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At-Risk Youth in Suburban Nebraska

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NEBRASKA POLICY CHOICES: EDUCATION

1989

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and Christine M. Reed, *Editors***

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PREFACE

The eight chapters in *Nebraska Policy Choices: Education* represent the work of University of Nebraska faculty from both the Lincoln and Omaha campuses, as well as the University of Nebraska Medical Center. These authors participated in a unique effort jointly sponsored by the University of Nebraska Central Administration, College of Education (University of Nebraska at Omaha), Teachers College (University of Nebraska-Lincoln), and Center for Public Affairs Research (University of Nebraska at Omaha). Unlike earlier volumes of *Nebraska Policy Choices*, the focus of this volume is on one critically important area: education policy.

As with previous volumes, our primary goal is to focus on emerging issues—not necessarily those currently on the policy agenda, such as school finance and reorganization. The process of identifying those emerging issues began with a brainstorming session in May of 1988, attended by 30 individuals from around the state who represented a variety of perspectives and who came from different geographical areas.

Shortly after the brainstorming session, faculty from UNL's Teachers College and UNO's College of Education gathered at a forum to discuss the recommendations of the brainstorming group and to offer their own suggestions for chapter topics. As a result of these two sessions and further proposals from interested faculty, several strategic education policy issues were identified, and prospective author-experts were commissioned to write chapters for the volume.

The eight chapters included in this volume reflect the priority strategic issues identified by the brainstorming group and faculty—the increasing debate over who should control schools, the expanding role of schools as the educational system is asked to redress certain consequences of larger societal trends, and the appropriate purposes of the school system in Nebraska.

The volume begins with Robert O'Reilly and Donald Uerling's analysis of local education control. This chapter charts the tension between state and local authority over what happens in schools, and it discusses some of the problems that emerge from this tension. Among its

recommendations is that state responsibility requires continued school district consolidation.

The role of business and economics in setting the education policy agenda in Nebraska is a critical component of the issue of control. Miles T. Bryant lays out the relationship between education and rural economic revitalization and suggests that if rural development is a strong state goal, the educational strategy of consolidation needs to be coordinated with regional and community development realities.

James Dick and James Marlin review the history and scope of school/business partnerships around the country and in Nebraska. Unlike some of the more celebrated examples in larger, urbanized states, there are no examples in Nebraska of systematic use of business resources for education reform. These authors urge the business community to invest its knowledge and skill in community schools and, ultimately, in small community development.

Michael Gillespie's chapter develops a vision of education that contrasts with the views of schools as centers of economic development. While Dick and Marlin tout the economic development model and Bryant cautions against it, Gillespie points out the critical error that such approaches may make. In this chapter, Gillespie focuses on discipline-based art education and challenges all of us to question whether, in the pursuit of a competitive position in the global market, we have lost sight of the purpose of general education: enhancing people's capacity to make experience intelligible by the way they order and relate phenomena. Without a good general education, Gillespie argues, students are subject to manipulation by the media. Moreover, debates in the education policy arena may erupt without the participants being conscious of the different images or values driving their positions. This chapter's in-depth look at an innovative approach to art education in Nebraska suggests how to enhance the human capacity to interpret and critically evaluate life situations through the development of ways of thinking about images.

The next two chapters cover in detail the changing requirements and needs of the state's younger children.

Deana Finkler and Cordelia Robinson identify one group of children at risk: those experiencing biological or environmental difficulties that carry a significant risk of developmental delay. New federal legislation, P.L. 99-457, makes incentive funding available to states for early intervention services not only for handicapped infants and toddlers, but also

for children from birth through age two who are at risk for developmental delay. The State of Nebraska already serves this age group, but it must define what criteria it will use to designate children as *at risk* if it chooses to serve them. Finkler and Robinson lay out the new choices federal law will require state policy makers to make, including how to: 1) define the family unit; 2) foster inter-agency cooperation; 3) develop trained specialists who can work effectively in a cross-agency setting; and 4) solve funding problems.

Mary McManus Kluender and Robert L. Egbert highlight the factors that help or hinder opportunities for children to succeed in their personal, social and economic responsibilities as adults. Their research demonstrates that a strong relationship exists between what children experience during the early years of their lives, their academic and behavioral performance by the time they complete the primary grades, and the life circumstances they will experience as adults. They find that to be born poor is to drastically increase the likelihood of being at risk, and that early childhood education is the single most effective means for Nebraska to help children overcome the constraints of poverty.

Two particular areas promise to become more and more critical for education in the state. As the world grows smaller and as dominant cultures shrink, education will need to respond by producing a citizenry cognizant of the need to give all Nebraskans equal opportunities and rights. Helen A. Moore's chapter points out that, despite a public policy of equal education opportunity and a high overall secondary school graduation rate, racial minority and female students continue to experience subtle but pervasive discrimination. Moore's analysis of a statewide survey leads to the conclusion that, while citizens hold to a general belief in cultural pluralism, they resist specific curricular reforms needed to eliminate racism and sexism in the institution of elementary and secondary education. However, educators can be leaders in communicating to their communities the value of ethnic diversity and the contributions of women. Moore's chapter emphasizes the statewide nature of this issue, particularly as a result of projected changes in the cultural diversity of communities with an influx of immigrants, such as Norfolk, Hastings and Lexington.

John W. Hill's chapter on at-risk youth in a suburban Nebraska school district provides startling evidence that troubled youth exist in large numbers in school districts commonly thought to be immune from such difficulties. His study of junior and senior high school students suggests

that an alarming number of older youths at risk are capable of achieving at the national average; however, these teenagers are "failing" according to the norms of their college-bound peers. Hill argues that at least one-third of the teenagers in this suburban district are at risk for unproductive lives, and that their best hope is to stay in school, which will only happen if educators send the message that they are valued members of the school community.

We have many people to thank for the enormous effort that lies behind these pages. First, Katherine Kasten, formerly of UNO and now at The University of Northern Florida, provided essential guidance to the project in its early stages. Margaret McDonald Rasmussen undertook the difficult task of converting academic prose into a language more accessible to the lay community. The help of Russell L. Smith, Director of the Center for Public Affairs Research, was also instrumental. Finally, our faculty colleagues who gathered in early planning stages to brainstorm the content of this volume, and who subsequently wrote chapters, deserve our special thanks.

We hope that all who read this volume will find in it useful information about some part of the educational policy puzzle.

Miles T. Bryant, Christine M. Reed and Patrica O'Connell, *Editors*

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 rate 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 |
| 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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