems that want to incorporate it into their curricula and services.

The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, in collaboration with CIS, has supported the further development and field testing of SSP. Some of this support assisted the design of an Internet-accessible version of the questionnaire, called the School Success Profile Online (SSP-OL), which allows students to complete the survey online at school. Placing the survey online makes its administration less labor intensive and time-consuming by eliminating staff work in mailing, entering and tabulating data, summarizing results, and mailing the results back to sites. SSP-OL immediately translates the data into student profiles. The student and teacher can then discuss the results, target areas for improvement, and develop an individualized work plan.

SSP provides information on individual students and on groups of students. The individual profile has two components. The first is the Social Environment Profile, which summarizes the student's responses to questions about the student's neighborhood, school, friends, and family. The second component is the Individual Adaptation Profile, which summarizes the student's perception of his or her general social support, self-confidence, school behavior, and general well being.

Dimensions of the Social Environment	Dimensions of Individual Adaptation
<p>Items about the student's neighborhood:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • neighborhood satisfaction • peer culture • neighborhood safety <p>Items about the student's school:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • school satisfaction • teacher support • school safety <p>Items about the student's peers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • peer satisfaction • peer acceptance <p>Items about the student's family:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • family satisfaction • family integration • parent support 	<p>Items about social support:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • social support • home academic culture • parent education monitoring <p>Items about self-confidence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • self-esteem • school coherence • school influence <p>Items about school behavior:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • attendance • trouble avoidance • grades <p>Items about general well being:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • physical health • happiness • adjustment • parent support

Students receive an individual score for each component, along with information on how their responses compare with those of other students.

Data from individual student profiles can be aggregated into a group profile. Group profiles identify and document the needs of a program, school, or community. They can be the basis for formulating goals and interventions at these levels, measuring progress, and directing future program activities. Group profiles also enable social workers, teachers, and other professionals to design interventions for groups of students with common risk factors, or to tailor programs according to the needs of a large number of students. Group profiles can be the impetus for motivating and mobilizing parents, school administrators, community members, and local decision makers to step up their youth development endeavors.

Most students take approximately 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Their responses are scored and summarized by the SSP team at UNC. For reasons of privacy, school personnel never see students' answers to individual items. Instead, they receive informational notebooks that contain a one-page profile of each student who filled out a questionnaire, a group profile, and a letter that highlights key findings. The notebook also includes a reference copy of the SSP, and intervention planning forms to

help social workers and teachers use the profiles in their work with students. Individual student profiles may also be downloaded via the Internet.

SSP's Place in Communities In Schools

CIS states that it is the nation's largest public-private partnership for promoting student success in school. The program trains local staff, volunteers, board members, and local private and corporate funders to work alongside school staff, forming a safety net of individuals and resources for at-risk students. Social workers, tutors, counselors, health providers, and employers are also on these school-community teams, and address a wide range of issues affecting student performance, including school attendance, literacy, job preparedness, teenage pregnancy, drug and alcohol use, teen suicide, and school violence. CIS reports that it serves more than 216,000 students in 1,025 school sites across 28 states.

CIS National Program Standards have guided the development of the SSP. The developers of the SSP report that the SSP fulfills each of these program standards. These standards require all CIS activities to:

- Describe the students selected for program participation
- Inform the process by which each student is provided with a comprehensive program of academic services, social services, and employment and life skills training
- Monitor changes in program participants over time
- Contribute to the development of effective and responsive programs
- Be accountable to major stakeholders, including students themselves

SSP's developers claim to have developed the only student assessment instrument available that profiles individual students. There are other tools, however, that assess the school environment. The Search Institute has developed an assessment tool for use with students in grades 6-12 called "Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors" (www.search-institute.org). This instrument assesses students' assets, deficits, and at-risk behaviors and reports its results in a group profile. The developer reports that the instrument is used chiefly to determine program needs and priorities and to mobilize community efforts.

In addition, the Gordon S. Black Corporation markets an instrument that collects information from a broader range of school and community stakeholders. Its respondents are parents, teachers, administrators, students, and others. This instrument has been used in 100 school districts to inform and monitor the results of planning efforts to improve student performance.

The Research behind SSP

SSP springs from the urgency to develop effective and efficient interventions for youth who are at risk of failing in school. Bullying, physical assaults, robbery, and other forms of crime and violence have become commonplace in many of these students' schools and neighborhoods. Statistics reveal that drug and alcohol use among adolescents has been increasing since 1991 and continues to tug at American youth.¹ Other data warn that nearly one quarter of high school students in 1993 carried a knife, razor, club, or firearm to school on at least one occasion during the previous 30 days.² Nearly one out of ten of these students reported having carried a gun to school.

