CHAPTER 6

Preventing School Failure and Promoting Positive Outcomes

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DESCRIPTION OF THE PROBLEM

Despite the trend toward high-school completion, about 5% of American high-school students drop out of school each year (Kaufman, Kwon, Klein, & Chapman, 1999; Rumberger, 2001). High-school dropouts face greater risks for unemployment, reliance on public assistance, low wages, and incarceration than their peers (Finn, 1989; Rossi & Montgomery, 1994; Rumberger, 1987). Learning disabilities, untreated attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, early parenthood, emotional reactions to family stressors, and chronic illnesses have all been implicated in school failure (Mattison, 2001; Steinberg, Brown, & Dornbusch 1997). Other factors, which are the focus of this chapter, are best described as problems in the structure and organizational culture of American schools. Irrespective of the reasons, however, the cost to society of these poor outcomes is tremendous. Clearly, there is a need to intervene early to prevent school failure.

What can be done to prevent failure and to ensure that all students achieve to the best of their abilities in school? Educational reformers have wrestled with this question for decades and have attempted countless strategies with

varying degrees of success. These have included instructional changes (e.g., curricular improvements, more rigorous standards, better textbooks), grouping strategies (e.g., ability tracking, cooperative learning), improvements in teaching (e.g., professionalizing teaching, improving salaries), enhancing support (e.g., facilitating teacher-student relationships, mentoring programs), structural reforms (e.g., smaller groupings, fewer transitions), alternatives to the public schools (e.g., charter schools, vouchers, contracting), improving attendance and reducing attrition (e.g., dropout prevention), and home-school partnerships (e.g., building connections between parents and schools). Although a complete review of the rationale for and effectiveness of these approaches is beyond this chapter's scope, we will highlight some of the more commonly advocated strategies for preventing school failure and promoting achievement.

REVIEW AND CRITIQUE OF THE LITERATURE

Instructional Changes

Educators and policy makers often focus on modifying classroom learning and curricula as a means of preventing school failure and improving students' performance. Experts (e.g., Murnane & Levy, 1996) argued that American students do poorly in comparison with students from other industrialized countries because American schools provide relatively fewer opportunities for in-depth, thorough learning. Along these lines, Darling-Hammond (1997) has advocated more meaningful and relevant school experiences that promote critical thinking and deeper engagement of students in the learning process rather than rote memory of decontextualized information.

Early experience with school-to-work programs and other applied learning activities often are advocated as strategies for more fully engaging some students in school. With academic learning complementing the work experience, students improve their proficiency and are better prepared for employment (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). For instance, the Work Experience Program was designed for students in grades 7 through 10 who have been identified as being at risk for school dropout by virtue of their economic disadvantage and lack of motivation to perform in school (Fernandez, 1991). The Work Experience Program offers these students planned learning experiences with job shadowing, student internships, and exposure to employment opportunities. Work Experience programs and other school-to-work experiences can engage students in the learning process. By taking abstract concepts to the workplace, initially reluctant learners can have the opportunity to discover the relevance and applicability of information to real life (Fernandez, 1991).

Other researchers (e.g., Chall, 2000; Ravitch, 2000) have argued for a return to basics in curricula. They emphasize standards and the mastery of core concepts on the grounds that all students, irrespective of race or class, need to have a common knowledge base. Chall (2000), for example, has argued that many educational innovations do little more than dilute learning and undermine academic achievement. This criticism has prompted districts to adopt tightly stipulated curricula, standardized across settings. Critics of this core base of knowledge perspective are cautious about gaining a superficial exposure to a large number of concepts from different disciplines (e.g., Perkins, 1992). Their premise is that knowledge is accumulated over many years as a consequence of students engaging school content thoughtfully.

Grouping Strategies

Another approach to preventing school failure is to design a more customized educational plan for each individual student. Proponents (e.g., Levine, 2000) of this approach have argued that, because students are diverse in their abilities, they need curricula that are more directly tailored to their abilities. This, in turn, can lead to greater precision in how students are grouped. As Levine (2000) predicted, "We are heading to an era in which schooling will change profoundly.... Children will no longer be grouped by age. Each student will advance at his or her own pace in each subject area through individualized tutorials, student-centered group learning, and a cornucopia of new technology and software" (p. 24).

