



At-Risk and Dropout Prevention Task Force

Legislative Report

December 31, 2023

Contents

At-Risk Task Force Charge	3
At-Risk Task Force Membership	3
At-Risk Definition.....	4
At-Risk and Dropout Prevention Funding	4
Areas of Study.....	4
Recommendations	10
Appendix A. Midwest Comparison of Four-Year Graduation Rate	11
Appendix B. Testimonials	15

At-Risk Task Force Charge

The At-Risk Task Force, established by the Iowa General Assembly in 2023 (SF560), “shall study all of the following:

- a. How schools currently utilize state funding for programs for at-risk students and dropout prevention programs.
- b. The effectiveness of programs for at-risk students and dropout prevention programs.
- c. Whether and to what extent state funding for programs for at-risk students and dropout prevention programs should be reallocated to direct intervention by an Iowa Jobs for America's Graduates (IJAG) specialist.
- d. How to best utilize state funding for programs for at-risk students and dropout prevention programs.”

The task force was directed to submit its findings and recommendations to the general assembly in a report by December 31, 2023.

This report shares findings related to the four areas the task force was directed to study and provides recommendations.

At-Risk Task Force Membership

Task force members are listed by name and title:

- Dr. Willie Barney, Instructional Leadership Director, North Region, Davenport Community School District
- Joshua Baxter, Alternative Services Teacher, Carlisle High School, Carlisle Community School District, President of the Iowa Association of Alternative Education
- Dr. Kim Davis, Principal and District Liaison for Homeless and Foster Care Youth and Homeschool Administrator, Walnut Creek Campus, West Des Moines Community School District
- Dr. Jeff Hawkins, Associate Superintendent, Ames Community School District
- Dr. Wendy Mihm-Herold, President and CEO, Iowa Jobs for America’s Graduates
- Dr. Theron Schutte, Superintendent, Marshalltown Community School District
- Chuck Tonelli, Science Teacher, Metro High School, Cedar Rapids Community School District, Former President of the Iowa Association of Alternative Education

The task force was facilitated by Dr. Kim Buryanek, PK-12 Learning Division Administrator at the Department of Education. Dr. Buryanek was assisted by staff from the Department of Education. Inquiries or questions about this task force report should be directed to Dr. Buryanek (email: kim.buryanek@iowa.gov).

Meetings

The Department of Education convened the task force for four working sessions to study and make recommendations. Task force members responded to requests for input between meetings in order to meet the purpose of the task force within the established timelines and provided written comments on the draft report.

Task force members used their formal and informal networks to seek and gather input to inform the findings and recommendations within the legislative report. A public comment period and a public

listening session during the public comment period were also held to solicit feedback for task force members to consider before approving the final report.

At-Risk Definition

Iowa Administrative Code defines an at-risk student as “any identified student who needs additional support and who is not meeting or not expected to meet the established goals of the educational program (academic, personal/social, career/vocational). At-risk students include, but are not limited to, students in the following groups: homeless children and youth, dropouts, returning dropouts and potential dropouts.” Iowa Administrative Code 281-12.2

At-Risk and Dropout Prevention Funding

Two funding sources provide funds for at-risk programs and dropout prevention programs. See Iowa Administrative Code 281-97.3 “Supplementary weighting plan for at-risk students” and Iowa Code §257.38 “Funding for at-risk, alternative school, and returning dropouts and dropout prevention programs-plan”.

Areas of Study

1. How schools currently utilize state funding for programs for at-risk students and dropout prevention programs.

Task force members generated an extensive, but not exhaustive, list of at-risk and dropout prevention programs utilized by schools and school districts. Task force members contacted schools from different regions of the state and from different size categories to compile a comprehensive list of at-risk programs and dropout prevention programs. Not all programs are used in every school or school district, but it was realized that schools and school districts are implementing multiple programs identified in Table 1 to support the needs of at-risk students simultaneously. The at-risk and dropout prevention programs are organized into two expense categories: Personnel for Programs and Non-Personnel Costs for Programs. It was clear to the task force that the majority of expenses for at-risk and dropout prevention programs are due to personnel costs.

It is important to note that task force members reported that weighted at-risk funding, modified supplemental amount for dropout prevention funding, and additional funding from the general fund and/or grants are used to fund the at-risk and dropout prevention programs.

