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Essential ingredients of effective student at-risk programs

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Essential ingredients of effective student at-risk programs

Abstract

At-risk students might be an undefinable group. There is; however, a greater consensus of the characteristics and significance this group plays toward our society as stated by Research for Better Schools (1989). McCann and Austin (1988) maintain that you must differentiate among three sets of definitions. The primary problem is in reference to students "at risk" of not achieving the goal of education which is graduation. These students are perceived as not being able to acquire knowledge or skills that would allow them to become productive members of American society.

ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS OF EFFECTIVE
STUDENT AT-RISK PROGRAMS

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At-risk students might be an undefinable group. There is; however, a greater consensus of the characteristics and significance this group plays toward our society as stated by Research for Better Schools (1989).

McCann and Austin (1988) maintain that you must differentiate among three sets of definitions. The primary problem is in reference to students "at risk" of not achieving the goal of education which is graduation. These students are perceived as not being able to acquire knowledge or skills that would allow them to become productive members of American society.

A second problem is in reference to students who exhibit behaviors that will infringe on the educational process. McCann and Austin (1988) stated that these include:

- 1) Not attending school regularly.
- 2) Noninvolvement in classroom and school activities.
- 3) Failure in daily learning tasks and achievement testing.
- 4) The use of drugs and/or alcohol.
- 5) Committing disruptive or delinquent acts.
- 6) Pregnancy or the rearing of a child.
- 7) Suicide.

McCann and Austin (1988) concludes that the final problem is in regards to those students whose family or community backgrounds place them in jeopardy. Economic status and the English proficiency of a student's family have traditionally been used. Demographic trends indicate that the future holds new characteristics that will place students "at risk". Hodgkinson (1985) indicated that a greater number of students in the future would be:

- 1) Premature at birth.
- 2) Born to a teenage mother.
- 3) Born to parents who are not married.
- 4) Come from single-parent homes.
- 5) Come from "blended" families - remarriage of one original parent.
- 6) Have not participated in a preschool program.
- 7) Have working parents.

What must be done to reduce the potential at-risk student population? Phlegar and Rose (1988) state that early identification of potential at-risk students is the preventative key. The rural setting of Iowa nurtures the correct conditions in which a prevalence of at-risk students can be found. Indeed, the majority of unserved and underserved children are located here as maintained by Helge (1984).

Many strategies currently used to deal with at-risk students are ineffective. Some of these include flunking students, pullout programs, and in-class models. These tactics result in a further deterioration of the student's self-esteem as stated by Slavin and Madden (1989).

Helge (1988) concludes that a team approach is needed if effective strategies are used to help at-risk students. This team must be made up of state agencies, business and industry, communities, schools, and parents. Program emphasis should be placed on prevention and early intervention, but these efforts must be generic rather than targeting a particular problem.

The at-risk problem reaches beyond education and it is unwise and unfair to expect our educational systems to solve it alone. Family, churches, employers, agencies, and local organizations must be partners in a collaborated effort to insure a reconnection of at-risk students toward the goal of education concluded the National Governors' Association (1987).

What are the essential qualities of an effective at-risk program? Slavin and Madden (1989) indicated

that three vital characteristics must occur. They are:

- 1) Programs are comprehensive. This entails a well planned approach to instruction.
- 2) Preventive and remedial programs are intensive. This requires ownership development by the student and individual in charge of remediation.
- 3) There must be frequently assessed student progress and adapted instruction to individual needs.

Slavin and Madden (1989) also indicated that not only must an at-risk program be in place, but a comprehensive plan must be developed by the school district. This would involve:

- 1) A statement that it is the school's responsibility to see that everyone succeeds.
- 2) Success will not be cheap.
- 3) Emphasize prevention.
- 4) Classroom change must be emphasized.
- 5) Remedial programs will be used as a last resort.

Greene and Uroff (1989) expressed that the focus should be on the students. Schools failing to meet student's basic needs tend to fail in motivating them

to strive for success. In order to meet the needs of all youth, Hamby (1989) stressed that the following should be emphasized:

- 1) Awareness - keep them informed.
- 2) Attendance - keep them coming to school.
- 3) Achievement - keep them learning.
- 4) Attitude - keep them enhanced.
- 5) Atmosphere - keep them secure.
- 6) Adaptation - keep them coping.
- 7) Alternatives - keep them directed and focused.
- 8) Advocacy - keep them involved.