Other researchers (e.g., McEwin, Dickenson, & Jenkins, 1996) have argued for more heterogeneous ability tracking as a way to redress the fact that students from the dominant culture often are overly represented in the higher-performing academic sections. Within this context, cooperative learning and interdisciplinary teaming have become popular reforms, aimed at achieving educational equity and reducing school failure among students at greatest risk (Jackson & Davis, 2000). In cooperative learning, for example, students work in small groups that encourage peer interaction and cooperation. There is a subtle shift from a teacher-led classroom to more student-driven learning. This approach is seen as particularly important to minority students, who often respond to the covert struggles of domination by asserting their resistance and establishing their identity as uninterested and disruptive students (Fordham, 1996; Gibson & Ogbu, 1991). The underachievement pattern of minority students is expected to shift as cooperative learning fosters greater autonomy and responsibility for pursuing knowledge (Delpit, 1995).

Another approach, interdisciplinary teaming, involves the assignment of a

common group of students to a team of two or more teachers. This allows teachers to work more closely with a group of students and offers opportunities for increasing teacher-student bonds. In addition, by working together, teachers develop a sense of community and can work more effectively to address common student problems. Empirical research (Arhar & Kromrey, 1995) has indeed found positive benefits to the continuity that interdisciplinary teaming provides, including increased emotional connectedness between teachers and students.

It should be noted, however, that interdisciplinary teaming has not always resulted in positive gains, particularly since the formation of small groups does not prevent the development of ability status comparisons among students (Cohen & Lotan, 1995). Arhar (1997) echoed these concerns, suggesting that interdisciplinary teaming can sometimes lead to time conflicts in the scheduling needs of the team and the school as a whole and competition among teams. Therefore, it is important to implement teams with adequate teacher training and ongoing support. In their review of the literature, Jackson and Davis (2000) concluded that effective teams are those teams that plan and focus on their goals (e.g., student learning), develop specific strategies for sustaining staff and student involvement and energy, are flexible and continually tuned to the cultural and social values of students' context, and continuously assess their progress.

Improvements in Teaching

Other strategies for preventing school failure have focused on teacher competence and the relationships that teachers forge with their students. Research (Delpit, 1995) indicates that a key element in predicting students' success in school is their exposure to effective teachers. Ferguson (1991), for example, found that teachers' expertise (as measured by advanced educational degrees, high licensing examination scores, and experience) accounted for considerable variance in students' achievement, even when compensating for family and socioeconomic disadvantage. In a comprehensive review by Greenwald, Hedges, and Lain (1996) of 60 studies, similar findings emerged. Greenwald et al. (1996) concluded that teacher' competence (as measured by classroom management and pedagogical rigor) and advanced education were associated with significant increases in student achievement.

In light of these and related findings, researchers and policy makers (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 1997) have increasingly advocated strategies that enhance the teaching profession by improving and standardizing teacher educational requirements, offering professional development, and hiring better-paid, well-

educated teachers (Darling-Hammond, 1997). Also, good teaching is fostered by schools where the structure of the school allows teachers to build on each other's strengths and compensate for weaknesses (Oakes, Quartz, Ryan, & Lipton, 2000). As Meier (1995) reflected, "School change of the depth and breath required, change that breaks within the tradition of our own schooling, cannot be undertaken by a faculty that is not convinced and involved" (p. 109).

Structural Reforms

Reforms that seek to change the school environment play a prominent role in efforts to prevent failure and promote better student outcomes. These efforts often focus on the creation of smaller schools and class sizes, advising programs, school-within-school programs, and transition programs. Many of these programs are initiated as a means of helping students as they make transitions to new schools or into middle or high school, when students are more vulnerable to declining school performance (Felner, Primavera, & Cauce, 1981; Jason et al., 1992; MacIver, 1990). Such programs attempt to redress some of the problems that emerge as a function of the changing structure of middle and high schools. For example, supportive bonds with teachers often become less practical as students move into middle and high school and no longer have a primary teacher with whom they spend most of the day (Eccles, Lord, & Buchanan, 1996). These changes, unfortunately, often lead to declining teacher-student closeness. Midgley, Feldlaufer, and Eccles (1989) found that students perceived middle-school teachers as more remote and impersonal than elementary-school teachers. This growing distance decreases the likelihood that teachers can intervene with problems at an early stage. Indeed, researchers (Cauce, Mason, Gonzales, Hiraga, & Liu, 1994; Lynch & Cicchetti, 1997) have noted that middle-school students tend to have few positive interactions with teachers outside of instruction and feel less secure with their teachers than do elementary school children. The growing emphasis on standardized testing in middle and high school often gives rise to rigid curricular demands that constrain teachers and leave little room for the kinds of activities that typically draw them closer to their students. These trends have created obstacles to the formation of genuine, trusting relationships between teachers and students (Evans, 1996; Freedman, 1993; McDonald, 1996; Oakes et al., 2000). Moreover, cuts in school budgets have resulted in larger teacher-to-student ratios, making it more difficult or challenging for teachers to give students individual attention.

