Supporting At-Risk Students

A Step-By-Step Guide for Helping At-Risk Students Succeed Academically and Emotionally
Modeled on a Successful Program at Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School
By Teachers For Teachers Series, No.9

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Supporting At-Risk Students

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I am very proud of the work Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School (LMACS) teachers have done to not only keep our students in school, but to help them earn their high school diplomas.

From the Desk of Lisa Bryant

November 12, 2003

Dear Reader,

Thank you for your interest in *Supporting At-Risk Students*. We all know how important a high school education is and how challenging it is for many at-risk students to stay in school. I am very proud of the work Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School (LMACS) teachers have done to not only keep our students in school, but to help them earn their high school diplomas.

Getting to this point has been a journey for LMACS. The school was founded in 1989 as a dropout prevention program, and as we have grown over the years, we have faced many successes and challenges. We find ourselves constantly reevaluating how we can best serve our population of students. Our teacher/counselors approach this work with honesty and willingness to consider how we can do things differently and better. In this, we take inspiration from our students, who are learning to re-examine their own behaviors and beliefs and make positive changes to better support their growth and development. In allowing them to rise to our expectations, we have also had to rise to meet their expectations of us, the adults who care about their success.

Along the way, LMACS has developed a number of specific practices that consistently help us to support at-risk students and help them gain the social, emotional and academic skills they need to succeed in school and in life. It is our pleasure to share these with you in this book.

As educators, our bottom line is to help students learn and succeed. Working with the Project for School Innovation (PSI) has given us a rare opportunity to help not only our own students, but students at other schools, too. Showing great leadership and dedication, the LMACS faculty spent a year working with PSI's highly skilled writers and facilitators to put together this book—researching and exploring what works at LMACS, so that we could share these practices with other schools. Wherever you are on your journey towards building a support program for high school students, I hope *Supporting At-Risk Students* helps you on your way.

Best wishes,

Lisa Bryant

Lisa Bryant, Executive Director
Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School

Supporting Students At Risk: *Lessons From Contemporary Research*

In the beginning of the 21st century, few jobs exist for those with a high school education or less. In this climate, the problems faced by students labeled 'at risk' seem particularly pressing. Often the culmination of a lengthy pattern of failure, dropping out of high school carries greater disadvantages than ever before. In addition to the obvious economic disadvantages, research indicates that a lack of formal education during adolescent years can yield deep psychological wounds. "The earlier adolescents initiate adult roles and behaviors, the more damage occurs to their later life functioning and success" (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Croninger and Lee, 2001, p. 549). A teenager's decision to drop out of high school will affect him or her forever.

Many schools specifically target students at risk of dropping out. The missions and structures of these schools are varied. Some are designed to foster self-esteem, others aim to build trade skills, while others take a military-style approach. Educators who work with at-risk students vary in their opinions and practices. Yet research indicates that some specific principles characterize the best programs for students at risk of dropping out.

First, these programs leverage interpersonal relationships. Relationships with family, peers, and teachers often play a significant role in a student's academic success. Effective schools can coordinate the efforts of different people in a student's life to positively influence his or her choices.

Second, the most effective programs for at-risk students recognize the importance of teaching behaviors conducive to success. In proactively teaching study skills and social skills, schools can reduce the need to react to many academic and social problems after they arise.

Finally, the most effective programs recognize that academic accomplishment is directly related to a student's feelings about attending school. These programs do not simply coddle students into passing time in school. Students are held to rigorous standards, and supported in their efforts to meet these standards. Students who enjoy true efficacy are more likely to remain in school.

Relationships

Relationships play a vital role in a student's academic success or failure (Parsley and Corcoran, 2003, p. 84). The most effective programs capitalize on the power of relationships to encourage students whose academic performance is reliable and to reconnect students whose performance is diminishing.

Scholars tend to agree that dropping out of high school is rarely the consequence of a particular catastrophic event. Rather, dropping out of school is, "a cumulative process, not an impulsive action" (Martin, Tobin, and Sugai, 2002). Although students who drop out usually do so between 10th and 12th grade, careful examination tends to reveal a pattern of disengagement dating back to a student's elementary school years (Croninger and Lee, 2001, p. 551).

In a 2001 study, Robert Croninger and Valerie Lee explore the role of students' relationships with teachers as a source of "social capital," which is the interpersonal assistance typically provided by institutions such as, "families, religious associations, [and] community groups" (p. 549). Networks with adults provide encouragement, and a pool of knowledge upon which to draw when facing the challenges associated with adolescence. Relationships with adults serve as resources (p.551).

