

An Evaluation

# **Children At Risk Program**

*Department of Public Instruction*

## **2005-2006 Joint Legislative Audit Committee Members**

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State Auditor - Janice Mueller

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Janice Mueller  
State Auditor

March 4, 2005

Senator Carol A. Roessler and  
Representative Suzanne Jeskewitz, Co-chairpersons  
Joint Legislative Audit Committee  
State Capitol  
Madison, Wisconsin 53702

Dear Senator Roessler and Representative Jeskewitz:

As required by s. 118.153(6), Wis. Stats., we have completed an evaluation of the Children At Risk program, which is administered by the Department of Public Instruction. The program is intended to increase the number of students earning high school diplomas by improving services to those at risk of failing in or dropping out of school. It was created in 1985, and it has been appropriated \$3.5 million in general purpose revenue annually since fiscal year 1990-91.

The program was last modified by 1999 Wisconsin Act 123 in response to recommendations from the Joint Legislative Council Special Committee on Children At Risk. Since these changes were implemented, the number of participating school districts has increased from 13 to 21. In the 2003-04 academic year, these 21 districts identified 29,669 students as being at risk of not graduating from high school.

We found that districts have not fully complied with requirements to allocate funding to specific programs and have not collected data linking students who meet performance objectives to specific district programs. Therefore, we cannot isolate the effect Children At Risk funding has had on at-risk students. Graduation and dropout rates improved in participating districts, but when we analyzed district-wide at-risk student performance, we found that the number of students in participating school districts who met at least three statutory performance objectives—such as remaining in school, having an attendance rate of at least 70 percent, and demonstrating reading and math gains—decreased from 46.8 percent in 1999-2000 to 40.2 percent in 2003-04.

We appreciate the courtesy and cooperation extended to us by Department of Public Instruction staff and participating school districts. The agency's response follows the appendices.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Janice Mueller".

Janice Mueller  
State Auditor

JM/PS/ss



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## Report Highlights ■

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***Program funding represents a small percentage of total funding for at-risk students.***

***Districts do not comply with requirements to allocate funds to specific at-risk programs.***

***Indicators of at-risk student achievement have been mixed.***

The Children At Risk program, which is administered by the Department of Public Instruction (DPI), is intended to reduce the number of students in grades 5 through 12 who are at risk of not graduating from high school. It was created in the 1985-87 Biennial Budget Act and, in response to recommendations from the Joint Legislative Council Special Committee on Children at Risk, was last modified in 1999 Wisconsin Act 123. Each year since fiscal year (FY) 1990-91, the program has provided \$3.5 million in general purpose revenue (GPR) to participating school districts. These funds represent a small percentage of total funding for at-risk services statewide.

This is our sixth evaluation of the Children At Risk program. Under s. 118.153(6), Wis. Stats., we are required to determine the extent to which funded programs meet statutory performance objectives that include specified attendance rates, graduation for high school seniors, and demonstrated gains in reading and mathematics. However, both the manner in which program funds are allocated by individual districts and inconsistencies in the reporting of performance data limit the conclusions that can be drawn regarding program success. Consequently, we reviewed:

- the number of school districts that have participated in the program, and the funding provided to each district;
- how districts have used funding provided through the program;

- student achievement of statutory performance criteria; and
- school district compliance with statutory requirements.

### **At-Risk Program Funding**

School districts provide a broad range of programs and services to meet the needs of at-risk students, including counseling, after-school programs, and placement in alternative high schools. School district staff note that the majority of at-risk programs and services are provided not only to students identified under s. 118.153, Wis. Stats., but also to those from kindergarten through high school who may need more extensive services for other reasons, such as limited English proficiency or evidence of alcohol or other drug use.

In FY 2003-04, the \$3.5 million provided through the Children At Risk program represented 1.2 percent of the \$290.7 million provided to school districts to serve at-risk students from kindergarten through high school, or to prevent children from becoming at-risk. The total included \$164.2 million in federal funds and \$126.5 million in GPR.

### **School District Participation**

In the 2003-04 school year, 21 districts participated in the Children At Risk program. They identified 29,669 at-risk students. The number of students at risk of not graduating statewide is not known because only districts that receive program funding are required to report to DPI.

