The problem of students at risk

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The problem of students at risk

Abstract
A number of national and state groups have issued reports over the years expressing great concern about the number of students who fail to graduate from high school. Their inability to acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to become productive members of American society (Levin, 1986). The most recent of these reports comes from the Council of Chief State School Officers’ (1987).
THE PROBLEMS OF STUDENTS AT RISK

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by

J. V. Eckley

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A number of national and state groups have issued reports over the years expressing great concern about the number of students who fail to graduate from high school. Their inability to acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to become productive members of American society (Levin, 1986). The most recent of these reports comes from the Council of Chief State School Officers' (1987).

From the beginning, this nation has been committed to education as fundamental to the success of a free democratic republic. Over two centuries we have made profound advances in expanding educational opportunity to assure our form of government and our quality of life. We have realized that our entire population must be literate and well educated for our social, economic, and political effectiveness. We have moved toward the objective of a fully literate and educated population. But we have not attained it! Our nation is at risk of starting the 21st Century with one of four youth failing to complete the essentials of learning. There was a time in this nation when school failure
and little education did not foreclose a person's capacity in trade, defense, environmental condition, or quality of life. That time is gone. Technological advances demographic changes, international competition, and intense pressures of providing a better life for greater numbers of people on a seemingly shrinking planet today require a citizenry educated at least through high school graduation. This is imperative for our nation.

This paper provides the educator with an overview and analysis of the literature that deals with issues related to the education of "students at risk."

* Who are "students at risk"? The first section defines "students at risk" and highlights indicators used to identify students who may be at risk.

* What is the extent of the problem? The second section reviews data that suggest the magnitude of the problem.

* How are educators currently addressing the problems of students at risk? The third section lists some of the initiatives to
address the problem of students at risk. It briefly looks at these initiatives from two perspectives: the dimensions of the problem suggested by the definition of "students at risk", and what may influence students' failure to graduate from high school with the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to become a productive member of society.

* The paper concludes with a list of next steps and initiatives for students at risk.

During the past several years, many states have undertaken strong initiatives to increase expectations and standards for students and to enhance state support for the schools. The State of Iowa has taken the necessary steps to assure these new expectations are met by all local school districts.

STATE STANDARD FOR AT RISK STUDENTS

THE IOWA ADMINISTRATIVE CODE RULE (1988) states that the board shall have a program to identify and provide special assistance to students who have difficulty mastering the language, academic, cultural, and social skills necessary to reach the educational
levels of which they are capable. The program shall serve students whose aspirations and achievement may be negatively affected by stereotypes linked to race, national origin, language background, gender, income, family status, parental status, and disability. The program shall include strategies for identifying at risk students and objectives for providing support services to at risk students. These objectives shall be translated into performance objectives for all school personnel. The program shall also include provisions for in-service training for school personnel; strategies and activities for involving and working with and academic improvements of at-risk student; provisions coordinating school programs and community-based support services; and maintenance of integrated educational environments in compliance with federal and state nondiscrimination legislation (Iowa Master Plan, 1989).

The issue of students at risk is broad and complex. Many of the factors which place a student at risk in the educational setting are interrelated, and students at risk academically are often at risk emotionally, socially and physically (Bartusek, 1989). The State of Iowa defines a student at risk as follows:
Any student identified who is at risk of not:
Meeting the goals of the educational program
established by the district; completing a high
school education; or becoming a productive worker.
These students include, but are not limited to,
those identified as: Dropouts; potential
dropouts; teenage parents; drug users; drug
abusers; low academic achievers; abused and
homeless children; youth offenders; economically
deprived; minorities; culturally deprived (rural
isolated); culturally different; those with sudden
negative changes in performance due to
environmental or physical trauma and those with
language barriers; gender barriers and
disabilities (Iowa Master Plan, 1989).