Students who benefit most from social capital are, according to Croninger and Lee, "students most at risk of dropping out of high school. This is especially true for socially at risk students who enter high school with low educational expectations and a history of school-related problems" (p. 568). The presence of meaningful adult networks or their absence bears a disproportionate influence on the fortunes of students socially or academically at risk.

Students' relationships with teachers, Croninger and Lee find, produce more valuable social capital than relationships with any other adults. Although other members of the school community, such as administrators, counselors, and peers are significant, the particular characteristics of the teacher-student relationship give it prominence (p. 554). In fact, teacher-based forms of social capital "reduce the probability of dropping out by nearly half. However, students who come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and who have had academic difficulties in the past find guidance and assistance from teachers especially helpful" (p. 548).

In the most effective schools, structures exist to help faculty connect with their students. These structures include (Martin, Tobin, and Sugai, 2002):

1. Advisory programs. These programs bind students to adults and to one another, and provide opportunities to monitor academic and social progress.

2. "Systematic monitoring of risk factors." Schools which carefully track attendance, grades, and behavior are able to strategically intervene with students at appropriate times.

3. Creation of 'schools within a school' or small learning communities. Creation of learning environments with small populations is conducive to engagement between teachers and students.

4. "Wraparound interventions." Students in particularly dire circumstances may benefit from coordinated interventions, organized by school officials, which include adults from inside and outside the school environment.

Teaching Behavior

The most effective schooling for at-risk students includes an intentional focus on behaviors conducive to success. Teachers in these types of schools convey to students a sense of their responsibilities. Though some teachers may misperceive time spent on social skills as a distraction from core academic material, time spent building positive behavior tends to save time in the long run, by preventing problems. Indeed, according to Lori Korinek's study on classroom communities and networks for student support, "schools and class-

es where the most academic and social progress is being achieved are places where the adults assume responsibility for modeling and facilitating community among themselves and among their students at all levels" (Korinek et al., 1999, p. 4).

This type of instruction is inextricably linked to students' development of positive relationships. In their argument that networks provide social capital, Croninger and Lee identify a potential area for breakdown in, "the manner in which *adolescents themselves* purposefully seek out and use teacher-based resources to enhance their school efforts" (571). Korinek addresses this concern with the suggestion that faculty must deliberately build the skills students need to seek help. "Without adult attention to increasing students' repertoires of prosocial skills and to facilitating peer acceptance, many students fail to develop support networks." In Ruth Charney's research on classroom management practices, she notes, "Safe and effective communities in the classroom are rarely by-products. They are built through our commitment and conscious design; they grow from our best energies, time, and attention" (Charney, p. 10).

The most effective schooling for at-risk students includes an intentional focus on behaviors conducive to success.

The Importance of Academics

Finally, there is no substitute for rigorous and supportive attention to academic material in helping students at risk of dropping out. Social networks and skills bear significantly less relationship to a student's drop-out risk than his or her level of academic achievement. "Poor academic achievement is the strongest predictor of dropping out of school before completing the 10th grade, and additional variables add comparatively smaller unique portions of explained variance when poor academic achievement is considered," according to Battin-Pearson's study of predictors of early high school dropout (Battin-Pearson et. al.). Self-esteem is difficult to separate from academic achievement. "Perceived academic self-efficacy [influences] how students think, motivate themselves, and act," according to Miriam Alfassi in her study of instruction designed to foster self-efficacy and motivation (2003, p. 28). Academic achievement establishes what is effectively a positive feedback loop. Success breeds success.

With this in mind, the best programs for dropout prevention focus on academic achievement as early as possible. Students are most assured of their academic prowess when they complete tasks which demonstrate mastery of academic material. Students need to, "experience success with the performance at hand through authentic mastery experiences," argues Alfassi (p. 29).

This evidence may seem to present a 'Catch-22' situation. Students at risk of dropping out have often established lengthy patterns of academic failure. The suggestion that academic success would improve their situation may seem irrelevant. Yet effective programs have been developed which actually reverse patterns of academic failure by matching high expectations with a host of supports. High achieving schools with at-risk students, "set high academic standards with a firm belief in students' capabilities to fulfill them....In par-

ticular, such schools refrain from excusing students' poor academic performance on the grounds of low inherent ability or adverse family backgrounds that supposedly render students unmodifiable" (Alfassi, p. 29-30).

