Talene Magee

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Professional Text: Summary and Review

Schargle, F. P. (2005). *Best Practices to Help At-Risk Learners*. Larchmont: Eye on Education. Pages:176.

Franklin P. Schargel grew up in Brooklyn New York receiving his Bachelor’s Degree from the University of the City of New York. Schargel went on and obtained his Masters Degree in Secondary Education from City University, as well as a second from Pace University in School of Administration and Supervision. Schargel spent an enormous part of his lifetime in his chosen career fields. He spent thirty-three years as a classroom teacher and counselor as well as an additional eight years as a school administrator. He has also taught a collegiate level course at Doling College in their MBA Program.

In addition to Franklin Schargel’s extensive education and experience background, he also as written five highly esteemed books and many journal articles published in reputable education journals and business magazines. Schargel also provides workshops all over the world for teachers, administrators, counselors, students, parents, etc., whom are interested in creating and supporting world-class schools through his training firm, in which he is Senior Managing Associate, called School Success Network.

Schargel’s achievements in enriching inner- city schools, increasing parental awareness and involvement, significantly decreasing the student dropout rate, increasing postsecondary school attendance, appear in twenty-five books, fifty-five newspaper and magazine articles as well as being recognized by the United States Department of Education, Fortune Magazine, Business Week, and the New York times. He also received the National Dropout Prevention Center’s Crystal Star Award for “demonstrating clear evidence of success in dropout recovery, intervention, and prevention.” Schargel’s success left a lasting impression that continues to permeate the education and business world.

Schargel’s education background and experience speak to his creditability for writing *Best Practices to Help At-Risk Learners* in that he has provided substantial amount of accomplishment in helping at-risk learners not only continue their educational path but succeed in their educational path. Schargel writes this book as “tried and true practices” based on “reliable, field-tested, research-based, data-driver practices” (vii). An ample amount of evidence from his accomplishments proves his practices valid and effective.

The book *Best Practices to Help At-Risk Learners* by Franklin P. Schargel looks at specific tools and practices used by successful schools, school districts, and a variety of state and local programs. The book works to address the growing at-risk student population in the schools. As many other books address the “what to do” regarding at-risk students *Best Practices to Help At-Risk Learners* addresses the “how” to implement what it is educators need to do. This book is effective for all those with a heart to establish schools or programs dealing with at-risk students as well as present educators and administrators wishing to improve their current situation.

 This text covers a variety of topics all pertaining to the fifteen strategies as outlined by the National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC) at Clemson University. These strategies have been proven most effective in positively impacting the school dropout rate. Schargel writes this text as an instructional guidebook providing certain situations/questions and then providing guided instruction for how to deal with the situations/answer the questions. The book consists of mostly text in the beginning with increasingly more charts and rubrics in the middle and toward the end. The text is formatted in subtopics under the entire topic of the best practices for at risk learners. Within the subtopics are actions for defined circumstances determined by research and data analysis. The book contains a Dropout Prevention Strategies self-assessment tool, which includes all categories within the fifteen strategies as defined by the NDPC. Included are Indexes categorized by strategy, grade level, administrators, counselors, and special educators. The book does not include a glossary of appendices with supplementary information, nor are there additional digital resources.

 In the text, Schargel goes through the fifteen effective strategies, as proposed by the National Dropout Prevention Center, that have helped considerably in decreasing the drop-out rate. These strategies proved successful in various education levels and environments. The fifteen strategies are broken up into four subcategories: School and Community Perspective, Early Interventions, Basic Core Strategies, and Making the Most of Instruction.

In concerning School and Community Perspective, Schargel discusses school-community collaboration, safe learning environments, and systematic renewal. When the community as a whole supports the school there is a strong foundation built for a very supportive, caring environment in which students feed off of and thrive in. Schargel addresses how the community can be involved in the schools to help decrease truancy and dropout rates by providing framework to take action for these circumstances. Moving on, a safe learning environment provides better daily experiences for students allowing them to thrive. Schargel states that positives social attitudes and higher interpersonal skills are created in a safe learning environment. He also discusses the warning signs of suicide and how to counteract bullying the school. In order to create a safe learning environment systematic renewal must take place. Systematic renewal is the process in which goals and objectives are constantly being reevaluated. Everything that pertains to school policies, practices, and organizational structures is considered for evaluation. Concerning, mainly, how these policies, practices, and structures in place will impact a variety of learners and where they can be adjusted to encompass a wider variety of learners. This creates an environment in which all learners can feel comfortable and thrive in.

When looking at Early Interventions, family engagement is crucial. Studies consistently find “that family engagement has a direct, positive effect on Children’s achievement and is the most accurate predictor of a student’s success in school” (1). Schargel stresses the importance of building relationships with the parents in an inviting environment offering collaboration. Collaboration between the parents and the teacher is crucial in that the parents have a lot of information that cannot be obtained anywhere else about their child. Schargel states that the relationship begins at the parent-teacher conferences. In order to maximize the effectiveness of parent-teacher conferences, Schargel offers some key elements like establishing rapport with parent, emphasizing the positive qualities about their child, involving parents in creating solutions, and ending with action steps. He also states that teachers should follow up with a phone call or a note after the conference to display the commitment to the parent and teacher working as a team.

Schargel considers the problem of unreceptive parents. He states, “Many parents of at-risk children do not know how to cope with their child’s behavior” (5). Given this situation, the teacher should bring documentation of what the parents should know, listen to the parent, keep calm and professional, be prepared, know limits, open lines of communication, and end the conversation positively. These actions will help deal with the argumentative parent.

