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**TEACHING AND LEARNING
RESEARCH EXCHANGE**

Beyond Duty

**A Compilation of Teachers'
Roles and Responsibilities
with "At Risk" Youth
in Saskatchewan
Secondary Schools**

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*Two men met on the beach.
“Good evening, friend. What are you doing?”
“I’m throwing these starfish back in the ocean.
If I don’t, they’ll die up here.”
“There must be thousands of starfish on this beach.
You can’t possibly get to them all.
You can’t possibly make a difference.”
He smiled, picked up yet another starfish,
and threw it into the sea.
“Made a difference to that one!”*

- Anonymous

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**For Maureen
who has given me wings that I may soar.**

Foreword

Most agree that the classroom of today is extremely different from the classroom of just a few years ago. In 1992 a committee was formed by the government of Saskatchewan to explore issues of service delivery to better meet the needs of children and families at risk within our school systems. The committee recognized that as families in society change, education also must change to ensure that *all* students are successful. The incidence of children and families at risk is growing within Saskatchewan.

Approximately 30 to 40 percent of Saskatchewan children are considered to be at risk. Children at risk face complex and multi-faceted problems such as poverty, family breakdown, violence, child neglect and abuse, and sexual or substance abuse that threaten their ability to learn and develop into caring, competent and contributing adults. (Integrated school-linked services for children and youth at risk: Implementation guide, Planning and Evaluation Branch, Saskatchewan Education, Training and Employment, 1994)

It is apparent that if the numbers of at risk students within Saskatchewan schools are increasing, then teachers, who are directly involved with the lives of these students, must adapt to effectively reach at risk youth within their classrooms. Is the traditional role of “teacher” changing to accommodate this new variation among students? What are teachers currently doing in terms of involvement with at risk students, and, further to this, what do teachers currently see as things they *wish* they could do to help at risk students succeed? This study is designed to answer these questions.

The idea for this study grew out of the researcher’s own response to students at risk. As one who has been working with at risk students for most of my fifteen years of teaching, I began to wonder long ago what other teachers were doing in *their* classrooms to encourage such students. For me, teaching these students brings daily frustrations: they are frequently late and many have a history of poor school attendance. I hear numerous requests to leave the classroom during instruction time: students say they need to use the washroom, get a drink or even go home sick. Curiously, these requests come just as assignments are given. Often these students do not have correct materials at school and lack the organizational ability necessary to keep on top of assignments. Instructional time is again and again devoted to teaching and re-teaching skills and information that students should have already attained somewhere in their school careers. Many of the students have been out of school for long periods of time or have jumped frequently from one school to another. It is not uncommon to review school records and see that a grade nine student, for instance, has been in a dozen or more different schools since kindergarten. Sometimes these students need food, sometimes they need jackets or mitts and sometimes they need bus money. Sometimes, it seems, they need more things than we as teachers can give them.

But teaching at risk students brings, for me, incredible joy. Most of them are eager to learn, and eager to be praised for their efforts and accomplishments. They want to be safe, they feel better about themselves when they are working and learning, and they are moldable. They need security, they need acceptance, and they need love. Every day I ask myself, *do I love these students enough?* Perhaps, as their teacher, it is not my job to love them. Then again, perhaps it is.

Some might argue that there are no differences between students who are “at risk” and all other students. For example, *all* students need praise, encouragement, safety and so forth. If this is true, then there is no difference between being an effective teacher for any student and being an effective teacher for a student who is at risk. This study seeks to respond to these diverse views through the hearts and voices of Saskatchewan secondary teachers.

So it is in this context that I wanted to reach out to my colleagues to see if they, too, are working with at risk youth *beyond duty*.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION **PAGE 1**

PART I: SHARING STORIES: WHAT IS AN “AT RISK” STUDENT TO SASKATCHEWAN TEACHERS? **PAGE 2**

PART II: FOR REFLECTION: LITERATURE REVIEW **PAGE 5**

TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF “AT RISK” **PAGE 5**

CIRCUMSTANCES ASSOCIATED WITH AT RISK STUDENTS **PAGE 6**

PROGRESS TO ADDRESS THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN AT RISK **PAGE 7**

EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS AND THE ISSUE OF AT RISK STUDENTS **PAGE 8**

SERVICE INTEGRATION PROGRAMS FOR AT RISK YOUTH **PAGE 12**

DEFINITION OF SERVICE INTEGRATION **PAGE 13**

PART III: WHAT WORKS: WHAT ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES DO TEACHERS CARRY? **PAGE 15**

PART IV: WISH LIST: WHAT DO TEACHERS WISH THEY COULD DO FOR AT RISK STUDENTS? **PAGE 17**

SUMMARY / RECOMMENDATIONS..... **PAGE 20**

REFERENCES **PAGE 21**

Introduction

This research proposal was submitted for consideration for a McDowell Foundation grant on Wednesday, March 29, 2000. The selection committee approved the research proposal shortly thereafter for the next funding year beginning on July 1, 2000. To keep within the McDowell Foundation funding timelines, surveys were sent to a random selection of 82 Saskatchewan secondary teachers at their school addresses at the end of the 1999–2000 school year. The purpose of conducting the survey at this time was to fulfill the goal of completing the research project before the next Learning from Practice conference in November 2000. Out of 82 surveys sent out to teachers, six were returned with sufficient information to use in this study. Some of those who responded chose to respond to only one section of the three-part survey. A few respondents indicated that they teach no at risk youth, according to the definitions provided in the survey, and wished the researcher success on this project.

