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School Practitioner Listserv

A Weekly Community of Practice Network for Sharing and Interchange

Mental Health in Schools
UCLA Center
Program and Policy Analysis*

July 7, 2014

Special Edition on Students "at risk"

Request

>What are the payoffs & pitfalls of flagging kids as "at risk" in early grades?

Follow-up

>Alternative education: An option for helping "at-risk" students graduate

Featured Center Resource

>Quick access to resources to support "at-risk" students

Request

"The Payoffs and Pitfalls of Flagging 'At-Risk' Kids in Early Grades"

http://blogs.kqed.org/mindshift/2014/06/whats-the-danger-of-flagging-at-risk-kids-early-on/

Because of the continuing controversy about this topic, we suggest you read the above news story by Alyson Bryant (June 10, 2014).

Below is an excerpt for your convenience. Following the excerpt are a few responses we elicited from colleagues with expertise in this area.

And, now we are looking to receive and share responses from this Practitioner Community of Practice listserv.

(EXCERPT)

"Long before students have even entered ninth grade, teachers are looking to detailed data to figure out which kids are most likely to drop out of high school. Though this flagging system can call attention to a need for additional help to a potential dropout, there may be concerns, like inaccurate predictions, or worse, lowered expectations.

At Clinton Middle School in East Los Angeles, teachers are using a system called Early Warning Indicators, or EWI, which is part of a school transformation program called Diplomas Now, currently used in 14 cities around the country. The system is based on recent research out of Johns Hopkins University that shows what specific factors best predict the likelihood of dropping out of high school. The warning system uses three data points – suspensions or behavior, attendance, and grades in middle school - to identify kids at risk of not making it to high school graduation. According to an op-ed written by Diplomas Now in the N.Y. Times, in the 2012-13 school year, "the program achieved a 41 percent reduction in chronically absent students, a 70 percent reduction in suspended students, a 69 percent reduction in students failing English and a 52 percent reduction in students failing math."

Here's how it works: After reviewing the trends, teachers examine names that are colored red or yellow, considered off-track or in danger of being off-track. At Clinton, signs of being off-track include coming to school less than 85 percent of the time, getting a bad behavior grade, or an F in any class. Students who show two or more of these signs are flagged.

The teachers then discuss the circumstances around each student, things like how often he or she visits the nurse, or what's going on in the family. Then they brainstorm interventions. These can be simple, like saving an extra breakfast for a student, or more involved, like assigning tutoring or Saturday school.

Though teachers have always kept students' needs in mind when grades have dipped or behavior has changed, typically those decisions were made within the teacher's own classroom. Teachers don't always know what's going on in the classroom next door, and it's fairly rare to have time carved out of the school day just to problem-solve around student data. Likewise, students often don't realize that teachers are paying attention to their personal lives.

At Clinton, a student doing poorly in math class is every teacher's problem, because that student is considered more likely to drop out. The faculty meets every month, hoping that within a month, they can bump a student back on-track - a process they call 'recovery.'

But does being off-track definitely mean that a student will drop out? The kids interviewed at Clinton are in seventh grade and only 12 years old. Can data accurately predict if one of them is going to drop out of high school five years down the line?

"What if what's the cure for under-performance in middle school becomes a disease when they move on to college, because they've been told they can't do it on their own?"

That's a question Chris West is wrestling with, based on his work developing an Early Warning Indicator system for Montgomery County Schools in Maryland. His system flagged

"at-risk" students as young as first grade. One of his concerns is whether all this information can even be acted upon. He found that 76 percent of the students who dropped out had these warning indicators, but 47.4 percent of the non-dropouts had these indicators, too. What's the risk of "mis-predicting"?

Ultimately, West said if you identify someone incorrectly, but they still show signs of disengagement, the effects of intervening could still be positive.

There's another concern about these early flagging systems. What if knowing that certain kids are on the "at-risk" list colors the way teachers see them, and they start to expect less? Or what if the students start to expect less of themselves?..."

Listserv Participants:

What do you think about all this? Send responses to ltaylor@ucla.edu .