Districts receive funding based on the number of their at-risk students who achieve statutory performance objectives. Because of increasing numbers of students achieving these objectives, payments are prorated. For example, in the 2003-04 school year eligible school districts will receive 51.0 percent of the amount for which they qualified. Milwaukee Public Schools will receive \$1.9 million, or 54.3 percent of all funds the State has allocated for the Children At Risk program.



Statutes require each school district to specify the amount of Children At Risk funding dedicated to each of its programs for at-risk students and to provide a preference in allocating that funding to alternative schools, charter schools, schools within schools, and private agencies. However, because Children At Risk program funding represents only a small portion of their at-risk expenditures, districts typically do not allocate it to specific programs for at-risk students. Instead, Children At Risk program funds are typically deposited into a district's general fund. Because of this practice, it is difficult to isolate the effects of the Children At Risk program.

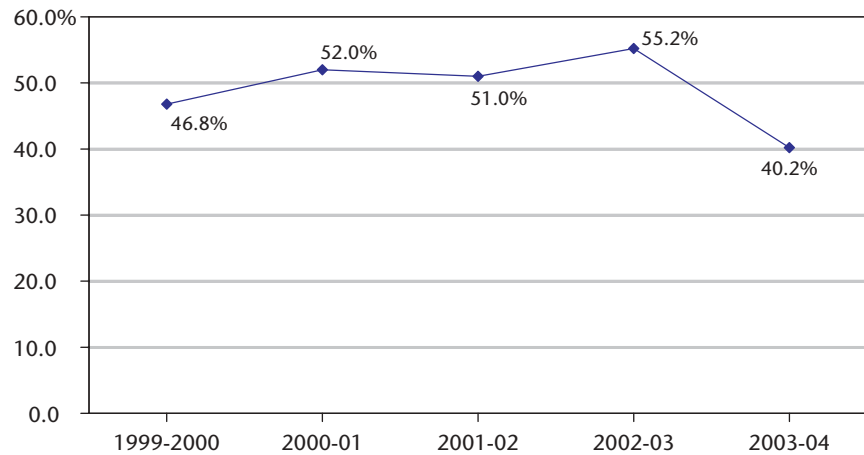
## **Student Achievement**

For a district to receive reimbursement from the Children At Risk program, an identified at-risk student must achieve at least three of five statutorily defined performance objectives:

- receiving a high school diploma;
- remaining in school;
- an attendance rate of at least 70 percent;
- earning at least 4.5 credits, or a prorated number of credits if the student was enrolled in a program for less than the entire school year; and
- demonstrating, on standardized tests or other appropriate measures, a gain in reading and mathematics commensurate with the duration of enrollment in an at-risk program.

Among the 21 participating districts, 40.2 percent of students identified as at-risk achieved at least three statutory performance objectives in the 2003-04 school year. This is the lowest level in the five-year period shown in Figure 1. By district, the percentage of students achieving at least three objectives ranged from more than 80.0 percent in Janesville and Stevens Point to 25.0 percent or less in five other districts.

Figure 1

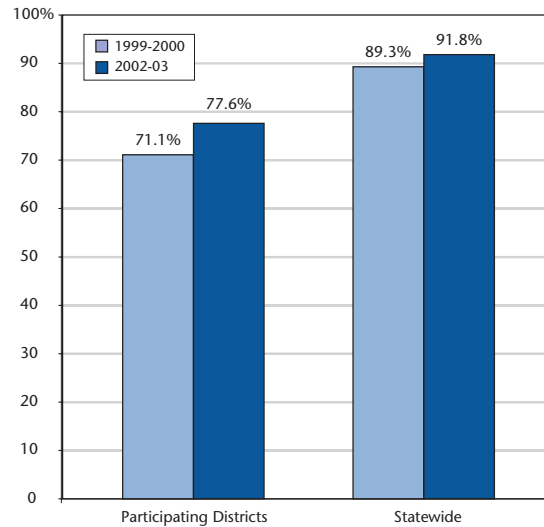
**Percentage of At-Risk Students Achieving at Least Three Statutory Performance Objectives**

The best indicators of success for the Children At Risk program may be comparative graduation and dropout rates for participating and nonparticipating, but otherwise similar, students. School districts do not track this type of information. However, we were able to analyze trends in 11 school districts that participated in the Children At Risk program in each school year from 1999-2000 through 2002-03.

