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## Interventions for At-Risk Student Success

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**Interventions for At-Risk Student Success**

Keanon Lewis

Northwestern College

A School Improvement Plan Project Presented

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Education

### **Abstract**

At-risk students are a growing group in public education who, by definition, are not expected to meet school goals and need additional support to be successful. These students often have poor school attendance, low academic performance, high deviant behavior rates, and increased levels of substance abuse. Not only are public schools failing to prepare at-risk students for a successful future, but these students also bring their troubles to school and negatively impact other students, further hurting education and communities. This school improvement plan is designed to create a system of interventions to correct this downward trend for current at-risk students, as well as identify effective practices that can be implemented throughout the district to inhibit development of at-risk traits, thereby lowering the number of at-risk students in the future.

*Keywords: Academic, At-risk, Attendance, Behavior, Dropout, Education, Engagement, Intervention, Mentoring, Practices, Self-efficacy, Socio-emotional, Strategy, Substance abuse*

**Table of Contents**

Abstract.....2

Review of the Literature.....7

School Data & Analysis.....26

Action Plan.....28

Implementation of the Plan.....31

References.....33

### **Interventions for At-Risk Student Success**

In Iowa, many high school students struggle with academics, socio-emotional stability, behavior problems, school attendance, and substance abuse. In fact, less than 70% of students are proficient in math or English (State of Iowa) and over 20% report regularly using alcohol and/or tobacco and vapor products (IDPH). These students are generally classified as “at-risk students,” a term which includes “any identified student who needs additional support and who is not meeting or not expected to meet the established goals of the educational program (academic, personal/social, career/vocational)” (Iowa Department of Education). For example, at Pocahontas Area High School in 2021-2022, there were 62 at-risk students identified out of 450 in the student body. At the time of research, these 62 students represented only 13.8% of the student body but accounted for 19.6% of absences, 58.8% of behavior referrals, and 67% of drug referrals in the school.

In addition to these students possibly not becoming proficient academically and socially, the problem is that at-risk students will likely negatively impact other students, especially in the younger grades, which is before many at-risk identification and intervention programs begin. At Pocahontas, only 6 of the 62 identified at-risk students were entering the 7-12 building, well below the expected 10 per grade level. This statistic strongly indicates there is an unsatisfactory at-risk identification system from the elementary grades into the middle school. This project is intended to correct a gap in practice by creating a structure to identify these students early in order to intervene consistently and correct risky behavior, in turn decreasing the influence of the behavior on other students. This project will also identify best practices for teachers to use when educating students with academic, socio-emotional, attendance, substance abuse, and behavior problems.

The purpose of this school improvement plan is to implement an at-risk identification system and continuing intervention course at Pocahontas Area Middle/High School and to identify best practices for teachers when working with students at risk of being unsuccessful. Specifically, this plan is intended to improve student interventions regarding academics, behavior, attendance, socio-emotional distress, and substance abuse. This plan will improve daily educational practices in classrooms, counselor meetings, and administrative decisions by informing school personnel of trends and strategy efficacy and by creating an intervention for at-risk students built into the school day and includes students in the lower grades who are often overlooked.

During the research for this school improvement plan, a literature review was initiated to gather existing research in the field of at-risk students, specifically regarding the areas of academics, socio-emotional stability, school attendance, delinquent behavior, and substance abuse. Research studies were found in Northwestern College's Dewitt Library online database and Iowa state education reports using a variety of search terms, including at-risk, behavior, socio-emotional, attendance, behavior, substance abuse, growth, academic, mentor, and mentee. Research was limited to peer-reviewed articles within the last 10 years and government databases with the most current available data, typically from the school year 2019-2020.

After research, the most effective practices of at-risk intervention are early identification and consistent interventions with a mentor. Academically, these interventions should include teaching students how to self-regulate while also providing support in the content area. Self-regulating techniques have also been shown to improve student attendance, as have mentoring programs, in general. For students at risk due to socio-emotional instability and substance abuse, the interventions should focus on empowerment techniques, which could be in the form of

relaxation, confidence improvement, or self-efficacy training. Studies have also shown when students are engaged by a mentor, by differentiated classroom techniques, or by counselors and administration, deviant behavior in the school drops significantly. This information reiterates the need for a concrete identification and intervention system, including teacher education of the best practices in working with at-risk students.

This literature review will be decomposed into four sections based on different concerns of at-risk students, namely academics, deviant behavior (including substance abuse), school attendance, and socio-emotional stability. These concerns are often not independent but will be detailed separately to detail the interventions and best practices that can improve each individual behavior. The literature review will also include sections on classroom engagement and mentoring programs as these two areas came up consistently throughout research and they have been shown to correlate strongly with at-risk student success.

## **Review of the Literature**

### **Academic Performance**

The main function of schools is to teach students content knowledge and academic skills they can use to learn about different subjects, start a career, and be successful in their career. Therefore, increasing academic growth and improvement of all students should be prioritized but students with consistently low academic performance, such as at-risk students, should take the highest priority. As Carroll and Conklin-Spillane (2015) found, increasing academic success can also cause improvements in other areas, including increased attendance and decreased behavior incidents. In their study, these authors found implementing reading interventions for high school students not only caused at least one year's growth for all students but also caused a 50% decrease in unexcused absences. These improvements may imply students enjoy learning when they feel able to do so but avoid school altogether when they feel like they are not successful. The research also shows academic growth opens doors to other improvements, such as behavior and social skills.