SSP's developers anchored the SSP in research on how young people behave when confronted with such conditions. Studies of risk and resiliency show that not all adolescents who live in poverty suffer negative outcomes. Many go on to finish high school and college and lead productive lives. Researchers who have studied why some students succeed while others fail have developed several theories and perspectives about why this is so.

Much of the thinking behind SSP stems from ecological theory. Ecological theory posits that the social environment in which a young person lives either advances or constrains his or her development. Risk factors, such as neighborhood danger, threaten children's safety and ability to adapt by depriving them of essential experiences, relationships, and opportunities. On the other hand, protective factors, such as social supports, provide children with opportunities, resources, and supplies with which to meet their physical and psychological needs and respond to demands from their environment. Social supports include neighbors, teachers, parents, friends, and others in the social environment who provide the adolescent with a sense of safety and stability.

Other relevant research draws on social disorganization theory, which seeks to explain the influence of neighborhood characteristics on adolescents' perceptions and behavior. According to this paradigm, neighborhood norms and values guide adolescents' behavior. Well-organized neighborhoods offer many educational and recreational opportunities for adolescents, along with positive norms and role models for positive social behavior. However, neighborhoods differ in the extent to which they meet young people's developmental needs. Family income, cultural heterogeneity, residents' sense of cohesion, and residential transience are all factors that affect norms and values. Adolescents from socially disorganized neighborhoods are more likely to feel alienated from the mainstream, exhibit delinquent behavior, use drugs, participate in gangs, and engage in other negative features of American life.

Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a third research base underlying the SSP. Maslow's hierarchy offers a general explanation for human behavior by arranging needs in an order in which they must be met. Physiological needs such as food and shelter are at the bottom as most fundamental to human existence, topped next by safety and security. Social needs, or the need to belong, follow, with the need for esteem or self-respect next, and finally, the need for self-actualization or fulfillment. Applied to schooling, the hierarchy suggests that youngsters must have physical, safety, and relational needs satisfied before they are able to attend to the higher-level needs associated with fulfilling their academic potential.

Besides reviewing the literature on school success, the SSP developers tapped into instruments and survey items that yield valid and reliable information on student behavior.

Each of the SSP items and scales received extensive field testing to ensure content validity, including reviews by child development experts, school officials and teachers, social intervention experts in the schools, and CIS student representatives. Because of the low reading levels among many students at risk of school failure, special attention was given to both the wording of items and the ease with which the response format was used. The SSP items and measures have shown good concurrent validity in prior analyses.³ The developers also consulted national experts in education, adolescent development, and social work about the design of the questionnaire and assessment of program outcomes.

While the SSP's reliance on student self-reports may leave it open to criticism that respondents do not reply objectively to items that ask about their activities, its developers argue that school-age children, particularly as they get older, are often the best chroniclers of their own situations, behavior, and feelings. They point to a considerable body of research that backs up their claim.⁴

Further evidence of the reliability of student self-reports appears in a field test of the SSP itself. Middle and high school students' self-reports of their performance and behavior at school converged significantly with the information in their school records. The grades that students said they received on their most recent report card paralleled at a moderate to high level grades posted in school records. Also, students' self-reports of cutting school or missing school because of illness moderately matched the number of absences recorded in official records. What's more, students' self-reports of school suspension or expulsion during the past 30 days moderately to highly reflected both the number of disciplinary actions and the number of suspensions during the academic year in school records.

SSP Field Test and National Norming

SSP was field tested in 19 schools with CIS programs in North Carolina and Florida in 1995-96. CIS state directors in these states nominated schools for the field test that were exemplary in the quality of

their CIS programs and staff. In all, 665 CIS students participated in the SSP field test. The purpose of the field test was to evaluate the value that the SSP added to student assessment information.

The developers used a Solomon Four-Group research design for the field test. This design uses four experimental groups to test various degrees of intervention while controlling for pretest influence and history effects. Schools were randomly assigned into one of four treatment groups.

Students in Group 1 schools completed pre- and posttests. Practitioners working with students received (1) group and individual student profile data on their site, (2) a detailed cover letter that outlined steps for using the SSP to target interventions, and (3) a one-day site visit during which the developers provided technical assistance.

Students in Group 2 schools also completed the pre- and posttest. Practitioners received group and individual profile data for their school and the cover letter but no special assistance in using the information.

Students in Group 3 schools constituted the control group for the study. These students completed the pre- and posttests but practitioners did not receive any profile data. Developers hypothesized that less change would occur in this group than in Groups 1 and 2.

Group 4 students completed only the posttest. The purpose was to determine whether simply taking the SSP would produce changes in students.