The researcher is not disappointed that few teachers responded to this survey. The end of a school year is a busy time for teachers and the paper work is enormous during that time. Some schools had already let out for the summer by the time the surveys were mailed out. Furthermore, the spring of 2000 was an unsettled period in the lives of many Saskatchewan teachers because of pending contract negotiations.

To those who did respond, however, the researcher is deeply grateful. They generously gave their time to record stories, observations and wishes for at risk youth. Although the respondents were few in number, this study could not have been accomplished without them. They made a valuable and tremendous contribution to the survey.

It is important to note at the outset that there is a blurred distinction between the recorded research on at risk students and the literature on effective schools. For the purpose of this study, some information on effective school practices has been included.

PART I

Sharing Stories: What Is An “At Risk” Student to Saskatchewan Teachers?

The question the teachers were asked to respond to in the survey was:

In order to compile a current understanding of what the term “at risk” means to Saskatchewan secondary teachers, summarize an example or situation in which you felt you were dealing with an at risk student. Please change the identities of the individuals involved so this narrative appears in an anonymous way. If you would like to respond using point form, the researcher can draw your views together in a narrative format. Feel free to share more than one story.

The following are responses submitted by those Saskatchewan teachers who chose to participate in this study. Out of respect for each teacher’s comments, the individual responses have not been edited.

RESPONSE No. 1:

We have a number of students who would not graduate in the traditional manner if it were not for intervention by teachers. These students have a variety of problems ranging from alcohol and drug abuse, learning disabilities made worse by a lack of parental tender loving care, and verbal and physical abuse by peers, siblings and parents. We have been successful in keeping the iceberg moving with 90 percent of those people. One student finally packed it in after years of hostility and loss of focus. His father was an alcoholic and very abusive. When this student was younger, his parents defended many of his actions in school giving him the idea that he could do what he wanted – and he did. In school he was hostile. Out of school he was different: he would be the first person to help if you were in trouble. He is aware of his wasted days.

RESPONSE No. 2:

A student at risk lacks basic and fundamental skills in English, math and/or science. The student has low motivation to improve and is content with the status quo. Work is often sloppy, disorganized and difficult to decipher. Emotionally, the at risk student displays mood changes. The student is often tired and easily succumbs to illness, often as an excuse. Family support is missing and the social and economic situation suffers. There is a lack of “culture” and goals. Reading and good viewing are not encouraged within the home. Parents appear to

be disinterested. Perhaps they are discouraged and are not aware of the resources and support systems available. Finally, students who are misplaced are also at risk. For example, a student is placed in a modified class because of a lack of attendance and motivation or lack of appropriate behaviour.

RESPONSE No. 3:

I have two stories: The first is about a grade eight girl. She was removed from her home by her parent. She regularly began to stay late at school because she had nowhere to go. She began to bounce from friend to friend. Her attendance became sporadic, and eventually she stopped coming altogether. The school had no support from home. The phone calls to home were meaningless. Most ended with her parents putting the responsibility on the school. "If you want her at school, find her and make her work!" was the typical response from her parents.

The second story is about a grade eight boy. He was retained in this last year because of learning disabilities. He has learned to bully others as a coping technique. He comes from a split home: there is no accountability for his actions by him or his parents. Neither have control over him. Yet this boy can work and can be polite. He chooses to play a victim role. He acts helpless or defiant on a regular basis.

RESPONSE No. 4:

I teach several students that fall into the "at risk" category. The great majority of these are Aboriginal students who make up about 10 percent of our student population in secondary grades. These students typically come to our school from the nearby band controlled reserve school and sometimes from other reserves or from Saskatoon. They are usually two or three grade levels behind the rest of the class and very weak in abstract thinking and problem solving. To complicate matters, their work habits and attendance patterns are poor. In many cases the home situations are very difficult for these children. Homes are often overcrowded, noisy and offering little privacy or support for school work. Of this group, some are FAS or FAE cases but rarely diagnosed officially as such. Finally, I support that some of these students are living in an atmosphere of neglect, violence, abuse and fear. School work is not a top priority in such an atmosphere.

RESPONSE No. 5:

There are so many examples I can think of. One that comes to my mind is extremely heartwrenching:

Years ago I taught a small, frail boy who was in my grade eight classroom. He was meticulously clean, always careful to comb his hair and keep his shirt tucked in. He did not have many clothes, however. Even in the winter he lacked mitts and often wore a light jacket. Although he strived to please teachers, he was picked on unmercilessly by the other students who often used him as a scapegoat for various pranks. Lacking many peer and social skills, he would react by yelling and eventually crying. He was never seen with another friend, but in the fall would ride his little bike all around the city: he located the homes of each teacher, and no matter where a teacher in that school lived, this boy would be seen riding back and forth in front of the teacher's house. Early in the school year, it came to my attention that he had been caught shoplifting a number of times at the grocery

store just behind the school. In fact, the grocery store had eventually banned him altogether. I learned that he was going over to the store at noon and after school and stealing such items as apples and wieners, not the usual items that one would suspect a grade eight boy to steal if given a chance. As the winter unfolded, I noticed him coming to school earlier and earlier and staying later and later in the day. We, the teaching staff, usually had to ask him to leave the school at the end of the day. Then, one day, I went out to start my car at noon because of the dreadfully cold temperatures. I looked around the neighbourhood as I was shivering inside my car, and I saw this boy sitting on the frozen and snowy concrete steps of his house. He was waiting for the time when he could come back into the school. This alarmed me terribly, and through my principal's office we were able to contact social services.

