

MINORITY STUDENTS ARE FAR FROM ACADEMIC



By Christopher T. Vang

SUCCESS AND STILL AT-RISK IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

As a teacher, it is my belief that every child deserves a good education, and every teacher should be committed to meeting every child's academic needs and providing all with an equal learning opportunity in the classroom. Quality teachers who deliver meaningful instruction have great influence on student learning and success. Knowing the characteristics of at-risk students can help teachers identify the factors in their academic success or lack of success.

I am excited to share some research findings involving at-risk students with those who are dealing with these kinds of students on a daily basis to help them understand why at-risk students are not learning at greater speeds. There is more than one way to teach students and not all students learn the same way.

BILINGUAL STUDENTS ARE SPROUTING IN CALIFORNIA

Today, language-minority students comprise one of the fastest-growing segments of the total student population in America, a culturally and linguistically diverse group. In California, approximately 80% of Limited English Proficient students (LEP) speak Spanish and the other 20% speak Vietnamese, Hmong, Cantonese, Tagalog, and other languages. More than one hundred languages are spoken daily by children in California's public schools.

Moreover, California has approximately 1.5 million LEP students in its public schools. At least 38% of the total student populace in public schools in the U.S. belongs to an ethnic minority, and a large portion of this group comes from a language-disadvantaged family. Zehr (2000) projected that in 25 years, one in every four elementary students will be Hispanic since Hispanic is the nation's largest racial minority. Moreover, 58% of the nation's LEP student population were born in America, and of that number, 74% are from Hispanic background (Manning & Baruth, 2004).

Many language-minority students in public schools are classified by the school as at-risk. However, the classification may not be an accurate portrayal of every student so designated. The classifications are probably based on a sorting paradigm in which some students receive instruction based on high expectations and the rest are relegated to lower quality education and lower quality futures (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory [NCREL], 1999).

HOW PUBLIC SCHOOLS CLASSIFY AND TRACK LANGUAGE LEARNERS

As required by academic mandates, public schools classify language-minority students as LEP or fluent English proficient (FEP) following an initial assessment process. California is currently using the California English Language Development Test (CELDT) to measure English proficiency in second-language learners. LEP students are classified according to five English-Language Development (ELD) levels: Level I (pre-production), Level II (early production), Level III (speech emergence), Level IV (in-

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intermediate fluency) and Level V (advanced). Public schools sometimes offer LEP students primary language instruction, bilingual tutoring services, English language development or specifically designed academic instruction in English, or bilingual instructional assistance.

Most public schools are more likely to classify language-minority students as LEP than FEP and place them in three main categories: (a) students identified by school districts as limited English proficient, (b) students who were foreign-born and entered public schools for the first time in the U.S. but learned English quickly, and (c) adolescents who were foreign-born and came to America between the ages of 11 and 18. Sedlacek (1995) stated that the labeling of bilingual students is often done for social control; he called the practice "the quest for the golden label" because public schools sometimes misuse the label to "solve" academic problems.

A large number of bilingual students fall into the at-risk category because their cultural and linguistic backgrounds put them at a disadvantage in the American educational system and place them in a position in which school, second-language learning, academic achievement, and cross-cultural adjustment could be difficult. Miranda, Halsell, and Debarone (1991) reported demographic statistics that indicated that at-risk students are usually poor and of ethnic minority status.

Similarly, Horn, Chen, and Adelman (1998) found that risk factors often correlated highly with a student's gender, race, and socio-economic status. These authors listed five personal risk factors: low socio-economic measurement, single-parent family, dropout history in the family, mobility rate, average grades of "C" or lower, and repeating an earlier grade.

WHAT KIND OF STUDENTS ARE CONSIDERED AT-RISK STUDENTS?

The term *at-risk* is not new to some experienced classroom teachers; however, its meaning and implications may be relatively new to some teachers who may not know how to deal with students so identified. The At-Risk Institute (U.S. Department of Education, 1998) reported that students were at risk of educational failure because of limited English proficiency, poverty, economic disadvantage, or specific race or geographic location. The institute cited many definitions of the term *at-risk*, some based on economic and cultural characteristics. Some of the definitions were based on an ecological view of educational risk, systemic failure, or the inequity of

access to educational opportunity and academic achievement.

