Welcome to RAPSA’s Quarterly Journal

RAPSA is in the process of building a network of committed professionals who want to establish best practices for serving at-promise students and advocate for policies that support student success.

This second issue of our quarterly publication provides four articles about research and initiatives across the country that explore solutions for serving out-of-school and other high-risk youth. We’ve also included links to news that may inform strategies that you develop to serve at-promise students.

- “At Risk” Or “At Promise”? From Deficit Constructions To Possibilities For Authentic Alliances With Children And Families
- Schools For Students Who Struggle Are Not The Same As Struggling Schools
- Bridging Alternative Education To College Entry And Success
- ASN Serves True Heroes, The Youth!

Legislatures across the Country are actively in session. Please share issues that are arising in your state so that we can learn from each other. In California, Assembly Members Jones-Sawyer, Santiago, Smith and Weber have authored AB 413 to replace the words “at risk” with the words “at promise” in both California’s Education and Penal Codes. At the Reaching At Promise Students Association we appreciate the recognition that it’s time to replace the deficit mindset that the term “at risk” establishes. In this Journal we have included an article from Dr. Beth Swadener who has long argued that “at promise” is the best way to recognize the potential of young people facing challenges. AB 413 was approved by the Assembly Education Committee on April 11th by a 5 to 1 vote. The bill will be heard next in the Assembly Public Safety Committee. We also include the Committee Analysis of the bill.

Please send us your thoughts so that this journal becomes a platform for sharing strategies, research and support among education, community and workforce leaders who serve the 16-24 year old at-promise population. Please feel free to submit articles to me by email (ernie.silva@siatech.org) about your own successes and ideas for improving our work here.

Finally, we encourage your active membership in RAPSA. Please find a membership level that meets your needs. This quarter, new members will earn a $50 discount on the 2019 Alternative Accountability Policy Forum registration.

Thank you for your passion and commitment.

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"At Risk" Or "At Promise"? From Deficit Constructions To Possibilities For Authentic Alliances With Children And Families
By Beth Blue Swadener, Arizona State University - Tempe, Arizona USA

When I began a critical analysis of the evolution of “at risk” rhetoric twenty years ago, I found over 2,500 articles, conference papers, and monographs that used this label and assumed its validity. In the U.S., the terminology had shifted from “culturally deprived and deficient” (used widely in the 1960s and 1970s) and “disadvantaged” (used in the 1980s) to the currently popular “at risk”.

Since 1989, a growing number of state and national education reports in the U.S. have continued to address the “at risk” theme; perhaps the most publicized was the 1983 report A Nation at Risk. In the 1990s, many states passed laws defining and mandating programs for “at risk” children and families. In short, the term “at risk” has become a buzzword to increase the likelihood of funding. There is a clear ideology underlying the use of the medical metaphor “at risk”. I suggest that we reconceptualize all children as “at promise” for success, versus “at risk” for failure. The problem of locating pathology in young victims and their families is, in my opinion, the most objectionable tenet of the “at risk” rhetoric.

The language of deficiency, whether applied to parenting, academic potential, preparation for success in school and work, or health-related factors, is pervasive in public policy discourses concerning young children and their families. In calling for an “at promise” view of all children and families, we have not intended to play a semantic substitution game of trading the “at-risk” label for an “at promise” one. Rather, we encourage everyone working with children and families to look for and build upon the promise in all children and to concentrate valuable energies and resources on building on these strengths while addressing the many structural and environmental factors that have been argued to place many children “at risk.”

Implicit in the “at risk” theme is the perceived lack of agency, promise, and resiliency in the lives of those living in poverty – often children and families of color. A view of children and families “at promise” requires a critical examination of the dominant culture and popular media’s “common sense” about “high risk” children and building a positive alliance with all parents.

As an example of focusing on the promise of students and families by the institute for Education that is Multicultural, colleagues and I focused on urban public schools undergoing school-wide reform and emphasized a better understanding of the communities they serve and more equitable and effective academic preparation of the students. These reforms have included starting each school year with a parent-teacher-student conference in which parents are asked, “What are your goals for your child this year?” A question too rarely asked of low income parents and parents of color. Another change has been the “de-tracking” of the curriculum away from ability groups in advanced or honors courses to a recognition that all students are at promise and encouragement of a more culturally inclusive curriculum for all learners. The results were evident within the first two years of this “experiment,” parent involvement was greatly increased, as were student achievement test scores at the end of the school year.

Those of us who fight for educational equity must not lose sight of the multiple forces that converge in a brutal assault against children, particularly poor children and children of non-dominant culture backgrounds, as they seek the mandated knowledge, differentially packaged, in our schools. Advocacy for and with children and families is urgent in these times and stronger alliances between educators and families, particularly families who are socially excluded, offer promise for a more inclusive and equitable future. We must find the will and the character to view all children through the lens of promise rather than the bias of risk.

Schools For Students Who Struggle Are Not The Same As Struggling Schools
By Michael Rothman

Six weeks ago, New York State identified one out of every four New York City transfer schools for Comprehensive School Improvement, a designation for struggling schools that requires them to implement a change plan to reach certain benchmarks. But the accountability metrics used to determine these ratings aren’t designed to distinguish between transfer schools and traditional schools.