At-Risk And Dropout Prevention Program Staff

The success of the at-risk and dropout prevention programs was attributed to the quality of the program staff. If program staff were effective in forming relationships with at-risk students, the at-risk students were more likely to be successful.

A student enrolled in an Iowa alternative school shared their story: “The alternative school has benefited me so much. I have been able to go to class more than I thought I would’ve been able to two years ago and I am even graduating a year early with the help of the school. When I have urges to self-harm, I am able to take a break in the nurse’s office until I feel safe enough to go back to class and 90% of the time I am able to go back to class instead of going home which has helped me get a lot of

my school work done instead of falling behind. I have been able to get a lot of one-on-one work with teachers, which helps me when I'm struggling with work instead of causing me to give up on the work. The alternative school teachers and faculty know how to deal with a student when they are struggling with their mental health, which has helped me tremendously. I'm also really close to a lot of the teachers and faculty members which motivates me a lot to go to school, and they help me feel better when I'm having a hard day. We have fun activities such as pumpkin painting competitions, gingerbread house competitions, and boat racing. (Alt school) is an amazing school, and I am so grateful that I am able to attend it."

Additional testimonials demonstrating the impact of at-risk and dropout prevention programs can be found in Appendix B.

Table 1. At-Risk and Dropout Prevention Programs in Schools and School Districts

Personnel for Programs	Non-Personnel Costs for Programs
<p>Academic Support:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Before- and after-school staff, including staff for credit recovery program* • College and career readiness support staff • Dropout support/re-engagement staff • Math specialists or interventionists • Paraeducators • Reading specialists or interventionists • Staff for transition program from elementary to middle school and from middle school to high school • Summer school staff 	<p>Academic costs for students placed in psychiatric medical institutions for children</p> <p>Contracted service with community college for credit recovery.</p> <p>Instructional software</p> <p>Materials to support food insecurity and clothing needs.</p>
<p>Administrators:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dean of students • Principal 	<p>Non-personnel costs associated with student assistance program.</p>
<p>Other Support:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attendance specialists • Behavior interventionists • Counselors • Juvenile court liaisons* • Mental health counselors* • Mental health therapists* • Mentors* • Nurses • School resource officers* • Social workers • Truancy court liaisons 	<p>Non-personnel costs associated with transition program from elementary to middle school and from middle school to high school.</p> <p>Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports curriculum and materials.</p> <p>Professional development</p> <p>Transportation</p>
<p>Teachers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alternative school teachers • At-risk teachers 	<p>Tuition for sharing agreement with another school for alternative schools.</p>

- Iowa Jobs for America's Graduates (iJAG)*
- Staff to reduce class size
- Work-based learning

2. The effectiveness of programs for at-risk students and dropout prevention programs.

According to research shared by the Region 9 Comprehensive Center at the November 2, 2023 at-risk task force meeting, common data used across schools, districts, and states to measure the effectiveness of programs for at-risk students and dropout prevention programs are:

- Graduation rates
- Dropout rates
- Achievement gap analysis

Graduation rate and dropout rate are calculated using the same methods across the nation. For example, when Iowa's four-year graduation rate is reported and South Dakota's four-year graduation rate is reported, the two rates can be compared because the same method is used for calculation. Similarly, when Iowa's 2021-2022 dropout rate is reported and South Dakota's 2021-2022 dropout rate is reported, the two rates can be compared because the same method is used for calculation.

The task force analyzed public high school four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) from Midwest states. Based on the data analysis, the task force members concluded that post-pandemic, the graduation rate is lower than the pre-pandemic graduation rate. The graduation rate in Iowa pre-pandemic was 92 percent and post-pandemic is 90 percent. The task force members felt the decrease in the four-year graduation rate was correlated to the effects of the pandemic. The task force members anticipate that because of the loss of learning during the pandemic, especially among students who are at-risk, we will continue to see a lower graduation rate when compared to the pre-pandemic graduation rate. The need for at-risk programs and dropout prevention programs is greater post-pandemic to support the needs of students who struggle.

The task force members also concluded, based on the four-year graduation rates of Midwest states, that Iowa's at-risk programs are effective because each year Iowa's graduation rate is the highest, or equal to the highest, compared to Midwest states.

A comparison of the four-year graduation rate of Midwest states can be found in Appendix A.

