

Teachable Moment

Helping improve achievement for students with multiple academic risk factors

Analysis of student data has shown that students who qualify for free- or reduced-price lunch (FRL), students with disabilities (SWD), and students with limited English proficiency (LEP) are less likely to score at grade level, and that fewer of those with more than one academic risk factor show grade-level achievement than those with just one. Yet many of these students do score at grade level on state and local assessments.

Recently, Wake County Public School System's (WCPSS) Evaluation and Research Department undertook a study of students with multiple academic risk factors to identify school and home experiences that support positive achievement patterns over time.

What we found

We studied cases of students facing challenges to school success. The group with positive achievement patterns was more likely than the group with negative achievement patterns to show signs of resiliency. Resiliency is *the ability to overcome difficult*

circumstances, often with the help of school staff, families, and/or the community (McElrath, 2005).

Students with positive achievement patterns are more likely to display a positive sense of purpose, with a strong motivation to succeed and high expectations. These students often have strong support and exposure to hobbies/high-interest activities as well.

Resilient students often take on extra challenges with the belief that they could succeed. They exhibit a

Traits of Resiliency: One student in our study had a fierce determination to come to school every day even though he faced health concerns.

Another student who overcame multiple academic risks took music lessons at school for many years and was involved in sports as well.

Another student in our study was taken from a traumatic living situation and placed with a close relative. With substantial support and encouragement, she was able to improve her grades after the move, despite her disability as well as her challenging life circumstances.

sense of autonomy, an understanding of their relation to others, positive feelings about their capabilities, and an ability to overcome negative circumstances.

They also are likely to have social competence and problem-solving skills, with the ability to identify and access resources and learn "how they learn."

Student Characteristics: Students with positive achievement patterns were more likely to enjoy reading. They showed formative assessment scores that were at grade level or that improved to grade level over time. Regardless of achievement, most of these students planned to attend college; expectations tended to mirror those of their parents or guardians.

Most of the LEP students in the study entered WCPSS in kindergarten or first grade with limited English skills. Those with more positive achievement patterns showed stronger English skills over time. Most LEP students studied were older than is typical for their grade. Attendance and conduct tended to be strong, although occasional conduct issues were more common for LEP students who showed more negative achievement patterns. LEP students with positive achievement patterns also were more likely to be involved in sports, academic activities, or music.

Attendance and conduct were stronger for SWD students with positive achievement patterns.

School Experiences: Many classroom strategies mentioned as important in national research were used with both groups in our study. Teachers of all students in our study mentioned the importance of building relationships with students and of using small-group instruction. Providing supplemental reports and coordinating efforts across teachers were also commonly mentioned.

Providing structure was mentioned more often for cases with positive achievement patterns than cases with negative



achievement patterns overall. Within the LEP and SWD cases, some practices were commonly noted:

- For LEP students, flexible grouping, positive reinforcement, homework, and motivation strategies were mentioned as being helpful.
- Among SWD students, modifying assignments and breaking them down into smaller chunks was mentioned much more often for cases with positive achievement patterns.

Family Support: Homework completion was an issue for all students in our study. In LEP cases with positive achievement patterns, students were more likely to complete homework than in cases with negative achievement patterns. Decreased English-language ability among parents of LEP students made it difficult for most of them to provide homework support. However, most LEP students did receive some support at home from parents or older siblings.

Among SWD students, only half of the students in our study completed homework regularly. In SWD cases with positive achievement patterns, students had somewhat stronger homework and family support than cases with negative achievement patterns.

Parents and guardians of students with positive achievement patterns were more likely to attend school conferences than were the cases with negative achievement patterns. Among LEP cases, fathers from the cases with positive achievement patterns were more likely to attend conferences.

How teachers and families can help

Teachers can suggest low-cost or free community activities related to student interests or instructional activities to provide intellectually stimulating opportunities that also build connections and learning. Helping students understand the relationship

between grades in school and future college attendance and careers can motivate students who want to attend

It is important for teachers and other school staff to know students well enough to determine their interests, what motivates them, the challenges they face, their past school successes and issues, and the resources available in the home or in their community. All of these can be critical to success in school. Teachers should reach out to involve parents and the community in any way feasible.

college primarily to play sports. Finding alternative ways to give students practice without homework can have a positive impact on students facing multiple risks. Teachers can also help students understand the critical role of homework and test performance in bolstering grades.

Teachers and/or families can secure tutoring or mentoring for students at school or in the community. This is particularly important for LEP students who are still learning English, given that schools' ESL programs (especially at the elementary level) focus primarily on a specific language arts curriculum rather than on providing students with help for classwork or homework.

Parents and guardians can help children succeed in school. They can provide a place for homework, check on homework completion, limit television and video viewing, and show that they place a high value on their child's learning.

Students with multiple academic risks clearly can achieve academically. We hope this newsletter provides ideas that help students facing multiple risks to succeed in school. By working together, parents and teachers can influence students' personal, social, and academic skills to make a positive difference in their success in school and beyond.

For more information

To learn more about our studies on effective practices for students with multiple academic risk factors, visit the WCPSS Evaluation & Research Department online at www.wcpss.net/evaluation-research.

References

- Baenen, N., Ives, S., Lynn, A., Warren, T., Gilewicz, E., & Yaman, K. (2006). *Effective practices for at-risk elementary and middle school students*. Raleigh, NC: Wake County Public School System, Evaluation and Research Department.
- Baenen, N., Paeplow, C., Ives, S., Reichstetter, R. (2007). *WCPSS students with multiple academic risks: achievement patterns and school experiences*. Raleigh, NC: Wake County Public School System, Evaluation and Research Department.
- McElrath, M., & Smith, T. (2005). Fostering resiliency in the middle-level school. *Middle Matters*, (13)4, May 2005. National Association of Elementary School Principals.