



# Reaching and Teaching Students At Risk:

## *Voices from the Classroom*

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A research project sponsored by the McDowell Foundation in 1996-97 created an informal network of Regina teachers who met to talk about their experiences in teaching students who are at risk of failing either in school or in life. Validated and encouraged by these discussions, the teachers decided to carry their reflections a step further. They applied for a grant from the McDowell Foundation in order to develop a handbook of practical ideas for themselves and other teachers. As they explain in the end notes to the handbook:

Each time we have “presented” on children that are at risk, we get a large turnout.

*So why do I teach kids at risk?  
Easy - it is so rewarding!  
I find these kids  
to be the most grateful and appreciative  
students that I have ever known!  
I am the lucky one to have them.*

Children at risk are present in most classrooms. Whether because of social, economic, physical, or academic problems, students who are at risk exact a terrible cost on themselves, their teachers, and society.

Teachers can make a difference. We hope that our observations may be of use to some teachers. Teachers talking to teachers can be a powerful tool for solving problems.

The handbook begins by helping teachers come to grips with the constraints and realities of teaching these children. There are constraints related to finances, the curriculum, school structures and the constant need for time and focus; however, as the teachers point out, “[p]ersonal attitudes and approaches not consistent with teaching students at risk appear to be our greatest constraint”. They go on to consider the social barriers affecting these students at home and at school, what is involved in working with their parents, and the need to establish appropriate expectations and priorities for a student with life in jeopardy. They also deal with making academic adjustments for students at risk and where their teachers can look for supports. In each chapter, comments and stories provide the voice of teachers drawing on their experiences to encourage and support each other. Many questions are raised for reflection, quick tips are given, and best practices are identified. The handbook demonstrates what its authors have learned about “being positive, adaptable, supportive, accepting, and consultative”, as well as their determination to “continue to grow”!

Zack was in my grade four classroom and seemed to be very unhappy. His behaviour demanded so much attention that an assistant was hired to work with him. When his cumulative folder arrived, it became obvious where some of his unhappiness had begun. He was 10 years old and had already been in 14 schools. He had younger siblings that he talked about a lot but didn't live with. When his aunt visited school, she told me that during the summer he lived with mom so he could look after his younger brothers and sisters for her. During school times he lived with a relative that was willing to look after him.

*We must remember that when a family's basic needs are not being met, school will not be a priority.*

*Curriculum instruction is what universities teach us to do and we feel safe with it. It is very important but not at the expense of losing students. I remember my first teaching job, trying to teach everything for the grade level and using all the approved materials. I talked to my principal after he observed in my classroom. I felt I had to say something about the materials not relating at all to the lifestyle or experiences of the children I was teaching. He told me to forget the materials and teach the children! What a relief! Many teachers are doing this and feel safe enough to share. It is wonderful.*

## Do...

- Look for ways of making school a positive experience.
- Determine motivators for students. Establish criteria for achievement. Work towards achieving them.
- Post achievements. Discuss and promote positive motivational ideas.
- Create opportunities for the student to succeed.
- Find ways of addressing student's interests.
- Establish an open, working relationship.
- Show you care.
- Have clear, achievable goals.
- Use a modular approach in developing units rather than making them long and drawn out.
- Teach what the student needs rather than what the curriculum dictates.
- Assess in September and continue to assess regularly throughout the year.
- Develop individual objectives.
- Maintain consistency.
- Develop routines.
- Have high expectations for all.
- Create a safe, secure school environment.
- Create a bright, appealing environment (artwork, pillows, chairs).
- Be aware of self-destructive behaviour patterns.
- Take a suicide prevention course.
- Know the student's history (social, economic, academic, behavioural, familial, health).
- Read the student's cumulative folder.
- Talk with the student's previous teachers.
- Involve support personnel (the law and other community agencies).
- Be persistent.
- Ask if you don't know.
- Maintain clear rules for behaviour, fairly enforced.
- Clearly articulate and publish choices for students as well as the positive and negative consequences.