The results of the field test showed that many students experienced a relatively small increase in their profile scores in the approximately seven months between the pretest and posttest. The addition of technical assistance for practitioners made no difference in students' scores. In fact, the amount of change in scores was higher for groups that received no technical assistance, on average, than for the group that received assistance.⁵

These field test results provided the developers with several lessons that they later incorporated into the SSP's implementation. First, the developers learned the importance of both the program director and the person who would actually administer the questionnaire attending training prior to using the SSP. A possible explanation for field test results, they believed, was that the person who participated in training was not always the same person who administered the questionnaire and worked with students.

A second lesson was the need to put organizational procedures into place well in advance of the start of the school year. Administration of the questionnaire was hampered by the long time it took to obtain required permissions for the research project during the school year when school personnel were already juggling other demands on their time.

Turn-around time, too, became an issue with its own lesson. The developers found that by the time they analyzed students' responses to the questionnaire and returned the results to schools, interventions were already underway. The lesson for the development effort was that feedback must be provided quickly if adults and students are to use it in the desired manner.

The final lesson concerned trust between researchers and practitioners. Trust and cooperation develop in small increments. The field test period was not long enough to foster the trust and cooperation needed for research to find its way into practice.

With Knight Foundation support, the researchers contracted with the national polling firm of Harris and Associates to administer the SSP to a representative cross-section of U.S. youths. The sample design was specified to ensure adequate representation of students by gender, race/ethnicity, size of place, and region. The Harris study, conducted between October 31, 1996, and February 15, 1997, collected data from a nationally representative sample of 2,099 students in grades 6-12 in 93 public schools. The purpose of this survey was to establish national norms for the SSP. With this information, the developers could compare a student's or school's response on the SSP to a national average.

SSP Research Studies

The wealth of data produced by the SSP, both in the national field test and through the Harris survey, fueled numerous studies of the relationships among student, school, home, and neighborhood characteristics. To date, the developers have conducted 15 studies using data collected by the SSP. These studies have examined the responses of at-risk students in CIS programs only, compared the responses of CIS students with those of the national sample, and analyzed the responses of the national sample.

Findings from these investigations have introduced new knowledge to the fields of social work and education and suggest important avenues in designing and implementing effective practices and interventions at the policy, community, family, and individual levels. Based on an assumption that homes, schools, and neighborhoods are key settings in which young people develop, SSP has been used as a research tool for looking at the following issues: neighborhood and school safety, peer group acceptance, school coherence, school satisfaction, social supports, and home academic climate.

Early on, in *Contextual Risks, Social Capital, and Internal Assets Among Communities In Schools Participants: Comparisons to the National School Success Profile*,⁶ the researchers studied the role of risk and protective factors in outcomes such as school performance. Contextual risks are conditions in children's social environments that lessen their chances for positive life experiences and make adverse developmental outcomes more likely. Social capital refers to the support that students receive from their

families and from institutions and adults in their communities, along with their parents' positive relationships with others in their communities. Finally, internal assets are those resources that reside within the individual. These assets reflect children's beliefs about themselves and their level of control over events in their lives.

Focusing on contextual risks, social capital, and internal assets, the researchers compared the responses of CIS students who participated in SSP field testing with the nationally representative sample of 2,099 students surveyed by Harris and Associates. Overall, their analysis revealed that CIS students faced greater risks in their social environment than did their national counterparts. This, in turn, placed them at greater risk of school failure.

More specifically, their findings showed that:

- Compared to the nationally representative sample, youth in the CIS sample were more likely to be from racial/ethnic minority groups, to live in single parent homes, to live with a parent who did not complete high school, and to receive free or reduced price lunch
- At-risk youth, on average, had lower school performance, attendance, and behavior than the representative sample, but most of these young people were trying to succeed in school in spite of social environmental risks
- Levels of contextual risk were higher and levels of social capital were lower for CIS youth than for youth in the nationally representative sample
- Levels of internal assets were similar for the two samples; however, the levels were only about 60 percent of the maximum possible in each category
- For both samples, higher levels of risk were associated with lower school performance, as well as lower levels of social capital and internal assets
- Higher levels of social capital and internal assets were associated with better school performance

From this research sprang numerous other investigations, many of which continue to this day. Summaries of these studies follow.

Studies of Neighborhood and School Safety

Crime and violence in neighborhoods have both psychic and academic costs for adolescents. They jeopardize students' physical and emotional safety, and they impede the availability of, access to, and quality of potential learning opportunities.

A number of studies analyzed student responses on the SSP to learn more about how neighborhood influences—both negative and positive—affect students. One such study, *Poverty, Neighborhood Danger, Social Support, and the Individual Adaptation Among At-Risk Youth in Urban Areas*,⁷ found that protective factors may play a more profound role in students' lives than does the impact of either risk factors or neighborhood stress.