Researchers have found that at-risk students come from every part of the community and have varied needs (Barr and Parrett, 1995; Lange and Lehr, 1999). Lee-Pierce, Plowman, and Touchston (1998) observed that not all children have a childhood filled with a variety of experiences and not all begin school with a library of knowledge in pre-reading or science skills. These authors suggested that children raised in poverty are especially at-risk.

Wright (1997) and Tugent (1986) described an at-risk student as an individual who was chemically dependent, a dropout, suicidal, either sexually active or pregnant in the teenage years, or alcoholic. Brown (1986) defined an at-risk student as someone in one of the following categories: chronically truant, underachiever, troublemaker, economically disadvantaged, poor student, minority young person, runaway, delinquent, unemployed teen, or lacking motivation to do well in school or work (p. 13).

Brown (1986) proposed two definitions for *at-risk*. The first considered an individual's background, social, and emotional characteristics. The second was based on problematic behaviors, including low grades, skipping classes, disruptive actions, underachievement, and lack of academic progress. Brown suggested that behavioral traits were crucial in identifying at-risk students. Moreover, Brown confirmed that the term *at-risk* was normally applied to students rather than children in general, since educational institutions commonly use the term *at-risk* to predict students' academic success or failure.

Dougherty (1989) defined as at-risk those students who, for a variety of reasons, did not perform well in school and were likely to drop out. Slavin, Karvell, and Madden (1989) widened the definition to take in those students who were in danger of dropping out or leaving school without adequate skills. The term *at-risk* has also been applied to students with a high probability of school failure or learning problems.

Siu (1996) observed that *at-risk* was not synonymous with dropping out; some high school students graduate but have inadequate academic competencies. Siu noted that many Asian-American students do not drop out, but quietly fail in school. Siu also expressed concern regarding the number of Asian-American students who leave school with less than adequate proficiency in English. Siu cautioned that researchers, school districts, and state agencies define *at-risk* differently, each having its own operational definition of the term. This creates difficulty when comparing aca-

demetic statistics and research data on at-risk students.

Inside the classroom, some educators identify at-risk students according to five different approaches:

1. In the achievement approach, an at-risk student is one with two or more failing semester course grades.
2. In the age approach, an at-risk student is one who is 2 or more years older than grade-level peers are.
3. In the attendance approach, a student is at-risk who misses more than 20% of required classes.
4. In the discipline approach, an at-risk student is one with one or more school suspensions.
5. In the transiency approach, a student who moves three or more times in one school year is at-risk.

Furthermore, some classroom teachers feel that language-minority students are more likely to be at-risk because they lack the academic language needed for performing academic tasks in school.

ENGLISH LEARNERS FACE COMPLEX PROBLEMS IN SCHOOL

When language-minority students first enter the public school system, they usually lack academic background, English skills, and appropriate learning styles needed for school success. Public schools face a multitude of problems with these students since appropriate placement or instructional methods are not always in place to meet their overall academic needs. Language deficiency is generally the biggest handicap, and the lack of language skills leads to low scholastic achievement, low test scores, and credit deficiencies. Furthermore, language-minority students face difficult challenges in the classroom because they speak one language at home and learn a new language in school.

Researchers have linked academic underachievement to the lack of academic language (Cummins, 1981; Kuehn, 1996; Stotsky, 1979; Wright, 1997). The nature of academic language is still a subject of debate among linguists, researchers, and scholars, but most experts, educators, and scholars agree that academic language is a distinct type of communication used in textbooks and classrooms (Wright, 1997). Students who are unfamiliar with it or fail to develop it, these educators say, could be academically at-risk. In most cases, second-language learners have difficulty with academic language. As Kuehn (1996) and

Wright (1997) observed, acquisition of academic language is vital at school regardless of a student's native language or cultural background.

Cummins (1981) distinguished between cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP)—language used for critical thinking and reasoning—and basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS)—language used for conversational purposes. He explained that academic language is context-reduced in nature and conversational language is context-embedded in nature. In context-reduced circumstances, students do not have situational or paralinguistic cues, but they think and reason based solely on comprehension of a situation. In context-embedded scenarios, students are able to enhance situational and paralinguistic cues through a variety of means: body language, speech intonation, sequence of events, meaning, understanding of phrases, and interpretation.

Stotsky (1979) suggested that academic language refers to the language of mature, expository prose or the formal English in college textbooks. Stotsky characterized language as academic strictly on the basis of its linguistic features: abstract vocabulary, noun forms, verb forms, Latin/Greek vocabulary roots, and other grammatical elements.