According to the Region 9 Comprehensive Center, there are also methods that can measure agency, belongingness, and connectedness which recent research indicates are factors that contribute to the success of students in schools. Outcomes of agency, belongingness, and connectedness can be measured through:

- School climate data
- Student and family perception data
- Student engagement data

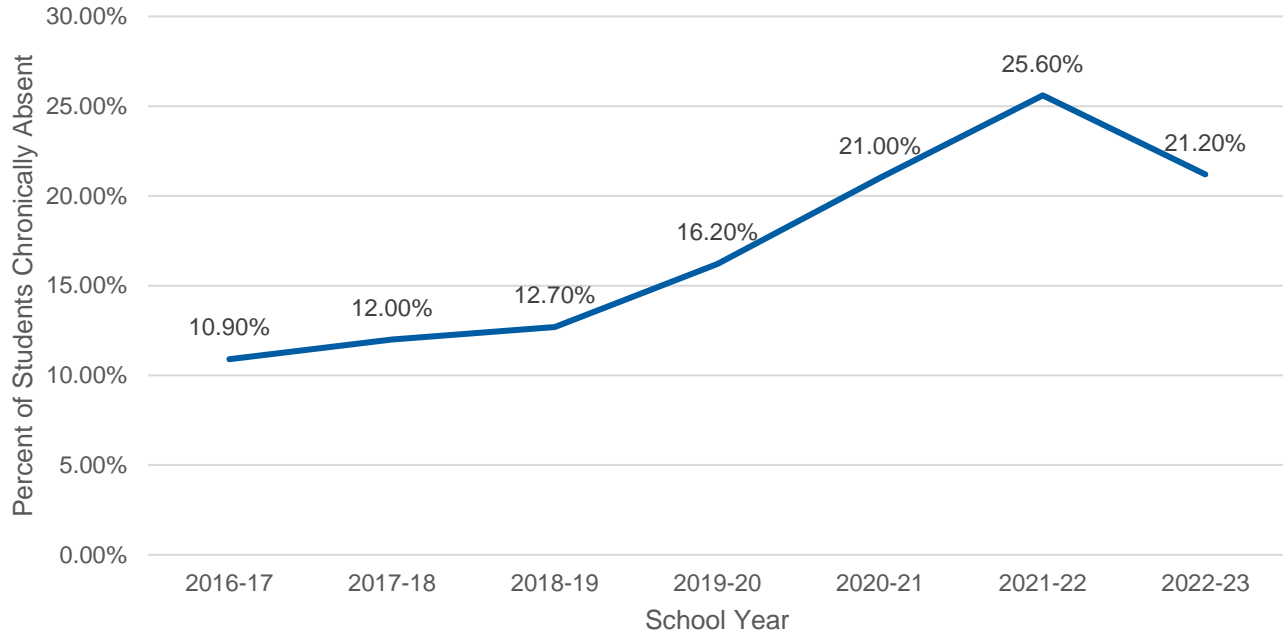
According to research shared by the Region 9 Comprehensive Center at the November 2, 2023, At-Risk Task Force meeting, early warning indicators of potential at-risk or dropping out of school are:

- Attendance
- Behavior
- Course performance

The Department of Education collects attendance data from schools. Chronic absenteeism for schools is reported through the School Performance Profile. Students who miss 10 percent or more school days for any reason, excused or unexcused are considered chronically absent.

The chronic absenteeism rate has increased since 2016. A significant increase was seen in the 2019-2020 school year through the 2021-2022 school year. Last year (2022-2023), the chronic absenteeism rate declined, however the rate was still higher than the pre-pandemic rate. Figure 1 shows the chronic absenteeism rate in Iowa schools since the 2016-2017 school year.

Figure 1. Chronic Absenteeism Rate in Iowa Schools



Task force members each provided anecdotal data that illustrated the effectiveness of at-risk and dropout prevention programs for individuals and groups of students.

Even though there were nine data sources identified by the Region 9 Comprehensive Center that could be used to measure the effectiveness of at-risk and dropout prevention programs, Iowa schools are required to report little data regarding the effectiveness of at-risk or dropout prevention programs to the Department of Education. Graduation rates and chronic absenteeism is data collected by the Department of Education and this data could be correlated to the effectiveness of at-risk and dropout prevention programs. There is a need for a robust way to collect data related to at-risk and dropout prevention programs to help quantify the effectiveness of the programs.