Early Interventions begin as soon as a child begins school. Early childhood education is crucial in preparing and developing the brain. Schargel states, “Birth-to-five interventions demonstrate hat providing a child with additional enrichment can enhance brain development” (11). In order to decrease the drop out rate, students must be immersed in creative and learning enhancing classroom instruction from time they first begin school into primary schools. Schargel focuses on early intervention in serving the population of English-Language Learners (ELLs). He stresses the importance of acknowledging a students culture and native-language influences. Making the student feel welcome and building up a safe and accepting environment is crucial for ELLs.

Within Early Interventions is the topic of Early Literacy Development. Early interventions can help poor readers establish the skills they need to excel in reading and writing as well as their other subjects. Schargel discusses a compact of reading, which is a written agreement among a partnership between family, and a wider outside community that describes how each partner can help improve the reading and language arts skills of a certain child from kindergarten to third grade. He lists the responsibilities of the parents/family, student, teacher, principal, and community members, all of which hold the student to a high standard of achievement.

Now entering the Basic Core Strategies, first Schargel addresses the mentoring and tutoring process. In this case, mentoring is a supportive relationship between a student and a teacher that is based on trust. Tutoring focuses more on academics than relationship building. Schargel gives important strategies for establishing a mentoring program, what policies and forms should be in place, and how to recruit, screen and train volunteers for the program. Schargel provides actual forms for these processes. He also provides a list of qualities to look for in a effective mentors. He states that many times we think of mentors as genuinely nice people, but they need to be much more than that in order to be effective. Some of the characteristics he lists include: honest, accepting, fun, outgoing, firm, available, and dependable. These are just a few of the important qualities that one should look for in mentors.

Service Learning is an important part of the Basic Core Strategies. Service Learning makes connections between community experiences and academic learning. This method promotes growth within the child in many areas including: personal, social, career development, and civic responsibility. The students see and understand how they play a role in society and the importance of their role. The benefits of effective serve learning programs are increased student engagement, improved academic achievement, improved thinking skills, improved character, improved social behavior, stronger ties to schools, communities, and society, exposure to new careers, positive school environments, stronger community groups, and increased community support for schools. In order to bring service learning into the classrooms it is important to fist assess the needs and resources of the community and school.

Alternative Schooling is extremely important for Basic Core Strategies. This provides potential dropouts with avenues to still achieve a high school diploma. These programs cater to the students’ social needs as well as academic needs to accomplish the goal of receiving a high school diploma. Schargel provides an example of an Alternative Education Referral. He then moves onto the last category concerning Basic Core Strategies is After-School Opportunities. Whether the school offers after-school or summer programs, they are designed to deter information loss and arouse interest in various areas. These opportunities are extremely important for at-risk students because it provides them with beneficial and appealing activities.

The next subcategory addressed is Making the Most of Instruction. Here Schargel deals with professional development, active learning, educational technology, individualized instruction, and career and technical education. Professional development is crucial for teachers in general but especially when working with at-risk learners in order for the teachers to continue to “develop skills and techniques and learn about innovative strategies” (61). Schargel provides a rubric on measuring professional development. Active learning is an avenue in which students are taught different ways to learn in order to achieve success. They learn new and creative ways to problem solve using engaging strategies and involving students as much as possible. Schargel discusses how students learn in different ways and gives strategies for different ways of learning. For example, some students with ADD or ADHD need to constantly be moving or tapping their foot. The teacher can attach a bungee cord o the legs or the desk and allow the student to move his/her feet (74). Schargel also states that in order to keep kids focused “it is important to change the learner’s state every 7-10 minutes” (75). This will help keep students focused and on task so that they do not get bored and act out in the classroom during instruction.

Educational technology is another way to make the most of instruction. Technology engages students and delivers instruction adapting to student’s learning styles and addressing multiple intelligences. Not only is it great in offering students diverse ways of learning, but also it allows a closer connection between school and family. The teacher is able to communicate to the parents via e-mail or his/her personal website.

Individualized instruction remains an important part of making the most of instruction. Individualized Learning Plans (ILPs) aid at-risk students by specifying the area of need that is present with clearly defined goals and objectives in order to keep the student motivated. Schargel stresses the importance of meeting individual needs as a means of keeping students engaged, motivated, and driven to complete their education. Like ILP’s, in Career and Technical Education programs are designed to recognize where a skill is needed and prepares them for the high demanding workplace.

I feel that Schargel’s goal in *Best Practices to Help At-Risk Learners* of providing the best practices for at-risk learners was met. He gives detailed situations and circumstances of which at-risk learners are often in and provides examples and explanations on how to deal with those situations so the at-risk learner will thrive. For example, Schargel discusses individualized instruction and how and why it is important. He states that students develop on different levels and ILPs create flexibility in teaching methods and motivational strategies for the at-risk students. He gives strategies on how to implement individualized learning plans and the goals of these plans to help the at-risk learners in need of specific guidance and goal setting.

Schargel provided an ample amount of examples, charts, lists, and rubrics in order to for the reader to comprehend the best practices for at risk learners. I did not find any weak points in the text. It was very well formatted with clear objectives as to why all of the information was there. It was easy to read with Schargel’s incorporation of the fifteen strategies from the National Dropout Prevention Center and the subcategories in which they are filtered into as stated throughout the text summary.

I would recommend this book to my peers and teachers who are working with at-risk leaners. This book gave clear-cut examples or how to deal with certain situations in which many teachers find themselves everyday. Our goal as teachers is to affectively teach all students and that includes the at-risk learners. I learned the importance of service learning for at-risk students. It is important for all students but especially at-risk students because it shows them their importance in society and how they fit into society as whole. At-risk learners need the motivation of seeing their role played out in their community in order for them to realize their importance. Reading Schargel’s text about the best practices to help at-risk students has helped me to understand this population of students better and has informed me on ways in which to work with these students.