Academic language has unique language functions and structures that are difficult for language learners to master. Although the research on academic language is still very limited, scholars agree on the language functions of academic language: seeking information, analyzing, comparing, classifying, predicting, justifying, hypothesizing, persuading, solving problems, synthesizing, evaluating, generalizing, and abstracting (O'Malley, 1992; Wright, 1997). Students must be able to perform these functions and thus need academic language in order to achieve academically.

In 1993, the U.S. Department of Labor reported that elementary LEP students take at least 3 to 5 years to acquire English skills for social settings equal to those of their peers (American Council on Education, 1994). These same students require a minimum of 4 to 7 years to attain grade norms in academic English. The Department concluded that the lack of academic language is a major reason for academic failure among language-minority students and a major factor contributing to high dropout rates among these students.

A study on the academic language of college-bound at-risk secondary students, exploring self-assessment, proficiency levels, and effects of language development instruction, found the following character-

istics among the at-risk students (Wright, 1997):

- ◆ The problems faced by at-risk secondary students were complex and often related to academic achievement in ways that were not under anyone's control.
- ◆ Lack of academic language proficiency was related to low academic achievement in high school.
- ◆ Students were generally under-prepared in the area of academic language.
- ◆ The development of academic vocabulary was necessary for good reading comprehension and writing.
- ◆ Academic language skills were generally not strongly related to grades in high school.
- ◆ Grades included elements of effort and persistence and were not reliable measures of language proficiency or academic achievement for LEP students.

NEED EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES TO SERVICE LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Findings such as these suggest that LEP students should be placed in primary-language instruction classrooms with primary-language teachers or bilingual teachers who have cross-cultural, language, and academic development (CLAD) or bilingual cross-cultural, language, and academic development (BCLAD) teaching credentials. However, a review of school practices prior to and after the passage of Proposition 227, the "English-Only Instruction Initiative," revealed that many LEP students are placed in classrooms with teachers who do not have proper credentials or do not speak a second language.

For instance, in California, approximately 30% of LEP students were in a bilingual program without a bilingual teacher, approximately 70% of these students received no formal primary language instruction in academics, and approximately 25% of LEP students received no special services at all.

The NCREL (1999) described how a student is placed and tracked as at-risk in the school system:

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 man-

ner 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. (p. 2)

Researchers have found that LEP students are sometimes placed in classrooms with less qualified teachers where expectations are lower, curriculum is watered down, and fewer classroom materials are available (Cooper, 2000; Hubbard & Mehan, 1999; Oakes, 1992). In contrast, White students were placed in high-track classrooms in disproportionately high numbers and received more qualified teachers, greater classroom resources, and an enriched curriculum designed to prepare them to attend college (Hubbard & Mehan, 1999; Oakes, Gamoran, & Page, 1992). In some cases, placement becomes a tracking system.

Grouping and clustering are not the most effective methods for tracking LEP students. School officials often characterize low achieving students as those whose cognitive structures have gaps in fundamental knowledge. School personnel should keep in mind, however, that language-minority students from different cultural backgrounds and sub-ethnic groups cannot be categorized by the same criteria as native-speaker students. They have different repertoires, learning styles, socio-economic status, academic backgrounds, and cultural/language barriers.

LEGAL SEGREGATION IS STILL A COMMON PRACTICE

In this regard, the public education system remains separate and unequal despite extensive desegregation efforts over the past 50 years (Cooper, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 1995; Steele, 1992). Even though some schools have achieved success with racial integration, others remain stratified by race and social class (Oakes, 1990; Schofield, 1991). The segregation of students in racially mixed schools is the result of tracking or grouping students by perceived abilities (Oakes, 1985; Orfield, 1993; Wells & Grain, 1994).