Eventually we discovered that this poor boy was being locked out of his house early in the morning and could not come back until later in the evening. He was not allowed a key to his house. He went throughout the day without breakfast, I assumed, and certainly no lunch. The shoplifting began to make sense. He would be inappropriately dressed for winter, and as the staff in the school recognized what was going on, they began to bring him scarves and hats and mitts which he accepted. The staff even went so far as to put extra food in the fridge in the staffroom, which was accessible to the hallway of the school. By midwinter, this boy had mastered the skill of asking to leave the class for the washroom just before recess and stopping by the staffroom to take some food out of the fridge. Of course, the teachers did not let on that we were purposely planting the food there for him. I can only believe that the intervention by a social worker was helpful. The end of the school year came, and I have not seen him since. But I wonder about that poor boy all the time.

PART II

For Reflection: Literature Review

The literature surrounding the topic of at risk youth is widespread. This short summary does not presume to be an exhaustive report on all the research thus far. It is a brief synopsis only and is supplied to offer a glimpse into what other researchers and agencies have contributed in this area of study. There has been an attempt to focus only on Canadian- or Saskatchewan-based information; however, some American-based research is also included where it is specifically pertinent.

TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF “AT RISK”

For the purpose of this study, the following two definitions, consistent with recent publications of Saskatchewan Education, are provided for the term “at risk”:

Children are “at risk” if they are likely to fail – either in school or in life. (Frymier and Gansneder, 1989, quoted in Saskatchewan School Trustees Association, 1992)

A student defined as “at risk” is one who, because of social, physical or academic problems, may not graduate from high school in the traditional manner. (Moskowitz, 1989, quoted in Saskatchewan School Trustees Association, 1992)

A youth’s adeptness in succeeding at school and living a satisfying life depends upon an intricate interplay of personal, academic, social, economic and environmental elements. It is estimated that up to 40 percent of children coming to school today have difficulty learning because of poverty, family instability, abuse, violence, substance abuse, hunger and teen pregnancy (Saskatchewan Education, 1995).

THE MEANING OF RISK

The conceptual framework for defining “risk” may be seen to consist of four components:

1. **Risk antecedents:** This component consists of those environmental forces that have a negative influence on the developing individual in producing an augmented vulnerability to future problems in the family, school or community. A quick review of the literature indicates that there are three dire risk antecedents for early adolescents: poverty, neighbourhood environment and family environment.
2. **Risk indicators:** Although there are other indicators, it may be said that there are two main indicators consistently associated with the identification of at risk youth: poor school performance and involvement with child protective services, including out-of-home placement in the foster care system. These two

indicators have particular policy relevance because they can be noted in the records of public systems, and they allow program planners to target the youth at greatest risk.

3. **Problem behaviours:** These behaviours are defined as ones that have the potential to hurt youth, the community, or both. The behaviours that have most consistently been identified as signaling potentially more serious consequences for youth in the future can include: early initiation and practice of sexual behaviour, truancy or absenteeism from school, running away from home (or from an out-of-home placement), early use of alcohol and other drugs, and association with delinquent peers.
4. **Risk outcomes:** There are clearly injurious conditions that have negative outcomes for a youth's future development as a responsible, self-sufficient adult. The risk outcomes of primary concern include teenage pregnancy, parenthood, homelessness, involvement in prostitution, alcoholism and/or drug abuse, delinquency and criminal behaviour, dropping out of school, AIDS and other sexually-transmitted diseases, physical and sexual abuse, and other serious health-threatening conditions such as hepatitis, tuberculosis, pneumonia, accidents, suicide and homicide.

Despite the obvious overlap in risk antecedents and markers, it is difficult to judge the degree to which adolescents run a high, moderate or low risk of experiencing risk outcomes. Applying a simple population appraisal based on poverty or neighbourhood is difficult and will overestimate the number of youth who go on to experience risk outcomes. The more precision one desires in a prediction of risk, the more difficult it becomes because antecedents and markers can never be clearly defined predictors. Some researchers address this issue by taking the presence of the problem behaviours themselves as their "risk" indicators. However, the research outcome is murky because the youth it selects as at risk have already done the things predicted.

CIRCUMSTANCES ASSOCIATED WITH AT RISK STUDENTS

What conditions predict whether or not a student will be at risk? What circumstances predict the likelihood of a student dropping out of school before graduation? What circumstances predict whether a student will go through high school having a frustrating and unrewarding time regardless of actual graduation?

Researchers have discovered that it is possible to identify likely dropouts as early as elementary school (McDill, Natriello and Pallas, 1986). Hodgkinson (1985) found in his research a widely held view that "we intervene too late in the course of a student's development, that certain parts of the profile of a dropout-prone student may be visible as early as the third grade" (p. 12).