Impact of At-Risk and Dropout Prevention Program

It is difficult to attach a value to a student staying engaged in school, staying out of trouble, or earning credits to graduate.

A grandparent of an at-risk student shared their story: “The summer of 2022 our granddaughter was in a dismal situation. The child of drug addicted parents, she had a background of abandonment and trauma. She had struggled socially and academically through middle school. Three weeks before the end of term she dropped out of 8th grade. She drifted into homelessness without any future plans or future hopes. She found herself living in an apartment with several disengaged teenagers in town.

In February 2023 she was introduced to the alternative school. The flexibility of the program made her think she might give it a try. She found herself willing to take the risk. After visiting the campus, she said words she had not said for a long, long time. 'I like this school.' The staff and teachers were amazingly non-threatening. They were totally accepting of her; not 'judgy' at all. They liked her. They wanted her there. The connection she has made with the staff and teachers at the alternative school have made school the place she wants to be.

She earned four credits by the end of that partial year. In another school that might be minimal, maybe even unacceptable. At the alternative school, all realized it was a miracle. And the success of earning those four credits brought an entirely new student with a new attitude to school in the fall of 2023.

The goals at the alternative school are understandable and reachable. This trimester, she needed a biology credit. Earning an A in biology earned her the right to take Anatomy next semester. That puts her eligible to attend the comprehensive high school's CNA class in the fall of 2024. She is well on her way to be an EMT and eventually a Flight Nurse, her chosen career.

The alternative school and its nontraditional model of education has been life changing for our granddaughter. That is not an exaggeration. It has changed her life."

3. Whether and to what extent state funding for programs for at-risk students and dropout prevention programs should be reallocated to direct intervention by an Iowa Jobs for America's Graduates specialist.

Task force members were unanimous: State funding for programs for at-risk students and dropout prevention programs should not be reallocated to direct intervention by an iJAG's specialist. Task force members were also unanimous in their belief that school districts should be able to contract with iJAG and consider iJAG as an option as they look for partners to help them support the needs of at-risk students. It is important to note that iJAG's program serves a specific student population with specific needs. iJAG focuses on career development, including; leadership training, career exploration and employer services. Thus, the appropriateness of this program is dependent upon the needs of the student population which vary from district to district.

iJAG's program operates 155 school programs and continues to grow. iJAG is funded through contracts with schools, legislative funding and private donations. Of the six school districts represented on the at-risk task force, four of the six districts contract with iJAG for programming. The task force members believe school districts would choose to partner with iJAG if they had students with needs not being met with the school district's programs and iJAG could meet the needs. One task force member stated they would likely consider partnering with iJAG if they were unable to hire a work-based learning coordinator. Some school districts are providing the same or similar services as iJAG, but providing the services without contracting with iJAG.

4. How to best utilize state funding for programs for at-risk students and dropout prevention programs.

It is important to recognize that at-risk funds and dropout prevention funds are two separate and distinct funds with differing allowable expenditures, formulas, and sources.

The task force was presented with financial data related to the weighted at-risk funding each school district receives. The allocation is based on enrollment and the percentage of students in grades one through six qualifying for free or reduced lunch. Iowa Administrative Code 281.97.3

The historical at-risk supplementary weighting for school districts can be found in Table 2.

The task force received information about the modified supplemental amount (MSA) of funding that school districts can apply for At-Risk/Dropout Prevention (AR/DOP) programs. Table 3 shows historical data regarding available funding for MSA AR/DOP.

Table 2. At-Risk Supplementary Weighting

Fiscal Year	Supplementary Weighting
FY20	\$16,809,090.00
FY21	\$17,079,488.00
FY22	\$17,216,348.00
FY23	\$17,480,708.00

Table 3. Historical MSA for AR/DOP

Fiscal Year	MSA Possible	Carryforward	Amount Requested
FY20	\$140,682,151.00	\$14,213,907.00	\$125,532,276.00
FY21	\$144,345,421.00	\$10,161,072.00	\$131,832,895.00
FY22	\$145,526,070.00	\$8,139,291.00	\$135,878,958.00
FY23	\$149,375,615.00	\$8,958,519.00	\$139,916,523.00