Indeed, research indicates an unusual phenomenon characteristic of academically rigorous programs for students at risk. Typically, as students get older, they demonstrate less intrinsic interest in their studies. While students may maintain a pattern of success through adolescence and into early adulthood, academic study is often seen increasingly as a means to boost grades and attain external achievements. At-risk students who have little experience with success, may actually experience the opposite. "For such students...effective learning is a new experience that is bound to challenge and stimulate them" (Alfassi, p. 39). Hence, once a school can help students to surmount the hurdle of persistent failure, the ensuing marginal successes may create a self-reinforcing pattern.

Support at Lowell Middlesex Academy

Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School (LMACS) represents a living example of the aforementioned principles. Small overall enrollment, a unique view of teachers' roles, and a variety of programmatic structures facilitate the growth of intensely supportive relationships. A specialized curriculum and transparent discipline system have been designed to intentionally cultivate the life skills necessary for success. Substantive, individualized planning enables all students to realize academic success. In actualizing these principles, LMACS has offered concrete guidance to schools seeking to more effectively support at-risk students.

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Overview: "A Place of Second Chances"

Lowell, Massachusetts, is widely remembered for its prominent role in the American industrial revolution. The best-known mill town of its kind, the city has long attracted immigrants in search of steady work and a better way of life. Through the years, Irish, French Canadian, Italian, and Greek immigrants have called Lowell home. Today, a significant portion of the population are recent immigrants of Southeast Asian or Latino descent. Though the textile factories have long since left the region, the city remains a haven for those seeking a fresh start. While crime, gang activity, and drug trafficking still plague poorer parts of the city, signs of a renaissance are evident everywhere: art and cultural activities are booming, small businesses are growing, and century-old buildings are getting gleaming new facelifts.

Mr. Chadwick talks with a student during advising.

And for some teenagers in a small school near the center of town, a different kind of rebirth is also thriving: Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School (LMACS) is giving them a fresh start at a high school education.

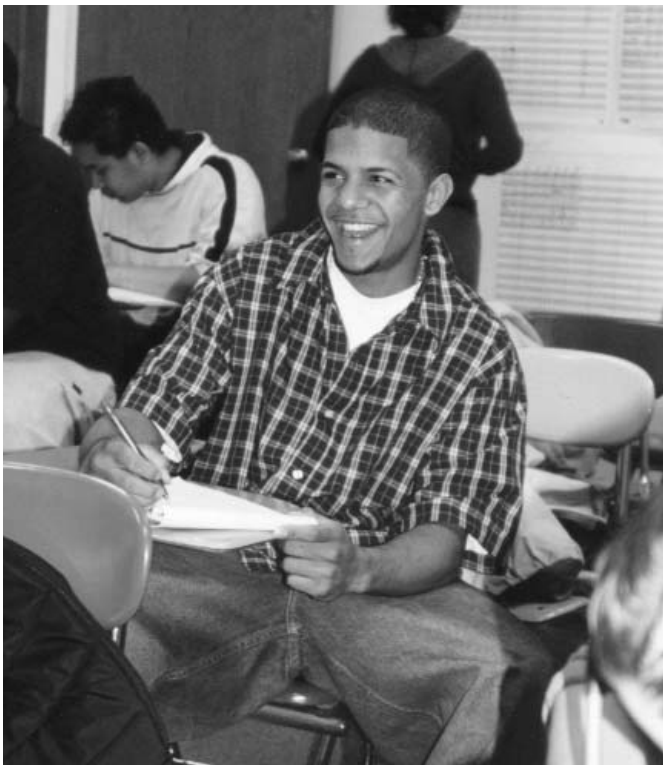
There are volumes of literature on the risk factors for dropping out of high school, including demographic and experiential factors such as race, language-minority status, income, teen pregnancy, history of drug and alcohol abuse, and parent's education level. Academic risk factors such as poor attendance, low grades, attention problems, or discipline problems, also predict possible failure. Students saddled with more than one or two of these risk factors are often labeled "at-risk students."

By these criteria, the students at LMACS can quite accurately be described as at-risk. Yet, walking into the school's classrooms, one does not see "at-risk students." One sees simply students. Students of all races, family backgrounds, and academic preparation levels read literature, work in the computer lab, relax in the student lounge. Some are bright eyed and eager to be here. Some are tired and wishing they were still at home. To most observers, these students appear no different than students in any urban high school in America.

While LMACS students don't share a single demographic profile, they do share a common experience—they have all previously dropped out of high school. In spite of their personal struggles and prior negative school experience, they have all come to LMACS with a commitment to receiving their high school diploma. And, against considerable odds, most of them succeed.

