

## Supports for Students Deemed At-Risk

*“At-risk student” means any identified student who needs additional support and who is not meeting or not expected to meet the established goals of the educational program (academic, personal/social, career/vocational). At-risk students include but are not limited to students in the following groups: homeless children and youth, dropouts, returning dropouts, and potential dropouts.*

Iowa Administrative Code 12.2(256) <https://www.educateiowa.gov/pk-12/learner-supports/risk>

**I**ncreasing attention has come to students labeled as at-risk. *Who are these students and what can schools do to help them?*

Definitions of “at-risk” students vary. The common denominator is a concern about providing supports for students who are viewed as likely to become school dropouts. The focus is mainly on learning, behavior, and emotional problems not attributable to diagnosable disorders/disabilities. A special concern is with risk-taking and illegal behaviors that can directly interfere with schooling and healthy development and those that pose life-threatening dangers to self and others.

Use of the term “at-risk” is controversial. The intent is to ameliorate problems. However, as with all labels that convey a negative quality, it also can exacerbate problems (e.g., generate self-fulfilling prophecies, stigma). Another major concern is that the term focuses the locus of the problem as being within the student. The reality, of course, is that many problems experienced by students are caused by external factors. (William Ryan famously cautioned against “blaming the victim”.) From a developmental perspective, it is best to understand human problems in terms of a broad range of external as well as internal causal factors and the transactions among factors. From this perspective, the many factors can be grouped as neighborhood, family, school, peer, and individual conditions. For schools, it is useful to think about risk factors as barriers to learning and teaching and to focus on how to address them.

Given the number of students experiencing learning, behavior, and emotional problems, addressing barriers to learning and teaching is essential to the goal of enhancing equity of opportunity for students at school and beyond. Estimates are that as many as 40% of the over 50 million K-12 students in the U.S. are not doing well at school. And because these problems are poorly attended to, current estimates are that one in five students do not complete high school in four years (Murnane, 2013; Reconnecting Youth, 2013). Among low-income students, the figure is almost 30 percent (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Fox, et al., 2014).

Many of these students begin their lives in poverty, experiencing all that is associated with economic disadvantage. And those who drop out of school are likely to continue the cycle of poverty, be dependent on social services, and suffer from poor health, and too many get caught up in the justice system. The costs to society, in terms of social and financial capital are substantial (Balfanz, 2014; Center for Labor Market Studies, 2007; Jerald, 2006; Lleras-Muney, 2005).

Of course there are other factors that can put students at risk (e.g., race, gender, sexuality, nationality, immigrant status, religion, incarceration, pregnancy, living in foster care, being homeless). As social and political theories recognize, institutionalized biases are associated with such factors and contribute to various forms of privilege that benefit some students and put others at risk. The concept of intersectionality recognizes that institutionalized prejudice and discrimination and unfair and inequitable distribution of resources may be compounded when subgroups represent more than one factor (DeFrancisco et al., 2013; Elliot, 2014).

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Researchers stress that risk indicators for many students are apparent to teachers (and parents) at every grade (e.g., Adelman & Feshbach, 1971; Adelman & Taylor, 2006; Allensworth, 2005; Corrin, Sepanik, Rosen, & Shane, 2016; Neild & Balfanz, 2006; Roderick, 1994; Rumberger, 2004). Thus, schools need to address barriers that interfere with learning and teaching beginning at preK and continuing until graduation from high school and for those at risk in post secondary institutions.

## What Do Schools Currently Do to Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching?

A major concern, of course, for leaders for school improvement is how to address student problems. Schools are engaged in an increasingly wide array of activity, including promotion of social and emotional development, direct services, outreach to families, and various forms of support for teachers and other school personnel.

Based on federal initiatives, schools increasingly are indicating that they approach problems with a three tiered framework. This framework calls for different levels of support. School-wide interventions are designated as Tier I. Tier II interventions are targeted to designated subgroups deemed at risk or as manifesting specific types of moderate problems. Tier III interventions are for students with severe and chronic problems.

There also is enhanced emphasis on coordination and collaboration within a school and with community agencies to provide a "network of care" to deal with complex problems over time. However, services in schools expand and contract rapidly, depending on budget conditions, and current approaches to student and learning supports continue to be fragmented and marginalized in school improvement policy and practice (e.g., Adelman & Taylor, in press).

Schools differ, of course, in what supports they have in place to address barriers to learning and teaching; some have few; some have many. Some have connected with community services (e.g., health and social services, after-school programs). However, given the sparsity of community services, agencies endeavoring to bring their services to schools usually must limit activity to enhancing supports at a couple of schools in a neighborhood.

In general, there is not a good connection between community services and the work of the many school and district-based student support staff whose roles include preventing, intervening early, and treating students with learning, behavior, emotional, and physical problems. Such school-employed personnel include psychologists, counselors, social workers, nurses, dropout/graduation support staff, special educators, and others. When school and community efforts are poorly connected, community and school personnel may be working with the same students and families with little shared planning, coordination, or ongoing communication. And there is almost no attention paid to systemic improvement.

