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The medical model of predisposing factors and warning signs can be applied to ongoing concerns of students who are at risk of failing at school and/or life.

# STUDENTS AT-RISK: Predisposing Factors, Warning Signs, and Treatment Plans

David L. Griffin

Cancer . . . diabetes . . . heart disease. We are well aware that lives can be saved by knowing the predisposing factors and warning signs of these diseases. With current advances in medicine, more effective detection techniques and treatment protocols are being developed. Continued research provides the hope for eventually effecting cures.

The medical model of predisposing factors and warning signs can be applied to the on-going concern of students who are at-risk of failing at school and/or at life. Administrators and teachers must be able to recognize the predisposing factors, detect the early warning signs, and develop "treatment" programs and strategies for at-risk students if they are going to save our next generation.

## Predisposing Factors

Several characteristics have been identified by researchers that place students at-risk for dropping out of school. In the medical model, family history of illness and lifestyle patterns (e.g., diet, exercise, stress levels) affect the likelihood of being diagnosed with an illness. In an analogous sense, this is the case with students in our schools. Family histories and lifestyle situations can be significant indicators of at-riskness. Results from the Phi Delta Kappan Study of Students At-Risk<sup>1</sup> suggest that family-related factors are critical determinants of whether students are to be considered at-risk for failing. Of the five Kappan categories of factors designating at-riskness, four are heavily dominated by family characteristics. Factors gleaned from other research studies<sup>2</sup> support this finding (see Figure 1).

Clearly, administrators and teachers must work not only with students, but with students' families to reduce the potential for dropping out of school. Our nation's future depends on their ability to meet this challenge.

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Figure 1

### Predisposing Factors for At-Riskness

- Parent alcoholic
- Family used drugs
- Family illness/death in last year
- Low socioeconomic level
- Low parental education level
- Sibling dropped out of school
- Disrupted home life
- Changed schools frequently
- Student employed outside of school
- Student pregnant or parenting

### Warning Signs

In addition to the factors that predispose students to risk are those signs that warn of trouble. The decision to drop out of school does not happen overnight; rather, it is a process that occurs over time until a student sees no alternative but leaving school. These symptoms, which may or may not be related to the predisposing factors, can begin as early as the elementary school years. Some of the warning signs include the following (see Figure 2):

Figure 2

### Warning Signs of Dropping Out

- Poor academic record
- Attendance problems
- Dislike of school
- Pattern of behavior problems
- Little or no participation in extra-curricular activities
- Low self-esteem
- Drug/alcohol use by students

Other researchers<sup>3</sup> have categorized and prioritized a list of warning signs. However, what may be most vital is that educators know these signs and, once diagnosing a student as being at-risk, develop "treatment" plans for him or her.

### Treatment Plans

Strategies for "treating" the at-risk concern must include a systems approach that addresses the entire range of a student's educational experience. Twelve ideas related to advocacy, instructional approaches, and organizational features of schools are suggested for administrators and teachers to consider.

#### Advocacy

1. *Shared responsibility.* The responsibility for the academic success of at-risk students needs to be shared by the entire staff, if not the entire system, to be most effective. Ensuring success requires on-going staff development to respond to the needs of at-risk youth. These staff development efforts should be designed and based on knowledge gained from the at-risk research. Staff development experiences should include such topics as recognizing the factors and signs of at-riskness, strategies and approaches for working with at-risk students, and attitudinal experiences to foster an understanding of and appreciation for diversity. Those involved in the staff development activity should be included in the planning and implementation of the sessions as well as evaluation of the impact.

2. *Concerned and caring faculty.* At-risk students benefit from frequent, personal contacts with school personnel who believe that education is important and that students are valued and capable. Adults within a school (e.g., administrators, teachers, counselors, custodians) can serve in this advocacy role by being advisors or mentors to the students. Mentors can assist students in setting educational goals for

themselves, acting as a resource person if problems arise, and monitoring students' progress. Mentors can also communicate that what students do matters and that school can be to their benefit.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, peer monitoring programs can be very successful. The campaign that promotes "Friends don't let friends drive drunk" could be transformed into a similar campaign that promotes "Friends don't let friends drop out of school."

3. *Partnerships.* Some of the problems facing schools and students today cannot be adequately addressed by the financial and personnel resources of schools acting alone. Effective solutions must include partnerships with parents, city and state agencies, universities, and businesses. Specific contracts or agreements must clearly define the expectations and responsibilities for each group.<sup>5</sup> In addition, it is vital that all partners understand the program's intent and that completion of a student's education is the priority. Partnerships must be truly collaborative in their efforts, minimizing territorial issues. More and better incentive programs for both students and teachers need to be explored and developed.

4. *Coordinated services.* There needs to be better coordination of services for at-risk students. Duplication of efforts is common, and poor coordination can prevent the services from reaching the very people for whom the programs are designed: the students. A person, whose sole responsibility entails the coordination of efforts of programs and services for at-risk students, needs to be employed by each and every school district.

#### *Instructional Approaches*

5. *Teaching Strategies.* A variety of instructional strategies should be employed at both the elementary and secondary levels emphasizing those techniques that seem to have the greatest effect on student learning. This includes research-based strategies such as cooperative learning, computer-assisted instruction, and mastery learning. Using a variety of methodologies will increase the likelihood of meeting the diverse learning styles and needs in the classroom. Combining instructional strategies with effective teaching practices is essential.<sup>6</sup> Such teaching practices are discussed in research-based programs such as Teacher Expectations and Student Achievement (TESA) and Gender/Ethnic Expectations and Student Achievement (GESA).

