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At-Risk Youth in Suburban Nebraska

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John W. Hill

For the greatest part, Nebraska's students are succeeding in school. However, there are students who experience early school failure and early school refusal, students who are "at risk" for leaving school before receiving their high school diplomas. Data from a school district were analyzed as a critical case example to uncover characteristics, achievement, and cognitive skills of identified students at risk in order to answer questions about these perplexing youth. Policy initiatives are discussed.

Concern for students at risk has been expressed at the national level (Ekstrom 1987; Wehlage and Rutter 1986; Wehlage and Smith 1986) and the state level (Miller and Tuley 1984; Austin Independent School District 1982; Blum and Spangehl 1982; Martin 1981; and O'Connor 1985). Recent Nebraska task force papers developed by the Nebraska Council on Vocational Education and the Nebraska Department of Education also emphasize the factors contributing to school failure and dropping out.

At-risk, or troubled, youths are more likely than other students to drop out of school before receiving their high school diplomas. They often turn to drug and alcohol abuse, delinquency, gang membership, teen pregnancy, and even suicide. Conditions most often thought to be associated with at-risk students are poverty, neglect, special education diagnosis, and racial minority status. The behaviors associated with being at risk are poor attitudes and efforts in school, failure to complete assignments, and truancy.

While not all at-risk youth turn to self-destructive behaviors, many face a lifetime of financial dependency. A recent study indicates that in 1985, 60 percent of men and 50 percent of women between the ages of 18 and 24 years who lacked any college education were living at home with their parents. Moreover, of the 3.1 million families headed by non-college men and women under 25 years of age, 30 percent had incomes

below the poverty level, compared to 11.4 percent for all other families ("Youth and America's Future" 1988).

Nebraska Students At Risk

The impression held by many people is that youth at risk live only or primarily in large urban centers. However, a troubled youth is defined as someone who lives in a "cycle of failure," with no significant person in his or her life—a much broader interpretation (Monroe 1989). As a result, even in Nebraska's suburban school districts, one finds significant numbers of youths at risk.

This research is based on a study of at-risk students attending a suburban Nebraska school district during the 1987-1988 year in grades 7 through 11. These students were identified as failing two or more core subjects in either semester and/or having 12 or more unexcused absences in either semester—grounds for automatic failure. Thus, at-risk students in this study were not identified on the basis of ascriptive characteristics, such as race, poverty, or special education diagnosis, but rather because of their observed behavior in school. This study concerns only those students considered at risk and who were in attendance during the 1987-88 school year; the data do not pertain to those students who dropped out or did not attend school during this year.

While this study is based on a single case, it is a representative case according to the "critical case method." Critical case studies are designed to test specific hypotheses about the existence or prevalence of certain social conditions. *A critical case is one in which the researcher is least likely to encounter the relevant social condition; if the condition is discovered there, it is likely to occur on a broad scale. Thus, if at-risk students live in this sample school district, which is relatively affluent and racially/culturally homogeneous, then troubled youth likely live throughout Nebraska, not just in the inner city districts.*

Table 1 is a profile of students at risk in the school district studied. Boys and girls at risk constituted 30.3 percent of the total junior high school population (grades 7 through 9) and 33.5 percent of the high school population (grades 10 and 11). These figures are comparable to urban school districts nationwide. However, unlike typical inner city schools, this student population is relatively affluent and racially homogeneous (see table 2). Moreover, the at-risk students are not predominantly minority; nor are they especially likely to be diagnosed as requiring special education.

Table 1. Profile of At-Risk Students* for the School District Under Study, 1987-88.

	Junior High School (n = 1,439)			Senior High School (n = 908)		
	n	Percent of Total Students At Risk	Percent of Total Class	n	Percent of Total Students At Risk	Percent of Total Class
Boys	221	51.0	15.3	173	56.7	19.0
Girls	216	49.0	15.0	132	43.3	14.5
Total	437	100.0	30.3	305	100.0	33.5

*Failing two or more core subjects in either semester and/or having 12 or more unexcused absences in either semester, grounds for automatic failure.

That so many girls were found in this study to be at risk may be viewed as a surprising finding. It seems that whatever the conditions contributing to the phenomenon of early school failure and early school leaving, they most certainly should be considered "equal opportunity," as far as gender is concerned.