Transfer schools are by definition fundamentally different educational entities from traditional schools. Their mission is to take in students who are over-age and under-credited—those repeatedly failed by the system. These schools are filling a gap that existing structures created and are doing an invaluable service to our state’s students and families. From Eskolta’s own first-hand experience working with 40+ transfer schools in NYC for nearly a decade, in most cases these schools are doing valuable and effective work to re-engage students after they fall off track in other schools. Their varying models—whether smaller class sizes, additional social-emotional supports, or individualized and flexible pathways to graduation—offer students a welcoming and supportive environment grounded in their individual needs. But the state’s measures as designed currently do a poor job of assessing the progress taking place inside their walls.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires states to establish accountability systems to ensure schools are serving their students well. It also gives states the flexibility to design a system that would accurately measure the work of alternative schools. The starting point is grounding this analysis in the recognition that these schools intentionally enroll students who are at different starting points than other high school students. While there’s no perfect solution, we have identified a number of comparisons and benchmarks reflective of the reality of these schools which we shared in this blueprint developed last year with Center for American Progress.

If we are serious about supporting all students, we need to invest time and thought into creating improved criteria to assess schools that meet the definition of alternative education campuses. Transfer schools can and should be held accountable, but this must be done using measures that are meaningful and based in the realities of their role in the education system. Otherwise, attempts to ensure our schools serve the students most in need will end up penalizing them.

This editorial by Eskolta Founder Michael Rothman was previously published at http://eskolta.org/schools-for-students-who-struggle-are-not-the-same-as-struggling-schools/
It’s not news that it is increasingly difficult to obtain self-sustaining employment with only a high school diploma at the same time that employers struggle to find trained workers, particularly workers who can fill “middle skill” job openings. Community colleges, long a vehicle for economic and social mobility, can play an important role in preparing students for those positions. Their programs are flexible, reasonably priced, and informed by current employer needs. In the California Community College system, Guided Pathways, Multiple Measures Placement, Strong Workforce, and MakerSpace programs are proof of a commitment to student academic success and subsequent employability. What, though, can be done to increase the number of students enrolling in community college and staying enrolled long enough to take advantage of these programs? For many students, attending college can seem as out of reach as it is vital.

In California, 4–5 percent of students attend high school in an “alternative” setting, e.g., a continuation, community day, juvenile court, or re-engagement charter school. However, alternative schools serve more than twice that number throughout the year. As a group, these students experience more poverty, more trauma, and less support at home and are more likely to be first-generation college students than their counterparts in traditional high schools. These challenges impact alternative education students’ academic access and success, eventually limiting their employment options. Alternative education students need the improved career options that come with continuing education, and the economy needs a trained workforce that includes everyone.

SIATech High Schools enroll opportunity youth ages 16–24 who would like to earn a high school diploma. In the process of designing career pathways, SIATech quickly discovered that increasing the number of students enrolling in postsecondary education and training programs was going to require intensive, personalized support from a college and career counselor. Our students often don’t see themselves as the “college type.” They frequently believe that they are ineligible for financial aid or don’t know how to access it, and are unaware of how a certificate program or associates degree can greatly improve their career choices. Additionally, family, work, and financial responsibilities appear to be (or actually are) at odds with attending college.

Students begin a SIATech career pathway by taking career interest surveys. Then they meet with a SIATech student support specialist to review the results and explore career options. While CTE courses are available to students interested in taking them, the real focus is on empowering students with the self and career knowledge to make good decisions, and to help them to feel comfortable in environments that are likely very new and intimidating.

The student support specialist arranges college visits for students, holds financial aid workshops, helps students register for and complete dual enrollment courses, and invites guest speakers (including college student ambassadors and industry professionals) to meet with students. College and career readiness resources are also available to students via an online repository, and as part of their coursework.

These efforts are paying off. Students participating in a pathway have a retention rate that is 15 percent higher than their non-pathway peers. The program is too new to produce meaningful data about post-graduation outcomes, but students are talking about, visiting, and taking courses at their local community college in ever greater numbers. The experience of our student support specialists is proof that with the right support, alternative education students are interested in and able to access and succeed in college.

**ASN Serves True Heroes, The Youth!**

At ASN, the true heroes are the youth we serve

**In The Words of Malik…**

“Alternative Schools Network (ASN) saved my life. I recall a 17 year old Malik Milon walking through the doors of Sullivan House High School August of 2015 with no purpose. I wasn't even living, I was merely existing. I didn't have any goals, drive or ambition. Just 4 months before that, I'd lost my father to gun violence. I was on a slippery slope, and it had been over a year since I've been in any school. I didn't think I was going to finish. I never liked traditional school, I wasn't in a positive space at all, and I wasn't in a position where I could afford nice clothes or shoes to wear. But little did I know, none of that mattered once I stepped foot in Sullivan House High School, an ASN member school. I came to ASN to be a student. I didn't know I would be welcomed into a family full of loving, supportive educators and peers. That's exactly what ASN is; a family. It was nothing like the traditional schooling I was used to. This was a completely different environment and culture. Everyone was on the same mission and no one was bigger than the next person. There were no social barriers or segregation. Everyone knew everyone and respect and love was universal. This is where I found my purpose in life. Here I gained confidence and was in a loving space where I could grow and embrace my talents.

At Sullivan House, the students and staff supported my talents and pushed me to believe in myself. They even gave me several opportunities to showcase my music and public speaking. I was able to play organized basketball again! Something I thought I'd never get the chance to do again. In 2017, I graduated a proud student and family member of ASN. However, the family ties didn't stop there. Even after graduating, ASN stayed in contact and supported me in every way they possibly could. Thanks to people like Jack, Martrice, Genessa, Darnell, Dr. G. and many more, I was able to blossom. I went in a caterpillar and came out a butterfly. I learned family, love, humility, and purpose. Four years after walking through those doors, and I'm still connecting with ASN and being given opportunities to develop my public speaking and embark on my creative endeavors. I never even imagined I'd be facilitating big events or signing contracts to work with students who are being welcomed into the same family I walked into. It is because of ASN that I am who I am today. ASN saves and changes lives. There’s no family like it!”