For instance, African-American, Hispanic, and other language-minority students, placed in lower tracked classes in disproportionately high numbers, systematically receive fewer resources than their peers. Even though the merits of tracking continue to be debated, school segregation remains widespread, and an alarming number of students are at risk of school failure. For instance, parents and educa-

tors are extremely concerned about special education segregation in public schools since 70% of special education students are African-American students. Sanders (2004) asserted her concerns as follows:

There is a disproportionate number of black children in special education, especially the black males, because it's easier to push them into special education and label them learning disabled than it is to work with them.... Part of the problem is that those making the designation may not understand the black culture. Often, these decisions are culturally biased. (p. 9)

Researchers have suggested that tracking creates class and race-linked differences in learning and is a major contributor to the persistent achievement gap between disadvantaged and affluent students and the gap between students of color and Caucasians (Cooper, 1999; Oakes, 1992). According to a 2004 report from the California Teacher Association (CTA), the widening achievement gap in California's public schools raises many questions about educational equality.

The report further indicated that in 1990, there was a 33 point gap between the scores of black and white students on the National Assessment of Educational Programs (NEAP) mathematics test at the eighth grade level as compared to 2000 scores, the gap had grown to 39 point gap. Similarly, Latino students were 28 points behind white students in 1990 and 33 points behind a decade later. In 2003, of the fourth and eighth grade students tested, African-American and Latino students were found to perform on average, statistically, three years behind their white counterparts in math and language arts.

McLaren (1998) noted that tracking fosters "the illusion of meritocratic competition while in reality it functions as a ranking system that legitimates differences based on race, gender, and social power and locks students into positions of limited opportunities" (p. 9).

Ogbu (1978) characterized this practice and the school organization that implements it as a type of caste system. Similarly, Dayton, Ruby, Stein and Weisberg (1992) and Shorr and Horn (1997) described the educational system as a caste system that permeates every facet of student learning, academic performance, and school failure. They cited as evidence the following:

- ◆ The system tracks students by ability, thereby reinforcing and exacerbating social and class stereotyping.
- ◆ Size and impersonality of classes increase in high school.

- ◆ Low expectations are held for students who were not accepted culturally.
- ◆ Uninspiring curricula are offered that lack academic rigor and fail to develop skills students need after high school.
- ◆ Narrow vocational training is offered for jobs with little future.
- ◆ LEP students are not offered a successful transition into mainstream education.

Reyes and Jason (1993) observed that educational support for language learners is generally pulled out too soon, leaving these students with superficial skills because the public schools use different instructional methods for bilingual students. Although the goal for LEP students is to become proficient in English, some instructional methods are appropriate for reaching this goal and others are not.

In addition, the CTA's 2004 report stated that academic gap in public schools is widening as a result of family poverty, and most schools with the lowest test scores are mostly filled with minority students living in poverty. However, it further specified that the problem is compounded by the fact that public schools with minority students tend to have greater percentage of teachers on emergency permits and high teacher turnover (p. 13). Not only did the report show that family poverty is the sole contributor to the academic gap, but schools with predominantly diverse minority students tend to have few minority teachers they can relate to and view as role models. This indicates that teaching expectations are not met since many teachers working in urban schools may not have sufficient training in poverty and race issues relative to academic responsibilities to work effectively with students of diverse backgrounds.

THE NEED FOR SENSIBLE MULTICULTURAL CURRICULAR EFFORTS TO ADVANCE LEARNING

The fundamental approach to developing a culturally pedagogy is to empower ethnically diverse students through academic success, cultural affiliation, and personal efficacy (Manning & Baruth, 2004). It is very important for teachers to realize that some instructional practices may inhibit academic achievement in language-minority students. Any instruction needs to be prescribed with careful consideration; otherwise, learning can be cognitively undemanding and not academically relevant. In addition, if teachers are to provide effective culturally responsive pedagogy, they ought to understand how ethnically diverse students learn and acquire a different language.

The English as a Second Language (ESL) methodology was developed primarily to teach English to university students rather than at secondary and elementary levels. However, ESL methodology became prevalent in the public school system when a large influx of Indo-Chinese refugees and European immigrants arrived in the United States. The ESL guidelines at that time included a sheltered English methodology and content instruction in the student's primary language.

The content instruction was used to teach new concepts in subject matter in a comprehensive manner and help students earn academic credits required for graduation. However, the tradition of bilingual curriculum and instruction was organized around subjects or disciplines and the subjects were presented as separate entities using facts and skills that were disconnected, fragmented, and disjointed (Del Vecchio et al., 1994). As McQueen (1999) explained:

Poor students are not getting the same challenging schoolwork as other children, despite a federal law designed to bridge the learning gap between the haves and have-nots. Under the \$8 billion federal program, the U.S. Department of Education gives states money to raise the historically low achievement levels of poor and other disadvantaged children. For years, many schools dumbed down the curriculum for poor children, believing such children couldn't be expected to do the same schoolwork as peers who didn't face the troubles they did. (p. A5)

Recently, the ESL and content instruction methodologies were replaced by English Language Development (ELD), which helps language learners improve language skills in reading, writing, and comprehension. ELD instruction helps students develop vocabulary skills that enhance their understanding of academic concepts. ELD is used to improve the comprehension and speaking vocabulary of a language (BICS) whereas content instruction and bilingual methods were used to develop academic language proficiency (CALP).