How can these programs be implemented?

Policymakers must be told they cannot mandate or direct what happens in schools and classrooms. Teachers and principals who are determined to stretch the minds and fashion the character of at-risk students are the key. Substantial participation of an entire staff is needed in order to develop the most influential curriculum, instruction, and school organization revealed Cuban (1989).

Comer (1980), Leinhardt and Bicklel (1987), and Cuban (1989) suggested that practitioners of successful at-risk programs all used:

- 1) Limited class size. Permits a level of personalized instruction.

- 2) Instructors choose to work in at-risk programs. Principals provide tangible and emotional support.
- 3) Flexibility in classroom techniques, often nontraditional.
- 4) School as community. Form of an extended family where achievement and caring is important.

Many vocational programs currently in place play a major role with students at-risk. Weber (1988) found that vocational programs often have lower than average teacher-pupil ratios, an organizational environment that is nontraditional, staff who establish a closer student-teacher relationship. Wheeler (1988) indicated that vocational classes many times extend through traditional time blocks which often promotes improved student-teacher relations explained. The vocational classrooms provide an arena in which teaching style and classroom settings allow the at-risk student to feel a greater sense of ownership in the classroom (Bishop, 1988).

Many times the at-risk students view the classroom as a place for failure. Failure becomes common place as they pass from class to class. Teachers become the

key in stopping this vicious cycle (Eschenmann, 1988). More importantly, concluded VanSciver (1987), the entire school staff must be involved. This includes: custodians, secretaries, food service workers, board members, and administrators. It is essential that those staff members used in an at-risk program volunteer. This insures a keen interest in improving student performance.

Conrath (1988) reported that the following are the hallmarks of an effective at-risk teacher:

- 1) Toughness. Ethically, intellectually, and emotionally tough enough to know they can help the student. When students become angry or confrontational they keep the critical issue in focus.
- 2) Compassion. They realize their students often come from uncheerful, nonsupportive homes which make life very grim. They become the adult who cares.
- 3) Professionalism. They project an image of why school and graduation from high school is important. They are willing to reveal the pleasure and importance of learning. Students learn that education is not just a piece of

paper or a learned trade, but for developing pride, competence, and a higher quality of life.

- 4) **Seriousness.** They possess a clear focus of what they want for their students, yet are flexible to how they will get there. They refuse to put up with the "I don't care" attitude of the students.
- 5) **Knowledge.** They understand teaching and learning, learning styles and motivational theories.
- 6) **Creativity.** They can introduce and explain topics or ideas in many different ways. More importantly, they do this until all their students understand.
- 7) **Authoritativeness.** There is no need to quote rules and regulations. Their direction comes from their own expertise and competence.
- 8) **Sense of purpose.** These teachers understand why they like teaching. They overflow with high ethical and intellectual expectations of their own.
- 9) **Cultural competence.** They positively reflect their knowledge and expertise with great enthusiasm and pride.

In today's society, parents are not allowed the luxury to spend a lot of time with their children. Students need more individualized attention. When teachers are allowed this one-on-one relationship with students, they are lead to believe they can succeed (Hirschorn, 1987).

Boschee and Mehrer (1988) indicated that teachers must be encouragers. By doing so, they promote strengthen abilities, self-worth, and help to develop a foundation on which the at-risk student may build.

An effective encourager must hold the following attitudes:

- 1) Complete acceptance and positive regard for the student.
- 2) Non-judgemental attitude.
- 3) Empathy, this is the most valued asset.
- 4) The ability to communicate confidence in the student in order to enhance the building of self-worth.
- 5) Sincere enthusiasm and value for the discouraged student's purpose.
- 6) Willingness to promote the student's free expression without censorship by non-evaluative listening.

Conrath (1988) revealed that the primary goal for dealing with at-risk students should be to create an environment that is nonthreatening to them.

Instructors and teachers hold the keys to success.

Teachers must strive to prevent situations in which students do not become discouraged or defeated. Instructors must create curriculum that will meet the at-risk students' needs. Principals must work at creating in-services that deal with how to positively handle discouraged or defeated students.

Societal pressures will continue to grow in the future. New technology today is outdated tomorrow. These are the essential reasons why we must meet the needs of the at-risk student. Our American educational system is based on the principle of developing everyone to their fullest potential. The at-risk student deems our utmost attention so that they may realize the dream of becoming a successful, prosperous, and contributing citizen of this American society.

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