For those who do not get the necessary interventions in time, Sanders, Munford, and Boden (2018) found at-risk students decline significantly in multiple measurements, including involvement in mainstream education, proportion of students who are on track with their education, and the overall educational outcome measure, which is a score combining many metrics to determine overall likelihood of future educational success. Combining the Sanders, Munford, and Boden (2018) and Carroll and Conklin-Spillane (2015) research studies shows us if at-risk students are not engaged to be productive, the alternative is likely to continue a downhill trend until it cannot be reversed.



There has been an overwhelming amount of research detailing the importance of keeping at-risk kids in school. Sanders, Munford, and Boden (2018) detailed the risk of non-retention but when students do not want to be in school or feel they cannot be successful, it is challenging to prevent them from dropping out or leaving the traditional educational setting. As Harðardóttir and Júlíusdóttir (2015) found, one strategy that can be very effective is to teach resiliency skills to students. For at-risk students, especially those with disabilities, teaching students how to be mentally strong creates a mindset where they can overcome adversity and obstacles to reach their potential. Harðardóttir and Júlíusdóttir (2015) also found teacher support is closely correlated with academic success and the best way to teach resiliency is to foster it within the parents and at home. Essentially, when the adults in a child's life demonstrate the mindset and ability to overcome obstacles, the child is likely to adopt this mindset, which is incredibly important in school and life.

One way resiliency can be fostered in students is by moving them from a traditional classroom to an alternative learning setting. In a traditional setting, low attendance can be devastating or fatal to a grade, but alternative schools are often self-paced, allowing students to overcome absences if they work hard enough when they are present. As Darling-Aduana (2019) found, students in an alternative education setting attend more school than those in traditional settings. In this study, students who were enrolled in online courses (who could access them outside of school hours) attended about 2.45 days more than those enrolled in traditional classes. According to this research, it seems online courses allow for success by either encouraging students to attend when they can, regardless of school hours, or making students feel they can be successful, leading to them wanting to attend school. Either way, it seems as if this intervention is effective for some students, which is exactly what at-risk students need.

One key to intervening in struggling at-risk students' performance is simply identifying who may be at risk. If teachers and administration wait until a student struggles constantly, it is too late to correct the student's academic path without lasting effects. For example, students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunches (FRPL) score an average of 2.8 points lower on ACT Reading and 2.3 points lower on ACT Math than non-FRPL students, according to Marchetti, Wilson, and Dunham (2016). This is a major difference in scores that can easily be identified by basic demographic information, which then allows teachers and administrators to intervene as appropriate. Marchetti, et. al (2016) also found students who meet ACT benchmark scores in either reading or math are more likely to participate in extracurricular activities, which have been extensively shown to create more well-rounded individuals.

Dobele, Gangemi, Kopanidis, and Thomas (2013) researched what common factors exist among at-risk students to identify the most likely future at-risk students. Their research found at-risk status is not related to gender or age but to nationality and native language. In the university in Melbourne, Australia where this research took place, students who are non-English speakers or non-resident aliens are more likely to be at risk than English speakers and Australian citizens (Dobele et. al, 2013). Furthermore, students who have been classified as at-risk in the past are more likely to return to at-risk status than those who were never identified as at-risk. Due to this research, it is important to remember that even when students leave their at-risk status, they are still fighting against the qualities that caused them to be at-risk in the first place. It is also important to assess and implement appropriate supports for ELL students in all areas, since they are learning the language as well as content material and are more likely to be at-risk than their English-speaking peers.

One strategy that is effective for most students, especially ELL students, is the check-in, check-out (CICO) practice. In this strategy, the student will check in with the teacher at the start of the day or class period, then check out again at the end of the period. During the CICO, the student will briefly talk to the teacher about how they feel, if they got their homework done or understand the last lesson, and anything else possibly affecting their performance or attitude that day. According to Hawken, Bundock, Kladis, O’Keeffe, and Barrett (2014), 21 of 28 group outcomes were in favor of CICO while 19 of 39 individual outcomes were in favor of CICO. This can be interpreted as CICO benefiting the class as a whole, even though not all students benefit from CICO individually. Some individuals do not need to check in consistently, so they do not report positive growth but, as a group, the entire class functioned more efficiently due to the improvements made by students who did need the check in.

### **Deviant Behavior and Substance Abuse**

Students in middle and high school deal with a variety of negative influences throughout their day in and out of school but two of the most common and hurtful are inappropriate behavior and the inappropriate use of substances, including alcohol, tobacco and vape products, marijuana, and medications. While these issues can occur separately, Sharp, Young, and Moore (2019) found many correlations exist between specific substances and behaviors. For example, alcohol use in the past 30 days was strongly correlated with bullying and victimization behaviors, including physical, verbal, and cyber bullying. According to this research, which included relatively equal numbers of middle school and high school students in Florida, the most correlated behaviors with alcohol use in the past month were selling drugs, driving under the influence of alcohol or marijuana, and riding in a vehicle with someone driving under the

influence (2019). Due to these findings, students who have consumed alcohol in the past 30 days are generally more likely to engage in risky behaviors or act aggressively towards others.

Regarding marijuana use, Sharp et al. (2019) found while there is a correlation with bullying behaviors, its correlation is much weaker than with alcohol use. Also, marijuana use does not show a significant relationship with victimization behaviors. However, just like with alcohol, there is still a correlation between marijuana use, selling drugs, and driving/riding with a driver under the influence but marijuana is also strongly correlated with carrying a handgun. This information, along with the findings about alcohol use, is intimidating when paired with the fact that over 20% of Iowa high school students report regularly using alcohol (IDPH).