Researchers in this study investigated the influence of neighborhood danger and social support on students' physical health, psychological well-being, and personal adjustment. Their sample of responses came from 207 middle and high school students participating in the CIS program. Specifically, they found that:

- Social support accounted for a significant amount of the variance in students' health, well-being, and adjustment
- Parental support was most important for students' health, well being, and adjustment, followed by neighborhood support and then teacher support
- Neighborhood danger explained little of the variance in students' health, well-being, and adjustment beyond social support influences
- Low income students (those who received free or reduced price lunches) reported higher levels of subjective and objective neighborhood danger

Two studies examined students' exposure to neighborhood and school danger, and how this affected their school attendance, behavior, and grades. The results of *Effects of Crime and Violence in Neighborhoods and Schools on the School Behavior and Performance of Adolescents*⁸ confirmed previous research that adolescents' exposure to and personal experiences with environmental danger often correlated with their other characteristics. Of the 2,099 students in the Harris study, males, African-Americans, high school students, free or reduced-price school lunch recipients, and students in urban schools reported being more exposed to school and neighborhood dangers than did their counterparts. In addition, results showed:

- Students who perceived danger at school and in the neighborhood had poorer school attendance, school behavior, and grades
- Neighborhood danger affected school outcomes as much, if not more, than school danger

*Students in Peril: Crime and Violence in Neighborhoods and Schools*⁹ examined (1) the prevalence of crime and violence in the neighborhoods and schools of 1,818 middle and high school students and (2) the impact these had on students' perceptions of danger and their school performance and attitudes. The students in this study portrayed their neighborhoods and schools as laden with crime, violence, and risky youth behavior.

Almost 60 percent of the students in this study indicated that their neighborhood peers were likely to act out one or more risky behaviors, especially using alcohol (54 percent) and drugs (36 percent). African-American and Latino youth, high school students, and students in urban areas were more likely than other groups to recount risky peer behaviors. Almost 40 percent of the students said that one or more incidents from a list of six violent crimes and illegal drug sales had struck their neighborhoods recently.

Levels of crime and violence at school were also high. Almost one-third of students stated that three or more of 11 types of crime and violence were big problems at their school. Another 30 percent acknowledged that one or two of the types of crime and violence were big problems. About 30 percent of the students had a personal experience with school crime or violence in the last 30 days.

Close to one-third of students worried about their safety in their neighborhoods and/or on the way to school. A similar percentage reported being afraid at school and/or staying home from school because of fear.

These results show spillover effects between students' experiences with crime and violence between home and school. Crime, violence, and personally threatening experiences in the neighborhood explained up to 10 percent of the variance in school attendance and problem behavior. School crime, violence, and personal threats accounted for a slightly higher percentage of the variance in attendance and behavior.

In their quest to understand neighborhood influences, the researchers also explored adolescent risk and resilience. *Perceived Crime and Informal Social Control in the Neighborhood as a Context for Adolescent Behavior: A Risk and Resilience Perspective*¹⁰ examined the mix of (1) adolescents' perceptions of neighborhood crime, (2) adolescents' perceptions of neighborhood informal social control, and (3) adolescents' perceptions of peer prosocial and problem behavior.

Informal social control in this sense means that adults impose high value on keeping their neighborhood free from crime and are willing to monitor adolescents' activities and intervene when young people engage in delinquent behaviors. Thus, neighborhood informal social control is a protective factor against adolescent problem behavior.

This research used data from the nationally representative Harris study of 2,099 middle and high school students. The results demonstrated that adolescents' perceptions about the levels of crime and informal social control in their neighborhoods were related to their beliefs about their peers' behavior.

More specifically, the researchers concluded:

- Early and middle adolescents who reported higher levels of informal social control tended to report lower levels of neighborhood crime
- High levels of perceived neighborhood crime correlated with perceptions of increased problem behavior among peers
- The more informal social control that adolescents perceived, the more prosocial behavior they perceived among peers
- Risks associated with perceived neighborhood crime were of greater magnitude, relative to the protection associated with perceived informal social control

Again, the results point to the importance of neighborhood social organization on adolescent development and behavior.

Studies of School Coherence and School Satisfaction

The concept of school coherence bears on the extent to which students feel that (1) others at school understand them and are able to structure the demands of the school environment, (2) they are able to handle school demands and challenges, and (3) they think school is challenging and engaging. In examining these issues in *Sense of School Coherence, Perceptions of Danger at School, and Teacher Support Among Youth At Risk of School Failure*,¹¹ researchers discovered that:

- Students who reported low levels of school coherence also reported high levels of school danger
- Students who reported high levels of teacher support also reported high levels of school coherence; teacher support was more important to students' sense of school coherence than school danger
- Students in the free or reduced price lunch program reported higher levels of sense of coherence than did others

When students perceive that their school is safe and their teachers are interested in them, they have a stronger sense of school coherence than they do under less favorable conditions. The findings confirm the critical role that teachers play in shifting the balance between risk and protection in the lives of at-risk students. Teachers who communicate caring, respect, and appreciation for their students may be especially important for those students who do not have other adult support in their lives.