Note: There has been too much emphasis on punishment when dealing with misbehavior of students who are not doing well at school. An extreme example is seen where zero-tolerance policies remain in vogue. Given that a significant proportion of students viewed as "at risk" are racial minorities and youngsters with disabilities, these subgroups have particularly felt the impact of punishment policies and practices. For example, in many states, African-American students and individuals with disabilities have been disproportionately suspended for minor issues such as a sarcastic tone, cellphones, or too many absences.

## Moving Forward

Research has underscored that

- current school improvement policy focuses on problems as discrete entities and generates piecemeal initiatives which exacerbate already fragmented and marginalized practices and increase counterproductive competition for sparse resources;
- students who are not doing well at school tend to have multiple problems (e.g., there is a strong interrelationship among learning, behavior, and emotional problems);
- multiple problems require multifaceted interventions that can address both external and internal factors and enhance not only knowledge and skills, but also attitudes.

Despite the research findings, relatively little attention has been paid to the implications for school improvement policy and practice. Thus, policies and practices related to addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students remain relatively untouched. It is evident, however, that systemic changes are imperative in order to significantly enhance equity of opportunity for students to succeed at school and beyond.

Our analyses (e.g., Adelman & Taylor, 2006; in press) indicate the following changes are needed:

- (1) *Expanding the policy framework for school improvement from a two- to a three-component framework.* The third component coalesces all efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching (e.g., unifies them as a Learning Support Component); is prioritized and developed as primary and essential; is fully entwined with the Instructional and Management/governance Components.
- (2) *Operationalizing the third component.* Replacing fragmented practices that focus mainly on discrete problems requires reframing student and learning support interventions to create a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports in classrooms and school-wide. A prototype intervention framework has been developed that encompasses
  - *a continuum of school-community interventions* consisting of *subsystems* (not just “tiers) for
    - >promoting effective schooling and whole child development
    - >preventing problems experienced by teachers and students
    - >addressing such problems as soon as feasible after they arise
    - >providing for students who have severe and chronic problems

and

- *a cohesively organized and delimited set of “content” arenas* for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students in the classroom and school-wide. These arenas encompass the range of concerns a school copes with each day. They also stress enhancing intrinsic motivation and resilience as protective factors.
- (3) *Implementing the third component.* This involves
    - reworking the operational infrastructure to ensure effective daily implementation and ongoing development of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable systemic approach that enhances equity of opportunity;
    - enhancing mechanisms and strategic approaches for systemic change in ways that account for context and ensure effective implementation, replication to scale, and sustainability;
    - developing standards and expanding the accountability framework to account for the third component and to do so in ways that encompass both formative and summative evaluation.

## Concluding Comments

There is a simple truth that every professional working in schools knows: persistent barriers to learning must be addressed if students are to learn effectively and schools are to accomplish their educational mission. The negative outcomes associated with not doing so affect every student and the society as a whole.

It would be nice if the process of addressing factors interfering with school success could be handled solely by families or public and private community agencies. Unfortunately, these agencies are unable to do the job alone. Thus, if school reform is to be effective, schools must play a major role in easing problems, increasing opportunities, and enhancing the well-being of students and families.

Moreover, teachers can't do it alone. Multifaceted and interrelated solutions require various forms of collaboration. Thus, schools must transform how they connect with homes and communities so they can work together in pursuing shared goals. And teachers must establish regular in-classroom collaborative working relationships with other teachers, student support staff, and volunteers to enhance equity of opportunity for students to succeed.

As the *Every Student Succeeds Act* is implemented, tweaking current practices will not be sufficient to significantly counter the plight of at risk students. Systemic transformation is imperative. School improvement decision makers and planners must address barriers to learning and teaching comprehensively, cohesively, and equitably.

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## Appendix

### Can “early warning systems” keep children from dropping out of school?

By Emma Brown The Washington Post June 28, 2016

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/can-early-warning-systems-keep-children-from-dropping-out-of-school/2016/06/21/853c5436-36ef-11e6-a254-2b336e293a3c\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/can-early-warning-systems-keep-children-from-dropping-out-of-school/2016/06/21/853c5436-36ef-11e6-a254-2b336e293a3c_story.html)

PHILADELPHIA — A half-dozen sixth-grade teachers sat in a circle inside an empty classroom, poring over sheets of data showing their students’ attendance, grades and discipline. They were looking for children who were sliding, whose records indicated they were in danger of falling off the track to high school graduation. . . .

The research is clear: If you want to know whether a child is on a path toward graduating or dropping out, standardized test scores are not very useful. Far more telling is whether that child comes to school regularly, behaves in class and earns passing grades.

A growing number of states and school districts have begun closely examining attendance, grades and discipline records for even the youngest students in elementary school, searching for warning flags. Such “early warning systems” give schools a chance to intervene long before students lose their way.

Whether such efforts can change a child’s trajectory is still an open question, but many educators think early warning systems hold great promise. Emerging evidence suggests that they can be an important force in reshaping how schools identify and serve at-risk students.