In a study performed by Uzun and Kelleci (2018), the researchers found 38.7% of Turkish high school students had a substance abuse problem either themselves or in their environment. Uzun and Kelleci determined there was a correlation between self-efficacy and substance abuse, with non-users having an average self-efficacy 5% higher than users of alcohol, tobacco, and/or marijuana (2018). This shows students who feel more competent and successful may not turn to substances as much as students who feel unfulfilled or lack confidence.

At the BRIDGE alternative school in Lowell, Massachusetts, the teachers recognize the relationship between stress, self-efficacy, and success and teach self-regulation strategies to students (Spiegel, 2017). These students, aged 16 to 20, were at-risk and did not succeed in traditional school settings before entering the BRIDGE program. After learning a mix of academic and calming strategies, students who successfully exit the program saw an average score increase of 76% on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. In addition, 64% of these students significantly decreased their suspension times from traditional schools (2017). These overwhelming statistics demonstrate when struggling students are taught how to self-regulate

and manage stress, they perform better academically and behaviorally. For at-risk students who are underperforming academically, it may be worth teaching these strategies alongside classwork, rather than solely teaching academics.

As Carroll and Conklin-Spillane (2015) found, if students can receive academic interventions, they may also decrease their negative behaviors in class. In their research, the authors found high school students receiving either of two reading interventions behaved better in the classroom setting, with minor behavior infractions becoming almost non-existent. This research shows when students can succeed in class, they want to participate rather than disrupt. Darling-Aduana's research (2019) confirms this notion by finding at-risk students who take online classes, accessible at any time, attended 2.45 more sessions than students in a traditional classroom setting.

Substance abuse, bullying, and deviant behaviors are major negative influences on middle and high school students. Identifying the driving factors behind why students take part in these behaviors and teaching them how to self-regulate are important steps to keep students from consistently bad decisions, both in and out of school.

### **School Attendance**

To be successful in their education, students need to attend school in some way. Sanders, Munford, and Boden's study (2018) found over the course of six years, at-risk students became less involved in their education over every period of the research. In each of those intervals, the proportion of students who were on track in their education also decreased at a statistically significant level. This means for at-risk students, attendance is even more important to their success. For a group of students identified largely due to their truancy, this risk factor can easily become a major cause of failure in many areas.

One of the best ways to improve student attendance is by making the school a physically and emotionally safe place for students to spend their time. Many studies have shown mentor programs between teachers and students effectively create this atmosphere in the school. As Lindt and Blair (2017) discovered, middle school mentoring relationships that are informal, flexible, mentee-focused, and listening oriented improved student attendance and decreased dropout rates throughout high school and college more than other types. Middle school students benefit from a loosely structured program where a mentee can seek out their mentor and talk about their problems as needed, rather than a rigorous, scripted mentoring session occurring on a schedule. Essentially, this study shows students can gain more from a supportive ear than from planned counseling.

Huffman (2013) also found social workers within schools can have a similar impact on students. For high school students with multiple family structures, weekly meetings with social workers improved their attendance. The researchers found many reasons possibly leading to this outcome, including the facts that social workers can work with parents to create attendance improvement plans and implement those plans using methods school officials and teachers cannot, including physically transporting the student to school and applying for services of which students and parents are unaware. Although this is a different take on mentoring than Lindt and Blair (2017) took, the main takeaway is the same; when students communicate with adults in positions to make changes, changes can be made to help the student.

Another way students can feel safer and more self-sufficient in schools is by learning how to handle stress and negative incidents throughout their days. Students who feel overwhelmed or unsure of themselves may avoid school as it places a demand on student work and performance. Teaching students to rise to the occasion and to be mentally strong can help

negate some of the stress they feel on a typical day. At the BRIDGE alternative school in Lowell, Massachusetts, students are taught calming and self-regulation strategies to combat emotional distress (Spiegel, 2017). Many of these students are at BRIDGE due to physical altercations, attendance issues, and mental health concerns, often amalgamating in excessive suspensions and expulsion from public schools.

Of these at-risk students, 64% significantly reduce the amount of suspension time they earn (Spiegel, 2017), allowing them the opportunity to attend school more than they had before. This is an indicator that students lash out when stressed and that teaching them self-regulating strategies can reduce outbursts and suspension time. If students are more in control of their emotions and are lashing out less, they may also be more inclined to attend school since there would be fewer incidents causing them to dislike or fear school.

For students who truly dislike school, feel endangered, or simply prefer working on their own schedule, research has shown online classes are often helpful. Jennifer Darling-Aduana (2019) found students who take online classes are more engaged in their work and attend more classes per year than students in face-to-face settings. Since students can access their online classes remotely, Darling-Aduana determined these students spent about 2.45 more days per school year logged into their curriculum than traditional students spent in their classes. Since the online courses are self-paced, it stands to reason nearly all the online students' time was spent on academics, whereas traditional students are likely disengaged for a large amount of time throughout that year. If students struggle to attend classes in person, they may feel school is a waste of time. However, if they feel they get out what they put into it, online courses may be an effective method of reengaging and retaining students.

