

School Success for At-Risk Students

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ABSTRACT

There is a need for individualized instruction for students identified either as struggling readers or students at-risk of school failure. The authors discuss parental involvement and focused interventions. Struggling readers, or at-risk students, need additional support from both their teachers as well as their parents. By working together, teachers, parents, and administrators can positively impact the success of children.

In 1975, the All Handicapped Children Act was passed to ensure that handicapped students would receive education and services needed to meet each student's unique needs and provide an effective education (Public Law 94-142 (S.6), 1975). Since then, school and government administrations determined that students with a physical handicap were not the only students who required the need of special education and services. With this understanding, in 1990, the aforementioned law was re-titled as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to include learning disabilities. This law continues to be modified as researchers, teachers, and school administrators learn to better recognize what constitutes a learning disability and to help it fall in line with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which was enacted to enhance the outcome for at-risk students (Madaus & Shaw, 2006).

An "at-risk student" is defined as any student who encounters major obstacles to the successfully reaching his or her academic goals, and as a result, is at-risk for school

failure and/or dropping out of school (UBC Counseling Services). Some factors that are cited as conducive to a student being deemed at-risk of school failure are having little to no parent involvement, coming from a low-income family, or even lacking a print-rich environment. As the demands of the curriculum and schools increase, so do the amount of school failures.

There is a strong relationship between parent involvement and students deemed at-risk of school failure. Research indicates that many children who do not have parental involvement in the school setting are not academically successful. Since parental involvement and students deemed at-risk of school failure are directly related, teachers and administrators need to realize that with parental work and involvement in the classroom, parents will begin to become partners with teachers in their child's education (Fredericks & Rasinski, 1990). The gap between parents and educators has to be bridged in order to successfully correct the problems in a student's failing education.

Epstein (2001) states that all parents want to help their children grow and achieve success. Epstein goes on to explain that some parents are not equipped with the proper tools to complete the task. A school-based parental involvement program, which is designed to help students with their scholastic achievement, readily assumes that additional help provided by involving parents is beneficial for the success of at-risk students. A parental involvement program also works to bring parents into the school setting by encouraging them to participate in school events and activities, provide assistance in classrooms, or assist with school events. The more parents are involved at the school, the easier it will be from them to understand the schools' expectations for their children.

Pagani, Jalbert, and Girard (2006) explain that it is vital for academic administrations to encourage parents to participate at the school and community level since it enables the parents to become involved with their child and their child's teacher. Chao, Bryan, Burstein, and Ergul, (2006) explain that parents need to be brought into the decision-making process so that they may play a more active role in the education of their child since early parent involvement has high positive effects on students' accomplishments. Bailey (2006) states that parent participation in the student's education increases the likelihood that the student will succeed academically. As the gap between parents and professional educators is bridged, success will come to at-risk students. As a result of parental involvement in the schools, students will have assistance in developing the personal, social, and problem-solving skills that are needed to succeed in school.

When assisting at-risk students, a special integration of the curriculum and the people who have the most influence on the students' success is needed in order to help these students avoid educational failure. Changes must continue to be implemented to assist in identifying at-risk students who may or may not have a disability but still require the increased exposure and intensity of the curriculum. In addition, school curriculum should be designed and delivered to provide students with the necessary knowledge to help them advance to the next educational level.

The laws, which were developed to help establish specific guidelines, allow for each at-risk student to receive the unique instruction that he/she may require for the curriculum to be effective. It is the job of professional educators, to implement the curriculum and ensure that at-risk students are receiving the additional time and services

necessary. In managing their classroom instruction, teachers have to ensure that the students have extra time and the appropriate learning environment in the classroom that is most conducive to learning.

Research indicates that students who at a young age struggle with reading will continue to fall further and further behind (Pagani, Jalbert, & Girard, 2006). Parental involvement is a critical aspect of the learning process since they are the first examples to their children. Parents play a critical role in the building of early reading proficiency. Parents serve as positive reading role models for their children by letting their children see them reading and also by reading to their children several times each week. This helps children develop a positive attitude and outlook on reading and literacy skills. Not only does parental reading activity promote a positive outlook of reading, it also promotes vocabulary and verbal skills with their children (Bailey, 2006).

Students from disadvantaged homes usually are read to less often, have a less enriching environment, and have less cognitive stimulation during early childhood. These struggling students have limited vocabulary knowledge that can lead to language problems and little exposure to print. Without this vocabulary and meaningful context, struggling students fail to understand and comprehend the text that they read. They also lack the prior background knowledge to make connections to text. When encountering an unknown word, struggling students do not have the real-life experiences to draw on to decipher the meaning of unfamiliar words. Without these real-life experiences to upon which to draw knowledge, these students struggle with comprehension and understanding of experiences associated with reading. Without the understanding of word meaning, struggling readers find it difficult to make connections with prior knowledge, make inferences, and reason through the text that they are reading.

It is the responsibility of educators to help at-risk students succeed and overcome these obstacles (Rupley & Nichols, 2005). To help struggling students succeed in school and become successful readers, certain things must change. Students need to be better prepared for the expectations of school. Targeted reading interventions have also been implemented in classrooms. To make sure students have that extra time and the appropriate learning environment, teachers are expected to provide interventions. These interventions focus on student's individual needs, learning styles, and scaffolding the reading instruction. Since it is ultimately the teacher's responsibility to implement the curriculum and to identify and assess at-risk students in his/her classroom, the purpose of instructional interventions is to help bridge that gap that continually grows. Teachers often work towards this goal by using a three-tiered intervention model. Tier I is accomplished by having a high quality of daily classroom instruction. Tier II focuses on additional interventions with target students along with the high quality instruction. With the use of Tier II, the student still receives classroom instruction but is also being exposed to one-on-one interventions. The teacher decides what instructional strategies are needed to uniquely help the specific at-risk child (Madaus & Shaw, 2006). If both of the previous methods do not meet the needs of the struggling student, the student is moved to Tier III. In Tier III, the student receives structured instruction that will be continuous over time (Denton, Fletcher, Anthony, & Francis, 2006). Teachers should keep parents abreast of goals for the student and the student's progress. This will allow the parent to encourage the student to assume an active role in the high intensity intervention.

It is evident from the research that school achievement and parental involvement go hand in hand. Many schools, with several families below the poverty line and a growing number of students deemed at-risk, have now implemented a pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and school-based programs to bridge the connection between home, school, and community. Schools are also implementing family-centered intervention programs where parents and teachers work together to create interventions that are applicable to the particular lifestyles of the students. It is evident that success for at-risk students can only be achieved by the culmination of the efforts of administrators, teachers, and parents toward an effective curriculum that reaches every student.

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