

# A Program Model for At-Risk High School Students

Beginning with a caring and autonomous faculty, the model envisions a school culture in which troubled students recommit themselves to social and academic success.

Dropouts enter our communities undereducated. With bleak prospects for success in the labor market, they are almost certain to become social liabilities and to face lifelong problems of unemployment and welfare dependency. Although educators are looking for interventions to reduce the number of school dropouts, we know more about who has dropped out, and why, than we know about effective school efforts to prevent students from dropping out.

What schools can do to retain at-risk students is a persistent problem, but a greater challenge for educators is how to provide educational experiences positive enough to change the lives of these youths. From this perspective, the most important issue facing educators is that of developing a concept of schooling that will be attractive enough to hold these students, but effective enough to promote their learning and development.

Attractive and effective schooling should offer something positive to both students and society. First, positive school experiences must negate the discouragement and alienation students have acquired through their previous formal education. Second,

these educational experiences should avoid repetitive remediation in low-level basic skills and narrow vocational training. The reason for this is clear: acquiring these skills holds out so little promise of a rewarding future that a life on the street or on welfare seems preferable. Educators must find and implement ways to promote broad personal and social development as well as academic skills and knowledge.

In the past, favorable conditions in the home, church, and community, have enabled schools to promote social development and positive citizenship in young people. Now, these previously favorable conditions are weak or nonexistent, and the school still is asked to intervene for the good of society. Certainly it does not appear that schools can escape this broader mandate. Educators recognize that a healthy society is tied to disadvantaged youths' gaining the skills and attitudes that will make them productive workers as well as effective parents and good citizens.

The discussion of our model program begins with the problems inherent in constructing new school experiences for at-risk students and

concludes with observations on positive applications of the model in several school systems.

## The At-Risk Student

Recent data from the High School and Beyond study indicates that at-risk students who become dropouts share a number of characteristics (Wehlage and Rutter 1986). Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds have the highest dropout rate; among ethnics, Hispanics have the highest rate, followed by blacks, then whites. Low socioeconomic status coupled with minority group status are strong predictors of dropping out. Other demographic factors which influence the dropout rate include: a single-parent family; a large family; or living in a city or in the urban or rural South. While these factors are clearly important in understanding students' problems, schools cannot change demographics. However, educators need to consider these factors as they develop strategies for providing at-risk youth with worthwhile schooling.

A somewhat different view of the data reveals that students' low expectations of receiving either good schooling or good grades often accounts for

their dropping out. Both of these negatives tie in with their disciplinary problems, of which truancy is the most common offense. Before dropping out of school, at-risk students demonstrate low self-esteem and a sense of having lost control of their futures. They perceive that teachers do not show much interest in them. A majority of dropouts and potential dropouts also believe that the school's disciplinary system is neither very effective nor fair (Wehlage and Rutter 1986). Even if these students' perceptions are inaccurate, schools face a credibility problem. However, unlike the earlier list of demographic factors, schools *can* influence students beliefs and attitudes. Thus, when schools change their policies and practices, they can change student perceptions about adults' caring and interest as well as about the legitimacy of the school's authority.

The picture we have of the at-risk student is that of a young person who comes from a low socioeconomic background which may include various forms of family stress or instability. If the young person is consistently discouraged by the school because he or she receives signals about academic inadequacies and failures, perceives little interest or caring from teachers, and sees the institution's discipline system as both ineffective and unfair, then it is not unreasonable to expect that the student will become alienated and uncommitted to getting a high school diploma.

If schools intend to construct new programs that will have positive effects on at-risk students, they need to respond to these conditions. Schools are not likely to help at-risk students unless they can change fundamental school-student interactions. For educators, the reform agenda requires a major effort to engage those who have become alienated. Reversing this alienation begins with the establishment of a positive social bond between teachers and students.

### **The Model Program**

Previous research indicates that educators have already developed effective programs in response to the difficulties of at-risk students (Wehlage 1983). This research, along with subsequent developmental work with practitioners, has produced a general model for

alternative programs of the school-within-a-school or alternative school type. High schools implementing the model have provided the practical experience of program development as well as research data.

The characteristics of this program can be described under four categories: (1) administration and organization, (2) teacher culture, (3) student culture, and (4) curriculum.