On a similar note, students who believe they have a stronger grasp of the content they are to learn may also be more encouraged to attend school. A study by Carroll and Conklin-Spillane (2015) found students who were instructed in whole-class reading interventions saw a 50% decrease in unexcused absences. The two classes each received different interventions, but both saw incredible improvements in academics, behavior, and attendance. Regardless of which intervention was better, it seems simply being engaged caused improvements in the students and their attendance.

### **Socio-emotional Stability**

While being physically present is incredibly important to a student's education, being emotionally invested is also critical. Before students can be completely engaged in their learning, they must feel they are safe in their learning environment. Socio-emotional stability includes this security in school but also accounts for factors outside of the school's control, such as home life, mental health, and activities not associated with the school. All students need security in school, but it is crucial for at-risk students because they often have little stability in other aspects of their lives.

Spiegel's research (2017) blatantly shows the importance of socio-emotional considerations in school. When the at-risk high schoolers at an alternative high school in Massachusetts were taught calming and self-regulatory strategies alongside their normal schoolwork, these students showed lower stress levels, lower suspension rates, and higher scores on standardized tests. Teaching students how to manage their emotions and self-regulate when they experience negative outcomes helps them develop problem-solving skills and become responsible adults who can deal with problems.



Muhammad and Mirza (2017) found similar results with 64 at-risk high school students in Pakistan. These students registered scores of “non-resilient” on a survey, then some underwent one hour of resilience activities daily for three months, after which they were surveyed again. The students scored much higher than the control group on later resilience tests and reported a more positive, supportive, appreciative learning environment (Muhammad and Mirza, 2017).

The works of Spiegel (2017) and Muhammad and Mirza (2017) are reinforced by Szlyk’s research (2018), which showed the most effective method of teaching students independence is to identify the problem, address the problem, and move on. The teachers in the survey noted the best ways to model and teach independence and social responsibility were through interactions with students and through the teachers’ teaching philosophies (Szlyk, 2018). Szlyk also found the school environment mirrored the philosophies of the teachers and the interactions between students and teachers. Based on this research, students take after their teachers and school employees must all act the way they expect the students to act. Furthermore, having staff who all buy in to the same philosophy can increase the rate of change in a school, since the school environment embodies that philosophy.

In a similar vein, Harðardóttir, Júlíusdóttir, & Guðmundsson (2015) found the best way to instill resilience in students is to foster that trait in their parents. Specifically for students with learning disabilities, resilience is an important characteristic because these students will inevitably face some form of failure in their lives. The research of Szlyk (2018) and Harðardóttir et. al (2015) both found a strong correlation between teacher attitude and student academic success. Both studies also show students learn behaviors and attitudes from those around them, including adults and peers. To change the actions and beliefs of our young learners, teachers, staff, and parents need to change their own actions and beliefs.

While the first and most important education in a person's life comes from their parents, children can easily learn negative lessons and attitudes from them. Schools can majorly impact how teachers act, but they have little authority to dictate how parents behave. Huffman (2013) found the marital status of parents strongly affects their children's school attendance and academic performance. Of 122 elementary and high school students, the 29 students who lived with a non-biological parent (guardian) had the lowest algebra scores, the highest suspension rate, and the second lowest attendance and English scores. The 35 students who lived with one biological parent of the opposite sex had the second lowest algebra scores, the second highest suspension rate, and the lowest attendance and English scores. In summary, the highest suspension rates and lowest attendance, English scores, and algebra scores all belonged to these two groups.

Huffman (2013) also found having a social worker in the school can offset some negative behaviors and mental fatigue. Specifically, when social workers meet regularly with at-risk students during the school day, students are less likely to suffer from depression or have outward behavior resulting in discipline at school. In many ways, social workers can have an impact on students more effectively than teachers, including creating behavior improvement plans (with a possibility of the social worker transporting the student) and collaborating with the students' parents more consistently (including day and extended visits) than teachers can manage.

Finally, Huffman (2013) found many people who suffer from mental issues or those who would be considered at-risk are not aware of government services for which they may qualify. For these reasons, Huffman believes it is imperative for schools to offer the services of a social worker within their system.

### **Engagement Strategies**

Engaging students in school is widely understood as one of the most crucial factors in quality education. However, students vary greatly in background, interests, and home life, so teachers need to be intentional about engagement in their planning. Elffers (2013) found vocational students aged 16 and older are more engaged when they perceive little opportunity for autonomous working in the program. If students feel they can do something on their own, they do not engage in instruction in the topic. If students see a benefit to the instruction, such as being able to do a task they would not have been able to do without being taught, they will engage in the learning because they understand the benefit.

Another finding from Elffers' study is student engagement was not correlated with the perceived difficulty of the program or strictness of school rules (2013). This means students did not disengage when they thought the content was too hard or the school staff was too mean, but when the students thought the instruction was not beneficial to them. In practice, if teachers can show the value of the content they teach, students may be more engaged than if they are simply told they must know what they are taught.

According to Trevino-Maack, Kamps, and Wills (2015) two effective ways to increase student engagement are to implement group contingencies and teach self-efficacy strategies. Group contingencies are external motivators used to encourage behaviors for an entire group, which are then rewarded. In this case, the authors created a token economy where tickets were given to reward actions such as increased writing in daily logs (total words) and active participation actions, like reading aloud and answering questions related to the reading. The high school students who received the group contingency showed a 129% increase in total words written and an additional 21% of students in class were actively engaged. This approach seems to

have at least short-term success and could lead to the development of internal motivation, which is more permanent.