*Diplomas Now*, which is being used in dozens of schools across the country, is helping middle-school students succeed, according to an independent evaluation released Tuesday. Some districts that have embraced early warning systems have had positive change, including at the Chicago Public Schools, the nation’s third-largest system. Proponents say that when schools focus on reducing absenteeism and course failure, they are able to uncover and address the root problems holding students back — which can do more to help them than cramming for an annual test.

“The shift from focusing on test scores to focusing on attendance and grades — it’s been a complete transformation in terms of how schools are working with students, and it’s much more effective,” said Elaine Allensworth of the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.

Allensworth’s research on the strong correlation between the number of courses ninth-graders pass and the high school graduation rate persuaded Chicago school officials to begin closely tracking the passing rate of freshmen, going to new lengths to make sure that students were coming to school regularly and engaging in class.

And Chicago’s graduation rate has risen dramatically — 22 percentage points — during the past decade and a half. The fastest growth came during the past six years, according to a study released this month — improvement that Allensworth said can’t be explained by demographic change and that appears to have been driven by ninth-graders’ improving rate of passing courses.

Thirty-one states produce some kind of early warning report about their students, according to the Washington-based Data Quality Campaign. And experts predict that the new federal education law, the Every Student Succeeds Act, will help stoke further interest with specific requirements for intervention in high schools with low graduation rates.

But early warning systems do not make a difference unless they prompt schools to take meaningful action to help students who are struggling, experts say.

“It’s not a silver-bullet answer,” said Susan Bowles Therriault of the American Institutes for Research, who has worked with many states to build early warning systems. “It actually ends up being a lot more work in the long run.”

And some advocates worry that early warning systems could be used inappropriately, such as if schools were to use the information to identify, and then push out, students who could reflect badly on test scores and graduation rates.

“There is huge danger of stereotyping as well, biasing teachers in a way that will be a self-fulfilling prophecy,” said Leonie Haimson, an activist in New York and co-chair of the Parent Coalition for Student Privacy. . . .

In Chicago’s ... Lindblom Math and Science Academy, that meant a renewed focus on attendance: A dean teams up with the social worker and school clerk to visit the homes of students who are not coming to school regularly and to solve transportation problems or help with other assistance.

The school’s schedule was redesigned to give ninth-grade teachers time to meet to discuss the students they have in common; they now work together on strategies to help students who are struggling.

But perhaps the biggest shift was reorienting the school to ensure that students are successful with the day-in, day-out class work instead of focusing so intently on their standardized test scores.... ,

The five-year graduation rate at Lindblom — a selective-admissions school where two-thirds of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch — has risen steadily in recent years, from 90 percent in 2012 to 100 percent in 2015.

Other early warning systems rely on bringing additional resources into the schools. One of the most prominent is *Diplomas Now*, which is used by dozens of schools, including Grover Washington Jr. in Philadelphia. “Our model brings people into schools, not just ideas and strategies,” Hopkins researcher Robert Balfanz said. “There are too many needy kids and not enough adults. Until you change that equation, it doesn’t matter if you give them new strategies.”

Balfanz and his colleagues were among the first to show the predictive power of the “ABCs” — attendance, behavior and course performance — in a study of Philadelphia middle schools a decade ago. Sixth-graders who fell short on any of the ABCs had a 75 percent chance of dropping out of school. That meant that if a student failed math or English for the year, received an unsatisfactory mark for behavior on a report card or had an attendance rate below 80 percent, they probably would not be walking at graduation six years later. . . .

Hopkins’ employees work with teachers, showing them how to use data to flag students who are going off track. But *Diplomas Now* includes other partners, too: City Year, an AmeriCorps program, provides volunteers who work full time to help teachers in classrooms, run after-school activities, and serve as mentors who reach out to struggling students and their families.

For students with the most intensive needs, Communities in Schools, a national dropout-prevention program, provides connections with outside agencies for help with hunger, housing and mental-health care.

In 2010, the Education Department awarded *Diplomas Now* a \$30 million grant to study whether the program could be scaled up effectively. Sixty-two high-poverty schools in 11 districts are involved in the randomized control trial, which is expected to last seven years. Not until the final results are published in 2019 will it be clear whether the program actually succeeds in improving students’ chances of graduating.

But an independent evaluation conducted by the nonprofit research firm MDRC, released Tuesday, suggests that the program has a modest but positive effect on increasing the number of students who are considered on track for graduation — those whose attendance rates exceed 85 percent, who are suspended fewer than three days, and who are passing both English and math. . . .

Shannon Blair, a veteran teacher who has worked at Philadelphia’s Grover Washington for half of her 17-year career, said she has seen students undergo remarkable transformations inside classrooms that serve as a stable oasis for children who face instability at home.

But Blair said she also has seen children whose challenges can’t be overcome by educators alone — children who, for example, still come to school sporadically even after many meetings with their parents and introductions to outside agencies that can offer support. ...