

## **The At-Risk Student: An Experience in American Public Schools and the Long-Term Impact on Urban Communities**

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### **Abstract**

In 1992, the U.S. Department of Education defined students who were more likely to fail in school as the “at-risk” student (1992, Foreword section, para. 2). “At that time, school failure was typically linked to school drop-out rates with data based on the percentage of students leaving school before high school graduation” (Definition of At-Risk Outcomes section, para. 1). “In stark contrast, the highest performing education systems are those that combine equity with quality. They give all children opportunities for a good quality education” (OECD, 2012, p. 3). Since the original identification of the at-risk population in American schools, the definition and identifying factors have since evolved to now include not only clear connections to academic underperformance and the long-term impact on the student directly, but also the broadened societal ramifications at-risk student underperformance has on communities across America. The inequities in education equity, coupled with societal factors resting between this stark dichotomy in educational opportunity within American schools serve as a mitigating factor that determines the long-term success or lack thereof for students across the country. This article explores the evolution of the at-risk population in education systems across America, and the long-term societal impact on the communities in which they live and go to school.

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### **Introduction**

The initial definition of the at-risk student as defined by the U. S. Department of Education (1992)

associated seven sets of variables with at-risk students to include: basic demographic characteristics; family and personal background characteristics; the amount of parental involvement in the student’s education; the student’s academic history; student behavioral factors; teacher perceptions of the student; and the characteristics of the student’s school. (Foreword section, para. 2)

A 2012 study written by OECD entitled, *Equity and Quality in Education: Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools* states:

School failure penalizes a child for life. The student who leaves school without completing upper secondary education or without the relevant skills has fewer life prospects. This can

be seen in lower initial and lifetime earnings, more difficulties in adapting to rapidly changing knowledge-based economies, and higher risks of unemployment. The same child is also less likely to take up further learning opportunities and less able to participate fully in the civic and democratic aspects of modern societies. Educational failure also imposes high costs on society. Poorly educated people limit economies' capacity to produce, grow and innovate. School failure damages social cohesion and mobility and imposes additional costs on public budgets to deal with the consequences – higher spending on public health and social support and greater criminality, among others. (p. 3)

Evidence of school performance and performance of the at-risk student can be linked to educational equity and the quality of the educational experience of the student. There is resounding evidence that reducing student and school failure indirectly strengthens individuals' and societies' capacity to respond to recession and contribute to economic growth and social wellbeing. Essentially, providing equitable access to all students irrespective of risk factors, socio-economic status, and the location of the school from early years through graduation is integral in reducing the larger impact seen in minority communities across America (OECD, 2012).

### **Purpose of the Article**

Students identified as at-risk are often described as “students or groups of students categorized as having a higher probability of failing academically or dropping out of school” (Great Schools Partnership, 2013, p. 1). While the term at-risk was originally anchored by dropout percentages in schools, identification of at-risk students has evolved to now include:

homelessness, incarceration, teenage pregnancy, serious health issues, domestic violence, transiency (as in the case of migrant-worker families), or other conditions, or it may refer to learning disabilities, low test scores, disciplinary problems, grade retentions, or other learning-related factors that could adversely affect the educational performance and attainment of some students. (Great Schools Partnership, 2013, p. 1)

The term at-risk and identifying factors associated with students categorized as a potential risk in schools served as the impetus for reform mandates inclusive of national legislation, the evolution of the broader charter school movement focused on school choice and a continued focus of research studies used to mitigate the growing divide in performance of students in American schools. The purpose of this article is to explore the evolution of the at-risk population in education systems across America, and the long-term societal impact on the communities in which they live and go to school.

The 2002 U.S. Department of Education's No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), placed schools and districts across the country in a challenging position of supporting at-risk students, along with producing high achievements scores, making adequate yearly progress, and meeting state standards. Schools and school leaders were thrust into making considerable strides to meeting the needs of students identified as at-risk to close achievement gaps and lower dropout rates associated with poverty, behavior, and/or academic deficiencies. This national mandate to find quick solutions was not only the proper approach to meet the needs of all students, exacerbated by sanctions against schools that were unable to close identified achievement gaps between sub-populations of students in all U.S. schools (U.S. Department of Education, n.d., A New Education Law section, para. 4).