To address these obstacles, some structural school reform efforts have focused on reducing the barriers to positive student-teacher relationships. Practices such as homeroom assignments, advising, multiyear teacher assign-

ments (i.e., maintaining the same teacher for more than 1 year), and smaller groupings of students have all been employed (Noddings, 1992; Oakes et al., 2000; Pianta, 2000; Sergiovannl, 1994). Homeroom teachers' roles may be modified to include counseling and tracking student absences and grades; in this way, they can serve as a key link between the students, their parents, and the rest of the school (Felner & Adan, 1988). There appears to be considerable variation in the extent to which these efforts have led to meaningful change in schools, particularly when the reforms have the unintended impact of overburdening teachers or undermining their sense of autonomy over classroom practices (Oakes et al., 2000; Phillips, 1997). A major challenge for schools is to create settings that can maximize teachers' and other staff members' caring potential, while maintaining academic rigor and some degree of teacher autonomy.

Unfortunately, many programs involving structural changes never get off the ground and are difficult to sustain in public schools. Teachers and administrators sometimes resist efforts that are seen as being too big a drain on resources or as destabilizing to the system (Oakes et al., 2000). Advising programs, for example, require a significant reallocation of resources, time, and staff professional development to expand teachers' roles (Rappaport, 1999). Faced with competing demands on resources and teachers' time, many schools do not make the investment necessary to sustain school reforms (Ravitch, 2000).

Alternative Settings

Beyond the changes that have been implemented in the public school system, a major trend in recent years has been the emergence of charter schools. Charter schools are independent public schools that operate with greater autonomy than traditional public schools (Darling-Hammond, 1997). They are established with performance contracts or "charters," which stipulate the schools' missions, approaches, goals, and evaluation criteria. Charter schools reflect a movement to create small, intimate school communities with stringent forms of accountability, and, often, heterogeneous grouping (Fine, 1994). Although not conclusive, several studies report improved academic achievement, better attendance, increased parent involvement, and fewer discipline problems (Darling-Hammond, 1997).

A major impetus for such alternatives is the recognition that there is often resistance to innovation within public schools. For example, the Edison Project, which enlists public school districts and charter school boards for the right to manage their elementary, middle, and high schools, reflects the vision that many reformers propose for restructured schools. Edison Project schools typically feature a decentralized structure of teams, standardized curricula and

assessment, access to technology, professional development and improved compensation for teachers, parent and community involvement, and a national system of supports (Edison Schools, Inc., 2000). However, the student improvement that occurs in such schools may be due to a redistribution of students with poorer-performing students being forced out of the school (Wyatt, 2001). As another alternative to public schools or charter schools, parochial schools typically provide traditional academic curricula in small-scale settings and sometimes can succeed in educating students where public schools have failed (Ravitch, 2000).

Reducing Attrition and Improving Attendance: Dropout Prevention

Research (Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Rumberger & Thomas, 2000) suggests that poor attendance or absenteeism is a strong predictor of attrition or dropping out. Low test scores, poor attendance, and disengagement from school are risk factors for dropping out (Newmann, 1992; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger & Thomas, 2000; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, & Lesko, 1989). Dropout rates are higher for students of low socioeconomic (SES) status; members of racial, ethnic, and language minorities; and men (Rumberger, 1987). Hispanic youth have the highest dropout rate of all the racial/ethnic groups in American schools (Velez, 1989). Low-SES high schools have dropout rates 60 percent higher than average-SES high schools (Rumberger & Thomas, 2000).

School factors may affect attendance and attrition (Rumberger, 1995, 2001; Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). For example, school resources such as teacher/student ratios have a significant effect on middle-school and high-school dropout rates (McNeal, 1997; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). Rumberger and Thomas (2000) found that the higher the quality of the teachers, as perceived by students, the lower the dropout rates; however, the higher the quality of teachers, as perceived by the principal, the higher the dropout rates. This discrepancy between students and principals may indicate differing ideas regarding high-quality teaching. For example, for students, good teachers may be teachers who are supportive and understanding which helps students stay in school, whereas for principals, "good" teachers may use strict discipline and very tough academic standards that may actually contribute to student dropout (Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). Structural factors, such as class size and school size, may affect attrition (Lee, 2000; Lee & Smith, 1995; Rumberger, 2001). Students in Catholic and other private schools tend to have lower dropout rates than do students in public schools (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; Bryk & Thum, 1989; Coleman, 1987; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). School policies and practices

also influence attendance and attrition, and the perception of discipline has been associated with attrition. Schools in which students perceive that the discipline is fair have lower dropout rates than schools in which students perceive the discipline to be unfair (Rumberger, 1995; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). The single most important predictor of dropping out is grade retention (i.e., having students repeat a grade). This effect is consistent for both early and late dropouts (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999), indicating the need for early intervention (e.g., the High/Scope Perry Preschool Program; see page 116).

Fashola and Slavin (1998) reviewed programs focused on reducing attrition among at-risk middle-school and high-school students and reported on two rigorously evaluated dropout prevention programs designed to increase high school graduation (for a review of elementary-school and middle-school programs, see Fashola & Slavin, 1997). These two were the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program (VYP) and Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success (ALAS).

Developed by the Intercultural Development and Research Association in San Antonio, Texas, and initially funded by Coca-Cola, the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program (VYP) was implemented in five high-school districts between 1984 and 1988 (Fashola and Slavin, 1998). VYP uses cross-age tutoring aimed at reducing the dropout rare and increasing the school success and self-esteem of at-risk middle-school and high-school students by providing them with positions of responsibility as tutors of younger elementary age students. Students' academic skills are addressed when they agree to serve as tutors and are required to enroll in a class that focuses on helping them develop and improve their own basic academic skills and their tutoring skills. The tutors work a total of about four hours per week with three elementary school students at a time and are paid a minimum wage stipend. They are recognized and honored as role models at functions given on their behalf, awarded certificates of merit for their efforts, and given caps and T-shirts (Fashola & Slavin, 1998).

An evaluation of VYP by Cardenas, Montecel, Supik, and Harris, (1992) comparing 63 VYP tutors with 70 comparison students who did not receive the program, found that 2 years after the program started, 1% percent of the VYP students had dropped out, compared with 12 % of the comparison group. The students in the VYP group had significantly higher reading grades and scored higher on measures of self-esteem and attitudes toward school than did the students in the control group. VYP has been replicated across the southwest and is currently being extended to other parts of the United States (Fashola & Slavin, 1998).

Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success (ALAS) was developed as a dropout prevention program for low SES, at-risk, middle-school Latino students in Los Angeles (see Fashola & Slavin, 1998; Larson & Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger, 2001). The program specifically targeted special education students and students who were at risk of dropping out because of low income, poor academic performance, and behavior problems. ALAS is

based on the foundation and premise that intervention should address the three major forces influencing adolescent lives: family, community, and school. Students in ALAS were provided with counseling, training in social problem solving, and recognition for academic success. In addition, participants' attendance was closely monitored, with daily follow-up with parents. Bonding activities and recognition were provided for the students, as well as frequent feedback from teachers to parents and students. Strategies for the family included workshops on parent training in guiding and monitoring adolescents, school participation, and the use of community resources. Specific community strategies focused on facilitating collaboration among agencies serving youth and families, and on developing and enhancing skills of agency personnel.

Students who participated received the intervention for all 3 years they remained in the target school. Evaluation data revealed that by the end of the ninth grade (the final year of the program) students not in the ALAS group had twice the number of failed classes, were twice as likely to be lagging in high-school graduation credits, and were four times more likely to have excessive absences than ALAS participants. However, once the ALAS program ended, these effects were not sustained throughout the following high school years, indicating that drop-out prevention programs must continue throughout the secondary school years (Fashola & Slavin, 1998; Rumberger, 2001).

Given that grade retention is an important predictor of school dropout, programs that focus on reducing grade retention should be of help in reducing attrition. This raises the question as to whether early childhood and elementary school intervention programs have long-term positive effects (Rumberger, 2001). One program that has empirically documented long-term success is the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project (Barnett, 1985, 1995) which took place from 1962 to 1967. This program targeted 123 low-SES African American children; at ages 3 and 4, one subgroup received a quality preschool program based upon High/Scope's active learning approach and home visits (CITE), while a comparison subgroup did not. Follow-up research found that the program members subsequently graduated from high school at significantly higher rates (67%) than did nonmembers (49%) and also had higher achievement test scores, higher grades, and lower rates of special education and grade retention (Barnett, 1995). These findings suggest early intervention programs for those at risk for dropping out can be successful.

Home-School Partnerships

With parental involvement being seen as an important venue through which schools can accomplish their goals, efforts to engage parents in their children's

education have been increasingly advocated (Steinberg et al., 1997). Home-school partnerships are an important component of preventing school failure, and parental involvement is connected to school success (Lareau, 1989). Lareau (1989) noted that SES exerts a strong influence on parental involvement, with lower SES parents tending to be less involved than middle-class and upper-class parents. Implementing a large-scale school transition program, Weine, Kuraski, Jason, Danner, and Johnson (1993) found that, when parents were encouraged and trained to consistently tutor their children in their homes, their children adjusted to their new school's academic requirements significantly better than children who were not tutored. In this review of the literature Coleman (1987; Coleman & Hoffer, 1987) also concluded that parental involvement improved school performance and decreased drop-out rates (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). Likewise, Miedel and Reynolds (1999) found that parent involvement in urban schools was correlated with lower rates of high-school dropout. Opening channels of communication between parents and schools can empower parents in the education process and also help the school administration understand the sociocultural and economic realities of students' families.

The Comer School Development Project (SDP) has been particularly successful in this regard and is different from other programs because it focuses on the total parent population (Comer, 1993; Drake, 1995). SDP was developed in New Haven, Connecticut, during the 1968–69 school year and was based on the premise that the home, the parents, the neighborhood, the teacher, the school, and the school program need to work together (Comer, 1993). SDP has nine components, the Parents' Program being one of them. The SDP sees relationships between school personnel and parents as based on a foundation of mutual respect, trust, and shared power in order to develop a positive climate in which children's growth is supported (Comer, 1993; Drake, 1995). The Parent's Program is designed for broad-based participation in order for all parents to be involved in their children's education. SDP has three levels of parental participation. Level Three parents participate in many activities such as general business meetings, fundraising, special events and potluck dinners, drama and musical performances, Halloween parades, and conferences with the staff. Level Two parents are involved in parent-staff workshops and room-mother activities; volunteer in the lunchroom, classroom, library, playground, and attend field trips. They may also work with the school's Mental Health Team. SDP Level Two parents developed many committees, such as the Parent Interest Group, the Parent Advisory Board, the Parent-Teacher Association, and the Parent-Teacher Power Team. Parents often go from Level Two to Level One. Level One parents are decision-makers and are involved in school governance, management, and curriculum and operation policy determinations. Planning, implementing, and evaluating school activities is an area of focus for the governance committee, as is working with staff. Through these arrangements, par-

ents can participate to the extent to which they are comfortable and capable and can change as they desire (Comer, 1993). Meaningful parental involvement in the daily and ongoing activities of a school benefits students, families, and communities (see Henderson, 1987), and as the Comer model suggests, home-school connections help foster student success in school (Drake, 1995).

CASE EXAMPLE

As outlined in this chapter, wide ranges of strategies have been employed to prevent school failure and promote academic achievement. In this section, we focus on one such strategy—advising programs. In doing so, we highlight some of the issues that arise when a school attempts to institutionalize an intervention that changes the school structure in order to strengthen the student-teacher relationship.

Background

Teachers and administrators who are searching for effective ways to motivate students to care about their education sometimes implement advising programs. In small alternative high schools, well-planned advising programs have made a difference in outcomes for at-risk students (Meier, 1995; Oakes et al., 2000). However, in larger public high schools, advising programs have not been consistently executed or sufficiently evaluated. In most cases, they have not been tried at all (Rappaport, 1999).

This makes what is happening at Cambridge Rindge and Latin High School (CRLS), a large public high school in Cambridge, Massachusetts,. For the past 6 years, CRLS has made a concerted effort to provide an advising program for its students based on the premise that constructive relationships between students and adults at school can enhance learning. The impetus for this effort stemmed from recognition of the vulnerabilities of the diverse body of students attending the high school. A district-wide analysis of school performance revealed that approximately one-third of the students fail at least one course every semester. The failure rate for minorities was even higher—41% for African American students and 43% for Latino students. Of the more than 2,000 students who attend Rindge, approximately 60% are racial or ethnic minorities, more than half are eligible to receive free lunches, and one third speak a first language other than English.

The advising program at CRLS is being phased in as part of ongoing restruc-

turing, which includes heterogeneous student grouping, interdisciplinary teaming, and time structured for staff to collaborate. The advising is currently limited to 9th and 10th graders, who see their advisors 1 or 2 days a week during a regular class period, but it will eventually expand to all four grades. Evaluations of the CRLS program have revealed promising preliminary findings, including high satisfaction ratings from teachers and students alike (Rappaport, 2001). Eighty percent of the students have reported that their advisers are strong advocates for them in the school. Preliminary analyses of a broad range of indices (e.g., grade point average, suspensions, detentions) also indicate positive effects (Rappaport, 2001).

Implementation Issues

As with many reform efforts, implementing an advising program involves several issues, including finding time in the schedule, determining which students to include, deciding curriculum content, and defining staff support (Rappaport, 2000). In this section, we discuss some of these issues and ways to resolve them.

At a very basic level, schools must identify staff members who should (and should not) engage in advising relationships with students. When programs are mandatory, they may enlist teachers who are reluctant to participate and unwilling to make the necessary effort to establish successful relationships. For example, some teachers may prefer to maintain their professional distance with their students and focus only on academic goals. When participation is voluntary, as is the case at CRLS, there is a greater likelihood of including teachers who are comfortable, enthusiastic, and engaged in the advising role. The disadvantage of voluntary enrollment is that some of the most dedicated and conscientious teachers in the school may not volunteer for fear that they will overextend themselves. CRLS has addressed such concerns by offering reduced workloads (i.e., release from a course), a costly strategy that implies the full support of school administrators and parents. Unfortunately, teachers of core subjects cannot always be released and sometimes feel resentful of those who obtain reduced workloads.

Along similar lines, schools must decide whether to involve all students in the advisory program or to select only those students who are at greatest risk for academic failure. Some administrators believe that advising should be reserved for high-risk students, whereas others have suggested that all students can benefit. The proponents of including all students in the advising program at CRLS advanced several arguments. They saw advising as a preventive intervention; to preselect students would defeat this purpose. Furthermore, many of the students who most need to examine their attitudes toward learning and

their investment in school might choose not to participate. Finally, selecting only underachieving students for the advising program would create the risk of stigmatizing them and making them feel more inadequate. On the other hand, there were some concerns that students might not feel comfortable making disclosures to certain teachers and that they should not be forced into such relationships. CRLS resolved this conflict by making a reasonable compromise. All students were expected to participate, but students could opt out in consultation with a school administrator. Although some administrators anticipated a mass exodus of students, only two students chose not to participate in the advising program.

Beyond these selection issues, there is a need to consider the integration of the program into the overall school setting. Understanding internal and external power structures is a crucial step in facilitating the successful implementation of advisory programs or other innovations. For example, an important element of success for introducing any sort of change in a school is the establishment of positive collaborative relationships with individuals serving as "gatekeepers"—those who oversee and sanction changes in the school. Some individuals have been assigned to this role formally, while others adopt it more informally (Glidewell, 1959). At CRLS, the guidance counselors serve as the key gatekeepers in the implementation process, presenting concrete information about graduation requirements, transcripts, goal setting, and course selection three times a year to each advising group. They have welcomed access to the advising groups because they see it as an efficient way to deliver information and therefore present it to teachers in a positive light.