There are a wide variety of conditions associated with being at risk:

- being a member of a low-income family;
- having low academic skills (though not necessarily low intelligence);
- having parents who are not high school graduates;
- speaking English as a second language;
- being a child of a single parent;
- having negative self-perception, being bored or alienated, having low self-esteem; and

- pursuing alternatives, e.g. males may seek paid work while females may leave school to have children or get married.

In 1989, the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services developed a form to be completed on young offenders entering residence that would assist in the identification of potential risk to self and the community. Items to be checked off on the form included:

- previous suicide attempts;
- previous incidents in which the youth was physically or sexually assaulted;
- previous use of a weapon;
- previous conviction for a violent offense;
- assault on authority figure;
- previous incidents of fire setting;
- previous escape from custody; and
- previous diagnosis as psychotic.

This study identified the presence and extent of these risk factors in a sample of Ontario young offenders and evaluated the predictive validity of each factor for reoffending. A large number of “other” risk indicators were noted by each case manager, including substance abuse, sexual problems, social problems and behaviour/conduct problems. The two areas of focus included in-program adjustment and reoffending during the follow-up period. Generally, the youth in the study continued to have adjustment difficulties both while in the program and following discharge. Half the youth showed poor adjustment based on case summaries within the program. Almost half (48 percent) reoffended during the follow-up (data collected over a six-month period), while three-quarters of the group incurred a new charge or breached a term of their probation. This reoffending rate reflects the time the youth spent both within the program and, where appropriate, after discharge.

PROGRESS TO ADDRESS THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN AT RISK

There is currently a major shift in Saskatchewan’s health, education, social services, justice and recreation systems as these human service agencies take on new ways of working together more effectively to meet the growing needs of children and families. We now see interagency collaboration, shared planning and community development occurring. The goal of working together is to provide preventive, holistic and enabling supports for Saskatchewan families. This fresh approach to the delivery of human services is being adopted province-wide with growing support evident at the provincial, regional and local levels. For example, Saskatchewan’s *Action Plan for Children* provides a framework for encouraging and coordinating government and community actions to address the diverse needs of vulnerable children, youth and families in the province.

The Prevention and Support Grants Program, initiated in 1994, provides a single point of entry for communities to access provincial government funds for preventive and community-based initiatives. The departments of Education, Social Services, Health and Justice contribute to the fund, which totals \$1.3 million. To date, grants have been provided to over 400 innovative and collaborative programs in areas such as:

- family support (parenting education, social skills, self-esteem);

- health and well-being (nutrition education, cultural awareness, positive lifestyles);
- family violence (conflict resolution, prevention of abuse);
- youth (leadership, peer support, dating violence); and
- summer recreation for young people.

EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS AND THE ISSUE OF AT RISK STUDENTS

There is value in applying effective schooling practices to at risk youth. In fact, successful programs for at risk youth reflect the use of effective practice. For example, within the constructs of successful programs, there is strong leadership to support and guide instructional priorities. All students must meet clear expectations for academic performance and behaviour, and there is frequent monitoring of student progress and support for success.

While the issue with at risk youth is often seen as a dropping-out-of-school issue, it appears that students leaving school prior to graduation is only an indication. For example, there is suspicion that in many schools a “push-out” syndrome exists. Fine (1986) asserts that some schools passively allow students to drop out by withholding any effort to retain them.

In addition, it is very easy to confuse “stopping out” (leaving school for another activity) with “dropping out”. After all, who is to judge whether dropping out of a poorly supported academic situation may not leave the student better off in the long run, particularly if there are alternatives available to school? Perhaps then, the indicator of the effectiveness of our dealing with the needs of at risk youth should not be the numbers of graduations, but should instead be the kinds of instruction and amounts of learning that take place in the school *while the student is there*.

The issue, therefore, could be the kind and quality of learning experienced by the student while in school. When the issue is defined in terms of the experience, it is an issue upon which the school can act.

Are there characteristics which effectively predict whether or not a youth will drop out before high school graduation? Wehlage and Rutter (1983) note that “the most powerful determinants of dropping out are low expectations and low grades combined with disciplinary problems, truancy being the most common offense” (p. 12). They determine that while the school can’t do much about the socioeconomic factors that are linked with being at risk, there are solutions that lie within the school’s control. Some researchers have further concluded that school-based factors which help students succeed have a similar impact on all groups of students, with no distinction between cultural or religious groups. In other words, school effects are school effects and they have impact on all pupils equally without regard to socioeconomic or cultural predispositions. In addition, it is critically important to distinguish between characteristics of at risk youth and the conditions in schools that fail to bring about learning. Edmonds (1979) ascertains that “all children are eminently educable and that the behaviour of the school is critical in determining the quality of that education” (p. 19).

Wehlage finds that one of the most important curricular characteristics of effective programs for at risk students is an experiential curriculum. He makes the point that a fundamental difference between experiential programs and work or vocational programs is that the latter tend to focus on monetary rewards and to

offer less opportunity for students to take challenging roles and opportunities. Experiential activities, on the other hand, offer important possibilities for maximizing adolescent development. Wehlage says that there is sufficient evidence about the effects of experiential education (that meet the criteria below) to argue for it as an essential component of educational programming for marginal students.