The best predictor of at-risk behavior in this suburban Nebraska school district was found to be socioeconomic status (SES), which was measured in this study by participation in the free and reduced lunch

Table 2. Characteristics of the Student Population Compared to At-Risk Students for the School District Under Study, 1987-88.

Characteristic	Percentage of Entire Student Population	Percentage of At-Risk Population
Special Education Diagnosis*	7.8	10.2
Free and Reduced Lunch†	11.1	17.6
Race:		
Black	2.5	2.5
Hispanic	2.1	2.1
Asian	1.7	0.6
White	93.3	93.1
Native American	0.3	0.4

*Children participating according to Rule 51, Rules and Standards for Special Education Programs, 1987. Of these students, 70 percent had specific learning disabilities, 15.7 percent had behavioral disorders, 10 percent were mentally handicapped-mild, and 4.3 percent had other handicapping conditions.

†Children qualifying for free and reduced lunch according to federal income guidelines.

program. By this standard, 17.6 percent of at-risk students were judged to be of low SES, while only 11.1 percent of the student body as a whole was.

The second most powerful predictor of at-risk behavior was special education status. While 7.8 percent of the entire student population participated in special education programs, 10.2 percent of the at-risk population did. The large percentage of special education students who were identified as at-risk (70 percent of whom were identified as learning disabled) is not surprising. In 1985, Zigmond and Thornton reported an alarmingly high (54 percent) dropout role for learning disabled students. Eisner's 1987 estimates were more conservative: 42 percent of learning disabled secondary students dropped out, compared with 16 percent for other special education students.

While this study was not about dropouts per se, the relationship between at-risk behaviors and permanent school leaving for Nebraska's special education students can not at this time be ruled out.

Achievement and Cognitive Skills of Nebraska At-Risk Students

At-risk youths are often thought to be either undiagnosed special education students or students who are above average in intelligence but rebelling against society. The data in table 3 suggest that overall total

Table 3. Variance Between Potential and Actual Achievement in Total Student Body, At-Risk Students, and Special Education Students for the School District Under Study, 1987-88.

	1. Actual Achievement* (Achievement Score)	2. Potential Achievement† (Cognitive Score)	Variance
	Percentile	Percentile	Difference
Total students	68.3	70.7	-2.4
Total students at risk	49.8	53.8	-4.0
Total students in special education	17.9	25.5	-7.6

*Measured by the California Achievement Test (CAT) total reading score, which includes reading vocabulary and reading comprehension subtests; the total language score, which includes language mechanics and language expression subtests; and the total mathematics score, which includes mathematics computation and concepts and application subtests.

†Measured by the Test of Cognitive Skills (TCS), which yields a Cognitive Skills Index (CSI) that replaces the term *IQ*. The CSI includes the following subtests: verbal reasoning, memory, sequence, and analogies. The mean for the CSI is 100, and the standard deviation is 16 points. The CAT and CSI were standardized in the Fall of 1984 and Spring of 1985 with a national probability sample of 300,000 students.

achievement (49.8 percentile) and cognitive skills (53.8 percentile) scores for combined students at risk compare favorably to those of other children nationwide; they are achieving right at the national median. However, compared to total local students' achievement scores (68.3 percentile) and cognitive skills scores (70.7 percentile), they fall short.

While little is known about the perceptions of at-risk youth, conversations with them suggest that they feel unimportant and irrelevant in a student body that is predominantly college bound. In Nebraska's schools, where students consistently perform above the national average, average performance is considered to be failure. The educational policy issue is how to treat average students as worthwhile members of the school community in order to keep them from dropping out.

Table 4 shows the achievement and cognitive scores as well as the differences between them for junior high school and senior high school students in several categories: all students (boys and girls), in special education, participating in free and reduced lunch minority, and experiencing school difficulties—in attendance, grades, and both.

The data show that, as students progress in school, the difference between their potential and actual achievement diminishes. The change over time is particularly marked in students with school difficulties, showing that if at-risk students can or will stick with school, they will have a better chance of living up to their potential or even overachieving.

Which students will stay in school and which will drop out is still an unanswered question. Will it be the most capable students at risk who leave school early? Or will it be the least capable students, those who come to school faithfully even though they receive failing grade after failing grade, that eventually drop out? Often the at-risk students who have the best self-concepts leave school to take jobs where they are valued and viewed as a success. There they receive daily confirmation for their capabilities along with a paycheck that represents a job well done instead of a report card that often symbolizes a job failed.