Another strategy for teaching self-monitoring and responsibility is goal setting. Creating realistic goals incentivizes students to work harder in order to attain them. However, simply setting goals is not enough. Carroll, Gordon, Haynes, and Houghton (2013) studied groups of delinquent, at-risk, and non-at-risk adolescents to identify what types of goals they set and their level of self-efficacy. Carroll et. al (2013) found non-at-risk students generally set goals related to academic image, whereas at-risk students set athletics-related goals, and delinquent students set goals related to social or reputational aspects.

In these students, at-risk and delinquent students also had lower academic self-efficacy and self-regulatory efficacy than non-at-risk students (Carroll et. al, 2013). This research demonstrates delinquent and at-risk students may have such low academic belief in themselves that they resort to prioritizing other areas over school, such as athletics, social interactions, or delinquent behavior. Non-at-risk students generally believe they can be successful in school and then actualize their success. Engaging at-risk and delinquent students to set goals could start them on a path of improvement that reprioritizes academics and deprioritizes delinquent behavior.

At Idaho State University, GED-holding students received mentoring (including counseling, job training, and English and math tutoring) for two years in order to engage and retain them (Nix et. al, 2015). In this study, students who completed the mentoring program had a final GPA of 3.38, up from 2.79 at the start of the mentorship. Retention also increased 8-12% each semester of the program (Nix et. al, 2015). Since these students all entered the program with GEDs, they were considered at risk of not graduating. However, many students saw

increased success with a mentoring program because of the multiple interventions included with it. Nix's research can be extended to secondary students to show simply hoping at-risk students turn it around and become successful on their own is unrealistic. A mentor program or other combination of interventions that engage students and require check-ins would be much more effective, both academically and regarding retention.

### **Mentoring Programs**

Many schools incorporate some sort of formal or informal mentoring system for at-risk students, often with multiple students assigned to one teacher mentor, who also typically teaches a full day. Schools also utilize counselors and at-risk specialist teachers to act as formal mentors, but informal mentors could be any school faculty or staff, including secretaries, custodians, food service personnel, and many other people. Like the findings of Nix et. al (2015), Lindt and Blair (2017) found mentor relationships increased academic success and retention in at-risk middle school students, especially when the relationship is informal, flexible, mentee-focused, and listening-oriented. For students at such an impressionable and crucial age, it appears rigid, goal-oriented mentoring is less effective than simply being a person to whom a struggling student can talk openly. For this group, having a trustworthy mentor appears to be more important than that mentor being an educator or trained in mentorship.

According to the research of Morales, Ambrose-Roman, and Perez-Maldonado (2016), students with a mentor could also experience increased levels of social interaction and self-efficacy. This research included 45 students taking developmental math courses at a public university in New Jersey who were each paired with a mentor based on their survey responses. Each mentee was required to attend weekly tutoring sessions and certain social events. Due to these requirements, every mentee had increased social engagement, but 70% of all mentees

reported attending optional academic events, as well (Morales et. al, 2016). In addition, 80% of mentees reported increased self-efficacy and 72% of mentees graduated the program, compared to 35% of non-mentees in the same program.

In Simões & Alarcão's (2014) study, mentees concluded their mentors were helpful in helping them reach goals. Over the course of a year-long mentorship, these mentors and mentees met in weekly groups for nine months, then met individually to discuss mentoring goals, later moving on to discussing academic concerns, relationship problems, and finally discussing self-regulating strategies. When discussing after the mentorship, mentors rarely mentioned characteristics of the mentees, speaking instead of their efforts and growth (2014). These mentors were all educational figures, but Lindt and Blair's research (2017) indicates similar results may occur with non-school personnel, as well.

For many schools, guidance counselors are becoming less of a reality because of budget constraints or inability to find trained, quality employees. Some of these schools resort to collaborating with their local social workers to meet regularly with students in need. According to Huffman (2013), these meetings decrease outward negative behavior and mental health issues. Social workers can help the school more than guidance counselors since social workers are not stationed in the schools. They can meet with and mentor parents as well as students, create attendance-improvement plans, and overcome barriers keeping students from physically attending school (Huffman, 2013). In areas that cannot afford or find a guidance counselor, utilizing social workers or other non-school personnel can be an invaluable second option.

### **School Profile & Baseline**

Pocahontas Area High School/Middle School serves 7<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> grade students within the PAC district, including those in the neighboring Laurens-Marathon 7-12 buildings due to a sharing agreement started in the 2017-2018 school year. The district (including Laurens-Marathon) serves about 700 students, with 450 of them in the 7-12 building in 2021-2022. Part of the lower K-6 enrollment is due to the private K-4 elementary, Pocahontas Catholic Elementary, which is not part of the public district.

Pocahontas is a historically effective institution, performing above the state averages in many areas and having many students recognized for a variety of honors. In 2021-2022, PAC had 30 active high school students who had been inducted into the National Honor Society, making up about 13% of 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade students. In extracurricular activities, Pocahontas regularly competes for state championships. Considering the separate histories of the schools represented in Pocahontas Area, PAC has two girls' basketball titles, eight boys' basketball titles, two football championships, and numerous individual wrestling state champions.

Academically, PAC's excellence continues to shine. According to the most recent available state statistics (from school year 2020-22), over 98% of students graduate from PAC within four years and 55% are deemed ready to succeed in post-secondary education (State of Iowa). Both values are significantly above the state averages, as are the percentages of students proficient in math and English. However, PAC students are making less growth in these subjects than the state average, landing in the 45<sup>th</sup> and 48<sup>th</sup> growth percentiles in English and math, respectively.