According to Wehlage's criteria for experiential education, the program should:

- offer optimal challenge with manageable conflict;
- provide a young person an opportunity to exercise initiative and responsibility;
- provide the young person with a task that has integrity (i.e. is not "make-work") and thus reinforces the person's sense of dignity;
- provide the young person with a sense of competence and success; and
- engage the student in reflection about his/her experiences.

Time and time again, research correlates the numbers of at risk students with effective school practices. Given below is a compilation on effective school practices from a variety of sources that illustrates congruence within the research:

- **Strong administrative leadership.** Evaluation of effective schools consistently mention strong leadership as one of the factors contributing most to their success. The role of the principal is to focus the whole school on instruction and use this focus as a means of establishing and acting upon priorities in the school. The principal and all others in the school know the school is a place for learning. The point seems to be that it is the quality of the leadership rather than the program that can help aid success. There is a climate of expectation in which no children are permitted to fall below minimum levels of achievement. All staff and all students share the expectation that all students can learn. Effective schools exhibit equity in terms of learning. Learning takes place in a safe, orderly environment, and students are expected to behave according to established, fairly executed rules of conduct.
- **Teacher performance.** All teachers are highly skilled in, and use a variety of, instructional methods and techniques. There are clear instructional objectives, activities are tied to objectives, and there is frequent monitoring and evaluation of student progress toward those objectives. There is professional accountability for program success, and the optimism and confidence teachers have in the program is evident. The extended role of the teacher in dealing with the "whole student" is essential. This extended role creates in students a sense that they are cared for. There is a sense of collegiality that binds together the team of teachers working in the program.
- **An orderly, but not rigid, atmosphere.** This is conducive to the instructional business at hand.
- **Academic priority.** There is an attitude in the school that makes it clear pupil acquisition of the basic skills takes precedence over all other school activities.
- **Student culture.** Wehlage says, "The single most valued characteristic of [successful] programs is the 'family atmosphere'" (p. 36). Wehlage reports that successful programs do not suppress criticism but instead provide a positive and constructive atmosphere in which criticism can occur. Another characteristic of student culture is cooperative learning, which allows

help to be obtained from other students or teachers and encourages team learning to take place.

- **Little emphasis on ability.** For at risk students specifically, there should be emphasis upon achievement, not ability. Ability-related goals may make students feel that they are defined in terms of how they compare to others.
- **Allocation of resources.** Effective schools have the ability to divert resources from other business in furtherance of the fundamental objectives when necessary.
- **Continual monitoring.** Effective schools have means for frequent monitoring of pupil progress. More specifically, they put in place means by which the principal and the teachers remain constantly aware of pupil progress in relationship to instructional objectives.

Wehlage (1983) analyzes several programs that successfully involve marginal students in school work and try to keep them in school. His analysis cuts across a breadth of school contexts, and he finds that alienation from the school, reinforced daily by teachers and administrators, is one of the most important threats to the retention of at risk youth. He asks, "When otherwise normal adolescents who have sufficient intelligence to succeed in school become alienated and reject the school, should not educators attempt to find ways to respond constructively to this significant portion of their clientele?" (p. 32).

Wehlage's unequivocal response is that educators can make a difference, that teachers and administrators can develop ways to retain at risk youth and involve them in learning. He criticizes programs that stress only basic skills or vocational education or career education alone as being too narrow in focus and, therefore, of limited value. He argues that schools must provide these young people with experiences of success in order to counteract the messages of failure he finds they are constantly receiving. Wehlage further contends that we reinforce the message of failure by not expecting enough from the marginal student. Sometimes these students are registered in alternative classes and this can deny them access to enriching experiences. Indeed, the failure to develop appropriately challenging experiences for at risk students is one of Wehlage's major criticisms of public schools. Instead, he would have schools stress the development of abstract thinking (in the Piagetan sense) and the development of social skills.

Further to this, many successful programs for at risk youth make use of their autonomy to develop very rich curricular offerings, particularly in the area of experiential learning. The advantages of this type of learning may well deserve investigation by effective schools researchers. Levin (1986) calls attention to peer teaching and cooperative learning as "two approaches that seem to work particularly well for disadvantaged students" (p. 15).

A drawback to the development of alternative programs is the difficulty of deciding where the school program offerings stop. The temptation is to develop a comprehensive program dedicated to the special needs of the population to be served. Such a program, however, requires components that go far beyond the capacity of the school itself to implement or oversee. For instance, Levin (p. 13) asserts that the major components of a strategy to solve the problems of disadvantaged students must include:

- provision of enriched preschool experiences;
- improvement of effectiveness of the home as a learning environment;

- improvement of the effectiveness of the school for addressing the needs of the disadvantaged; and
- assistance for those from linguistically different backgrounds in acquiring skills in standard English.

A somewhat divergent approach is taken by McDill, Natriello and Pallas (1986), who have integrated an extensive number of research studies and evaluation endeavors in an attempt to examine the potential results of tougher school standards on students who are at risk of dropping out. Their work is important because they focus on classroom-based research.