Virtually any student can be at risk at some point
in their educational career. Research points to
several signals that most at risk students display.
Students who may be at risk of failing to graduate from
high school are frequently identified earlier in their
school careers in terms of the following behaviors
(Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack & Rock, 1986):
* not attending school regularly, being truant,
not engaging in classroom and school
activities
* not succeeding in daily learning tasks and on local and state achievement measures
* using drugs and alcohol
* committing disruptive and delinquent acts
* becoming pregnant and having to care for a baby
* attempting suicide

The use of selected student behaviors and student background characteristics to define students at risk finds support in a number of studies conducted over the last twenty years. An example of this research, is the High School and Beyond Study (1986), compares characteristics of sophomores who stayed in high school to those of sophomores who dropped out. Some of the differences identified were:
* dropouts were disproportionately from low socio-economic families
* dropouts tend to come from homes with a weaker educational support system (e.g., homes having fewer study aids; there is less opportunity for non-school-related learning; mothers have lower levels of formal education; have lower educational
expectations for their children; and are more likely to be working; parents are less likely to be interested in or to monitor both in-school and out-of-school activities);

* dropouts, as sophomores, reported less interest in school;

* dropouts reported spending time outside "driving around" and "going on dates";

* dropouts reported working more hours per week, receiving a high hourly wage, and finding their job more enjoyable and important than school;

* dropouts had lower school grades and lower test scores, do less home work, and were involved in more disciplinary problems.

The single best predictor of who drops out was a students poor academic performance, Barro (1984) points out that D and F students are more apt to leave than those earning A's and B's. Students who have repeated a grade stand a far greater chance of leaving school than those who proceed from grade to grade on schedule. Teens in the vocational and general tracks are more inclined to drop out than those in the academic track. Teens who hold time-consuming jobs are more likely to
drop out than those who work fewer hours or not at all.

Barro (1986) also stated students who have been suspended, truant, or problems with the law have a high chance of dropping out. Males drop out more than females. Adolescents whose parents lack a high school diploma are at greater risk than those from better educated families.

Divorce is increasing, the number of single-parent families is rising, intergenerational interaction is changing, and out-of-wedlock births and cohabitation are increasing (Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack & Rock, 1986).

Poverty is the overwhelming demographic predictor of who will drop out, students from the bottom third in family income stand a far greater chance of leaving school than teens from middle class or affluent families. And when socio-economic factors are controlled, the differences across racial, ethnic, geographic, and other demographic lines blur. The High School and Beyond Study, Education Commission of the States and The States Excellence in Education Commission all indicate why students fail to achieve the goals of education (U.S. Department of Education, 1983).

We must believe students have the capacity to
learn and the educational system has the capacity to teach. The objective for Year 2000 is for all high school students to attain a graduation diploma. To accomplish this objective will require substantial changes in education policy and in school practices (Education Commission of the States, 1989).

From the High School and Beyond Study, (1985) Education Commission of the States and The States' Excellence in Education Commission indicate why students fail to achieve the goals of education. Many studies indicate a major risk factor is the student who is behind in grade level and older than their classmates. The Harvard Education Letter (1986) published a synthesis of studies that clearly shows that students held back actually score worse on achievement tests than similar youngsters who are passed along to the next grade (Featherston, 1986). Many of the students retained have low opinions of themselves and they also appear to have fewer friends than students who have been promoted. Recently, there has been a renewed interest in confronting the retention issue because the increasing numbers of dropouts pose a substantial threat to society (Lloyd, 1978).
The American public school dropout rate is said to be 25 percent, and as high as 40 percent in urban areas (Catterall, 1987). In 1987, the most recent year for which statistics are available, 5,574 students dropped out of Iowa schools. Fifty-five percent were male, forty-five percent were female (this is about 2.45 percent of the students enrolled in grades 7-12). The percentage of dropouts has gradually increased since 1983, when the dropout rate was 2.04 percent (Bartusek, 1989).

The U.S. Department of Education cited a dropout rate of 20.1 percent for the nation. Blacks are dropping out of school at the rate of one out of four, Hispanics at the rate of one out of three, and Caucasians at the rate of one out of seven. The Caucasian dropout rate continues to increase while the Blacks and Hispanics has stabilized. Dropping out of school has ceased to be a minority issue; it is becoming a Caucasian, middle class problem (Rumberger, 1985).

When looking at students not graduating from high school the National Center for Education Statistics compares two sets of numbers. The comparison of students graduating in a given year with the number of
students enrolled in the ninth grade four years earlier. Currently the National Center for Education Statistics reports that approximately 28 percent of the ninth graders fail to graduate.