The at-risk students in this study are achieving within the average range; they are achieving, for the most part, up to their cognitive skills index potential; and they appear academically capable—until they are compared to total combined school district student achievement (68.3 percent) and cognitive skills (70.7 percent) averages. Therefore, if the study population is representative, then not only are Nebraska's students in general learning well, but even those students who have

Table 4. Achievement and Cognitive Skills Scores for All At-Risk Students and Sub-Categories, in Junior High School and Senior High School for the School District Under Study, 1987-88.

	Junior High Total			Senior High Total			Combined Total		
	Achievement	Cognitive	Difference	Achievement	Cognitive	Difference	Achievement	Cognitive	Difference
	- - Percentile - -			- - Percentile - -			- - Percentile - -		
Boys and girls	48.5	56.3	-7.7	51.1	51.3	-0.2	49.8	53.8	-4.0
Special education	23.7	33.2	-9.4	NA	NA	NA	23.7*	33.2*	-9.4*
Free and reduced lunch	41.9	54.8	-12.9	38.2	38.4	-0.2	40.0	46.6	-6.6
Minorities	39.8	52.1	-12.3	35.7	32.5	3.2	37.7	42.3	-4.6
School difficulty:									
Attendance	56.6	62.8	-6.1	62.9	62.1	0.8	59.7	62.4	-2.7
Grades	29.3	42.0	-12.7	40.9	41.0	-0.1	35.1	41.5	-6.4
Both	33.5	44.7	-11.2	41.9	44.3	-2.4	37.7	44.5	-6.8

NA = no data available.

*Junior high school total.

attendance problems and grade problems that could lead to automatic failure are also, paradoxically, learning well. Unfortunately for these students, they are not achieving at a competitive level. Because of the discouragement they receive, they may view school as only being of real importance to those students who ultimately will be seeking entrance into colleges and universities.

Policy Strategies for At-Risk Students

At-risk students are not confined to inner city school districts. Thus, the problem of at-risk or troubled youth is potentially a statewide concern.

The most common approach toward at-risk youth in Nebraska is a "treatment to do nothing" strategy; most school districts emphasize college achievement and target their scarce financial and personnel resources to their college-bound students. This laissez-faire strategy assumes that it is not the responsibility of the school district to take care of youth with average intelligence who are achieving up to their potential but lack the motivation to study and attend school.

A second approach would be early identification of at-risk youth based on socioeconomic background, and making preschool programs and related enrichment activities available to them, even if they do not have a special education diagnosis. This strategy, of course, would require major adjustments for all school districts; however, research consistently shows that early intervention is the most effective strategy for helping youth who are at risk in our society. (See Chapter 5, "Improving Life Chances for Children in Nebraska.")

Nebraska school districts might also continue to target lower socioeconomic families for enrichment programs throughout the elementary school years. These activities might include extra time with teachers trained to handle the cognitive and noncognitive needs of students, as well as "play" time on personal computers and other high tech equipment that youth from middle class homes may take for granted as part of their home environment.

Finally, a strategy for older students who are hopelessly behind in accumulating course credits for graduation is to introduce graduate equivalency programs as a part of the high school curriculum. A part of this strategy might include the restructuring and re-organization initiatives that are being discussed by Nebraska educators. Deregulation, teacher decision-making and empowerment, parent involvement,

accountability for outcomes, and a reshaping of the work that teachers and students do are all features of this movement. At the heart of the restructuring movement is the goal of making school a more interesting and engaging experience for students. This goal has particular relevance for the at-risk students discussed above.

The most important challenge for Nebraska education policy makers is to rethink the value assumptions underlying current approaches to older at-risk students. Moving lower achieving students to alternative schools, for example, simply creates a "moving average"; once the students with "D"s, and "F"s are taken away from the regular school setting, the "C" students' performance is below the new average, and they become the new school failures.

In-school programs, options, and opportunities which will meet the legitimate power needs of students, so they may be less likely to turn to street alternatives, are needed.

What matters most is that we have programs for students—honors or average, at risk or not—that open tomorrow's doors, ushering them *all* through high school and onto important tasks in life.

The most immediate challenge is to insist, with one voice, that students at risk remain in existing school programs, during the regular school day, and to work together toward that goal. Programs that establish external alternatives should be discouraged.

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