



# **Helping At-Risk Students: Practices and Strategies**

## **A White Paper**

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What do kids really need to help them improve and increase their own achievement? This question has been asked by educators throughout the centuries of formal schooling and education. More recently, the rate at which this question has been asked has increased, due to rising global competition and legislation such as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. The difficulty of answering a question of this magnitude is that there is no one response for all the unique situations that exist amongst students within our schools. However, due to decades of research, we do know that certain practices and strategies can make substantial increases with at-risk students.

The purpose of this paper will be to examine various practices and strategies that research indicates increase student achievement. First, an overall framework for learning will be established by which various practices and strategies can have greater success. This framework will consist of examining the basic emotional and psychological needs of all children at a fundamental level. This will be followed by outlining key practices and strategies that assist at-risk students compiled in a large meta-analysis study done by the Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL).

There is an old expression often used by educators that states, “Kids do not care how much you know, until they know how much you care.” It is this essential drive of showing care



and concern for others that draws many into the field of education, particularly at the elementary level. While the acquisition of knowledge, skills and preparation for the future is the primary purpose of schooling, demonstrating an attitude of care, love and support is the attitude in which learning is delivered. In a speech delivered at the Georgia School Boards Association Summer Conference, Dr. Crystal Kuykendall (2009) discussed three basic needs of children. The first, a need for affection, is a basic human instinct which is undeniable and present in people from birth. This need for affection is a powerful determinant in the behavior of children and a need that will be sought after consistently. The home is the primary place for initial affection; however, if the home is devoid of affection children will often attempt to fill this need in inappropriate ways, often leading to behavioral challenges in school.

The second need of children identified by Kuykendall (2009) is the need for appreciation. Everyone wants to be valued and possess a sense of self-worth. Often, appreciation is demonstrated by educators in such ways as kind words and remarks, requests of students to assist with tasks, the establishment of high expectations by the teacher, and the belief through word and deed that students will meet the established expectations.

Lastly, the final need of children is achievement (Kuykendall, 2009). Achievement can be defined as to meet or exceed an expectation/standard or the accomplishment of a task. Students desire to excel in something and want to achieve success. Quality educators seek to assist students in finding a skill, whether in academics or the arts or both, where they can be successful. However, when students fail to achieve success, discouragement, frustration, and even resistance can often occur. Kuykendall states that "If kids do not find success in school,



they will find it outside of school”, often through inappropriate means. Therefore, the framework of affection, appreciation and achievement are underpinnings to a successful structure of student learning.

Even with the best of intentions and a framework of affection, appreciation and achievement, students can continue to struggle academically. At risk students, or those failing to achieve the established standards for learning, can be particularly challenging to teachers; therefore, implementing effective practices and strategies are needed to increase achievement amongst this specialized student group. In his study *Classroom Strategies for Helping At-Risk Students*, David Snow (2003) conducted a meta-analysis to determine effective practices and strategies that can be used in classrooms to assist at-risk students. In all, six practices were determined to make a statistically significant difference. These include whole-class instruction, cognitively oriented instruction, small groups, tutoring, peer tutoring, and computer-assisted instruction.

Whole-class instruction involves the teacher working with an entire class simultaneously (Snow, 2003). In recent years this approach has come under attack for being a vehicle by which a teacher may lecture to students, which is not a significantly effective learning strategy. However, the practice can be successful if different constructivist and behaviorist strategies are utilized, such as with a workshop approach. The workshop approach utilizes a short introduction and overview during the beginning of class, followed by an extended time for student work. Students can work in a variety of ways using different methods and groupings, while the teacher is free to monitor or work with individuals or small groups. The last part of



the lesson is reserved for summarizing progress and learning, often using specific students' work as examples.

Another effective practice is cognitively oriented instruction, which is defined by Snow (2003) as strategies used to help students better plan and reflect by having them think about how they learn. Specific strategies under this area include planning, preparation, and idea generation, as well as monitoring, self-checking, and revising. In reading, for instance, the text can be previewed, read, then summarized through writing reactions to the text or even drawing images or acting out sections of the text (Snow). In writing, students can go through the process of drafting a piece, gaining feedback from the teacher or other students, making revisions, then being formally assessed. Finally, in math students could identify patterns in their problem solving and then compare the situation to similar problems and solutions. This is followed by opportunities to test these patterns that have been identified when solving similar problems (Snow). As students take ownership for how they learn, greater understanding and achievement follow.

The next practice that can have a positive impact with at-risk students is small groups. Within this area are two strategies of grouping; mixed-ability or heterogeneous grouping, and like-ability or homogenous grouping. With mixed-ability grouping, students with various strengths and weaknesses are grouped in a cooperative learning setting and provided the opportunity to assist one another with various learning tasks. At-risk students can learn from higher ability students in multiple ways. However, the teacher must be cognizant of keeping higher ability students engaged with challenging tasks. With like-ability grouping, at-risk



students would be grouped with similar students, giving the teacher a more focused and isolated approach in meeting their needs. More concentrated efforts and strategies can be used with this approach. However, the teacher must weigh the costs of not only what the at-risk students may be missing by not working with and among the higher ability students, but also be careful to avoid stigmatization that could occur amongst the at-risk students.

The next two practices of tutoring and peer tutoring are similar in nature and thus combined for the purposes of this analysis. Tutoring, which involves teacher and student, is different from peer tutoring, which involves student and student. Tutoring has long been known, and validated by much research in recent decades, to have a major impact upon student learning (Snow, 2003). Provided that there are clear goals to accomplish, periodic evaluation and quality tutors available, tutoring can be a great resource for at-risk students. Additionally, students can be great teachers to one another through peer tutoring. Peer pressure is a powerful force, and so often times thought of in a negative light. However, peer pressure can be positive in nature and students can often learn concepts better from one another. While a learning concept is typically introduced by the teacher, it is often peers who help their classmates solidify their understanding by working together. Whether in collaborative pairs or small groups, peer tutoring is an effective strategy.

Lastly, the final practice shown to help at-risk students is computer-assisted instruction. In today's technological society, computer-assisted instruction can come in a variety of formats, from self-paced academic or skills software, to PowerPoint or video presentations. While aspects of Snow's study centers on self-paced or guided software, students in today's 21<sup>st</sup>



century schools incorporate more and more technology on a regular basis, and the use of high-quality software with a strong research base can greatly assist at-risk students. Designated time by at-risk students working on a high-quality program that teaches, assesses, or reinforces targeted skills can increase understanding and move students to higher levels.

The over-arching framework of affection, appreciation and achievement can guide teachers in what students, particularly at-risk students, need and desire. Through the use of comprehensive practices and strategies that research shows make an impact upon their learning, teachers can move at-risk students to greater heights of achievement. The research is clear: at-risk students can learn at higher rates and meet the learning standards expected of them by educators.

### References

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