In addition to not graduating from high school, students at risk are those who do not acquire critical knowledge and skills. This lack of knowledge and skills presents an unemployment problem. In 1978, twenty-three percent of the total U.S. population were between the ages of 16 and 24. By 1983 that percentage had dropped to nineteen percent. Based on current birth rates, it will further decline to sixteen percent by 1995. At the same time, the percentage of ninth graders at risk is growing (U.S. Department of Commerce). This data becomes another indicator of the growing youth problems.

Assuming that the nation's economy continues to expand at a moderate pace, business will be forced to dip increasingly into the at risk segment of the entry level youth employment pool. Add to the above data the indicator of children in poverty situations across the nation. Children in poverty was up from sixteen percent in 1970 to twenty-two percent in 1985. Almost half of the Black children and one-third of Hispanic

Chemical use is the most pressing problem in the public schools according to the U.S. Department of Education. Students' use of drugs and alcohol interferes with attendance, engagement, and learning. In addition, it is related to other at risk behaviors (U.S. Department of Education, 1985).

Data on the nature and scope of drug and alcohol use is based on surveys of youth and information collected from youth treatment agencies. The National Institute on Drug Abuse, (1985) recently published the results to its national survey of random sample of high school seniors. The report reveals the following trends:

* The steady decline over the past four years of elicit drug use, including marijuana, among high school seniors appears to have halted. Currently, 25.7 percent of seniors report using marijuana during the previous 30 days.

* Concurrently, high school seniors are reporting an increased use of cocaine: From 4.9 percent in 1983 to 5.8 percent in 1984 to
6.7 percent in 1985. Seventeen percent of responding seniors report that they had tried this drug.

* Monthly use of alcohol among seniors has declined from 72 percent in 1980 to 66 percent in 1985. However, there is an increase in the daily use of alcohol and more frequently within given time periods (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1986).

Students who are disruptive in school are not involved in learning. It is not surprising that such behavior is one of the predictors of who is apt to drop out of school (Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986). This behavior has been linked to weak attachments to parents, feeling alienated from any social order, dislike of school, expending little effort on school work, truancy, association with delinquent peers, low self-esteem or a delinquent self-concept (Gottfredson, G.D., Gottfredson, D.C., & Cook, 1983).

Recent trends in adolescent pregnancy and parenthood are of particular concern. The birth rate of unmarried teenagers increased by twenty-nine percent between 1970 and 1982 (The States' Excellence in
Education Commission, 1985). When coupled with the increasing tendency for teenagers to raise their own children, the result is an increasing number of single teenage parents. Last year unwed teens gave birth to 650,000 babies (Education Commission of the States, 1985). Many of these young mothers do not return to school. Teen parents who drop out place their children at risk. This will cause the indicators of disconnection to continue in a society already plagued with a most serious problem.

In order to maximize the chances of all students of graduating from high school there must be a genuine opportunity guaranteed to all students for a high school graduation. This third section presents a number of guarantees and affirmative practices addressing the successes for students at risk.

All children who are at risk of failing to graduate from high school should be guaranteed:

* an education program of the quality available to students who attend schools with high rates of secondary school graduates;
* a program supplemented by education services integrated with the regular program and that are necessary for the student to make
progress toward high school graduation and to graduate;
* enrollment in a school with an appropriately certified staff which has continuous professional development;
* a school with safe and useful facilities, systematically designed and delivered instruction of demonstrable effectiveness, and the use of adequate and up-to-date learning technologies and materials of proven value;
* enrollment in a school which demonstrates substantial and sustained student progress which leads at least to graduation from high school.

This guarantee, for the most part, reflects general expectations for any school: A quality program including supplementary educational services; a certified staff involved in continuous professional development; safe and useful facilities; and adequate and up-to-date learning technologies and materials. The "commonplaces" of schools are of ongoing concern to state leadership.