Another study, *School Size and Middle School Students' Perceptions of the School Environment*,¹² examined the effects of school size on middle school students' perceptions of school satisfaction, teacher support, and school safety. The findings confirmed the benefits of smaller schools.

Students in schools with enrollments of 800 or more scored lower on school environment variables than did students in smaller schools. Other results of the study showed that:

- The social environment of large schools exerts a negative effect on middle school students' performance
- Middle school students in schools with enrollments of 800 or more reported lower levels of school satisfaction, teacher support, and school safety than students in smaller schools
- Levels of school satisfaction and teacher support also varied by gender, with girls reporting higher levels of satisfaction than boys
- Nonwhite youth reported lower levels of school safety, on average, than white youth
- Interaction effects between school size and demographic characteristics were found for school satisfaction and teacher support
- Perceptions of school safety appeared the most sensitive to school size, with the sense of safety declining more rapidly than school satisfaction and perceived teacher support as school size increased

Studies of Social Support

A considerable research base underlies the notion that the social context in which students live influences school outcomes. Strong social supports advance students' school adjustment, sense of school coherence, retention in school, ability to handle daily school hassles, and attendance.

*Social Support Networks and School Outcomes: The Centrality of the Teacher*¹³ clearly confirmed these earlier findings. The research compared school outcomes among students who have different perceptions of the extent to which they receive social support from their parents, friends, and teachers—each alone and in combination. The study sample consisted of the national SSP data from Harris and Associates.

The analysis showed that students who perceived a high degree of support from parents, friends, and teachers indicated that they had better attendance, spent more time studying, avoided problem behavior more, got better grades, demonstrated greater self-efficacy, and were more engaged in and satisfied with school. In contrast, students who reported receiving low or no support from parents, friends, and teachers had the poorest school outcomes.

In addition, while strong support from teachers shapes positive school outcomes, the research showed that teacher support alone does not go far enough. Students must perceive support from parents or friends. This pooling of support appears to have the greatest effect on students' school satisfaction,

engagement, and self-efficacy. Although the amount of perceived support was also a factor in students' school behavior and grades, its net effect was smaller.

Particular types of social support sometimes influence particular school outcomes, as evidenced in *Social Support for Adolescents at Risk of School Failure*.¹⁴ Here, researchers shed light on the source and effect of eight types of social support on at-risk students' school performance outcomes. By analyzing responses of 525 students in the CIS program, they learned that:

- Parents and adult caretakers are major sources of support for at-risk middle and high school students
- Sources of support differed for middle and high school students, with parents being somewhat more important sources of support for high school students, and peers being more important for middle school students
- Receipt of social support had a consistent positive association with school outcomes

There are many forms of social support, each coming from different sources:

- Listening support. Middle school students use friends as their primary sources of listening support, whereas high school students use parents or adult caretakers. Middle school students who receive listening support have a greater sense of school self-efficacy and higher grades than their peers who do not receive this support. No school outcome differences emerged between high school students who received this support and those who did not receive it.
- Technical appreciation support. Friends provide technical appreciation support for both middle and high school students; however, parents are an additional source for middle school students, and parents and teachers provide this support for high school students. Both middle school and high school students receiving technical appreciation support report a greater sense of school coherence than those not receiving this support. In addition, high school students who had this support reported spending more time studying on school nights.
- Technical challenge support. Parents and adult caretakers are the major sources of technical challenge support for middle and high school students. Middle school students receiving technical challenge support reported better attendance than students not receiving this support. High school students who had this support reported greater avoidance of problem behavior.
- Emotional support and emotional challenge support. Parents and adult caretakers are the major source of middle and high school students' emotional and emotional challenge support. Middle school students who receive emotional and emotional challenge support report being more satisfied with school than students who lack these types of support. High school students receiving these types of support spend more time studying on school nights. Those receiving emotional support also report having greater self-efficacy, while those receiving emotional challenge support also report having better attendance.

- Reality confirmation support. Parents and adult caretakers are middle and high school students' major source of reality confirmation support. Students who have such support are more satisfied with school and have greater school self-efficacy than those who do not have this type of support. High school students with reality confirmation support also reported better grades.
- Tangible assistance support. Neighbors are a major source of tangible assistance support for middle schoolers, whereas parents and friends fill that role for high school students. Research found no school outcome differences between students who received such support and those who did not.
- Personal assistance support. Parents and adult caretakers are the major source of this support. Middle school students who received personal assistance support reported engaging in more prosocial behavior than those not receiving this type of support. High school students who received such support reported studying more on school nights.

