

1988/89 Executive Summary

**The Arizona At-Risk Pilot Project:
Serving Students
In Grades K-3 and 7-12
Pursuant to HB 2217 (1988)**

C. Diane Bishop
State Superintendent of Public Instruction
Arizona Department of Education

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Project Director/Principal Author

Dr. Louann Bierlein

Co-authors

Linda Sandler
Julie Martin
Dr. Rob Melnick

Prepared by

The Morrison Institute for Public Policy
School of Public Affairs
Arizona State University

Dr. Rob Melnick, Director
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

H.B. 2217 (1988) initiated a four year pilot education project of a magnitude never before undertaken in Arizona's history. The bill not only appropriated additional state funding to address the problems of Arizona youth who are "at risk" of failing in, or dropping out of, the state's public schools, but also required a comprehensive evaluation of this statewide pilot project.

This executive summary introduces the first of three annual reports which will illustrate the results of H.B. 2217 (1988). The goals of these evaluation reports are to provide school districts with regular, consistent feedback which they can use to make program changes, and to analyze issues that could potentially affect policy decisions regarding the continuance or expansion of the pilot programs and future programs for at-risk youth. This first report primarily describes the status of existing programs rather than an assessment of their impact on at-risk youth.

BACKGROUND

A significant change in Arizona educational policy has occurred in recent years as a result of limited fiscal resources and a heightened concern over accountability. In 1985, the legislature authorized the annual distribution of over \$15 million to districts based upon their K-3 population. No specific restrictions were placed on these funds and little information on their usage is required. Yet two years later, when an additional \$4.5 million was made available for at-risk programs via H.B. 2217 (1988), the resulting expectations of the legislature and the statutory requirements are great.

The dollars provided through H.B. 2217 (1988) enabled the Arizona Department of Education to fund 33 pilot programs throughout the state. Twenty-two programs provide additional assistance to at-risk children enrolled in kindergarten through third grade (K-3), and eleven programs focus on at-risk youth in grades seven through twelve (7-12).

H.B. 2217 (1988) requires that an evaluation of the pilot project be completed to "assess the progress of the pupils in the program." It further states that this assessment must include "a longitudinal four year study of the impact of at-risk pupils in these programs." To satisfy this requirement, the Department of Education selected the Morrison Institute for Public Policy (School of Public Affairs, Arizona State University) in June, 1989 as the external evaluator for the pilot project.

By funding pilot programs and by requiring a four year longitudinal study of their impact on at-risk students, H.B. 2217 (1988) established a process that will provide valuable information to both policy makers and educators. As the project progresses, data will become

available for utilization by policy makers in decisions concerning Arizona's growing population of at-risk youth and by educators when providing additional assistance for not only at-risk pupils, but all students.

THE PILOT PROGRAMS

Dependent upon previously available funding and the local governing board's commitment to providing additional assistance for at-risk students, major variations exist in the "starting" point of each pilot program. Previous to H.B. 2217 (1988), a few districts had already prepared comprehensive district-wide plans to assist their at-risk pupils. These districts are now using their at-risk funds to develop one or more components of a larger program. On the other hand, many pilot districts have now initiated their first major effort to assist children at risk.

H.B. 2217 (1988) requires the K-3 at-risk programs to focus on academic assistance and parental involvement. Twenty-two districts were selected to initiate such programs and have generally targeted students who are in danger of being retained, who have low test scores, and who have limited English proficiency. Although each program is uniquely designed to meet the needs of district students, there are also similarities among the programs. The components listed in the following table do not represent any one particular program, but reflect those found throughout the entire K-3 at-risk pilot project.

GENERAL COMPONENTS OF K-3 PILOT PROGRAMS

- Curricular and instructional modifications focusing on language development and math concepts
- Additional instructional/resource materials
- Staff development and training
- Additional instructional time/support through:
 - Summer school programs
 - Full-day kindergarten
 - Additional staff
 - Formal tutoring programs
- Restructured classroom groupings
- Focus on students' social and self development
- Increased school/home/community communication
- Increased parental participation in school operations
- Parent workshops on "Assisting Their Children to Learn"
- Adult education courses

At the secondary level (7-12), eleven pilot programs have focused on dropout retrieval, dropout prevention, or both. The majority involve a select group of students with extremely pronounced at-risk symptoms. A few districts have identified their entire student population as at risk and plan to provide services to all students. In some cases, students who have dropped out of school are "tracked down" for inclusion in an alternative school or alternative program. In general, the 7-12 districts have targeted students who are confronted with a variety of academic, social, and emotional problems.

H.B. 2217 (1988) required each 7-12 pilot program to contain academic, vocational, and support activities. In addition, the State Board of Education is requiring these programs to include parental communication and coordination with community resources. As with the K-3 programs, the particular components of each 7-12 program depend on the needs of the targeted students and on the services that were in place prior to receipt of H.B. 2217 (1988) funding. General components of the 7-12 programs are listed below.

