

# Whatever it Takes: A Lesson in Classroom Transformation for the At-Risk Learner

Even on the most bitter of wintry days, they come to school. They come with tangled burdens and clustered emotions. They come with ravenous stomachs and drowsy heads and heavy limbs. Even so, they arrive on hooves of splendid dreams and they bring with them a craving for graduation. In their classroom, there is a brightness that quenches the routine of days; indeed, where they used to have grim academic harvests they now have vivid scholastic expectations. Although they sometimes bemoan the teacher's insistence upon open binders and on-task conduct, they generally are happy to be in school. They express their joy by means of lighthearted banter with the teacher and with each other.

It is in this ordinary classroom in an ordinary high school on an ordinary day where they find acceptance and belonging. These at-risk learners are not chastised for past lapses in their school histories; rather, they are praised for trying school yet once again. A closer glimpse into this classroom reveals some seemingly trivial variations. For example, there are tables and chairs instead of desks which, in turn, foster a climate of peer-to-peer assistance. Class begins two hours later in the morning which accommodates the students who, for whatever life circumstance, find it unfeasible to arrive for an early start. Furthermore, each curricular subject is modularized; students simply must complete the



module to earn the credit. This makes all the difference in the world for learners at-risk. At no time do they receive a failing mark but receive only a passing mark once the module has been completed. Modularized instruction has an added benefit as well: students have a choice of which subject they work on as the day progresses. As long as they are on task, the teacher is not likely to interfere with their subject-specific decisions.

But the students in this classroom are still indeed at-risk. They have a myriad of heartbreaking reasons to not succeed in school. A classroom which is transformed to meet the students where they are at in their life circumstances is a good first step towards success. Such classrooms should be staffed with teachers who have a reclaiming "whatever it takes" philosophy. These are the teachers who repeatedly go above and beyond to connect with kids. In addition, supports should be in place to adjust the self-jeopardizing habits of youth at-risk. Through a team approach,

students who experience chronic substance issues should be offered alcohol and drug assessment and counseling. If students are expectant parents, they should be offered counseling and wellness support to help them make the healthiest decisions possible. Although many of these students are often prone to fall off the radar pretty early in the school year, attendance expectations should be raised: specifically, students should not receive their credits if they have not been in school most of the time. It is not sufficient to have the students producing academic success. They must also be at school to allow the channels of connection to be bridged and the spirit of reclaiming to flourish.

Authors Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern (2001, rev.ed.) describe a reclaiming environment in their book *Reclaiming Youth At Risk: Our Hope for the Future*. Using the Circle of Courage quadrants of generosity, mastery, belonging, and independence, at risk youth can succeed. A classroom which has been transformed to use these four concepts as its cornerstones has a first-rate chance of also transforming young lives. This type of classroom measures success by the number of students who attend school regularly (where they did not previously), the number of students who graduate, and the number of students whose conversations change from, "Today I will...." to, "In my life I will..."

To be an educator working with succeeding youth in such an environment is indeed the most worthwhile experience one can ever hope for.



#### About the Author

Sharlene McGowan is a guidance counselor in an inner-city public high school in Canada. She has both initiated at-risk programming and taught in classrooms transformed for at-risk learners. Sharlene is often invited to give keynote addresses on working with youth at-risk. Sharlene McGowan teaches educational psychology at the university level and is a freelance writer for educational texts. She can be reached at [smcgowan@sasktel.net](mailto:smcgowan@sasktel.net).

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#### ***Getting to the Heart of Education- Listening to the Whole Child***

Many students in schools are crying for help with their real life issues, such as sex, drugs and violence and yet many educators respond with an emphasis on academic proficiency skills. Many educators and researchers believe that listening to the whole child, not just the academic child, is the most effective way to reach and teach all students, especially reluctant learners who at risk for dropping out or who need alternative approaches to help them learn more and live better. With *No Child Left Behind* and its stress on academic achievement at all costs with little regard for the mental, social, physical, emotional or spiritual aspects of the whole child, many teachers teach tests and not students. Many students react and vote with their feet as nearly 1 out 3 students drop out of school because they are not motivated and are bored with the "drill and kill" approach of many educators. If kids are not learning the way we are teaching them, we must change the way we are teaching them. It is a time for a change.