The core of the question is whether or not higher standards will make it even harder for at risk students to succeed in school. On the positive side, when students are met with challenging standards, they are more likely to pay attention in class and spend time on homework. In certain studies, class cutting is notably higher in classes that make low demands on students than in classes with higher demands. These findings hold for students of all abilities. Generally, McDill et al. (1986) conclude that “results in several different lines of research provide hope that raising standards will lead students to work somewhat harder, at least when standards are originally quite low, and that greater student effort will lead to somewhat higher student achievement” (p. 149).

All the same, there must come a point where expectations are too high for some students to succeed without additional assistance of some kind. The research also notes that the size of the school is one of the most meaningful factors associated with the number of students with at risk behaviours. Higher achievement, higher levels of student participation and feelings of satisfaction with school are all possible ways to combat at risk elements.

Other measures that can help at risk students in schools are:

- individualized curriculum and instructional approaches;
- a system of academic rewards, i.e. the use of a variety of alternative, detailed reward systems, such as learning contracts, token economies and grading systems that base evaluation on individual effort and progress; and
- emphasis on academic excellence.

At the classroom level, the studies assert that a clear understanding of work and learning is essential before approaches such as individualized instruction can succeed. Without these basics, even the best teachers are unlikely to succeed in positively affecting the dropout rate. A class climate that is consistent and outlines clear expectations is vital.

The cumulative awareness in the research on alternative programs for at risk youth seems to support substantially the findings and recommendations of effective schools researchers. Where differences exist between the two bodies of research, the issues are concerned with curriculum goals and the overall purposes of education.

In recent years, considerable effort has been made to identify characteristics that distinguish effective schools. *Effective schools are those in which all students master priority objectives.* This understanding is taken from an extensive review and synthesis of the effective schools research that included examination of research in six areas: school effects, teacher effects, instructional leadership, curriculum alignment, program coupling and educational change and implementation. Major

findings were identified about what takes place in classrooms, school buildings and school divisions that contributes to high levels of student performance.

The chief characteristic of successful programs for at risk youth seems to be a strong, perhaps intense, level of commitment on the part of the instructional staff. The principal is active in the day-to-day operation of the instructional program and takes a strong interest in the operation of the overall school program. Traditional roles and role relationships are not as significant as taking the proper action to achieve school and program goals.

Some researchers note that one of the strongest criticisms of schools made by dropouts is that the discipline within the school is unfair and arbitrary. Successful programs for at risk students are seen as having fair, though sometimes tough, programs of discipline. The programs clarify what offenses are and what the punishment for them will be.

Professionals who work with at risk youth should consider that there is instructional value in experiences in which at risk pupils interact with other pupils. For instance, Ward (1986) notes that cooperative learning groups (small groups of students with diverse backgrounds working on common tasks) “produce significant gains in academic achievement for minority students” in desegregated classrooms (p. 6). In some areas, this concept can be identified with what is known as *pull out* programs.

One successful approach for working with at risk students used in Saskatchewan is the School-to-Work program. Many researchers note that successful programs combine intensive, individualized training in the basic skills with work-related projects. The intent is that when the relationship between education and work becomes clear, most potential drop-outs can be motivated to stay in school and perform at a higher level.

In keeping with the School-to-Work concept, concurrent studies report that successful programs for at risk students might exhibit these characteristics:

- strong vocational components;
- out-of-classroom learning;
- program intensity – programs tend to be small and individualized, have low student-teacher ratios and offer more counselling than the regular school curriculum.

SERVICE INTEGRATION PROGRAMS FOR AT RISK YOUTH (SI)

The literature on at risk youth and programs that serve them indicates that a comprehensive approach has the best chance of helping youth avoid negative behaviours and outcomes. Service integration is one way to increase the comprehensiveness of program offerings by facilitating access to services available in the community that a school does not normally provide.

The circumstances in children’s lives that put them “at risk” are too complex for the educational system to deal with alone. A concentrated effort by all agencies that serve children and families is needed. Saskatchewan’s Integrated School-Linked Services initiative recognizes these circumstances. In December 1994, a policy framework entitled *Working Together to Address Barriers to Learning: Integrated School-Linked Services for Children and Youth At Risk* was released throughout

Saskatchewan. In this policy framework, schools, human service agencies, families and communities are invited to work together to improve the way services are planned, delivered and evaluated.

Integrated School-Linked Services operate at three levels – the community, regional and provincial levels. Within communities, partnerships are formed by school divisions, schools, parent groups, and provincial and community human service groups to meet the complex and diverse needs of students and families at risk. Regionally, interagency groups work to promote and create a collaborative culture and to remove barriers to collaboration and service integration.

Provincially, the departments of Education, Training and Employment, Social Services, Health, Justice, and Municipal Government, as well as the Saskatchewan Indian and Métis Affairs Secretariat, work to deliver more coordinated and comprehensive services at the community level.

The results of program evaluations conducted over many years indicate that single-focus programs targeting at risk adolescents may not be the most effective way to help youth. Increasing attention is being paid to programs capable of dealing with the whole child, including the child's parents and neighbourhood.