*Administration and organization.* Most high schools have a relatively small percentage of students who are in danger of dropping out. In schools with not more than 100 to 150 at-risk students (e.g., 16 years old, 6 credits or less toward graduation, frequently truant), educators can implement an alternative program built on the school-within-a-school concept or an independent alternative school. Either of these concepts provides the basis for new programs that can achieve the goals described above.

The model requires the size of the program to be relatively small, ideally 25 to 100 students with two to six faculty. Small size is crucial for several reasons. Face-to-face relationships on a continuing basis are necessary if teachers are to communicate the sense of caring that students perceive as absent in the regular high school. All students can be known in a personal way by all of the teachers. Small numbers permit teachers to both personalize and individualize their instructional efforts. From a very practical point of view, teachers more easily can keep track of at-risk students, who sometimes seem to disappear in a large setting.

Small size also facilitates continued face-to-face communication among faculty for planning and meeting about matters of mutual concern. This permits faculty to create a clear identity for the program, to administer it, and to be responsible for both their program and individual students. Authority and responsibility are not dispersed or diffused as they so often are in large high schools.

The model gives teachers the authority to control admissions and dismissals from the program. They have the responsibility of scheduling themselves and the students, as well as creating courses and educational experiences for them. Such autonomy

**“Curriculum and teaching must be substantially different, . . . [with] individualization, clear objectives, prompt feedback, concrete evidence of progress, and an active role for students. . . .”**

communicates the school system's positive commitment to the teachers and their programs. Teachers are empowered to deal with difficult students. This autonomy, in turn, promotes teachers' ownership of the program. Teachers feel accountable for the success of both students and the program as a whole.

*Teacher culture.* It is essential that teachers believe at-risk students deserve a renewed opportunity to learn. One way teachers can act on this belief is through the "extended role." This role allows teachers to extend themselves to deal with the "whole child." This means that teachers must be willing to deal with certain problems in the home, community, or peer group to promote student success in school. For example, the teacher may need to confront a substance abuse problem, whether a parent's or a student's, if a student is to learn and develop.

Another important characteristic of the model is that teachers develop a strong sense of joint decision making and cooperation. Teachers in most

## Characteristics of Exemplary Vocational Education Programs Designed to Prevent At-Risk Youth from Dropping Out

James M. Weber and Judith A. Sechler

The time for studying successful dropout prevention programs is overdue. Although little progress has been made in combatting the dropout problem nationally, a number of local programs, that link vocational education and related work experience with other critical components appear to be working.

We reviewed the operational and organizational characteristics of nine such exemplary programs nominated by their respective state departments of education (Weber 1986). The programs represent different geographical areas and size school districts and diverse procedural strategies and student groups, but they share several characteristics, which are common as well to similar programs noted in other recent studies (e.g., Freeland 1986, Urban School Districts' Task Force on Dropouts 1985, Hodgkinson 1985, and Wehlage and Rutter 1984).

### 1. General organization

- Programs are presented in contexts that differ from a "traditional" school environment, and they function somewhat autonomously.
- Classrooms have low teacher-pupil ratios.
- Approaches tend to be holistic and multifaceted.
- Strategies are defined by a combination of remedial basic skills, parental involvement, work experience/job placement, counseling, supportive services, and vocational (skill) training.
- Programs focus on students who are in the beginning stages of their high school careers.

### 2. Staffing

- "Special" staff teachers are committed to their program's philosophy and goals.
- Teachers are able and willing to establish relationships with students that tend to be more demanding than "normal."
- Staff are flexible in their approach and able to stay on top of their students' needs.

### 3. Instruction

- Teachers devote about half of their efforts to addressing students' remediation needs (especially in basic skills); about one-fourth to resolving their personal needs (e.g., improved self-concepts); and one-fourth to addressing their work-related needs.
- Staff use pervasive motivational strategies (e.g., tying school activities directly to the real world and building esprit de corps among the participants).
- Instruction involves some degree of individualized teaching and learning.

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high schools experience a high degree of isolation physically, psychologically, and professionally during most of their teaching. In contrast, this model seeks to avoid the isolation of the single classroom with its rotating groups of students as well as the isolation of teachers with a group of at-risk

students. Thus the model is most effective when there is a single complex of facilities, even if it is only a single large room, within which both teachers and students spend time. Such facilities promote collegiality through frequent face-to-face interactions. They stimulate cooperative relationships that

make teaching more enjoyable, stimulating, and professionally rewarding.