GENERAL COMPONENTS OF 7-12 AT-RISK PROGRAMS

- Expanded academic tutoring and instructional support
- Expanded computer assisted instruction
- Summer school programs
- Alternative school/program settings
- Expanded student/family counseling services
- Integration of school and community services
- Career awareness activities
- Work study programs
- Staff development
- Increased parental communication and training

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

The evaluation effort conducted by the Morrison Institute for Public Policy will include the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data sets, through interviews, observations, standardized tests, case studies, and surveys. Parents, teachers, administrators, and students will be included in the assessment. By focusing on four levels of outcomes (individual students, program, district, and state), the evaluation will provide a comprehensive look at the impact on at-risk pupils in these programs.

A cohort of participating at-risk students will be tracked for three years, beginning FY 1989/90. Wherever possible, baseline data on these students will be retrieved for 1988/89, the first year of the project. Student profiles depicting academic indicators, absentee rates, grade level promotion, credits earned, continuous school enrollment, attitudes toward school, and parental involvement will be compiled.

The data collected will be used to produce three types of reports: 1) individual district evaluation reports to assist program directors and the Department of Education in making program adjustments; 2) an annual summary report to the legislature; and 3) a final longitudinal study identifying the most significant strategies and outcomes of H.B. 2217 (1988). The final report will also analyze the social and educational policy issues that are relevant to Arizona's at-risk population.

YEAR ONE OBSERVATIONS

During the first "year" of the at-risk program (January 1989 to August 1989), the 33 pilot sites reported that approximately 28% (24,229) of their total students enrolled in grades K-3 and 7-12 (85,564) were considered to be at risk. Districts stated that additional assistance was provided to approximately 54% (13,126) of these targeted students.

Although limited standardized "impact" data was collected during year one, on-site evaluation visitations and document analysis allowed the evaluators to identify several program strategies that may potentially impact at-risk youth. Activities attempting to ensure literacy for all students are being initiated. Dropouts are being retrieved back into the educational system through alternative programs. Parents who had little previous contact with schools are being trained in methods to help their children succeed in school. These strategies and others are highlighted in the following table and will be carefully examined over the next three years.

**YEAR ONE PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS:
POTENTIALLY SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES***

- Intensive commitment and focus on language development and literacy as **the vital component** in the learning process.
- **Examination of how students acquire basic skill concepts** with particular focus on language development and mathematics.
- **Commitment to a common "strategy"** in which large numbers of educational personnel are working toward a shared goal.
- Serious attempts to **actively involve** parents in the educational process, **rather than simply informing them** of the process.
- Adult education programs **initiated by school districts**.
- Provision of additional instructional time (after school and summer programs, tutoring, full-day kindergartens), and attempts **not to simply do more of the same** during that time.
- Provision of regular staff development pertinent to solving problems faced by at-risk students and an **expectation that teachers will implement changes** based upon this training.
- Provision of **alternative settings for students who cannot or will not function** in a traditional school setting.
- Heightened awareness of the **need for a "safety net"** between elementary and high school districts.
- Attempts to coordinate school/community/state/federal level resources for students in order to **eliminate the excuse--"it's someone else's" problem**.

*Items in bold are what distinguished these items from the status quo.

While some positive changes occurred during the first year of the project, some areas that could adversely impact a program's success were also identified. Preliminary concerns are highlighted below.

**YEAR ONE PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS:
PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION AND POLICY CONCERNS**

- High administrator/staff turnover resulted in unfilled positions and a lack of program stability.
- Lack of district strategic planning resulted in the failure of some districts to focus their program activities toward a common goal.
- Failure of some districts to conceive of their program as a "demonstration pilot" will make replication difficult.
- Additional district time and paperwork requirements associated with program monitoring and evaluation resulted in district concerns.
- Lack of comprehensive state level data collection assessments presents problems with comparable standardized data collection.
- Limitations in the state's ability to administer competitive grant programs and to provide adequate program monitoring and technical assistance resulted in district concerns.
- Perceived need for additional resources to assist students environmentally at risk resulted in this being raised as a policy issue.

CONCLUSION

There is little debate about the importance of addressing the needs of Arizona's at-risk students in a more comprehensive manner. Recent Arizona reports illustrate that the state's economy can no longer absorb the nearly 30% of its youth who do not obtain a high school diploma. Instead, the debate now centers on what strategies should be employed by state and local policy makers to mitigate this rapidly growing crisis, and on how these strategies should be funded.

Early prevention is being advocated by many as essential to saving the next generation of potential dropouts, while other people demand that the current generation not be forgotten. This policy dilemma is further complicated by cries to stop "throwing money at the problem" and begin to demonstrate tangible student outcomes. Compounding the issue are the lack of standardized educational performance measures, the limited information on "what works" for at-risk students, and a state fiscal deficit that does not allow every need to be covered adequately.

H.B. 2217 (1988) represents a significant attempt to address the economic, social, and educational issues associated with the state's at-risk youth. It is also a statement regarding the need for education program evaluation and increased accountability. The at-risk pilot programs will be scrutinized at a level never before experienced in Arizona and will undoubtedly yield very important data for Arizona's policy makers and educators. Given the current fiscal constraints and the need for better measures of student performance, it is already apparent that the implementation of the H.B. 2217 (1988) at-risk pilot project represents a wise policy decision for Arizona.