A single-focus, or traditional approach to providing programs for at risk youth means that often only a single risk marker is identified such as adolescent pregnancy, substance abuse or school failure. Single-problem focus has several limitations. First, such programs usually focus on problems (rather than individuals as a whole) and tend to offer short-term interventions. Programs that try to solve problems quickly and then close the case are not geared toward preventive interventions and often have little staying power. Thus, they do not always address the most pressing needs of their clients. Second, it is sometimes difficult to get other community agencies to fill in the gaps when such single-issue programs cannot meet client needs with their own program resources. Due to these problems, programs for at risk youth have tried to increase the comprehensiveness of their own offerings and use service integration to increase the students' access to a wide range of services offered by other programs and agencies.

DEFINITION OF SERVICE INTEGRATION

Service integration (SI) refers to procedures and structures that help several service agencies coordinate their efforts to address the full range of service needs presented by youth and families in an efficient and holistic manner. Few existing systems meet all the elements of the SI model with which this inquiry began. Several key elements in this initial idea of SI efforts for at risk youth include:

- an approach to helping at risk youth that sees each youth as an individual, and also as part of a family, neighbourhood and community that may in turn be influenced to reduce the risk that a youth will participate in problem behaviors or experience risk outcomes;
- a comprehensive, individualized assessment at or near the point of intake, that is conducted for each youth and family, to identify the full range of the individual's and the family's service needs;
- a coordinated service plan that, based on the needs identified, is developed to ensure that all needs are addressed in an efficient fashion by the program(s) best suited for the task;

- institutionalized interagency linkages that ensure that service referrals result in actual service delivery, which may entail an interagency case management function, co-location of services at a single site and/or sharing of other resources among programs; and
- follow-up on service referrals, to ensure that services are delivered in an appropriate manner and that the program coordination structures are functioning effectively.

There are barriers to SI delivery, e.g. professional training and orientation, administrative procedures, eligibility rules and the categorical nature of funding. Service agency staff are typically trained in rather narrow, specialized traditions, such as mental health or criminal justice services, and they may not feel comfortable dealing with other issues or working within an interagency framework. Bureaucratic procedures often obstruct SI efforts because agencies may insist on following their own intake and case processing procedures. Also, confidentiality requirements may limit ability of agencies to share information about clients with an SI team.

PART III

What Works: What Roles and Responsibilities Do Teachers Carry?

The question the teachers were asked to respond to in the survey was:

In order to understand what teachers in Saskatchewan are currently doing when teaching at risk students, please use this page to indicate your own typical roles, responsibilities and routines at your school or within your classroom. Please do not name your school in order that this information can be shared respectfully and anonymously.

The following are responses submitted by those Saskatchewan teachers who chose to participate in this study. Out of respect for each teacher's comments, the individual responses have not been edited.

RESPONSE No. 1:

What are we doing to teach at risk students? We are attempting to get them involved in activities other than school work such as drama, football or badminton. We offer a large number of activities for all kinds of skill levels and interests. We modify or adapt assignments and exams to allow these people to experience success. We take time to talk to at risk people about their goals and interests to find out where they want to go. Our social worker is available upon referral from a teacher or by request from a student. Our SRC brings in motivational speakers, talking about making the most of the skills given to you, healthy lifestyles and entertainment. As teachers, we support their efforts to help students get involved. We spend quiet time with students interviewing them about how their lives got to be so complicated. The Adaptive Dimension is used to allow students to be successful as the amount of work required is overwhelming. Methods for examining students require extra support: oral, taped, assisted, extra time or sometimes even a different exam. A note about adaptation: the amount of adaptation is problematic. How much is too much?

RESPONSE No. 2:

Some of the typical things I do for at risk students:

- I modify courses by reducing content required, by simplifying questions and assignments, by modifying evaluation techniques and standards, and by making modified tests;
- I check in with particular individual students after I give an assignment to make sure they understand the assignment and get started on the right track;
- I call students who are missing assignments to the library at noon to help them or see what the problems are; and
- I give students retests and review with them.

Some “non-typical” things I have done for at risk students:

- I have driven them to school and home again for one week so they would not miss exams. I was picking up five or six students each day at one point;
- I have given students rides home to their reserve so they could participate in drama or basketball after school; and
- I have hired a student to help him pay off a debt and earn a little money.

RESPONSE No. 3:

I am an Industrial Arts teacher. I also teach English, grades eight and nine, social studies for grades seven and eight, and grade nine math. I also coach volleyball, track and field, and cross country. I serve as the SRC advisor and organize dances, help with wake-a-thons, fundraisers and work with other teams. I am extensively involved with extra-curricular and intramural programs. In previous years, I have run modified classes in English and math. What helps for at risk kids is to boost their confidence. It is good for them to do the available work and I try to gradually bump up their skills. I try to give them areas to succeed, and hopefully in this way their misbehaviours will be reduced. I talk straight to them. I make them realize when they act out that they must “repay” the class using a restitution idea. I use Talking Circles. In this, each student has something to say and they learn to respect the other person’s opinion. I try to make my room a safe environment. I do not attack their efforts or lack of effort. I give extra praise for minimal improvement. I use many smiles and encourage participation. I explain and then re-explain assignments. Many times I will extend due dates and offer extra help. I call home often. I validate their feelings or fear of assignments and often will modify the work. Being in my class is the last thing on some of these students’ minds. Therefore, I must keep them coming to class in order to teach them something. If they feel safe, maybe they will come and maybe you can then teach them.