Overall, the Iowa State Report Card rated PAC High School as “commendable”, placing it in the top 52% of schools in the state, regardless of age or grade level (State of Iowa). Among

Iowa high schools (9-12), Pocahontas ranked 165<sup>th</sup> out of 402 schools, placing it in the top 41% of schools in overall performance, including factors such as academic performance and growth, graduation rates, and college readiness.

16.4% of PAC students were chronically absent in 2019-2020 (the most recent data), including 25.9% of students who qualified for free and reduced-price lunches, 22.7% of students with disabilities, 23.8% of Hispanic students, 21.1% of multi-racial students, and 15.7% of White students (State of Iowa). Of these classes, PAC outperformed the state average in all but free and reduced-price lunches (24.9%) and White students (13.6%). Interestingly, only the ninth grade at PACHS was above the state average for chronic absenteeism while the others were mostly well below the mean. 24.7% of PAC ninth grade students are chronically absent, compared to 19.4% at the state level. Removing this group would leave PAC with an average chronic absenteeism rate near 13%.

Decreasing chronic absenteeism has been a goal of the school ever since returning from the COVID school shutdown in 2020. Due to the high rate of absences, combined with the aftermath of the initial COVID onset, PAC schools allowed any student to choose to learn from home for the first semester of the 2020-2021 school year. For the second semester, the school required an application, which considered the student's academic performance, homework completion rate, and health concerns. Most applications were denied and most of the population returned to in-person learning. At the start of the 2021-2022 school year, virtual learning was discontinued completely and students were all required to attend school in person.

After the virtual learning option was essentially terminated at the end of the Fall 2020 term, returning all students to traditional classes was a priority at all levels of PAC. The high school staff specifically underwent professional development initiatives regarding trauma-



informed learning in hopes of making a more student-friendly and understanding atmosphere, in turn encouraging students to attend school more regularly. This fell in line with the school district's mission statement, which reads,

“Create and maintain an environment that ensures that every member of the school community reaches a high level of academic, social, emotional, physical, and aesthetic growth as determined by state and national standards. We commit to a comprehensive system of support to assure the outcome (PACSD).”

In accordance with this mission, PAC adopted the Illustrative Math curriculum in middle school and most high school courses, with plans to implement it in the elementary levels once the curriculum becomes available. The high school also developed a new senior-level math course called Applied Algebra II as a more practical alternative to traditional Algebra II for students who are not intending to pursue a four-year college degree, instead opting to enter the workforce or attend a trade school. These changes were made to accommodate the changing needs of the student body and support students as much as possible.

Pocahontas Area CSD also operates a Regional Learning Center (RLC) for students who struggle with a traditional school setting. These students are all considered at-risk and typically are very credit-deficient and will not graduate on time or at all. Other students simply have such inconsistent home lives that they cannot be successful in a school requiring consistency in attendance, behavior, and academics. These RLC students have a different schedule allowing them to work at their own pace, normally using learning software such as Odysseyware, to learn and demonstrate understanding of the required skills and content. These students are supervised and guided, both academically and aspirationally, by one person throughout the length of the program.



### **Needs Assessment**

Based on the school profile, PAC's biggest concern should be school climate and culture. Academic data shows student performance is above average in many areas. The teachers' professional development initiatives paired with the performance of the whole student body show the desire and ability of PAC teachers to improve student education. However, if the students do not attend school and make it a place where they all strive for excellence, the teachers' efforts may be in vain.

In a district that has recently taken on an additional 7-12 building, this is a crucial time to set an example of excellence. In addition to finding solutions to funding, transportation, and rivalries between the multiple communities involved, PAC must also address attendance, substance, and behavior concerns among the students before these problems overtake the school and cause irreversible change. Due to the statistics on PAC's at-risk students, this group appears to have major influence on the other students, meaning they should be the focus of PAC Middle/High School right now.

If PAC can manage to increase student attendance while simultaneously decreasing drug referrals and socio-emotional disturbances, the school clearly has an academic tradition that may shine brighter than ever before. Addressing at-risk student behavior could improve PAC's performance by not only improving the conduct of at-risk students but also by reducing the distractions and disruptions negatively affecting the rest of the student body.

### **School Data & Analysis**

At PAC, there is an abundance of data supporting the excellence of the school. However, many of these statistics are lower than they could be due to the drastic impact of low-performing at-risk students, as depicted in the table on page 20. For example, through the first 100 days of school in 2021-2022, PAC had 153 total discipline referrals in the 7-12 building. This is a relatively high number due to the small size of the school, but it is excessively skewed when considering the school's 62 at-risk students accounted for 90 of those referrals.

At-risk students make up 13.8% of the student body but account for 58.8% of all behavior referrals. Similarly, at-risk students were involved in 8 of 12 drug referrals in this time period. Removing at-risk students from these statistics yields only 63 discipline referrals for 357 students, which is a rate of about one incident per six students and one drug-related incident per 89 students. As a whole, PAC statistics indicate a referral rate of one incident per 2.74 students and one drug referral per 35 students. Attendance is a much less significant difference, with non-at-risk students attending 92% of classes and at-risk attending 87%, leading to a combined 91% attendance rate, but the gap is still clearly prevalent.