Both TESA and GESA help teachers to interact equitably with students in the classroom. Such interactions as wait-time, response opportunities, classroom questioning are discussed, practiced, and coded by participants in the training.

6. *Authentic learning experiences.* The curriculum of the school must be responsive to the needs and interests of the learners. Students must be able to see the relevance and importance of the material they are learning. To this end, programs should include life-related skills that are not only concerned with acquiring knowledge, but that also apply that knowledge to real-life experiences. Skills must also be related to the information age both in its resources and new demands.<sup>7</sup> This kind of purposeful learning can provide an intrinsically rewarding incentive program for students.

7. *Multiculturalism.* Equity issues should be an integral part of the instructional program. A multicultural commitment includes recruiting and retaining minority and bilingual personnel, as well as ensuring that all educational personnel understand and respect racial and ethnic diversity. All students should be provided with instructional experiences that include accurate studies of the culture, history, and struggles of diverse groups. Attention to these aspects of the instructional program will develop a school community whereby a strong sense of individual pride and collective purpose is understood and supported.

#### *Organizational Features*

8. *Data collection system.* To assist in the early identification of potential problems, a model system for data collection on at-risk students and potential dropouts must be developed and implemented. Ways to gather information about a student's family situation, which has been shown to be critical in identifying predisposing factors, must be sought. Mechanisms for collecting data on when and why students leave school, as well as ways of monitoring the incidence of various warning signs, must be developed.<sup>8</sup> Accomplishing these goals may be possible at a variety of levels. For example, a statewide data system could be established to provide accurate information with regard to student's attendance, admissions and dismissals, truancy and suspensions, and completion rates. Separation of information in the data system by gender, language proficiency, ethnicity/race, and socioeconomic status might help identify possible inequities in student programs and outcomes. At the local level, a self-study could provide data on an individual district's situation. A task force of representatives of the total school community is important to the process.<sup>9</sup>

9. *Staff empowerment.* Schools need to be restructured to support staff empowerment and to permit school-based decision-making. Principals, teachers, counselors, and other school staff need to be involved in the many aspects of the at-risk programs.<sup>10</sup>

10. *Alternative schooling.* School districts need to expand alternative educational opportunities to create new programs for students whose needs are not being met in the traditional setting. The possibilities that exist for doing this are virtually endless. Examples range from those that are commonly practiced such as an in-school suspension policy or links between education and work opportunities to more unusual approaches. For example, a school could institute a "leave of absence" policy for students who need some time out of school as an alternative to dropping out permanently.<sup>11</sup> A "forgiveness" policy could be instituted to help students who, because of certain factors, get off to a bad start academically but improve greatly once "treatments" are started. Other examples of alternative programs and options include making a policy that each student become involved in an extracurricular school program. Providing opportunities for teachers to stay with the same group of at-risk students over time may help to establish stable relationships and build bonds of trust.<sup>12</sup> Whichever option is considered, it is vital that those affected by or involved in the change become a part of the entire process—from development to evaluation of the program. In addition, support mechanisms (i.e., administrative, financial) must be in place to sustain the interventions.

11. *Regulations and practices.* It is critical to examine the regulations and practices that exist in schools. School personnel must begin to identify those rules and actions that may be pushing students out or making dropping out the only alternative. Certainly this is a task for individual districts, yet research suggests the need to look at several broad areas: hours of operation, child care, family mobility, and class credit systems. The rigid daily schedule may be incompatible with other demands on student's lives. Flexible hours may help students whose needs do not fit the traditional hours of the school day. Child care for young adolescent parents is an issue that continues to need exploration. Students' mobility, due to family circumstances, leads to many changes which can be disruptive to the students' education. Ways to keep students in their "home" school, when family relocation occurs within a district, need to be examined. Finally, the way credits are assigned for classes may discourage some students. Dividing the school year into smaller units may encourage students to complete more courses and experience more success.<sup>13</sup>

12. *Restructuring schools.* Ideas for reorganizing or restructuring schools must be considered. Some strategies address the reduction of teaching loads. Teachers who are responsible for large numbers of students may find it impossible to do anything more than process students through the system. Reducing the teaching demands would give teachers time to prepare, to meet with students, mentor, and coach them. Other strategies deal with dividing existing schools into smaller units or houses to which both students and teachers are assigned for several years.<sup>14</sup> This has the benefit of teachers knowing students better, following their progress more carefully, trying more creative solutions to problems, and providing better partnerships between parents, community, and schools.

### Conclusion

Addressing the needs of at-risk students to prevent them from dropping out of school and/or life is a responsibility that both administrators and teachers must face. Although some individuals may claim that at-risk students and dropouts are not a problem,<sup>15</sup> it is, in fact, a tragic waste of human potential. At-risk students who drop out will not be adequately prepared to accept the challenges of the 21st century. They will not be technically literate in a world that is shrinking due to advances in both the speed of delivery and quantity of information, and they will not be prepared to relate to a world where cultural boundaries are becoming less defined as mobility increases among people.

Administrators and teachers must recognize the serious nature of at-risk students. In the educational setting, teachers are the clinicians who have daily contact with students. Teachers, then, must be aware of the factors that may predispose students to failure. But they must also be ever watchful for the symptoms of at-riskness. For even students who have no "family history" of at-riskness may exhibit warning signs of dropping out. As with illness, the best chance for success comes with early intervention. Thus, teachers with the support of their administrators, must develop "treatment" plans to best meet the needs of the individual student. And, as in the medical model, research is key. Continued study in the areas of at-risk students and drop-out prevention programs provides hope for eventually finding a solution.

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