This guarantee also includes phrases that tie
several of its components explicitly to the goal of high school graduation for all students. Specifically, they assure all children at risk enrollment in a school which demonstrates substantial and sustained student progress that leads at least to graduation. The principle that each child, with the rare exception of some who have severe disabilities, has the capability to learn the knowledge and skills required by the standards for a high school diploma, even though each child comes to school with different knowledge, skills, and abilities. This guarantee is based on:

* research and development efforts that have demonstrated more effective instructional programs and practices. The identification of five types of reading and mathematics programs and practices that show convincing evidence of effectiveness with students at risk: Continuous-progress programs including elements of mastery learning, cooperative learning programs, preventive tutoring programs, remedial tutoring programs, outcome based education, and computer-assisted instruction programs (Slaven, 1987),

* the research demonstrates that schools can be
helped to adapt and implement instructional processes that increase student engagement in learning tasks and student success on both daily assignments and year-end achievement tests (Roberts & Kennedy, 1985),

* studies of alternative education programs for secondary students who are at risk—studies that demonstrate that modification in the school program, in the way teachers and students work together, in how time is used—can help these students develop social bonds to conventional school goals, rules, and activities, and to successfully meet school requirements for graduation (Wehlage, Stone, Lesko, Nauman and Page, 1986),

* research that has been exploring why schools serving students of similar backgrounds differ significantly on one or more measures of effectiveness—the so-called effective schools research. This research, in addition to identifying schools that achieve different results, is also providing insights into school characteristics and practices that may explain those differences, insights that can
help schools plan improvement efforts (Good & Brophy, 1986).

In addition to the challenge of applying what is currently known about fostering school improvement, current research and experience suggest that schools may become more effective with students at risk only when they modify the very structure of schools and the beliefs and values that underlie that structure. This challenge is suggested by the following perspectives:

* As a result of a series of studies seeking to understand the dramatic differences in achievement in American elementary and secondary schools, Stevenson suggests that one explanation may be found in the emphasis Americans give to students' innate ability in contrast to students' effort as a basis for their achievement. He believes this emphasis results in American schools evaluating early differences in children ability and using those evaluations to place children in ability groups or tracks (Stevenson, 1986).

* Oakes (1986) analysis of data related to taking students by ability, from All Study of Schooling, she found that most teachers and
administrators assume that tracking promotes overall student achievement, given the diversity of student populations; that tracking was of special benefit to less capable students who would "suffer emotional as well as educational damage" in classes with more able students, and that tracking "eased the teaching task." Her analysis showed the students in different tracks experienced different kinds and amounts of content; used in-class time differently; and received different amounts of homework. In summary, she found that tracking widens the initial differences that students bring to school.

* Cuban, (1986) identified in his historical review of the effects of public school reform movements, the amazing stability of structures like grades schools, self-contained classrooms, 50-minute periods, multiple curricula, standardized testing, and Carnegie Units. He suggests that these structures reinforce use of "teacher-centered classroom tactics": Lecturing; whole-group
instruction; reliance on a textbook and chalkboard; seatwork assignments; recitation; discussion; and use of teacher-made quizzes and tests. Cuban argues that the current wave of reform is further "freezing" these pedagogical practices.

* In order to address common concerns that too many high school students are to little engaged in their schools and too few students are acquiring essential knowledge, skills, and attitudes, researchers are seeking to identify changes that need to be made in school structures and in patterns of practice. They are questioning the multitude of purposes high schools are asked to perform, the fragmented programs of use of segregated tracks, the roles of teacher and student, the length of class periods, teacher loads in terms of numbers of students, the use of evaluation procedures designed to differentiate students and distribute them on a normal curve, rather to assess mastery of subject matter and ability to perform at specified levels (Sizer, 1986).
Early childhood development helps children who are at risk. The Project Follow Through Study, by Meyer, Gersten and Gutkin published in the Elementary School Journal, documents some of the challenges faced in the introduction of early childhood programs. These challenges include:

* staffing the early childhood programs with persons who can serve as positive role models and who can develop an interpersonal relationship with each child that fosters commitment to learning and schooling;

* designing a program that is both developmentally appropriate and designed to prepare each child to operate successfully in an elementary school classroom;

* developing a partnership with each child's family so they can reinforce and support their child's developing interest in learning and in school;

* developing a partnership with other social services to ensure that needs that might interfere with student learning are addressed (e.g., health needs);

* developing a partnership with primary school
staff to ensure that they build positively upon the knowledge, skills, and attitudes developed by each child through the early childhood program (Meyer, Gersten, & Gutkin, 1984).

