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11-2010

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TOGETHER WE CAN:
COLLABORATING TO MEET THE NEEDS OF AT-RISK STUDENTS

By Karen Gavigan and Stephanie Kurtts

With an annual dropout rate of roughly 1.2 million students, far too many children and youth are being left behind in our nation's schools. As a consequence of the large dropout rate, it is estimated that the United States loses almost $320 billion in potential earnings each year (CNN.com, 2010). It is apparent that educational reform is needed in order to identify at-risk students, and to develop programs to prevent them from leaving our schools. With the increasingly diverse educational needs of all students, it takes a team of professionals to ensure student success. School librarians can be integral members of these professional teams. Through collaborative activities, librarians can meet the needs of at-risk students by working to implement strategies designed to help them experience academic success and prevent them from dropping out of school. As stated in the common beliefs of the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) *Standards for the 21st-Century Learner* (AASL, 2009), "school libraries are essential to the development of learning skills" and "School librarians collaborate with others to provide instruction, learning strategies, and practice in using the essential learning skills needed in the 21st century" (p. 11).

DEFINING AT-RISK STUDENTS

Data collected as a result of federal and state legislation are a good indicator of which students are meeting standards and which students are most at risk. For example, the White House recently reported that almost half of our nation's dropouts are Latino or African-American students (CNN.com, 2010). In addition to race and ethnicity, other characteristics of at-risk students include:

- Low socioeconomic status
- English Language Learners
- Disabilities and identified as special ed
- Moves frequently
- Poor reading skills
- Grade retention one or more years

- Multiple suspensions and expulsions
- Single parent households
- Home alone more than three hours a day
- Pregnancy
- Drug use
- Bored with school

(Jones, 2006, p. 11)

Once at-risk students have been identified, the challenge is to implement comprehensive school-wide initiatives for keeping them in schools and to close the existing achievement gap. School librarians offer information literacy and technology instruction that is crucial for 21st century learners, particularly marginalized at-risk learners who may not have access to resources and computers in their homes. Furthermore, school libraries can provide students equal access to print and digital resources to help close the gap between privileged and at-risk students (Martin, 2008).

Keith Curry Lance and library researchers nationwide have consistently demonstrated that quality school library programs have a positive impact on academic achievement (Lance, 1994; Lance, 2002a, 2002b; Lance, Wellburn & Hamilton-Pennell, 1993; Lance, Rodney & Hamilton-Pennell, 2003a, 2003b). Unfortunately, however, administrators and stakeholders are often slow to recognize the role that school librarians can play when it comes to the needs of at-risk learners. Furthermore, in spite of the fact that most at-risk students have poor reading skills, school libraries are often ignored when it comes to dropout prevention efforts. Therefore, it is imperative for school librarians to be a part of collaborative student support

> "Caring and compassionate librarians can make school libraries places where at-risk students' differences are acknowledged and respected."

teams. Furthermore, principals need to understand the potential of the library program on student learning. As stated by Shannon (2009), ". . . the school librarian must be proactive in showing him or her how the library program supports the school's goals and impacts student achievement" (p. 19).

Using their knowledge of the overall curriculum, technological expertise, and the ability to locate resources, school librarians are in a unique position to collaborate with the educational team to teach and evaluate at-risk students. Librarians can support at-risk students in their academic, social, behavioral, and emotional success by offering them engaging and relevant instruction, increased personal attention, and improved relationships with adults (Jones & Zambone, 2007, 2009). Furthermore, caring and compassionate librarians can make school libraries places where at-risk students' differences are acknowledged and respected.

Working side by side with others on the team, the school librarian can help to implement school-based interventions such as mentoring programs. For example, the LISTEN (Linking Individual Students to Educational Needs) program proved to be successful for at-risk students in Tennessee (Lampley & Johnson, 2010). School librarians, administrators, counselors, teaching assistants, cafeteria workers, and retired teachers met with the students twice a week during the school year to establish relationships with at-risk students. These mentors were trained to work with the students on study skills, interpersonal relationships, problem solving, and communication skills. The results were positive, with 49 of the 54 LISTEN participants experiencing improvement in the areas of GPAs, discipline referrals, and attendance records.

LIBRARIAN'S ROLE AS A MEMBER OF A COLLABORATIVE EDUCATIONAL TEAM— RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION

All educational professionals, including librarians, should have knowledge of the services available to identify students at risk for academic failure. Increasingly, schools are turning to Response to Intervention (RtI), a student-focused approach using evidence-based tiered instructional practices that promotes early identification for students who struggle academically or behaviorally (Hawkins et

al., 2008; Mellard & McKnight, 2008). Addressed specifically in the reauthorized Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Education Act of 2004, RtI is based on individual student educational needs (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). RtI is founded on the premise that with data-based decision making and evidence-based practices many children, who otherwise may have been identified with a disability, will have the opportunity to have their educational needs met in general education settings. Overall, RtI has the potential for keeping a class together by promoting instruction in inclusive learning environments and may lead to better achievement and behavior outcomes for all students (Fletcher et al., 2004).

EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES AND STRATEGIES FOR INTERVENTION

Evidence and research-based practices are critical components of intervention to be used by teams of educational professionals as they address the needs of their students. Listed are several key practices that librarians should understand as they develop collaborative partnerships with teachers. These interventions are not exclusive; however, they may be used to implement a student-focused approach such as RtI to address the needs of struggling students.

Differentiated instruction. In a differentiated classroom, all students are included in the learning experience based on their individual learning styles. Teachers who incorporate differentiated instruction ensure that each student is equally important to the learning process. For example, through activities such as peer teaching and cooperative learning, students have the opportunity to become active learners, decision makers, and problem solvers. Differentiated classrooms challenge children of all ability levels (Jenkins, 2005).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL). The use of UDL offers students with diverse strengths and abilities, along with their teachers, multiple and flexible opportunities to make curricular goals accessible (Hitchcock, 2001). The function of UDL is not to modify or add on to a pre-existing lesson but rather to transform instruction from the outset in order to broaden the definition of the learners who are expected to succeed in the general education environment (Pisha & Coyne, 2001). UDL can

support teachers as they anticipate a wide range of learning styles and abilities in the classroom.

Culturally Responsive Instruction (CRI). Teachers who practice CRI foster a climate of caring, value, and respect to promote student performance. As such, educators are able to use a student's cultural and societal context as a vehicle for learning (Klump & McNeir, 2005). Culturally responsive classrooms make real-life connections based on children's experiences. Activities can include developing literacy skills across curricula, as well as learning from and about culture, language, and learning styles (Lipka, 2002).

In addition to academic support, many at-risk students will be in need of behavioral interventions that can be enhanced by the involvement of the librarian. Two examples of these interventions include a positive behavioral support system and positive classroom management.

A positive behavioral support system is a school-wide approach that focuses on proactive and preventive, rather than aversive and punitive, behavioral techniques (Sugai & Horner, 2001). Interventions are designed to decrease problem behaviors and to improve the quality of life for students exhibiting those behaviors. This is accomplished through increasingly intensive supports and data-based decision making. School faculties, of which librarians are an integral part, develop school-wide management plans while incorporating these plans into the daily routines of the school thus providing a framework for reinforcing compliance. Students are taught what behaviors are expected and held accountable and rewarded for meeting expectations (Kern & Manz, 2004).

Positive classroom management includes behavior management processes and interventions to enhance the development of student behaviors that are personally fulfilling, productive, and socially acceptable (Salend, 2008). Interventions may include creating a reward system, setting clear social and instructional goals instruction or a combination of the two (Cheney, 2008).

As interventions are implemented, progress monitoring activities are conducted to make informed, data-based decisions about the students' progress in developing appropriate behaviors.

While working in collaborative partnerships with teachers, librarians may also take time to get to

know their at-risk students by applying specific strategies that meet individual student needs. These strategies include:

- Developing library collections that include universally designed resources on a variety of levels and in a variety of formats to meet the unique needs and learning styles of at-risk learners (examples include bilingual titles, graphic novels, and interactive books)

- Developing library collections that include culturally relevant curriculum materials based on students' backgrounds, languages, experiences, and interests

- Providing opportunities for students to become engaged and feel successful in their reading (examples include book clubs, reader's theater, poetry slams, and Teen Read Week)

- Educating themselves about at-risk students and providing information literacy instruction and library services that can be customized to their learning needs

- Making the library a welcoming and supportive place for students to come before, during, and after school by including comfortable reading areas, posters, and creative signage

- Involving the community by encouraging active participation from parents and community leaders through programming and/or tutoring services

CLOSING

In today's global economy, a high school degree is a stepping stone to success whether a student is pursuing a career or higher education. It will take a school-wide effort to help at-risk students become engaged in learning, and choosing to remain in school until they graduate. As an active member of a school team supporting at-risk students, school librarians should work with other educational professionals toward the common goal of helping at-risk students experience academic success in a non-threatening school environment.

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WEB RESOURCES:

Center on Instruction—Information on Research-Based Instruction
www.centeroninstruction.org
A collection of scientifically based research and information on K-12 instruction.

Differentiated Instruction— Education World
www.educationworld.com/a_curr/virtualwkshp/virtualwkshp006.shtml
A virtual workshop on differentiated instruction with lists of additional resources.

Intervention Central—Response to Intervention (RtI)
www.interventioncentral.org
A comprehensive site for RtI resources; includes academic and behavior interventions.

SERGE—Special Education Resources for General Educators
http://serge.ccsso.org
Contains some of the most widely implemented strategies to help all students succeed.

Understanding Problem Behavior— An Interactive Tutorial
http://serc.gws.uky.edu/pbis
Part of a series of training materials to support the efforts of the Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports.