

Hixson, J. (1993) defines the term *at-risk*:

<http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/students/atrisk/at5def.htm>

"For at least the last 50 years--beginning as the first of the Baby Boom generation entered school--America **has been struggling to meet the challenge** (<http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/students/atrisk/amerstr.htm>) of successfully educating all students.

The 1981 publication of *A Nation at Risk* created a new sense of urgency and refocused the nation's attention on the continuing pattern of inadequate performance by a significant proportion of our children--children we have come to define as being 'at risk.'

Yet, despite the tireless efforts of thousands of educators, policymakers, parents and concerned others; formulation of numerous strategies for change and improvement; countless research and policy studies; new knowledge about teaching and learning; and myriad examples of remarkable success, the overall pattern of achievement for far too many students remains largely unchanged, particularly in poor or urban communities or communities of color. In fact, in many communities, the number of students identified as being 'at risk' has actually increased. Clearly, something is wrong!

The problem, however, is not a lack of effort, knowledge, examples of 'what works,' or the students we now have. Instead, the central dilemma is that we have framed the problem incorrectly and, as a result, have been looking for solutions in the wrong places. This predicament derives from four widespread, but nonetheless incorrect, assumptions:

- The way we currently 'do school' is the way school should always be done.
- The ways in which schools are organized and teaching is practiced has always worked before and was good enough for 'us.'
- The change in patterns of performance can be traced to changes in characteristics of the students, families, and communities that schools now serve.
- Statistical analysis (or sometimes simply personal assumptions) can provide the information necessary to plan the solutions we need.

While each of these assumptions have grains of truth, on the whole they have led us down the wrong paths, as the results clearly indicate. In order to get on the right path, or at least in the right forest, we must begin by reframing the manner in which we view the problem. The following three axioms provide the foundation for beginning that effort.

- Students are not 'at risk,' but are placed at risk by adults.
- Building on student strengths (e.g., knowledge, experiences, skills, talents, interests, etc.), rather than focusing on remediating real or presumed deficiencies is the key.
- It is the quality of the entirety of the school experience, rather than the characteristics of the students, that will determine success or failure--both theirs and ours. The two can never be separated.

From these perspectives, the following might be a more appropriate description of the 'at risk' phenomenon: Students are placed 'at risk' when they experience a significant mismatch between their circumstances and needs, and the capacity or willingness of the school to accept, accommodate, and respond to them in a manner that supports and enables their maximum social, emotional, and intellectual growth and development. As the degree of mismatch increases, so does the likelihood that they will fail to either complete their elementary and secondary education, or more importantly, to benefit from it in a manner that ensures they have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to be successful in the next stage of their lives--that is, to successfully pursue post-secondary education, training, or meaningful employment and to participate in, and contribute to, the social, economic, and political life of their community and society as a whole. The focus of our efforts, therefore, should be on enhancing our institutional and professional capacity and responsiveness, rather than categorizing and penalizing students for simply being who they are."