In 1994, California passed a law (Senate Bill 1969) authorizing public school teachers to provide specially designed content instruction. This was done in response to the growing number of English learners. The law requires teachers to have special training in order to be certified to teach ELD. More importantly, the law requires that public schools provide specifically designed academic instruction in English (SDAIE) to English learners. The ELD and SDAIE methods are sheltered instructions and have been used in a variety of ways in

dual language instruction and other bilingual program models, including primary language instruction, whole language teaching, phonics instruction, and second language instruction.

Keep in mind that regardless of academic plans and approaches, the number of ethnic and language-minority students in public schools continues to grow at a steady rate. Primary language instruction has failed to develop the academic vocabulary, concepts, cultural knowledge, and abstract ideas of the English curriculum and textbooks; therefore, the transition to English has been a hurdle for LEP students (Wright, 1997). Learning a second language is severely hampered when the transfer of literacy skills and knowledge to the second language does not occur. This means that LEP students have problems reading and writing in English because the primary language instruction is not conducive to such learning.

Language-minority students need to have English skills if they are to compete academically in the regular course of studies. Fluency in the primary language may not be necessary in later grades. Furthermore, researchers have found that the listening proficiency of English learners is about 80% of the proficiency of native-language speakers and the writing and reading proficiencies in English are below 50% of those of native-language speakers (August & Hakuta, 1997).

Weslander and Stephany (1983) concluded that most instruction in the English language should occur during the first year of exposure to the language and the amount of instruction can decrease thereafter. Teaching academic English is crucial for helping second language learners improve English skills. However, there is no uniformity in bilingual instruction in California's public schools.

Public schools have been criticized for the whole language approach to language learning ever since California students taught with the whole language approach had the lowest standardized test scores in the nation (Stein, 1995; Wright, 1997). Ferris (1996) and Stein (1995) observed that changes were being suggested to return language teaching to instruction in basic skills such as phonics because of the concern that the whole language approach may not use textbooks. Students are therefore not exposed to expository text until they face the difficult transition of needing to use textbooks for content learning in later grades.

With whole language, students failed to learn critical items in early grades such as vocabulary, complex sentence structures,

and academic language. For instance, even though vocabulary knowledge is the single strongest predictor of reading comprehension scores and academic success, it was, with whole language instruction, "a long-neglected area of language instruction in both elementary and secondary contexts" (Wright, 1997, p. 26).

Furthermore, the process called re-designation (reclassification from LEP to FEP) has been a real barrier for language minority students and is the most difficult hurdle that a LEP student has to overcome in K-12 schools. Most LEP students cannot perform the requirements to be re-designated from LEP to FEP or to get out of the system schools use to place and track them year after year.

As described in the master plan binder that each school uses to provide educational services to LEP students, the re-designation process uses five sources of data as the bases for making decisions about re-designation to a new language proficiency level: (a) data from an objective assessment of the student's English oral language proficiency, (b) a teacher's evaluation of the student's English language proficiency and academic grades of "C" or better on the student's report card, (c) a writing sample appropriate for grade level, (d) a record of the student's academic achievement on a standardized achievement test (at or above the 36th percentile in all tested areas), and (e) a record of approval from parents or guardians for re-designation. In some cases, bilingual students are trapped in a particular designation for as long as 4 to 6 years because public schools are inconsistent in monitoring and evaluating student progress (Fresno Unified School District, 1995-2000; Loide, 1994).

One study demonstrated that most bilingual students are lumped together at ELD V and are not re-designated because they do not meet all criteria for re-designation (Vang, 2001). As a result, language-minority students are academically at risk, lacking the language skills needed for academic success. Some LEP students remain in their initial ELD placements as long as they stay in school. Moreover, many LEP students are never reclassified as FEP even after several years of education in U.S. public schools.