Although the district-wide graduation rate in the 11 participating school districts remained lower than the statewide graduation rate, its increase was greater from 1999-2000 through 2002-03, as shown in Figure 2. Among the 11 participating districts, the graduation rate increased 6.5 percentage points, from 71.1 percent to 77.6 percent. Statewide, the increase was 2.5 percentage points.

It may not be reasonable to attribute changes in student performance solely to the Children At Risk program because of the availability of other funding for district at-risk programs. Additionally, because districts receive reimbursement under the Children At Risk program in the year after expenses are incurred, districts decide which programs and services to offer without regard to the level of Children At Risk funding they may subsequently receive.

Figure 2

**Graduation Rates****For Future Consideration**

The Governor's FY 2005-07 biennial budget proposes a continued level of funding of \$3.5 million annually for the Children At Risk program. However, the Legislature could consider at least three options for Children At Risk program funding.

First, the program could be eliminated. The lack of attention to program requirements by school districts raises questions about the priority they assign to complying with program requirements. However, most district officials with whom we spoke indicated that because providing at-risk services is a priority, funding for other district programs would likely be reduced if Children At Risk program funding were reduced or eliminated.

Second, funding for the Children At Risk program could be merged with other program funding. For example, the Alternative Education Grant program serves a similar population and has similar program requirements. It is also administered by DPI and receives \$5.0 million annually in GPR funding. Merging these programs could increase both efficiency and accountability, because districts participating in the Alternative Education Grant program are required to report specific program expenditures to DPI, while those participating in Children At Risk do not.

Alternatively, Children At Risk program funding could be merged into general school aids. This option could make additional funding available to all school districts. However, merging programs or redistributing funds would substantially reduce the amount of funds targeted to the 21 districts currently participating in the Children At Risk program.

Finally, maintaining the program as it is currently structured may help to ensure that services for at-risk students are not reduced in some districts. Although district staff indicated that Children At Risk funding is small compared to total district budgets, demands on available funding for district programs have placed an increased emphasis on maintaining all available funding sources.

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## Introduction ■

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Section 118.153(1)(a), Wis. Stats., defines students at risk of not graduating from high school as those in grades 5 through 12 who are dropouts or who meet two or more of the following conditions:

- one or more years behind their age group in the number of high school credits attained;
- two or more years behind their age group in basic skill levels;
- habitual truants, who are absent from school without an acceptable excuse for five or more days during a semester;
- parents;
- adjudicated delinquents; or
- 8<sup>th</sup> grade pupils who failed to be promoted to the 9<sup>th</sup> grade or who scored below the basic level in each subject area on the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination.

Statutes require that every school district identify these students and develop annual plans for meeting their needs. In addition, districts that have at least 30 dropouts or a dropout rate exceeding 5.0 percent of high school enrollment may apply for categorical aid through the Children At Risk program.

***Since FY 1990-91, the Legislature has annually appropriated \$3.5 million GPR for the program.***

Since FY 1990-91, the Legislature has annually appropriated \$3.5 million in GPR for the Children At Risk program. Districts that receive funding are required to report to DPI on the number of at-risk students in the district and the number that meet the performance criteria specified in s. 118.153(4)(c), Wis. Stats.

In FY 2003-04, 21 participating districts identified 29,669 students as at risk of not graduating. The number of at-risk students statewide is not known because only districts that request funding under the Children At Risk program are required to report to DPI.