Social support is often nominal in the lives of youths at risk of school failure. *Low Social Support Among At-Risk Adolescents*¹⁵ compares the perceptions of at-risk students who reported receiving no or low social support with those who reported receiving an average amount of support.

The research focused on five domains: perceptions of neighborhood, school, peer group, family, and health and well being. The sample consisted of 57 middle and high school students considered to be at risk of dropping out of school.

Students who reported receiving no or low social support differed from those who reported receiving an average amount of social support on 12 of 31 measures. This former group of students indicated:

- Moving a greater number of times in the past year
- Working more hours for pay
- Having lower school attendance
- Spending less time studying
- Being less helpful to others
- Being less able to overcome school problems
- Having fewer close friends
- Feeling less accepted by peers
- Sharing their feelings less frequently
- Having parents who showed little interest in school activities
- Having parents who did not monitor their schoolwork
- Having lower self-esteem

The researchers observe that all of these problems appear to share a theme of social isolation. Students' lack of resilience, as demonstrated by their low self esteem, compounds the problem.

Numerous studies suggest that students who are able to build strong bonds with their peers are better able to meet academic challenges.¹⁶ To determine if SSP data bore out these findings, in *Peer Group Acceptance and Academic Performance Among Adolescents Participating in a Dropout Prevention Program*,¹⁷ the researchers hypothesized that three factors—sense of school coherence, school influence, and avoidance of problem behavior—mediated the effects of peer group acceptance on academic performance.

Using students' SSP scores on these variables as the bridge between peer acceptance and school performance, they examined this relationship within four groups of adolescents: African-American males, white males, African-American females, and white females. Their total sample consisted of 527 students in the CIS program. The evidence told them that:

- Peer group acceptance did not directly affect academic performance, but indirectly it affected the performance of all four groups by helping students avoid getting into trouble
- Avoiding problem behavior had a strong positive effect on the academic performance of all four groups
- Indirect peer group influences on academic performance may be more pronounced for females than for males

Studies of Home Academic Climate

Parents and other primary caregivers mold children's commitment to schooling. Two studies concentrated on the academic climate in students' homes. *The Mediating Role of Educational Meaning in the Relationship Between Home Academic Culture and Academic Performance*¹⁸ focused on the value that others in a student's home attach to education. In particular, it examined the extent to which parents reinforced education by discussing school activities, study topics, and future plans with their children. Another part of the study looked at the relationship between the importance ascribed to education in the home and the time children spend doing homework and watching television.

Researchers examined the responses of 538 middle and high school students in the CIS program. The findings showed that the influence of the home environment on academic achievement was a two-step route with the effects being indirect rather than direct. In the first part of the sequence, the academic environment in the home communicated to children the esteem in which parents and other caregivers held education. When parents impressed on children the importance of education, children took the next step by performing well in school. Other results indicated that:

- Home academic culture positively influenced academic performance by conveying educational meaning and expectations for homework
- Higher levels of educational meaning were associated with more time on homework and less time watching TV
- More time watching TV was associated with lower academic performance
- Non-white students reported higher levels of educational meaning; students participating in the free or reduced-price lunch program reported lower levels
- Middle school students reported watching more TV than high school students

The second study of home academic climate was entitled *The Effects of Home Microsystem Risk Factors and School Microsystem Protective Factors on Student Academic Performance and Affective Investment in Schooling*.¹⁹ It examined the interplay of teacher support, home academic culture, and demographic risk factors on middle and high school students' grades and educational investment. The sample in this study consisted of 582 students in the CIS program. This study found that:

- Teachers expressed least support to students who needed it the most—those whose home academic culture and demographics placed them at high risk
- Grades and educational investment were higher for students reporting higher levels of teacher support
- Grades were not lower for students with more forms of home academic culture risk and home demographic risk, indicating, on average, that students with several risk factors performed as well as students with fewer risk factors
- Students from homes with high or moderate categories of risk were more invested in education
- Educational investment was higher for students with higher levels of home academic culture

Improving Chances for Student Success

These analyses of student responses on the SSP convey an unmistakable message. Social workers, teachers, parents, and other adults all must move vigorously to intervene on behalf of young people to ameliorate the conditions that put youth at risk. The most promising intervention, of course, would be to remove the environmental factors in students' lives that place them at risk of school failure in the first place. Reality, however, may not always make this possible. Nonetheless, sometimes removing dangers from the social environment must take priority before students can take full advantage of either their internal or external assets. Usually, in order to be the most effective, interventions must be pursued at many fronts at once.

Creating Healthy Neighborhoods

Analyses of SSP data signal that safety interventions structured solely for schools are unlikely to resolve all student performance problems. Neighborhood safety affects middle and high school students' school performance as much as school conditions, and perhaps even more.

