



Beyond Duty

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

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As a teacher in an inner-city high school, McGowan had worked with "at risk" students for 15 years. Knowing that the number of students considered at risk was growing in Saskatchewan, she began to wonder what other teachers were doing to adapt effectively to the needs these students brought to the classroom. Were her colleagues experiencing the same frustrations? Was the traditional role of the teacher changing to accommodate at risk youth in Saskatchewan secondary schools?

To answer these and other questions, she developed a survey that was sent to a random selection of 82 high school teachers. Only a few returned extensive responses, but from the

stories that they shared, the researcher concluded that teachers of at risk youth go beyond duty in providing students with services. For example, one teacher responded:

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 requires 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?

From a review of the literature on at risk youth, McGowan developed a conceptual framework for what it means to be a student at risk. The framework recognizes four factors that may lead to this designation:

1. Environmental forces with a negative influence on the developing individual (e.g. poverty, a decaying neighbourhood or a broken family).
2. Negative indicators in the records of the public system (e.g., poor school performance or involvement with child protective services).
3. Problem behaviours (e.g., truancy, absenteeism, drug use, or early sexual activity).

4. Injurious personal conditions affecting future development (e.g., pregnancy or parenthood, homelessness, sexually transmitted disease or poor health).

McGowan consulted the literature on effective schools to identify school practices that are effective in dealing with at risk students. They included:

- strong administrative leadership,
- a high level of teacher performance and accountability,
- a school environment that is orderly but not rigid,
- high priority on academics,
- a supportive “family” atmosphere within the school,
- an emphasis on student achievement rather than student ability,
- the flexibility to allocate resources in the most effective way possible, and
- continual monitoring of pupil progress.

After analyzing the usefulness and applicability of a number of approaches that have been used to teach at risk youth, McGowan makes the following recommendations to classroom teachers and schools:

Classroom

1. Teachers should have high expectations for all students.
2. A teacher should develop clear, achievable goals for each student.

3. Classrooms should have clear rules for behaviour that are 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.

School

7. Schools should establish and maintain high expectations and standards for all students and focus on helping all students to meet those expectations.
8. Schools should establish clear goals and objectives in order to move toward and achieve measurable success in the school.
9. Schools should have clear rules for student behaviour that measure behaviour against standards rather than previous behaviour or the behaviour of other students, and the rules should be enforced fairly and equitably for all students.
10. Effective classroom instruction and management techniques should counteract any decline in teacher involvement in or accountability for student performance, emphasizing teacher responsibility and the expectation that all students will learn.
11. Schools should monitor carefully the progress of all students and intervene to improve student learning.
12. Schools should expect all students to understand and respect the school as a place dedicated to learning.



Sharlene McGowan talks about her study at the 2001 Learning from Practice conference.