**Student culture.** The model is also set up to build a student culture with certain characteristics. First, the program is voluntary and students need to apply for admission. Not all candidates are accepted. One criterion of admission is the applicant's willingness to be candid about why he or she is in trouble with the school and to admit that a change in attitude and behavior is necessary for future success.

The program, seen as a fresh start, requires commitment from the students. They must commit themselves to a set of rules, work expectations, and standards of behavior. Clear rules about attendance, the quantity and quality of work required, and the consequences for breaking rules need to be spelled out in detail. The model assumes that not everyone can or will make an explicit commitment to such rules. For those who cannot make the initial commitment, admission is denied. Those who persistently fail to keep their commitment are terminated from the program. Dropouts from the dropout-prevention program need to be tolerated. This selectivity factor builds a program image based on standards and excellence. Such standards allow students to take pride in their program and their accomplishments.

Once students accept program requirements and goals, discipline problems can be expected to decline. A positive student culture can result in peer-monitored behavior because students will see that an effective program is in their best interest. Thus, the model creates a "family" atmosphere in which sharing and communication are stressed as ways to help members of the group deal with their problems. Within this atmosphere are clear rules that all students need to observe if they are to maintain their membership in the program. Students commit to important ethical rules such as not stealing from the group or committing any act of violence against a group member.

**Curriculum.** The model assumes that curriculum and teaching must be substantially different, at least in certain respects, from that which is ordinarily found in high schools. Individualization, clear objectives, prompt

feedback, concrete evidence of progress, and an *active* role for students are some of the dominant features. Basic skills must be given attention. However, wide variation in both achievement and ability will exist. The level of skills mastery on the part of students dictates where teachers begin. Most students need remedial work; substantial gains on standard measures can be expected for those who have been disengaged from schoolwork for any length of time. The model allows only a portion of a student's time for remediation. Other important activities implicit in the model include: sex education and parenting instruction; health care and nutrition education; and community social services.

### Experiential Learning

Improved social skills and attitudes are important goals within the model. At-risk youths need social experiences with adults who exemplify characteristics of responsibility, the work ethic, and the ability to build positive human relationships. Those qualities are taught through planned "experiential learning."

Experiential learning helps students be both active and reflective. Typically, students are involved as volunteers at day care centers, nursing homes, elementary schools, or centers for the handicapped. This involves them in real work, in tasks that genuinely need to be done because the people in these settings need help. The work is geared to make success more likely. A second type of experiential learning occurs when students, as a group, gut and renovate an old house under the supervision of skilled tradesmen. The construction of a new house is another possibility within the model. Other experiences involve student internships in hospitals, with law enforcement, with various social service agencies, with community newspaper production or the writing of local histories. Such group experiences teach cooperation, responsibility, the work ethic and, only incidentally, introduce youth to possible careers.

Later, students are introduced to a variety of vocational possibilities so that they can learn some specific skills in the world of work. Internships near the end of the program allow students

to consider making a commitment to a particular vocation. These internships are intended to make youth employable at the end of high school or to encourage them to continue their education. It is only in the later stages of the program that vocational experiences could lead students to paid employment.

This model for at-risk high school students is designed to achieve a broad set of goals that will promote the interests of both the individual and society. To accomplish these goals, the programs must be attractive to youth and teachers alike and should promote a positive teacher and student culture. Within it, an inventive curriculum can provide students with knowledge, services, and experiences that stimulate cognitive, personal, and social growth and lead to their success as adult citizens.

In recent years staff at the University of Wisconsin-Madison have been involved with implementation of the model program in Wisconsin high schools. Several schools replicated the model while others created programs with varying degrees of fidelity to the intended design. To test the effectiveness of these interventions, programs in nine high schools were evaluated. A number of criteria were used including the pre- and posttest measurement of changes in students' attitudes, beliefs about themselves and others, and perceptions of future opportunities for success. Generally, the results indicate that the greater the degree of fidelity to the model, the greater the effects on students' behaviors and attitudes. These encouraging results indicate that carefully designed school interventions with at-risk youth can produce effects that will benefit both students and society. □

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