

Provide individualized supports for students at risk of academic failure

Every year, hundreds of thousands of children are at risk of school failure in Pennsylvania. Students are considered “at risk” for several reasons, including: low levels of academic achievement; truancy; disability (particularly emotional and behavioral); poverty; substance abuse and dependency; or family and home instability. In 2008, 33 percent of Pennsylvania children lived in a home where neither parent had full-time, year-round employment. More than 40,000 Pennsylvanians aged 10 to 18 had a juvenile court delinquency disposition, 15 percent of all students were diagnosed with a disability, 15 percent of children lived in homes subsisting at or below the federal poverty level, 17 percent of children were born to mothers without a high school degree, and more than 20,000 children were living in foster care.¹ Overall, 22 states score higher than Pennsylvania on composite indicators of child well-being.² PSEA members know that students’ needs derive from many aspects of their lives inside and outside school. Meeting the complex needs of individual “at-risk” students must be a coordinated effort across multiple agencies.

PSEA Recommendations

Develop or expand programs and policies that build individualized interventions for students at risk of school failure, including:

- Programs for at-risk youth that adopt a comprehensive case management approach to planning and providing student support;
- Community schools that bring family counseling, substance-abuse treatment, legal aid, family health services, childcare and other services into the school setting to meet the comprehensive needs of students and to facilitate individual case-management;
- Mentoring programs, small school communities and other school reforms designed to develop meaningful relationships for every student with at least one adult;
- Coordinating state and federal funding to encourage integrated services for at-risk youth at the local level;
- Response to Instruction and Intervention (RTII) models that develop specific interventions targeted to a student’s level and type of need; and
- Integrated systems of program delivery and evaluation that link school success to community and economic development efforts.

Individualized interventions make a difference

Within a school context, students at risk of school failure often benefit from individual or small group instruction, service-learning and community-based curricula, and work-related training. Some students need flexible scheduling, credit recovery assistance, and tutoring in order to stay on track toward graduation. Students at risk of school failure often have multiple needs and interrelated problem behaviors that are not addressed by one institution or a stand-alone program that meets only one set of closely-related needs. Consequently, there is widespread interest in developing community-based models of service integration and delivery. These models are designed to address a wide range of needs in a case-management framework.³

The most successful intervention model for at-risk youth links the services of multiple agencies; integrates family, friends, and the community into service provision; provides meaningful opportunities for adult and youth interaction; and, encourages youths to engage in community- and service-learning projects.⁴ Effective programs for at-risk youth usually adopt several general principles. These programs:

- Recognize different student needs, learning styles, and stages of development, and integrate the child's education with physical and mental health services, employment assistance, career and technical training, childcare, and/or substance abuse services, based upon the individualized needs of each at-risk child. Schools and teachers become one of many entities engaged in supporting at-risk youth.
- Engage various agencies and organizations – such as community-based organizations; social, physical and mental health service providers; workforce investment boards; and juvenile justice agencies - in partnership with certified school staff to provide support.
- Consider the strengths and risk-factors inherent in a child's community, as well as inherent in the child.
- Build structured relationships between adults and youth. These options may include mentoring programs, job placements, and service learning opportunities.
- Provide access to relationships within the “real world” of work, allowing students to develop relationships with working adults, and giving them practical skills with clear application, motivating them to achieve.
- Shift away from traditional remediation to an emphasis on prevention and resiliency in children.
- Tailor services to meet the individual needs of every student; adapt the program to fit the needs of the child.
- Include individual academic tutoring, where necessary, that is based upon frequent diagnostic and prescriptive exchanges between the student and the teacher.

The Power of a Great Education: PSEA's 20/20 Vision for the Future



Educators who work with at-risk children and youth need specific time and resources to develop educational experiences that meet the individual needs of the learner. They also need time to coordinate with other service providers and to develop work-based and service-learning-based instruction for individual students. Finally, educators who work with “at-risk” youth need to have sufficiently small class sizes and low student assignment levels to be able to build meaningful relationships with the at-risk youth in their care.

(01/10)

¹ Annie E. Casey Foundation. Kids Count Data Center. (2009). <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/bystate/Default.aspx>.

² Annie E. Casey Foundation. Kids Count. (2009). Available online: <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/acrossstates/Rankings.aspx?ind=137>.

³ Morley, E. and Rossman, S.B. (1998). “Helping At-Risk Youth: Lessons from Community Based Initiatives.” Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

⁴ National Governors Association. (2000). “State Youth Development Strategies to Improve Outcomes for At-Risk Youth.” Washington, DC: NGA Center for Best Practices.