While at first glance turning around a dangerous neighborhood appears an overwhelming task for individuals or groups with few resources, these studies suggest several promising avenues for action. Social workers can encourage and lend their skills in community organization and political action to reduce neighborhood crime and its correlates, such as poverty and economic dislocation. Employers, local governing bodies, and neighborhood adult social networks are all potentially powerful allies in pressuring policymakers to supply necessary resources to improve neighborhood conditions.

Reducing adolescents' exposure to crime, even in neighborhoods with high crime rates, is another avenue for social workers. For example, one focus for effective social work intervention is to change adolescents' perceptions about neighborhood crime by demonstrating to them that crime is not as rampant as it appears or that engaging in crime is not part of the neighborhood culture. This, in turn, can relieve youngsters of the need to act in ways in which they think others act in order to fit in. Social workers can also encourage residents to build a neighborhood culture that expects positive social behavior from youngsters, and expects adults to enforce norms of appropriate behavior. These results suggest that it may be particularly important to remove, or remove the effects of, neighborhood risk factors when designing interventions to promote positive adolescent outcomes.

Creating Social Supports

The SSP studies affirm the importance of social supports in driving a wedge into adverse neighborhood conditions so adolescents will have opportunities to thrive. This implies that a critical intervention is developing ties between at-risk youth and these supports.

The researchers cite two primary approaches for social workers to use in helping students acquire social support. The psycho-educational approach aims to convince students of the value of social support, help them identify their social support deficiencies and adequacies, and find potential sources of support in their environments. The second approach, called the social skills approach, helps students develop behaviors that facilitate the acquisition of support. Interventions would encourage and guide students in developing relationships and practicing the use of support acquisition skills with family, peers, community members, and school personnel.

Social support may come from parents, teachers, neighbors, other adults, or young people's peers. The research shows that a supportive network of individuals is the most effective.

Social support from parents. Even as adolescents rebel against the structures that parents have created for them, parents remain the strongest influence in their children's lives. Children whose parents value education are more likely to understand what education means in their lives and judge it as important. The clear implication for practice is the importance of enlisting parents in supporting their children's education.

One strategy that the research suggests for strengthening academic culture in the home is for social workers to provide parents, either individually or in groups, with information on how to show interest and become involved in their children's education. Promoting higher expectations and standards for student performance and stressing the benefits of education and consequences of school failure both instill educational meaning. Practitioners can also work with teachers, suggesting ways teachers can facilitate greater parent-child interaction about school topics by, for example, assigning homework that requires parent-child discussion. Other strategies are to encourage parents to monitor their children's homework and reduce, if necessary, the time they spend watching television.

Increasing the volume of school-home communications related to student progress, classroom activities, school activities, and information about future education and employment is one more strategy to keep parents involved. Yet another is to equip students with skills in initiating discussions about school topics with their parents.

Social support from teachers. Next to parents, teachers are potentially best positioned to support students. In fact, their involvement may be especially important in cases where students need an

alternative to parent support in order to thrive. Often, it is the students who need the most support who don't know where to turn. In these cases, social workers can help students recognize their needs and gain access to different types of social support that are available to them.

School social workers can foster teacher support of at-risk students by conducting staff development programs focusing on the importance of conveying concern, warmth, and encouragement to all students, and on issues of cultural awareness. Where school safety is a concern, coaching teachers to use conflict resolution strategies and to recognize and respond to potentially threatening situations is another area where social workers can play a role. School social workers may also work with individual students and teachers to develop trust between the two.

Social support from peers. The challenge for social workers is to help young people establish supportive ties to others, especially peer groups, school personnel, family, and community members. Without even such a rudimentary support network with which practitioners can work, designing intervention strategies is a difficult task.

Peer acceptance and support is important to all students. Because middle school students, in particular, are more likely to identify with and be influenced by the attitudes and behavior of their peers, helping them establish peer relationships that promote healthy development is an especially critical task.

There may be several reasons for students being isolated from their peers. Most frequently, however, the cause is low social skills. Adults can help students who have a difficult time developing peer relationships by creating interventions that place students in group settings. These settings, then, can become the venue for interventions such as building skill in reading social cues or initiating and maintaining conversations. Other socialization groups can be formed around hobbies or academic interests.

The developers of the SSP warn that excluding already socially isolated students from extra-curricular activities because of low academic achievement may exacerbate the problem, not resolve it. And, finally, they point to the need for interpersonal skills development for all students. Teaching high status students to relate more positively to students who are less well accepted is equally as important. Finally, the developers of SSP suggest, whatever intervention is ultimately chosen, students should be involved in creating the solution.