Below are some of the first responses from colleagues around the country; three longer responses are appended at the end of this Practitioner Community of Practice listserv:

(1) "This is certainly a double edged sword. Beliefs about a student can predict the way that teacher interacts with students and whether or not he/she develops high expectations for that student. While I do believe early indicators are important predictors, they can be detrimental if shared with a staff not highly trained in teacher effect on student success."

(2) "I am familiar with a number of Early Warning Systems including the one from Johns Hopkins. I am most familiar with the one from the National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson. The research from that one is not very accurate in its field testing. It appears that teachers saw the risk factors before they saw the students. Some students with multiple risk factors succeed while those with fewer don't. Being able to predict which is which is a problem. The same difficulty is true with the SEARCH Institutes Developmental Assets."

(3) "Early ID can be a problem if teachers and administrators do not have appropriate supports in effect to assist children and families--"Full-service schools." Learning difficulties remains a family-involvement issue and must be addressed accordingly to be most effective. High expectation models help to keep teachers and administrators in line with regard to student progress. Basic psychological models (Maslow/Glasser psych. needs) can help professionals to develop a framework to address learning difficulties. A basis for decision-making on a day-by-day basis should be in place to understand what supports are needed. Having multiple services (mental health, social services, health services, recreational services,etc.)   in place within the school allows pros to address learning more appropriately. In short, we need to apply the research now available to address learning---research that cuts across all ares of our existence that effect learning. Maslow had it figured out long ago. We need to apply what is known to be most effective in school programming. School-based youth services programs as described by a variety of authors including James Veale and myself should be considered in maximizing learning potential.

[*Center note:* While full-service schools are one way to think about essential student and learning supports, we have stressed going beyond that approach to develop a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students.]

(4) "From a Pro perspective I found the team approach to understanding a child's position and potential reasons behind their fluctuating grades, decreased attendance or 'misbehavior' refreshing. Our school district applies this process for the Pre K to 12 range of kids. We are in a small rural area and have a collaborative relationships with various area agencies including physical and mental health services. On the Con side, I do think in some ways this approach of 'early identification' can color the way they might be perceived by their upcoming teachers. Perhaps it might be negatively impacting their resiliency but I tend to have the opinion that nothing harms resiliency or the sense of competency like repeated failure, especially when that failure is due in great part to conditions outside of a child's control. These things can range from poverty to homelessness, domestic violence to psychiatric illness."

(5) "I have some real concerns about programs of this sort. It's not that I am opposed to early identification, that is essential. My past experience has shown that attempts to do kindergarten screenings tend to produce a very high rate of false positives, which inevitably results in students being labeled as 'at-risk' who really are nothing more than lacking in exposure to early learning opportunities through their home or daycare. Weaknesses that can be easily resolved by exposure to the standard instructional procedures in a school. I believe that early identification begins with giving the students a chance to perform in class and training teachers in what to look for in terms of genuine developmental concerns. Then through a child study team approach, remedial plans can be designed that are less obvious and do not unnecessarily impair the child's self-esteem by suggesting that they are already on a downhill track. I was also surprised by the success rates quoted in the exemplar district., it seems like the old warning might apply here, 'If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.' I know everyone is looking for a quick fix but perhaps slow and steady really might win the race."

(6) "I agree that labeling children 'at risk' as early as first grade can have harmful effects. In my longitudinal study on the effects of grade retention, we recruited first grade students in school districts who were below the median for their district on a district-administered test of literacy.

Aware of the power of expectancy effects, we told only the school principals and certain district administrators what the purpose of our study was and what the criteria for eligibility were (i.e., below the median in literacy). Parents were told that the study was about factors that affect students' educational success, including school policies, parent-school relationships, child characteristics, etc. In my study, we offered no interventions, so the risk of negative expectancy effects could not be offset by the potential benefit of a treatment.

With respect to studies like the one at Clinton MS, I think the benefits outweigh the risks. The kids and parents and teachers already know there are some problems. The interventions appear to be well thought out. I think about Check and Connect and its success in engaging students. Still, I don't think we need to tell kids, teachers, or parents that their child is 'at risk of dropping out'; rather, the child shows signs of being disengaged from school, and we want to turn that around to ensure school success."