In FY23, there were 113 school districts that had carryforward amounts. Of those districts, six were not eligible to apply for MSA for AR/DOP because the carryforward was greater than the possible MSA. There were only five school districts in FY23 that did not apply for MSA AR/DOP. However, the fact that some districts had carryforward amounts or did not apply for MSA AR/DOP does not mean districts have an abundance of said funds or are failing to spend on the applicable needs. Rather, there are a multitude of other reasons why a district may have carryforward funds or did not apply. For example, if a district was unable to find personnel, the salary for said individual(s) remained unspent simply due to staffing shortage not due to a lack of need. Or districts anticipating a dissolution and/or merger would not apply for MSA. This is important context given at-risk and dropout prevention funds cover only a fraction of the costs incurred by districts in order to implement and offer the needed programs.

With the amount of money being designated for at-risk and dropout prevention programs, the task force discussed the importance of school districts implementing best practices when designing programs for at-risk students. National organizations, such as the National Dropout Prevention Center (URL: <https://dropoutprevention.org>) and the National Alternative Education Association (URL: <https://www.the-naea.org>) identify exemplary practices. The task force did not agree that all school districts should implement the same best practices, but should continue to have the flexibility to select the best practices aligned to their student needs.

Recommendations

Based on the At-Risk Task Force's study, the following six recommendations were developed:

Recommendation #1: School districts should report to the Iowa Department of Education data that shows ways at-risk and dropout prevention funds are being used. Data should include, at a minimum, specific uses of funds and the number of students participating in (enrolled/being served) in at-risk and dropout prevention programs.

- Additional data to be reported may be identified through the evaluation conducted (see Recommendation #4).

Recommendation #2: Use growth in state reported measures, which may include chronic absenteeism rate and four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate, to evaluate effectiveness at the state level.

- Additional measures may be identified through the evaluation conducted (see Recommendation #4).

Recommendation #3: Use additional locally determined measures, which may include growth data, course completion and/or credit accrual, and school climate data (for example, Conditions for Learning survey or locally developed school climate survey), to further evaluate effectiveness at the local level.

- Additional measures may be identified through the evaluation conducted (see Recommendation #4).

Recommendation #4: Partner with a federal entity, such as the Region 9 Comprehensive Center or the Midwest Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) to conduct an independent evaluation of the effectiveness, including per-pupil cost analysis, of Iowa's at-risk and dropout prevention programs. Region 9 Comprehensive Center and REL are established by the U.S. Department of Education to provide services and support to state educational agencies.

- If the Region 9 Comprehensive Center or REL are unable to conduct this evaluation at no cost, execute and fund a request for proposal for an evaluation.

Recommendation #5: School districts should continue to decide at the local level the programs that best meet the needs of students. Do not direct a reallocation of school district grants to iJAG, but continue to expand locally determined partnerships between school districts and iJAG, based on want, need, and benefit.

Recommendation #6: The Iowa Department of Education should compile and maintain a list of best practices in supporting at-risk youth and dropout prevention, including but not limited to resources from the National Dropout Prevention Center and the National Alternative Education Association.

Appendix A. Midwest Comparison of Four-Year Graduation Rate

Graduation Information, Statewide Average (2018-2019)

	United States	Illinois	Indiana	Iowa	Mich.	Minn.	Ohio	Wis.
Total ACGR for all Students	86%	86%	87%	92%	81%	84%	82%	90%
Percent Students with Disabilities	68%	70%	71%	76%	58%	63%	48%	70%
Percent English learner	69%	72%	76%	79%	73%	67%	65%	75%
Percent Economically Disadvantaged	80%	78%	83%	85%	71%	71%	71%	80%
Homeless Enrolled	---	67%	77%	75%	58%	49%	54%	68%
Foster Care	---	54%	57%	72%	44%	---	52%	53%

ACGR by Race/Ethnicity, Statewide Average (2018-2019)

	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian/ Pacific Islander	American Indian/ Alaska Native	Two or more races
Illinois	91%	77%	82%	87%*	78%	87%
Indiana	89%	78%	85%	94%	83%	83%
Iowa	93%	82%	85%	91%	77%	88%
Michigan	85%	70%	77%	91%	70%	76%
Minnesota	89%	70%	70%	88%	51%	72%
Ohio	85%	69%	73%	---	71%	77%
Wisconsin	94%	71%	83%	92%	79%	86%