Improving equity and reducing school failure in communities of color off and the indirect effects on the economic and social gaps resulting from school failure and dropout rates of students spurred a national call to action across America with a recognition that successful secondary education completion gives adults better employment opportunities, healthier lifestyles, employability, thus resulting in greater contributions to public budgets and community investment. Essentially, more educated citizens resulting in healthier economies and communities less dependent on public aid and less vulnerable to economic downturns. A 2012 study entitled, *Equity and Quality in Education: Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools* espouses:

Investing in early, primary and secondary education for all, and in particular for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, is both fair and economically efficient. Policies require investing in students early and through upper secondary education on the path to economic recovery, education has become a central element of OECD countries' growth strategies. (OECD, 2012, p. 13)

An early attempt to respond to what was a direct correlation between underperformance in school and the long-term impact on communities was the establishment of the federal mandate for school accountability grounded by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002. NCLB was instrumental in exposing performance gaps between minority students in urban schools and their counterparts, with schools across the country implementing interventions such as the Multi-Tiered System of Support (PBIS, 2019) as an early identifier aimed at providing targeted support to at-risk students. The NCLB mandate did however expose broadening achievement gaps even as interventions and new models of remediation programs were implemented on a national scale. The inequitable practices in schools spurred a national debate on continued educational improvements focused on school accountability and metrics to gauge progress in addressing a national issue and its impact on communities of color (U.S. Department of Education, n.d., A New Education Law section, para. 4).

With so many schools failing to meet the established NCLB targets as prescribed within the identified timelines set for all schools, the focus on accountability and targeted sanctions as a result of limp performance in schools exposed challenges in this prescriptive approach to closing achievement gaps with urban schools experiencing even greater impact driven by sanctions which included reallocation of critical funds those schools needed to address academic deficiencies through programming, targeted interventions, socio-emotional supports and other at-risk programming. As a result, the education community, legislators, parents and the broader research community recognized the need for revamped legislation designed to provide flexibility with school progress based on equitable opportunities for all students in an effort to strengthen the national education system and the greater economy (U.S. Department of Education, n.d., NCLB and Accountability section).

In response to the continued national cry to identify solutions for at-risk students and equity in educational access in response to growing performance gaps between minority students and their counterparts and community impact, the Obama administration passed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 that focused on the establishment of clear goals tied to fully preparing all students for success in college and careers. Key features of ESSA built on the early metrics of school accountability, while also providing protections for America's disadvantaged and high-need students and the introduction of high academic standards designed to prepare students to succeed in college and careers. The law also provided funding for the infusion of annual statewide assessments that measure students' progress toward those high standards, support and

grow local innovations inclusive of evidence-based and place-based interventions developed by local leaders and educators such as Investing in Innovation and Promise Neighborhoods, a focus on access to quality preschool programming and maintaining an expectation of accountability and action to effect positive change in our lowest-performing schools where groups of students are not making progress, and where graduation rates are low over extended periods of time (U.S. Department of Education, n.d., ESSA Highlights section).

Acknowledgement of the correlation between reducing school failure and simultaneously addressing societal, economic and social development in communities across America has highlighted the critical nature of equity of access for all students irrespective of race, zip code, risk factors or any other associated with deficit model thinking on the part of educational practitioners that often shows up in school classrooms. An OECD (2012) report entitled, *Equity and Quality in Education: Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools* cites a direct correlation between the problem of school failure and dropout rates across with almost one of every five students not reaching a basic minimum level of skills to function in today's societies. Students coming from low socio-economic backgrounds are twice as likely to be low performers often having personal and social obstacles that impeded their ability to reach their educational potential. Having limited skills and low educational attainment logically increases the likelihood of challenges in adulthood inclusive of an inability to secure employment, lower earning potential for those who are employed, and a reliance on social welfare programs with crime and higher incarceration rates often in urban communities (p. 9).

It is in these urban communities that generational poverty becomes the norm. A 2005 study entitled, *Children at Risk: Consequences for School Readiness and Beyond* "estimates that a high school dropout costs society \$243,000 to \$388,000 in present-value dollars over his or her lifetime, and societal costs for a typical career criminal are \$1.3 to \$1.5 million in present-value dollars" (Rand Corporation, 2005, Consequences for School Readiness and Beyond section, para. 6).

### **Concluding Remarks**

For all schools to improve and all students to have equity of access and programs designed to close achievement gaps. To support the improvement of low performing schools in an effort to simultaneously improve the communities in which they often live, OECD (2012) provides five key policy recommendations to support improvement in disadvantaged schools that includes a focus on improving the quality of leadership in underperforming schools and building systems based on highly impactful culture-climate systems that promote a focus on the whole child with counseling, mentorships, behavioral supports and therapy. Critical emphasis must also be placed on the recruitment, selection and retention of high-quality teachers coming out of teacher-education programs focused on the skills required to educate the disadvantaged student, paired with effective classroom strategies grounded by data-driven instructional practices based on assessment data. Most importantly, is the critical need to connect the parent and community to the life of the school with adult programs (pp. 11-12). In addition to the federal mandates for accountability inclusive ESSA, community-based programs and a focus on early education programs in urban communities are key to changing the narrative of at-risk youth often born into circumstances beyond their control.

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