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For your information
>Alternative education: An option for helping "at-risk" students graduate

Excerpt from: *Alternative education: Exploring innovations in learning*
http://www.renniecenter.org/research/AlternativeEducation.pdf

".. Alternative education programming often featuring flexible scheduling, multiple means to earn credit, differentiated instruction, and personalized learning offers at-risk students more customized options for achieving a high school diploma. While approaches vary considerably, alternative education options expand the number of viable pathways by which students may earn a diploma and prepare for college and career success ....

According to national research, the most promising alternative education models create respectful school climates that encourage learning for all students. These models employ teachers who know how to build strong relationships with students and motivate their success. Alternative options are often characterized by their small size, flexible schedules and structures, and one-on-one relationships, as well as their commitment to granting students substantial control over decision-making and to helping them set and attain long-term goals. Research points to several additional features that support effective alternative education implementation:

>Development of a comprehensive alternative pathway (not an "add-on" or piecemeal approach);
>Clearly identified goals with high expectations for social, emotional, behavioral, and academic growth;
>Low adult-student ratios, and significant staff autonomy;
>A non-deficit philosophy (teachers adjust their instructional approaches to accommodate individuals, rather than demanding that students change to fit the approach);
>Training and support for teachers in areas such as behavior management, alternative learning styles, and communication with families; and
>Individualized student support with links to multiple agencies and individuals outside of the school building, including students' families...."

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Center featured resource
>Quick access to resources to support "at-risk" students

See the Center's online clearinghouse Quick Finds for resources from our Center and from others who focus on the topics. Start with:

>*Alternative schools, alternative education*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/altschool.htm

>*Barriers to learning*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/barriers.htm

>*Prevention for students at risk*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/prevention.html

Also see *Troubling notions of risk: Dissensus, dissonance, and making sense of students and learning* by Walter Gershon in *Critical Studies in Education, 53* (2012).

Abstract. This article troubles constructions of 'at-risk students.' Utilizing Rancière's discussion of dissensus, the author first argues that what is at risk are not students but contemporary common sense notions of schooling. From this perspective, students' labeled as 'at risk' ways of knowing and being that interrupt ideas and ideals about the purpose and function of schooling. In order to make this argument, the author links Rancière and others' discussions of the importance of dissensus to questions of sense-making, the dangers of resonance in consensus, and the possibilities in the dissonance of dissensus. These assertions are then further complicated by the assertion that education is a necessarily risky endeavor and that all students should be placed at risk of learning. Understanding all students as at risk is significant as it simultaneously provides a space for students' complex constellations of identity to be treated with dignity in learning experiences and creates a less punitive context in which differences are less likely to be conceptualized as deficits.

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APPENDIX

Two longer responses about flagging kids as "at risk" in early grades:

(1) "... My thinking [emphasizes a] data driven system ... for school improvement rather than using data at the individual student level. The article you shared reinforces the need for system change when it talks about 49.4% of non-dropouts having indicators similar to 76% of dropouts. To me, that means that the school could help dropouts and non-dropouts alike by modifying some practices.... If we could focus on systems, that could help to alleviate the concern from the article about targeting youth and having lower expectations for some.

The other main idea that I got from the article was the individual attention given to students with high-risk indicators – something we preached for a long time. We used to include a slide in every Learning Support presentation to indicate the need to connect youth to school by developing relationships. It just takes one person to make a difference….

What concerns me, and what the article does not address is the way in which these students' needs are being met. It says nothing about strategies, best practice, linking youth with needed services or programs, or anything about what research would say is a good thing to do. (Hence the need for a comprehensive system of Learning Supports!) I'm afraid that the old adage about everything becoming a nail when you have a hammer might apply. Teachers need to be knowledgeable and educated about the best options/strategies they have for helping youth. I love that they're data driven but worry about the options they are using when they target youth. I'm more comfortable targeting the 'system' than the individuals and then identifying the types of practices that make the best difference for the greatest number of youth. (The mapping that [the Center at UCLA] continually preaches.) And finally, I really wish educators could switch out their deficit model for a 'protective factor' model. I've probably spent too much time in substance abuse prevention, but it seems like educators tend to think about risk factors that contribute to the failure of individuals and not think about what could be done to bolster

(protect) everyone. The research is there. I'm just not convinced that anyone is looking at it – or I think they would behave differently. Won't it be great when, one day, we have a comprehensive system of Learning Supports that is truly supportive and not just focused on 'fixing' something after the fact? I subscribe to the notion that kids are not broken (nor are families) – the systems that serve them are not working and that's why they fail."