In the classroom, these issues continue. Of the 62 at-risk students in PAC, 31 of them have been completely removed from the traditional setting and placed in the Regional Learning Center (RLC), which acts as Pocahontas's alternative school. Most of these students are credit-deficient and will not graduate on time in a traditional setting, so they take online, self-paced classes to catch up. In the HS/MS, several students also take these classes because they are credit-deficient but can still graduate on time if they take online classes part-time. Another reason these students are allowed to take online courses is because they cause such disruption in certain classes the rest of the students cannot learn in the classroom setting. At that point, the at-

risk students are inhibiting the growth of others and themselves, which means learning could be improved multiple times over if the at-risk student's behavior is corrected.

These disruptions can show themselves in students' final grades. The cumulative GPA of non-at-risk students is impressive at 3.10 but that value is weighed down by a meager 1.95 average at-risk GPA. Overall, the school is mildly successful with a GPA of 2.91 but being below three drops the typical PAC student a partial letter grade. The GPA differences only apply to high school students because PAC does not track cumulative GPA for middle school students, but lower GPAs can have an impact on students' abilities to afford or even get into college, as well as demonstrating they are not learning the material as well as they could be.

A difference between at-risk and non-at-risk students is to be expected but this large, consistent gap in all these key areas is unacceptable. Since at-risk students can negatively affect the rest of the school, it is important their behavior, attendance, and academic work improve. Increasing performance in these areas will help at-risk students, non-at-risk students, the entire school, and the communities making up PAC.

**Table 1**

Referral and GPA Data for 7-12 PAC Students Through 100 School Days in 2021-2022 School Year

	<b>Number of Students</b>	<b>Behavior Referrals</b>	<b>Behavior Referral Rate</b>	<b>Drug Referrals</b>	<b>Drug Referral Rate</b>	<b>Daily Attendance Rate</b>	<b>Cumulative GPA*</b>
<b>At-Risk Students</b>	62	90	1 incident per .7 students	8	1 incident per 7.75 students	87%	1.95
<b>Non-At-Risk Students</b>	357	63	1 incident per 5.7 students	4	1 incident per 89.25 students	92%	3.10
<b>All Students</b>	419	153	1 incident per 2.74 students	12	1 incident per 34.92 students	91%	2.91

\* Cumulative GPA considers only 9-12 students because PAC does not calculate cumulative GPA for 7-8 students.

### **Action Plan**

To improve the education of at-risk students, PAC will implement the following changes during the 2022-2023 school year:

1. Elementary teachers will communicate with middle school staff about possible at-risk students before they transition to middle school.
2. At the middle school level, identify school employees to mentor at-risk students. Students will check in with mentors when they get to school and will check in with their teachers at the start of each class. Students will also check out with these staff members at the end of each class and the end of the school day.
3. A new class will be created for 9-12 at-risk students and co-taught by the two at-risk teachers in the building. This class will focus on teaching self-management, resiliency, and workplace skills, increasing self-efficacy, and allowing students to receive regular academic interventions built into the school day.
4. All PAC staff district-wide will undergo training during professional development regarding engagement strategies and will meet weekly in content groups to discuss the implementation of these strategies in their classrooms.

Before at-risk students can receive interventions, they must be identified. PAC has been a year behind in this area due to the transition from elementary to middle school and low identification numbers in the seventh-grade students. Once these students are identified, they will

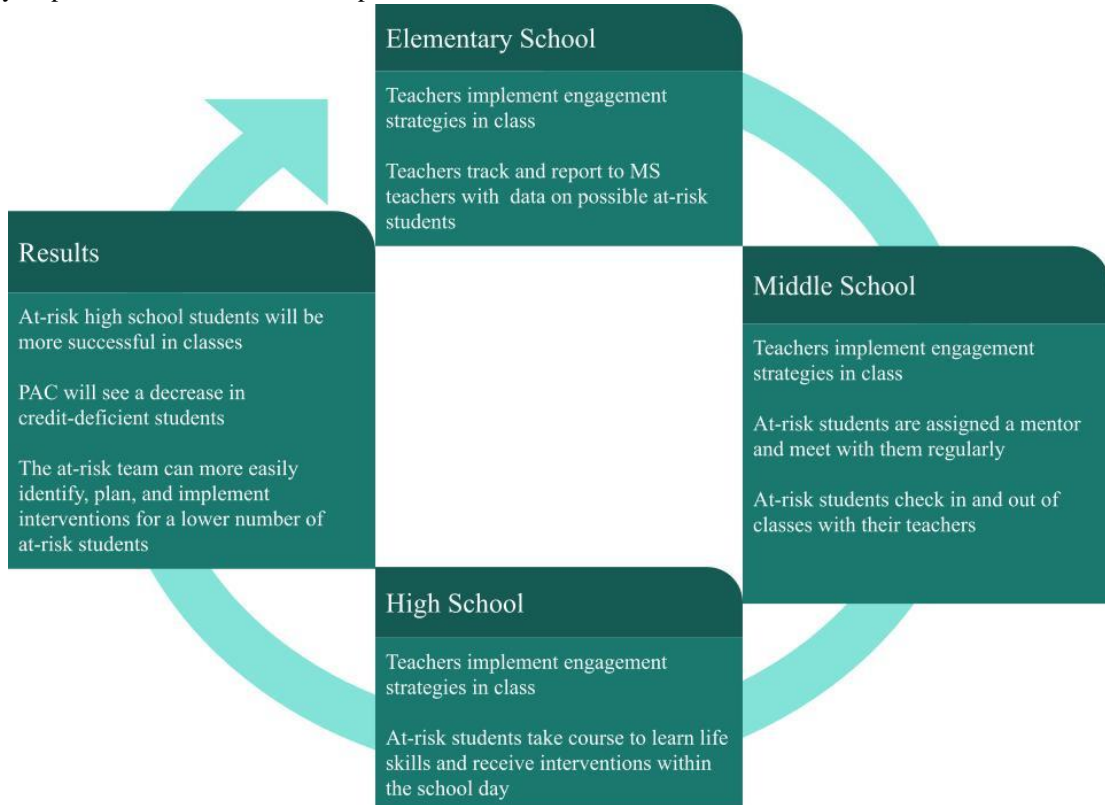
start their mentoring with a staff member in the building. The 7-12 staff will meet before the first day of school and identify a mentor for each at-risk student. When school starts, each student will check in with their mentor when they get to school and check out before they leave. This mentor will also periodically meet with the student throughout the year and make themselves available when the student needs support. During the school day, the at-risk students will check in and check out with each of their classroom teachers, as well. Consistently checking in and out with mentors and teachers ensures everyone is aware of how the student is feeling that day and creates intentional conversation where the student can share any issues or concerns they experience.