Limitations of SSP Research to Date

The SSP studies were conducted on a limited group of students who were participating in a program to increase school retention for at-risk students. The researchers recommend several cautions before generalizing these findings beyond the population in these studies. While their findings are

generally consistent with earlier research, additional work is necessary to replicate them in other contexts. In addition, longitudinal research is needed to understand the operation and sequencing of risk and protective factors over time, as well as how SSP results inform interventions over time.

Another limitation is that so far the SSP studies have not included macro-level measures of crime and violence in neighborhood and schools. The researchers derived all their data on school and neighborhood crime from student self-reports. While it is possible to aggregate the self-reports within schools, it is more difficult to aggregate data within neighborhoods because of the difficulty of defining “neighborhood.” SSP research has begun to resolve this problem by adding U.S. Bureau of the Census factors coded to zip codes or counties of students in the national sample (e.g., violent crimes in a census tract); however, this research was not available at the time of this review.

Knight Foundation Support in the Continued Development of the SSP

The growing demand for the SSP has made it necessary to develop an administrative and technical assistance infrastructure for the instrument. The Knight Foundation is supporting the Jordan Institute for Families at UNC at Chapel Hill in its continued development of the SSP in several ways:

- More enhanced technological capabilities for online administration, data analysis, and fully automated reporting of individual, group, and community profile reports, to improve efficiency and lower costs
- More solid multidisciplinary grounding including production of Spanish-language, audio, and elementary school versions
- A full-time administrative position to orchestrate local applications and to manage growth
- A position to provide specialized training to build local capacity to administer the survey, interpret the data, and use results for program planning and resource allocation
- Development of a community-level profile report based on individual student responses, using zip codes and U.S. Census data to help identify needs and opportunities for community-based in addition to school-based interventions
- Scholarly analyses of data and generation of research reports to share broader findings and practical lessons for the benefit of related professional fields such as education, social work, and public health

A significant part of the Foundation’s support is being directed to field tests of the SSP in communities in Charlotte, North Carolina; Miami-Dade, Broward, and Palm Beach counties, Florida; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Wichita, Kansas.

In Charlotte, with Knight Foundation support, the SSP was administered to all of the approximately 800 students of the Wilson Middle School. In the 1997-98 school year, 59 percent of the school's students scored below grade level on state reading tests and 79 percent scored below the statewide average in math. SSP data identified student needs and helped school staff develop interventions to improve student performance, school culture, and climate. Activities are continuing and include training for CIS staff and school personnel in the use of SSP data, family involvement and engagement programs, summer programs for exiting eighth-graders to ensure successful transitions to high school, and annual re-admission of the SSP to monitor the effectiveness of interventions.

In the southern Florida counties of Miami-Dade, Broward, and Palm Beach, the Knight Foundation supported the administration of the SSP to 1,800 at-risk middle and high school students. Individual, group, and school profiles will be used to match student needs with services, reallocate existing resources for greater impact, and tailor programs to address unmet needs. A second administration of the SSP will determine the impact of the services on students. Foundation support is also covering the costs of training staff; orienting school staff, community members, parents, and students; facilitating cross-county meetings, site visits, and sharing results; and securing a formal outside evaluation of the tri-county project.

In Philadelphia, the Knight Foundation is supporting the administration of the SSP to at-risk high school students at 12 Communities In Schools locations. Some of the students are also participating in a career exploration program called Law and Public Safety, in which students participate in mock courtrooms and adjudicate cases of fellow students accused of school conduct violations. The results will help staff better meet student needs and measure the effectiveness of their interventions. Other students taking the SSP are in the Transitional Opportunities Promoting Success Program, which serves older students returning to school after pregnancy, incarceration, or other adverse circumstances.

The CIS program in Wichita is using the SSP as part of the evaluation of its own local program. Students in Wichita will be administered the SSP over a three-year period to test the effectiveness of the interventions provided to them. Funds from the Knight Foundation support a staff position to organize and conduct the evaluation project, purchase computer equipment, administer a Program Information Management system, administer and analyze SSP data, and train staff. At the close of the three-year period, CIS anticipates being able to make better informed decisions about services for individual students, more effective resource allocations, and increased accountability to constituencies.

In Closing

The results of these studies clearly support the importance of interventions that target students' social environment in school, in the neighborhood, and in the home. In addition, results demonstrate that

the SSP can reliably identify aspects of students' social environments where interventions are necessary in order for youth to succeed in school and in later life. The development of the School Success Profile Online (SSP-OL), by which the survey is administered to students and scored via the Internet, is expected to make the administration of the SSP less labor intensive and speed up the return of results to users.

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¹⁹ N.K. Bowen and G.L. Bowen, "The effects of home microsystem risk factors and school microsystem protective factors on student academic performance and affective investment in schooling" (*Social Work in Education, 1998*) 20, 219-231.

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