***1999 Wisconsin Act 123 implemented changes recommended by the Joint Legislative Council Special Committee on Children At Risk.***

In prior evaluations, we noted that because districts did not dedicate Children At Risk program funding to any single district program or service, it was difficult to isolate any unique program effects. In response to these concerns, and in an attempt to improve program operations, the Legislature in 1998 convened the Joint Legislative Council Special Committee on Children At Risk to review the program. The committee's recommendations, which were enacted as 1999 Wisconsin Act 123, were primarily intended to simplify and focus the program by:

- making program participation permissive for all districts, rather than mandatory for some;
- lowering to 30 students, or more than 5 percent of high school enrollment, the number of dropouts a district must have had in the prior year to qualify for funding;
- requiring school districts to provide a specific amount of Children At Risk program funding to each district program in which at-risk students are enrolled, based on the program's ability to meet the statutory performance criteria; and
- requiring districts to provide a preference in allocating Children At Risk funding to alternative schools; charter schools; schools within schools; or private, nonprofit, nonsectarian agencies located in the school district or within five miles of the district.

To determine whether these changes affected school districts' administration of the program as well as their success in serving at-risk students, we:

- interviewed staff from 21 participating school districts, as well as staff in districts that were eligible but did not participate in the Children At Risk program;
- reviewed statutes, administrative rules, and guidance provided to school districts by DPI;
- analyzed data on program funding, the performance of students identified as at-risk that are submitted to DPI as part of program requirements, and statewide graduation and dropout rates;
- reviewed plans prepared by school districts to serve at-risk students; and
- identified the other sources of funding available to serve this population.

## **Programs Serving At-Risk Students**

***School districts provide a broad range of programs and services for at-risk students.***

School districts provide a broad range of programs and services to meet the needs of at-risk students, including individual counseling by a school counselor, social worker, or psychologist; after-school programs that offer academic credits; and placement in alternative high schools. For example:

- The School District of Superior’s Focus Program is an intensive, part-day program for high school students who receive individualized instruction in coursework that will lead to graduation.
- Merrill Area Public Schools and Manitowoc Public School District’s Lincoln High School allow students to earn credit by completing lessons in mathematics, English, science, and social studies on NovaNet, a computer-based program.
- The Racine Unified School District’s Lighted Schoolhouse Program offers one-half credit for each mathematics, English, science, and social studies course that high school students take after school.

- The School District of Janesville contracts with the Boys and Girls Club to operate the Truancy Abatement and Transitional Education Center, through which students who are habitually truant, expelled, or suspended can earn credits in mathematics and English and perform community service projects.
- Milwaukee Public Schools contracts with 16 community-based agencies, known as partnership schools, some of which offer non-traditional curricula.

In addition, all districts receiving Children At Risk funding offer classes that allow students to earn high school diplomas or high school equivalency degrees by taking the certificate of general educational development (GED) tests and completing additional requirements. These classes are typically taken at local technical colleges, but they may also be provided directly by districts. Many districts consider these classes to be an integral part of their at-risk programs. For example, both the Sheboygan Area School District and the School District of Rhineland have indicated that offering district classes preparing students to take the GED tests has been effective in encouraging former dropouts to re-enroll and in getting at-risk students to earn high school diplomas.

School district staff note that the majority of programs and services provided to at-risk students identified under s. 118.153, Wis. Stats., are also available to students who may need more intensive services for other reasons. Some of the circumstances or conditions school staff look for in determining whether a student is in need of additional “at-risk” services include:

- living in a household with an income below the poverty line;
- evidence of alcohol or other drug use;
- limited English proficiency;
- patterns of disruptive behavior or significant changes in behavior that could suggest family domestic problems; and
- parents or siblings who failed in or dropped out of school.



***In FY 2003-04, program funding represented only 1.2 percent of all funds spent on at-risk children.***

In recognition of the diverse factors that can place a student at risk, the State and the federal government provided school districts with a total of \$290.7 million in FY 2003-04 to serve at-risk students from kindergarten through high school, or to prevent students from becoming at-risk. As shown in Table 1, federal funds represented \$164.2 million of this total, and GPR represented \$126.5 million. The \$3.5 million provided through the Children At Risk program, which is limited to serving students in grades 5 through 12 who meet the statutory definition of "at risk," represented only 1.2 percent of the funding available to address the needs of at-risk students, or to prevent children from becoming at-risk. Additional information on the sources of funding for services to this broader population of at-risk students is provided in Appendix 1.

