

Building a Safety Net for At-Risk Youth: What Does it Take to Leave No Child Behind?



Pedro A. Noguera, Ph.D.
Steinhardt School of Education
New York University

I. Leaving Children Behind in the USA



- ✓ 1 out of 5 children in poverty
- ✓ 1/3 uncovered by health insurance
- ✓ 80% poor children not enrolled in quality pre-school
- ✓ Majority of Black and Latino children attend poorly funded, racially segregated schools
- ✓ 50% dropout rate in most cities
- ✓ UNICEF - US ranked 24 out of 25 nations on child well being

The Limits and Possibilities of Schooling



- ✓ The US relies upon public schools to meet the needs of poor children but provides inadequate resources
- ✓ Public schools serving poor children face unique challenges
 - ✓ Student transience
 - ✓ Overcrowding
 - ✓ Under-funding
 - ✓ Diversity in language, culture
 - ✓ Shortage of qualified personnel
 - ✓ Race and class differences between school personnel and student population

Schools Can't Do it Alone: External constraints place limits on what schools can do to help children



Health - asthma, diabetes, HIV, substance abuse

Poverty - lack of affordable housing, good paying jobs, inadequate clothing and nutrition

Families in crisis – low wages, absence of fathers, children w/out families

Lack of access to comprehensive social services

Community disorganization, crime, environmental degradation, etc.

Weak Private Sector - Few high quality neighborhood-serving businesses that reinvest local capital

Weak Public Sector – In most regions there is limited cooperation between public agencies

II. What we know about at-risk youth

- ✓ Their social and emotional needs affect their academic performance
- ✓ Achievement tends to follow consistent patterns with respect to the race and class of students - poor, non-white, recent immigrants
- ✓ White middle class youth also face risks – drug abuse, eating disorders, depression, suicide
- ✓ Poor students tend to receive a disproportionate amount of school discipline
 - ✓ Punished through exclusion and ostracism
 - ✓ Discipline practices ignore other needs
 - ✓ Not rooted in ethical framework

Ineffective Forms of Support



- ✓ Damaging effects of labeling - Special Ed and remedial programs
 - ✓ Self fulfilling prophecy
 - ✓ Social construction of disability
 - ✓ Lack of quality control in interventions
- ✓ Normalization of Failure - Patterns of success and failure have been in place for a long time - complacency
- ✓ Programs designed to “help” often show little evidence of effectiveness
 - ✓ Assigning weak teachers to high need students
 - ✓ Insufficient evaluation

Vulnerable Populations: Immigrant Students




- ✓ Tend to be over-represented among successful and at-risk students
- ✓ Prior school attendance and fluency in native language is a significant predictor of school performance
- ✓ Class and educational backgrounds of parents is significant
- ✓ Political opposition to bi-lingual education
- ✓ Acculturation process may produce conflict between students and their families

Students from households in distress



- ✓ Tend to receive less support at home and may act out more in school
- ✓ Often provided ineffective support at school
- ✓ Often fall further behind despite interventions
- ✓ Behavior problems may overshadow academic problems
- ✓ Punishment generally does not help change behavior
- ✓ Need to find ways to promote resilience

III. Promoting student achievement and healthy youth development



- ✓ Respond to social needs that affect learning and achievement
- ✓ Educators must be trained to teach how students learn
 - ✓ Not all students learn at the same pace
- ✓ Teacher quality and school effectiveness matter
 - ✓ Provide incentives for effective teachers to serve high need children
 - ✓ Work with unions to remove ineffective teachers – peer review
- ✓ Focus on developing strong relationships between young people and caring, responsible adults inside and outside of school

Lessons from effective high poverty schools (Education Trust: Dispelling the Myth 2002)

- ✓ They have a coherent strategy for delivering high quality instruction
 - ✓ Teachers adhere to a common set of strategies
 - ✓ In some cases, teachers follow a common curriculum
- ✓ They implement systems to monitor academic performance
 - ✓ They use data to make decisions about school improvement
- ✓ They engage in ongoing assessment
 - ✓ Diagnostic assessment
- ✓ They have shared and distributed leadership and create partnerships with community agencies to meet student needs
- ✓ They create school cultures that affirm the importance of education
- ✓ They use discipline to build character, reinforce pro-social values and re-connect students to learning
- ✓ They engage parents as partners in systems of mutual accountability

IV. Developing systems of support for students through Civic Capacity Building

- ✓ Step 1: Develop Community Partnership for Children Involving Key Stakeholders
 - ✓ Local government including courts, law enforcement, public health
 - ✓ School District
 - ✓ Non-profits, churches, civic groups
 - ✓ Private Sector including small businesses
 - ✓ Parents
 - ✓ Youth - including those seen as “at risk”

Step 2: Establish Clear Goals and Benchmarks

- ✓ Collect and analyze existing academic data and social indicators
 - ✓ Diagnostic data
 - ✓ Grades and test scores
 - ✓ Disaggregated by race, ses, teacher
 - ✓ Attendance and attrition
 - ✓ Discipline patterns
 - ✓ Health data
 - ✓ Community Asset Mapping and needs assessment

Step 3: Developing the Plan



- ✓ Must have clear, measurable goals (e.g. x% in pre-school by 2010)
- ✓ Must have secure financing plan (e.g. Children First in San Francisco)
- ✓ Must have authority figures who can insure cooperation and coordination between local government, schools, service agencies, churches, CBOs
- ✓ Must have implementation timetable with established benchmarks

Key Principles



- ✓ Must aim for empowering disadvantaged youth and their families
 - ✓ Linked to economic development
 - ✓ Problem posing curriculum focused on local, national and global concerns
- ✓ Must link poor communities to individuals and agencies with power and status
 - ✓ Bridging and Bonding Social Capital
- ✓ Must lead to schools that function as community centers and are accountable to the communities they serve
- ✓ Must provide educational and social services based on high standards of quality
 - ✓ Partnerships with higher education

V. Interventions that work



- ✓ After school programs
- ✓ Accelerated summer school
- ✓ Early intervention and prevention strategies for “at risk” youth
 - ✓ Transition classes
 - ✓ Targeted mentoring
- ✓ Coordinated services with trained professionals
- ✓ See *Effective Programs for Students at Risk* by Slavin, Karweit and Wasik (1989) Boston: Allyn and Bacon and “Promising Programs for Elementary and Middle Schools: Evidence of Effectiveness and Replicability” by Fashola and Slavin *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 2(3), 251-307, 1997

Demystify success



- ✓ Teach study skills
- ✓ Teach “codes of power”
- ✓ Provide samples of “good” work
- ✓ Provide students with opportunities to be involved in leadership and service activities
- ✓ Provide access to influential role models
- ✓ Discuss future plans early and expose students to options through internships and travel