Graduation Information, Statewide Average (2019-2020)

	United States	Illinois	Indiana	Iowa	Mich.	Minn.	Ohio	Wis.
Total ACGR for all Students	87%	88%	91%	92%	82%	84%	84%	90%
Percent Students with Disabilities	71%	81%	79%	76%	59%	65%	57%	70%
Percent English learner	71%	77%	89%	77%	74%	66%	68%	77%
Percent Economically Disadvantaged	81%	82%	90%	86%	72%	72%	74%	82%
Homeless Enrolled	---	74%	88%	76%	60%	50%	59%	67%
Foster Care	---	52%	67%	64%	40%	---	57%	60%

ACGR by Race/Ethnicity, Statewide Average (2019-2020)

	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian/ Pacific Islander	American Indian/ Alaska Native	Two or more races
Illinois	92%	80%	86%	92%*	80%	86%
Indiana	93%	85%	88%	96%	89%	88%
Iowa	94%	81%	85%	92%	83%	89%
Michigan	85%	70%	76%	93%	74%	77%
Minnesota	89%	69%	70%	89%	56%	73%
Ohio	88%	72%	76%	91%	78%	81%
Wisconsin	94%	71%	84%	92%	85%	87%

Graduation Information, Statewide Average (2020-2021)

	United States	Illinois	Indiana	Iowa	Mich.	Minn.	Ohio	Wis.
Total ACGR for all Students	---	87%	87%	90%	80%	83%	87%*	90%
Percent Students with Disabilities	---	77%	75%	74%	57%	64%	---	69%
Percent English learner	---	75%	83%	76%	72%	65%	---	76%
Percent Economically Disadvantaged	---	79%	83%	82%	69%	70%	---	78%
Homeless Enrolled	---	64%	---	---	54%	---	---	---
Foster Care	---	56%	---	---	40%	---	---	---

ACGR by Race/Ethnicity, Statewide Average (2020-2021)

	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian/ Pacific Islander	American Indian/ Alaska Native	Two or more races
Illinois	91%	78%	84%	91%*	79%	83%
Indiana	89%	77%	83%	94%	77%	83%
Iowa	93%	78%	81%	90%	77%	86%
Michigan	84%	68%	75%	92%	70%	74%
Minnesota	88%	70%	69%	87%	53%	75%
Ohio	---	---	---	---	---	---
Wisconsin	94%	67%	83%	92%	78%	84%

Graduation Information, Statewide Average (2021-2022)

	United States	Illinois	Indiana	Iowa	Mich.	Minn.	Ohio	Wis.
Total ACGR for all Students	---	87%	87%	90%	81%	84%	---	90%
Percent Students with Disabilities	---	78%	76%	73%	58%	66%	---	73%
Percent English learner	---	77%	86%	73%	73%	65%	---	76%
Percent Economically Disadvantaged	---	80%	84%	82%	70%	71%	---	81%
Homeless Enrolled	---	67%	---	---	56%	---	---	---
Foster Care	---	52%	---	---	41%	---	---	---

ACGR by Race/Ethnicity, Statewide Average (2021-2022)

	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian/ Pacific Islander	American Indian/ Alaska Native	Two or more races
Illinois	91%	80%	85%	91%*	80%	85%
Indiana	89%	78%	84%	92%	84%	83%
Iowa	93%	77%	80%	90%	81%	83%
Michigan	84%	70%	74%	72%	71%	75%
Minnesota	89%	74%	69%	87%	61% [^]	79%
Ohio	---	---	---	---	---	---
Wisconsin	94%	71%	82%	92%	80%	87%

Note: The National Center for Education Statistics, The National Center for Homeless Education, and State Department of Education websites were used to collect the data in Appendix A.

Appendix B. Testimonials

Members of the at-risk task force shared stories of effectiveness of programs. Narratives provided by task force members are included here to further illustrate the impact at-risk programs have had on students.

Narrative provided by a parent:

"Our daughter began struggling with anxiety and depression during 8th grade at (junior high). What was once a self-driven child, a straight-A student, lead in school plays, and active in sports began to withdraw. Homework was missed, tests were failed, and activities canceled. We began therapy and medication but that didn't stop the self-harm from occurring or the suicidal ideation from creeping in. Psychological tests were performed but no concrete answers were given.