Founded in 1994 as a dropout prevention program, Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School has truly achieved its vision as "A Place of Second Chances." An important indicator of the school's success is its students' consistent high performance on the state-mandated Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS): on these important high-stakes tests, LMACS students have outperformed state averages for three of the last four years—this with a population that has, by definition, performed well below average in the past. The school's impressive achievements have merited state and national recognition: LMACS was designated a Vanguard School by Mass Insight Education, a public school improvement organization, and in spring 2001, the school received the state's prestigious Edgerly School Leadership Award for its continued success.

These results would be commendable for any high school, but for students who were led to believe they would never achieve school success, they are nothing short of powerful. Through a combination of quality academic instruction and careful attention to these students' unique needs, LMACS aims not only to turn dropouts into graduates, but to give those graduates the skills and confidence necessary to go on to lead happy, successful lives.



A student enjoys a class discussion. (top)
A student writes a journal entry during Life Skills class. (bottom)

Supporting At-Risk Students: *The Book*

In surveys and interviews conducted by the Project for School Innovation in the fall of 2002, faculty and staff overwhelmingly used one word to capture the essence of the LMACS philosophy: *support*. That support starts with a friendly word and a shoulder to lean on, but it does not end there. While informal emotional support is omnipresent, every aspect of the school is systematically designed to aid and foster the psychosocial development of its students: from the schedule of the school day, to required coursework in Life Skills and an emphasis on school-to-career transitions, LMACS attempts to smooth the path not only to a high school diploma, but to a healthy life.

> *We'll help them find day care. We'll help them find work. We'll help set them up with whatever they need… Every student builds a connection, so they have somebody in the school that they kind of identify as mom or dad. When they have the smaller issues that come up all the time, they all have someone they're comfortable approaching. You smooth out the little stuff, you ask how they're doing. You're a cheerleader. That connection really helps a lot of students.*
>
> -LMACS TEACHER

> *What we call "student support" includes curricular pieces as well. The Life Skills class, the Nonviolent Conflict Resolution class, the Parenting class, Senior Seminar, Senior Civics. So although they're meeting in class blocks and practicing academic skills, the curriculum is geared toward student support. We're teaching life skills and coping skills, as well as study skills. And we know our kids are going to need lots of coping skills to make it here and in their lives beyond here.*
>
> -LMACS TEACHER

> *They motivate you to succeed in life, basically. And they try to help you. They praise you for everything. You never have the time to feel like no one is paying attention to you.*
>
> -LMACS STUDENT

During the 2002-2003 school year, the seven full-time faculty members of LMACS engaged in action research to document the specific practices and systems they have successfully used to break down negative habits and attitudes, teach constructive coping skills, and build positive, trusting relationships between students and adults.

Through these explorations, the LMACS staff recognized that a large part of the success of the school could be attributed to the clear path to success that teachers direct students along. This book shares four key areas that were documented in that process. It is divided into four sections: *Basic Structures for Success*, which outlines enrollment and attendance policies designed to support students in the early stages of their recommitment to school; *The Student Support Curriculum*, which explains specific coursework that teaches students coping skills; *Student Discipline and Individual Support*, which details constructive ways to deal with behavior problems if they do arise; and *Senior Year Support*, which explores how to prepare graduates for success once they leave the school.

Positive Impact of Student Support

What happens when support for at risk students is effective? The first answer is an obvious one: they stay in school. Yet at LMACS, student support is designed to do much more than prevent dropping out. The action research team at LMACS identified a total of five goals for how their program affects students' skills, beliefs, and attitudes. You will notice these goals as a thread running throughout this book.

1. **Students build positive relationships with adults.** Students perceive that teachers care about them and want them to succeed. They trust adults and feel comfortable opening up to teachers about issues that are negatively impacting their school success.

2. **Students feel comfortable at school.** Students can relax and feel the school is a welcoming place. They are invested in the school community and feel a sense of group identity and pride.

3. **Students learn constructive ways to cope with life pressures.** Students learn to replace negative coping behaviors, such as violence or drug abuse, with positive coping behaviors. They can identify and articulate their emotions and have a sense of control over their own lives. They learn specific strategies, such as goal-setting and peer mediation, to help them deal with their often stressful lives.

4. **Students gain increased access to *social capital*.** Students know what resources—such as health care, childcare, or therapy—are available to help them, and understand how to access those resources. They have the tools necessary to find support, guidance, and assistance in accomplishing a wide variety of academic and non-academic tasks.

5. **Students graduate prepared to succeed in life.** Students have thought about the school-to-career transition and have crafted a life plan that extends beyond graduation. After they receive their diplomas, students have the confidence and ambition to set and achieve multiple life goals.