Consequently, those LEP students who are not re-designated on time sometimes are required by school policy to repeat ELD classes in order to remain in bilingual education programs. School leaders and administrators should be urged to reexamine the re-designation process; otherwise, the tracking system will continue to bar bilingual students from entering

mainstream classes and will set them up for failure.

It is evident that some language-minority students are at a greater risk for academic failure than others because they receive an impoverished curriculum and are subject to standardized testing. The degree of risk also depends on where they live and what schools they attend. In recent years, research and political agendas drove public school policies; however, at the present time, standardized testing drives public school policy and the Academic Performance Index (API) is used to allocate funds. Most public schools now operate under measurement-driven curricula. In other words, schools are tailoring their instruction to meet state requirements for monetary incentives rather than focusing on the needs of students in the classroom.

In addition, state educational budgets are shrinking and educational services are being cut to meet fiscal demands. More testing and less funding for educational programs have divided school services and created a new form of school segregation between poor and affluent schools. This budgetary instability leaves many language learners at risk in the educational system since teachers are unable to deliver what is necessary to help them excel academically. This means that the academic gap is going to get wider while public schools struggle to implement the No Child Left Behind Act of 2000. With the state's dire budget situation, if schools are not dealing with this kind of educational disparity, more students, especially at-risk students, are susceptible to dropping out of school.

HELP BILINGUAL STUDENTS GO BEYOND SECONDARY SCHOOL

Statistically, bilingual students do not fare well in school. But the academic gap needs to be narrowed. Public schools need to stop placing bilingual students in classes that permit them to fulfill minimum graduation requirements only. Minority students are still underrepresented in higher educational institutions. The academic achievement gaps that separate African-American students from their European and Asian counterparts are as much as four grade levels (Manning & Baruth, 2004).

As a result of Proposition 209, in 2003, 25% of African-American students, 22% of Latinos, and 23% of American Indians completed course requirements for admission to the University of California and California State University systems. Every child deserves a chance to go beyond secondary school, and for that a student needs to have excellent learning experiences. Bilingual

students need an academic language academy that will provide them pathways to academic success. And most importantly, only excellent teachers can deliver excellent learning experiences to all students.

California definitely needs smaller class size, up-to-date textbooks, and more quality teachers in the classroom. Perhaps public schools need to grow their own teachers in order to meet this need (Vang, 1999). Good teachers are real heroes, mentors, role models, and lifesavers. They are life-long learners, and their services can spark a fire of learning in their students. More importantly, good teachers invent teaching strategies that combine integration, creation, and transference of knowledge in ways that actively engage students in the learning process.

Regardless of what education policy mandates, the schoolteacher is the key to the success of the minority-language student. Without good teachers, the extra academic challenges facing second-language learners will drive them into a silent limbo in the educational system. Whatever language a student speaks, whatever culture a student is from, and no matter what class a student is in, that student, like every other child, deserves an opportunity to learn in the class with a competent teacher. As noted in Manning & Baruth (2004),

Racism, discrimination, and stereotyping continue to exist and to take a heavy toll on people of different culture background.... Rather than accepting the status quo as the most equitable we can achieve, school curricula should deliberately instill in children and adolescent a sense of respect and acceptance for all people, regardless of their cultural and individual differences. (p. 214)

I realize that teachers are extremely busy and have many things on their plates to accomplish each day. And I know that most teachers have kind hearts and a passion to do whatever they can to give a child the best education they can. So what more am I asking of teachers than they are already giving?

First, be clear about your responsibility. As my college students discussed at-risk students, we considered the questions: If you see people drowning in a river, should you try to save everyone? Should teachers save everyone from drowning in the river of academic failure? Basically, the answer to both questions is yes.

However, sometimes it is impossible to save everyone . . . unless the teacher builds a bridge across the river or installs a barricade to prevent students from going into the water. So secondly, provide the extra help your students need and remove any hindrances. Teachers are really the

masters of Arts, and they must give their students the tools, life skills, academic knowledge, and guidance needed for success. Otherwise, students, especially language learners, will continue to drift in the system and will ultimately fail.

And finally, keep in mind that the only time students cannot grow academically is when a teacher has not inspired them. Teaching is a challenging endeavor and a life-long learning experience. Let's teach *all* our students to aim high, dream big, and live to make a difference. Then let's give them what they need to reach those dreams.

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