Changes in medications and multiple therapists followed with no progress and even further withdrawal. Her first suicide attempt (via wrist-cutting) came in March of 9th grade. Then another attempt in June. That prompted a 6-week admission to a facility outside Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She started her 10th-grade year at (comprehensive high school) with a full schedule but struggled to focus and keep up with classwork. She said the number of students in individual classrooms as well as in common areas (like hallways) caused her intense anxiety. When we asked her why she didn't ask the teacher for help, she told us that there were "too many other kids for them to care" and it was "too embarrassing to ask for help in a big class". We attempted to reduce her workload at (comprehensive high school) but were eventually down to only a few classes, which she was failing. Of course, her teachers at (comprehensive high school) DID care and we received wonderful support from counselors at (comprehensive high school). But to our daughter, she still felt like she didn't belong there and every day was a battle just to walk into the school.

Even though she had a good friend group, she still felt overwhelmed at (comprehensive high school). A few days before Homecoming 2022, she tried to hang herself with a noose she had made out of an industrial extension cord that she found in our garage. Another week in a behavioral health center in eastern Iowa followed. She decided that she wanted to transfer to (alternative school) as she didn't feel like it would ever "get better" at (the comprehensive school). Within the first few days, she knew that she had made the right choice by switching. In her words: "I like it at (alt school). Everybody there has something going on." She no longer felt the pressure to live up to the expectations of the "regular" kids at (comprehensive high school) and felt a connection with a lot of the other kids at (comprehensive high school), knowing that they also struggled with school attendance and needed extra attention.

Everything hasn't gone perfectly. After a falling-out with her best friend in the spring of 2023, she attempted to strangle herself twice in the course of a week. We decided to admit her to an 8-week program at a facility in San Diego. She was very willing to go because she knew that she would be able to stop classes at (alt school) and pick them up again when she returned. When she came back home, she was able to easily return to class and pick up where she left off. The one-on-one attention that she receives at (alt school) is invaluable as to letting her know that she matters and that people are willing to help her.

Before she attended (alt school), I had always assumed it was where "those kids" went. The kids that stole from their families or just didn't see the point of going to school. But we've been fighting mental health for four years and we've sent our child across the country to get her help. There are times when we feel like we're hanging on by our fingertips and we're the slightest slip away from falling backwards. I imagine that I have mis-judged "those kids" and they are all fighting a struggle of which I have no idea. As our daughter said: "Everybody there has something going on."

What we've learned through all of this is that we can't fix this for her. She has to do the work to get better. What we CAN give her is our unconditional love and tools that she can use to fight her struggles. And I believe (alt school) is one of those "tools". They give her that love and support that she needs. I get multiple texts a week while at work saying "Dad, I'm freaking out" or "Dad, I'm really struggling and I don't know what to do." As a parent, I can't tell you the comfort that it gives me to say "Take a deep breath, then go find (alt school staff member) (her case worker)" or "Why don't you go to (alt school counselor name) office and see if she is there to talk." We know the staff on a first name basis and it is wonderful that they know her struggles and come to her aid. My wife is a teacher, so I know the love that all teachers have for their students. But it is simply not possible to have that level of assistance at a school, like (comprehensive high school), with 2,000 students. I have so many staff contacts in my phone and I know that I can text any of them and say "My daughter was struggling today but decided to give it a go. Could you check in on her a few times?" They always reply back and follow through.

Our daughter knows that she has that support available when she needs it. When she was attending (comprehensive high school) and was having a bad day, she wouldn't even get out of bed. Now, she has the courage to bundle up her nerves and say "I'm going to school today. If I have trouble, there are people I can find and they can help me." I know there are days that I drop her off at the front door of (alt school) and she goes in and heads straight to the nurse, her academic counselor, or her case worker. Maybe schoolwork doesn't get done that day. But she's in the school, at the place where she needs to be and where she feels loved, respected, and understood. As a parent, that's all I can hope for."

Student testimonial:

"While at (comprehensive building) I was constantly battling with anxiety and depression. I wasn't able to receive the support I needed from my teachers. In no way was that their fault but with so many teenagers stuffed in a building they can only do their best. I dealt with bullies and felt like there was no one there on my side. There would be 30+ students in a class at a time and to me an hour class is not enough time for a teacher to give a lesson and help each student when they are struggling. I was missing classes because being in the class not understanding anything and not having the support I personally needed ended in me skipping classes and getting into arguments with my teacher.