(2) "As a way to prevent placement in special education being the ONLY way a student could receive some kind of help, several of the schools I supported used a weekly team meeting format. If a teacher had run out of ideas on his/her own, that teacher could schedule some time for discussion. The parents were usually invited and when people thought it was appropriate, the student in question attended, too.

We would start by listing student strengths & positive supportive factors in the student's life, such as 'parent cares enough to take time away from work for this meeting'. This got everybody thinking positively about the student. We then listed concerns. Everybody had a different point of view, so the concerns varied widely. We then made guesses about what could be the 'root cause' for each of the concern, and listed those. Then we prioritized 2~3 concerns for specific focus.

I tried to connect student strengths with root causes that seemed highly likely to me, saying something like 'If X is the concern, isn't there some way we could used strength Y to… (increase positive behavior/reduce negative behavior'). Generally, we could generate many possible causes and even more logical responses. I'd ask who could help with the project and when we had a person taking an action, then we had a plan.

I remember a student who didn't feel like he fit in with his classmates, and didn't want to come to school. In the Assets column, everybody said he was great with animals. So the plan was to make him the 'zookeeper' at the school. He got to school early and fed & watered the various pets in the room. He put out feed for the wild turkeys on the hill, bringing the feed closer to the school every day until he had trained the turkeys to be on the school grounds when the busses arrived. He enjoyed the work and got lots of good attention for it, so he didn't feel so much like going home when his work was done. We didn't have to label him with an emotional disability and segregate him into a special class to 'treat' his school phobia.

The system was self-correcting in that if we guessed a root cause wrongly, we would know when the logical intervention didn't work (or made things worse.) Problems that seemed intractable eventually led to 'maybe this student has a disability', but that put special education placement as one of many options - not the only option. Which was the whole point.

I believe the chart was originally developed by Joe Hull in Iowa, and it's a thinly-disguised representation of the scientific method. I added the 'assets' column because I didn't want the group process start off by complaining about all the things the student did wrongly.

It's a bit ecological, in that all possible causes are OK to consider. I remember a student who was very wiggly and was on the fast tract to ADHD medications. This team planning process resulted in mom reporting the boy doesn't wipe himself very well and he usually has a nasty rash 'down there.'

Parents usually reported that it was nice to have school staff actually listen to them and not use the meeting to push their own agenda. We usually learned about some social/ emotional factors that were previously unknown until the student spoke up at the meeting. I didn't sense we were 'identifying students at risk', although some folks referred to the

students in that way. It was a discussion and plan-making group which we hoped would make things better.

I understand you can detect risk factors, but if you are going to act on them, you need to keep data to determine the false positives as well as the drop-outs who do not match your risk factor profile. Otherwise, you can't estimate the efficiency of the procedure. Which is a long way to get to special treatment for kids with risk factors, but it shows you how I learned to think the way I do.

There is a part of me that believes that if you wait until a student has a lot of absences, low grades, and behavioral problems, that you have waited too long. Couldn't we make things better for all the kids? Isn't prevention usually more effective and less expensive than treatment?

I suppose I should be glad some schools are trying to do something for kids with at-risk factors, but it seems as though they might be aiming in the wrong direction. One thing the discussion/planning groups made clear to me; people are so busy that even if you bought-in to the plan because you helped to develop it, chances are you will not carry it out. There was no problem creating tons of great ideas, but the hard part was finding one person who had the time, the skills, the table, the chairs, and the room to sit down in with a child. Schools are that overwhelmed.

That led to me being not particularly excited by lots of time spent to study a student with learning disabilities. Typically all the students in sp.ed. got the curriculum approved by the central office administrator, no matter what. Differential diagnosis means nothing if you have no differential treatments."

Note that measurements of learning potential/progress remain limited in scope and do not generally address learning potential characteristics that must be considered when learning potential is being addressed. Focusing merely on achievement in academics does not address learning difficulties in a comprehensive manner needed to maximize learning potential."