In addition to understanding internal power structures, program implementers must be familiar with external factors that might bear on program functioning (Caplan, 1974). If, in the past, many other programs have been tried and failed, school personnel might be reluctant to attempt another intervention (Rhodes & Englund, 1993). In the past 10 years, there had been four different failed efforts to institutionalize reform efforts at CRLS. Although there has been cautious optimism because the external personnel such as the school districts, the superintendent, and the school board have endorsed the present intervention, the current advising program often has been vulnerable to the vicissitudes of the political climate and shifting educational pedagogy.

Irrespective of context, efforts to prevent student failure are often difficult to implement. Moreover, not all interventions are equally effective across school contexts. Adolescents with a higher probability of failure and dropout are a psychosocially heterogeneous group (Janosz, LeBlanc, Boulerice, & Tremblay, 2000). Practices that seem perfect in theory may result in negative consequences if they fail to target the underlying problems or are insensitive to the ecological context (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997; Schensul, 1998).

Moreover, successful school change depends on the readiness and willing-

ness of school staff, parents, and students to actively engage in reform efforts. Reforms can be rendered effective or ineffective by the knowledge, skills, and commitments of those stakeholders in school. Without administrative and teacher acceptance and appropriate support, school-based advising programs and other innovations cannot succeed. Indeed, school systems (like many administrative structures) tend to seek a state of equilibrium, and innovative practices may be seen as a drain on resources and a threat to the system's stability (Evans, 1996).

Although our preliminary findings suggest that effective relationships emerge through a combination of structure, activity, and emotional support, these observations need to be further refined. There is also a need for empirically validated guidelines to identify the needed infrastructure and training techniques in order to maximize advisers' impact. Additional understanding of the processes involved in creating trustworthy and consistent advising relationships is likely to lead to enhanced student competencies and reduced school failure.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

To date, much of the research on intervention and funding priorities has concentrated on the student, ignoring the crucial contributing roles of the teacher and contextual variables. The multidetermined nature of school failure, however, makes it necessary to expand, and even alter, traditional approaches. As noted throughout this chapter, relationships that transpire within school settings, school resources, and structural characteristics (such as class size) can shape students' experiences in school. We have suggested strategies for transforming schools, and carefully implemented research and program evaluation will be required to assess and refine these strategies across settings.

Several promising trends have emerged in recent years that provide some hope that this work will be accomplished. For example, the growing number of university-school collaborations is likely to result in more program evaluations that can identify and address the factors that underlie school failure. Within this context, systematic comparisons of strategies that vary by type and intensity should be conducted in order to provide a sound basis for comparisons and decision making. Of course, evaluations of treatment effects in school settings are complicated by the fact that the relationships do not exist in a vacuum and programs are often linked to a broader array of services.

In addition to comparing programs and specifying outcomes, a deeper understanding of the reasons for school failure is needed. Qualitative studies may shed additional light on both the circumstances that give rise to school failure

and the most appropriate means of redressing these problems within various contexts. Lightfoot (1983), based on her qualitative inquiry, suggested that in "good" high schools, "students feel visible and accountable" (p. 26). School leaders express a need for nurturance and partnership—"they do not want to go it alone" (Lightfoot, 1983, p. 333)—and teachers' needs are carefully attended to, with their work supported and rewarded. Given the importance of student-teacher ties, scholarly attention also should be directed to the processes that give rise to and govern these relationships. As Pianta (2000), concluded, "Relationships with adults are a cornerstone of development—they are responsible for a large proportion of school success. Too often the role of the adult-child relationship is underestimated either because it is not well understood, or because the role of the context is not understood or emphasized in prevailing models for understanding development" (p. 188). Developing and testing conceptual models of teacher support will be an important challenge in the coming years.

Students' experiences with teachers and, more generally, in school shape their appraisals of the school "climate." Because students' perceptions of school climate are considered to be key mediators between contextual variables (e.g., family and school characteristics) and academic, emotional, and behavioral outcomes (Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000), school climate represents a promising variable for expanding researchers' attention beyond measures of individual student adjustment.

Taken together, the range of preventive approaches considered in this chapter has the potential to reverse school failure. Such approaches, combined with careful program evaluations that are anchored in theory and scientific evidence, can contribute to more theoretically informed and practically applicable prevention efforts.

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