Just a few months after my freshman year had started I was transferred to (the alt school). At that point I was on the edge of expulsion. (Alt school) was my last chance. They welcomed me with open arms and gave me the time and help I needed. I was shocked when I walked into my first class and saw less than 10 students in there. I was able to take my time and build a personal relationship with all the teachers and staff in the building. I felt accepted. My teachers sit there with me for as long as I need them to until I understand the assignment. I always have a safe space to go if my anxiety gets too bad or if I can't focus. My teachers believe in me and they always push me to do my best. And I know that there is always a safe person at (the alt school).

(Alt school) and so many other schools like it were put in place to help students who need that extra help. With the one on one help I get with my teachers I'm working towards graduating this year. If you asked me as a freshman I probably would have told you that I didn't see myself graduating. Without (alt school) I wouldn't be working toward graduating, I wouldn't be where I am today. If funding was taken away from (alt school) and they did not exist, they will have a higher dropout rate and a lower average test score number. Teens would be dropping out because they wouldn't have another option.

I've talked about the school and the staff now for the students. (Alt school) is like its own little community of people. When you go to (alt school) where you came from and who you are doesn't matter. Everyone knows everyone and you are loved for you. At (the alt school) I made friends who are 4 years older than me and 4 years younger than me. I was taught not only about academics but how to

be successful after high school. They helped me build real life experience and forever friends. I couldn't be more grateful for (alt school) and the things they have done for me and for hundreds of other students."

Testimonial provided by a staff member from an at-risk program:

"The high school student and her two younger brothers (one in middle school and the other in elementary school) and sister (age 4) lived with their mom in an apartment at the homeless shelter. Being the counselor for the at-risk program, it was my job to remove any obstacles and barriers for kids' education. I provided fixings for Thanksgiving dinner and Christmas dinner, Christmas gifts, winter coats and boots, school supplies, food, clothing, medical care, etc.

The family met the DOE requirements for dropout prevention services. In the at-risk program, we provide a safety net, support and alternative learning for kids deemed "At-Risk" of dropping out. We provide smaller class sizes and more standard-based learning. Having positive relationships is essential to our success. Kids who are not earning credits in general education classes become great learners as our trained staff work with them. We have encouraged and developed graduates when the kids have lost all hope.

This particular student's attendance began to be spotty during her sophomore year. More conversations with her mom occurred during her junior year as attendance was becoming terrible. The alternative program teachers and staff continued to work with the student. Mom's health was a concern and the student was missing a ton of school as she was taking mom to doctor appointments and trying to run the household. We would go for days without seeing her.

As a senior, the student was behind in credits - failing classes were catching up to her. Graduation with her class was slipping out of sight. Due to her poor health, mom could not come to school for a meeting. Mom invited me to come to the home to discuss how we could help.

When I arrived, mom was sitting in a recliner. Her mother was sitting beside her. Mom was having extreme difficulty breathing. They were talking about calling the ambulance as she was getting worse.

The house was a total disaster. The chaos was chaotic. There was a mattress lying on the open staircase to the upstairs. There were filthy dirty socks coming out of the open bread bag. Dirty dishes filled the sink, kitchen counter and table. It was overwhelming. It was crystal clear what was happening for the student and why she was not attending school. All of the kids' attendance was a concern.

It was about two weeks later that mom again was having difficulty breathing. The ambulance was called. Mom was admitted to the hospital. While on the way up to her room in the elevator, the electricity failed. Mom died in the elevator. It was horrible. The children's lives were forever altered.

Through lots of care and support, as well as flexibility in how we met her needs the student graduated with her class. All of the children in this family have been served - all the years - receiving support and services. The youngest girl graduated last year.

I love the dropout prevention program and staff. We have impacted the lives of so many kids. And they have impacted ours."

Testimony from an IJAG program participant:

"IJAG showed me the leadership and communication skills that, turns out, were in me! The opportunities and experiences that were provided to me helped influence my career decision and next stage of my life. In 20 years, I'm going to tell stories to all my friends, family (and maybe kids!) about

everything IJAG has done for me and my current life. IJAG truly changes lives, and impacts you forever.”