The family as partners program is based on research that encourages a strong school family relationship (Coleman, 1987). In addition, it is based on research that has identified family attitudes and behaviors related to children's school success that may be affected by school initiatives (deKanter, Gensberg, & Milne, 1986). One review of this research suggests that families can influence their children's success in school by:

* communicating their expectations of educational achievement, their interest in school activities, and their belief in the value of hard work;
* structuring and supervising out-of-school activities (e.g., homework, reading, television viewing, use of community resources like libraries and museums);
* providing resources that promote education (e.g., a place to study, books and other
reading materials and most important, their time to reinforce the learning occurring in school) (Newcombe, 1982).

The diversity of students that schools serve should be matched by a diversity of effective support services. All children who are at risk of failing to graduate from high school should have access to supporting health and social services to overcome the condition which put them at risk.

To provide these services, state and local education agencies have the challenge of learning how to work in a coordinated and collaborative manner. A study of interagency coordination in three programs: Early intervention for handicapped children, teenage pregnancy, and drug and alcohol abuse identified factors that can affect the quality of interagency coordination and collaboration. These include difference in treatment philosophy, in who can be served, and what services can be provided. The procedures for determining and providing services will be limited by staff shortages, staff capabilities, and financial resources (Firestone & Drews, 1987). Yet, experiences in many states suggest that this challenge can be met.
In order to meet the challenge of a system gathering information for identifying students at risk and monitoring schools' performances is needed. To implement and evaluate a comprehensive program for students who are at risk, there needs to be sufficient "education information about students, the school, and school districts...to enable identification of students at risk and to report on school conditions and performance. The information must be sufficient to let one know whether the above guarantees are met and to provide a basis for local and state policies to improve the student and school performance (Montague, 1987).

The basis for sufficient educational information sets forth two purposes for collecting educational information: (1) identification of students at risk and (2) identification of school conditions/performance needing improvement. It reflects the efforts of teachers, principals, and central office staff to make more productive use of the data that they routinely collect about students.

Through these efforts, schools and school districts are demonstrating the feasibility of using such data not only to monitor student progress but to identify in "real" time students who, for one reason or
another, are becoming at risk. Once such identifications have been made, these schools and districts are instituting programs and services aimed at helping these students to succeed (McGrail, 1987).

This practice also reflects the challenges presented by the proposal for sufficient educational information. The Dropout Interview Study is beginning to identify the substantive and technical challenges involved in developing indicator systems, the potential costs of developing and maintaining such systems, and the positive and negative effects indicators (Gastright, 1989).

In addition, the experiences of schools and school districts that have developed structures and systems for encouraging staff to collect and use educational information either at the student level or at the school level suggest the challenges involved in this task. In general, the more effective systems provide school staff with both information to help them identify students and aspects of a school needing attention, as well as the time and support that enables them to identify and take action as individual teachers, as staff groups, or as an entire school faculty (McGrail, 1987).
This paper has examined the extent to which many states face a growing problem of students at risk. The next step(s) to initiate are the recommendation proposed and supported by state departments of education, local school districts, national studies, and commissioned reports. These initiatives are addressing elements of the proposed guarantee of "schools in which students make substantial and sustained progress"—specifically:

* the quality of educational program;
* the quality of provision of supplemental education services;
* the capability of school staff;
* instructional practices, materials, and technologies being used;
* the early childhood development program and a "family as partners" program;
* the use of individual student plans;
* the early identification and intervention.

The social, economic, and educational problems of at risk students are pervasive. These are real problems that not only affect the individual but families, schools, communities and the entire country. We must start the road to "a kinder gentler" country.
The educational community is in a strategic position to spearhead this effort.

For starters, along with federal, state, and local government can:

* provide data;
* fund projects, programs and research;
* devise guidelines;
* disseminate information;
* use the various offices individuals hold to nudge, encourage and facilitate public and private initiatives;
* work with other agencies (e.g., Health and Human Services, local law enforcement, and local labor to devise joint plans and strategies.

To counteract the continuing failure patterns of far too many of our nation's high school students, it will require all the resources our schools and communities can offer. We must not give up on the potential dropout until we have exhausted every available means of help, for as the poet John Greenleaf Whittier put it:

For of all sad words of tongue or pen,
The saddest are these: "It might have been!"
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References


References