In high school, at-risk students will undergo a year-long class, taught by the two at-risk teachers, which is a mixture of life and job skills, academic intervention time, and study hall. This course will teach students self-management and self-efficacy skills to help students create a positive mindset, which will help them succeed in school and afterwards. Another aspect of this class would be academic intervention time, where the at-risk students will have time to work on homework and receive appropriate supports from teachers and/or associates, depending on the students' needs. This time will help students stay on track with their learning and improve their knowledge of content they may have misunderstood.

Combining these practices with an increased and improved usage of engagement strategies in general education classrooms should increase the number of students learning and passing classes, which in turn will decrease the number of credit-deficient students. Since they will have more credits, these students will graduate in less time than they required in the past, meaning the number of at-risk students will become lower, allowing at-risk personnel and mentors to focus on fewer students and to become more involved with those remaining students.

Since students will be more engaged in classes and performing better, research shows they will likely exhibit decreased negative behaviors, meaning all students will benefit from a more appropriate classroom dynamic, allowing for more academic retention for all students.

**Figure 1**  
Summary of planned interventions and expected results for PACSD





### **Implementation of the Plan**

In the school year 2022-2023, teachers at all levels will undergo professional development regarding engagement strategies in their classrooms, starting in September on the monthly PD day. By January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2023, each teacher will have planned, implemented, and been observed teaching a lesson including a component utilizing an engagement strategy from the PD. By April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2023, each teacher will plan, teach, and document three separate lessons incorporating three different engagement strategies. Completion of these tasks will be monitored and tracked by the TLC coordinator, who will report this data to each building principal.

Throughout school year 2022-2023 and beyond, middle school staff will track academic and behavior data on all students in an effort to identify at-risk students at the end of the year. During the March 2023 PD day, all 6<sup>th</sup> grade faculty will meet with all 7<sup>th</sup> grade faculty to discuss possible at-risk students who will matriculate to the MS/HS in Fall 2023. Both principals and all at-risk staff will also attend. At the end of this meeting, staff will have a document containing the names of high-risk and low-risk students for consideration of at-risk status in August 2023 at the MS/HS. Completion of these tasks will be monitored by the elementary school guidance counselor and principal.

Starting in school year 2022-2023, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade at-risk students will be matched with a staff mentor and will check in and out with him/her upon entering and leaving the building each day. Each at-risk student will also check in and out with their classroom teachers at the start and end of each class. At each check in and check out, the student will share any concerns, frustrations, or needs for help. Mentors will also pull students out of TRIBES at least once a week to discuss these issues in a private setting, one on one. Mentors will report weekly to the at-risk coordinators with any ongoing concerns about the student, or his/her failures to check in or

out consistently. Teachers will also report to at-risk coordinators regarding any consistently missed check-ins or check-outs.

In school year 2023-2024, PACHS will offer a life skills course including academic intervention time and the teaching of self-regulation and motivation strategies. All 9-12 at-risk students will take this course one period each day, both semesters. This course will be taught by the two at-risk coordinators at the MS/HS and will include interventions by the guidance counselor, English department, and Math department, as necessary. At each midterm, the at-risk coordinators will meet with the guidance counselor and the HS principal to review data on at-risk students regarding attendance, behavior referrals, and drug referrals. At this time, specific individuals may be identified to receive different levels and types of supports or interventions.

At the end of each school year, the HS principal, guidance counselor, and at-risk coordinators will meet to review year-long data regarding at-risk students. This plan will be considered “in-progress” until school year 2025-2026, where all middle school at-risk students will have been mentored in this system for two full years, allowing time for the interventions to be used consistently. At this point, the high school students will also have taken the life skills course for two years, which should help them become more engaged in classes and allow them time to have received interventions.

At the end of the first 100 school days of school year 2024-2025, PAC will expect the following goals to be met:

1. At-risk student attendance increases from 87% in 2022-2023 to at least 90%.
2. At-risk student behavior referrals decrease from 90 in 2022-2023 to no more than 75.
3. At-risk student drug referrals decrease from 8 in 2022-2023 to no more than 5.

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