PART IV

Wish List: What Do Teachers Wish They Can Do For At Risk Students?

The question the teachers were asked to respond to in the survey was:

Reflect on your own view of the needs of at risk youth which are beyond you to meet. The researcher is interested in gathering all ideas of what needs to be done yet to help at risk students become more successful in Saskatchewan secondary schools. What is your wish list?

The following are responses submitted by those Saskatchewan teachers who chose to participate in this study. Out of respect for each teacher's comments, the individual responses have not been edited.

RESPONSE NO. 1:

The students need someone to care for them. For example, they need someone to care where they go after school. For instance, a grade eight boy wanders around late at night. He is lacking the basic needs of love and friendship and a sense of belonging.

RESPONSE NO. 2:

As teachers, perhaps we can modify expectations. For example, the length of the course and more time to complete if attendance is a problem. Simply failing these students is not a solution. These students need successes even if they are small. They need a sense that they contribute to life around them in a positive way. The transition from elementary to grade nine often sets an at risk student up for failure.

Point #1: The non-retention policy of elementary schools is a farce – an enormous farce.

Point #2: Students need transition classes to upgrade their skills. This is a must. Trained personnel is essential.

Point #3: Effort is needed to socially assist students with inappropriate behaviours.

Point #4: A back-up system such as an area for counselling and time out to address verbal and physical abuse is needed.

Point #5: Support for the child and teacher is required within the classroom setting to accommodate the integration policy of special education students as determined by Saskatchewan Education.

Point #6: The basics must be emphasized and mastered before implementation of electives. We need more time to teach the Practical and Applied Arts classes to these students. We need more time for everything. We need smaller groups of students. We need co-op programs for these students.

RESPONSE No. 3:

More money! Smaller class sizes! More prep time! It's quite simple, really. To deal with the individual needs of students (not just at risk students but gifted, ADD, shy, learning disabled, etc., as we are constantly doing and being urged to do...in fact, we are told it is our duty and responsibility to do so), we must have smaller class sizes and more prep time. Teachers in rural schools in particular are saddled with eight or nine different classes to prepare for and evaluate, little or no prep time and huge extra curricular loads. To deal with the problems of at risk youth, we need at least one prep period per day in every school and class sizes of between 15 and 20 – 20 should be the maximum!

RESPONSE No. 4

- support for alternate and/or modified programs
- money for textbooks and workbooks – at risk youth do not do well with binders full of photocopied handouts
- structure and discipline in the school
- trained and active First Nations liaison workers in schools to facilitate programs, support and communication with homes
- a greater effort to ensure that basic skills are acquired in the younger grades before students arrive in junior high school
- more realistic curricula – present trends in curriculum development are too abstract and wishy-washy!

RESPONSE No. 5:

We can't meet all of the needs of our at risk students. Some of them should be relocated in better homes away from their parents. Others need to get a fresh start in another school. Others need a year of military training. Our school requires more vocational classes for those unable to handle mainstream academic classes such as agriculture, autobody, drama or construction. They might keep programs that put these students in a real work experience with proper supervision. This would be a good idea. Work experience such as mechanics, welding, designing clothes and sales are examples. For those people who are addicted to alcohol or

drugs, compulsory rehabilitation sooner rather than later is needed. The best approach, I think, is an experience closer to nature away from the stress and pressures of normal living. We need healing camps where these people can get in touch with the value of life yet get firm enough direction to keep the situation under control. Everybody needs to feel they are useful and have a place under the stars.

Summary/Recommendations

When the responses of the Saskatchewan secondary teachers included in this study are synthesized with findings from the current research, the following recommendations may be made for teaching at risk youth:

1. There should be high expectations for all students.
2. A teacher should develop clear, achievable goals for each student.
3. There should be clear rules for behaviour, and these should be fairly enforced.
4. Effective instruction and classroom management are essential.
5. There must be careful monitoring of student progress.
6. It should be emphasized that school is a place for learning.
7. Although at risk youth are often channeled to programs with special, reduced expectations for performance, especially academic performance, the effective schools research strongly suggests that schools should establish and maintain high expectations and standards for all students and focus on helping them all meet those expectations.
8. Since at risk youth exhibit a lack of and strong need for success, they need the clear goals and objectives recommended by the effective schools research to move toward and achieve measurable success in school.
9. To overcome the lack of consistency in discipline that often contributes to the problems of at risk youth, who may be, in effect, penalized for being at risk, schools should establish and maintain clear rules for behaviour of all students, with behaviour measured against standards, not against previous behaviour or behaviours of other students, and with rules enforced fairly and equitably for all.
10. A problem in schools with high at risk populations is the decline of teacher involvement and/or accountability for the performance of these students. This teacher withdrawal may be counteracted by effective classroom instruction and management techniques, with an emphasis on teacher responsibility and the expectation that all students can and will learn.
11. Since there is often a lack of attention to the needs of individual at risk students, schools should implement careful monitoring of all students' progress with interventions to improve student learning.
12. To counteract the lack of engagement in learning that often characterizes at risk youth, schools should expect that all students are involved in their own learning and that all students will understand and respect the fact that the school is a place dedicated to learning.

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