Table 1  
Sources of School District Funding to Serve At-Risk Students  
FY 2003-04  
(In Millions)

Type of Program	GPR	Federal	Total	Percentage of Total
<b>Statutorily Defined At-Risk Funds<sup>1</sup></b>				
Children At Risk Program	\$ 3.5	\$ 0.0	\$ 3.5	1.2%
Other At-Risk Programs	6.2	1.8	8.0	2.8
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>9.7</b>	<b>1.8</b>	<b>11.5</b>	<b>4.0</b>
<b>Other At-Risk Funds<sup>2</sup></b>				
Low-Income	102.6	146.8	249.4	85.8
English as a Second Language	8.3	4.5	12.8	4.4
Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse	5.9	4.7	10.6	3.6
Low-Performing	0.0	5.9	5.9	2.0
Homeless	0.0	0.5	0.5	0.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$126.5</b>	<b>\$164.2</b>	<b>\$290.7</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

<sup>1</sup> Includes programs that provide services to students most likely to meet the definition of at-risk under the Children At Risk program in s. 118.153(1)(a), Wis. Stats. Does not include a \$285,000 grant awarded by the Wisconsin Technical College System Board to the Private Industry Council of Milwaukee County under s. 38.40(4m), Wis. Stats., to provide school-to-work training to students meeting the statutory definition of children at risk.

<sup>2</sup> Includes programs that provide funding to serve at-risk students as defined more broadly than under s. 118.153(1)(a), Wis. Stats., including students in kindergarten through 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

Examples of programs that serve the broader population of at-risk students include:

- federal Title I basic grants, which provided \$143.4 million to supplement instructional programs for disadvantaged students from low-income families;
- the Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE) program, which provided \$94.8 million in GPR to reduce class sizes in kindergarten through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade in schools in which at least half of the students are from low-income families; and
- the Bilingual/Bicultural Education Program, which provided \$8.3 million in GPR to improve the reading, writing, and speaking ability of students with limited English proficiency.

Funding for at-risk programs is also provided through the general school aids formula and through the local tax levy. Although they were not able to quantify the at-risk program funding provided through these sources, school district officials indicated that it exceeds the amount provided through the Children At Risk program. In FY 2003-04, school districts statewide received a total of \$4.2 billion in general school aids.

The comparatively small amount of funding provided through the Children At Risk program and the fact that school districts do not typically differentiate Children At Risk program funds from other funds used to serve at-risk students make it difficult to assess the program's effect on student performance. However, we were able to analyze the amount of funding each district receives through the Children At Risk program and their uses for these funds.

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## School District Participation and Funding ■

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An increasing number of school districts and students are participating in the Children At Risk program, reducing the share of the \$3.5 million annual appropriation that is available to any single district. However, districts did not fully comply with statutory requirements to allocate funds to specific at-risk programs. This failure does not appear to reduce the level of services provided to at-risk students, but it limits the extent to which the effectiveness of district programs funded by the Children At Risk program can be evaluated.

### District Eligibility and Participation

***School district eligibility for program funding is determined annually.***

School district eligibility for Children At Risk funding is determined annually. As noted, a school district is eligible to request program funding if, in the prior school year, 30 or more of its students dropped out of school or the district had a dropout rate exceeding 5.0 percent of its total high school enrollment. DPI identifies and notifies eligible districts, although statutes do not require it to do so. However, districts cannot accurately predict the amount of program funding they will receive in any year because funding levels are contingent on the number of at-risk students for whom eligible districts claim funding.

***Many school districts' applications for funds are not timely.***

Section 118.153(4)(a), Wis. Stats., requires districts that request Children At Risk funding to submit data by August 31 of each year regarding at-risk student identification and achievement during the prior school year. However, some districts are late in submitting

these data. For example, only 10 of the 21 school districts that requested funding for the 2003-04 school year met the August 31, 2004 deadline; 5 others were granted extensions by DPI, and the remaining 6 submitted their applications up to two months late. However, every district that applied and met other eligibility criteria will receive funding. DPI accepts funding requests after the statutory deadline to ensure that eligible districts have an opportunity to receive funding. However, it could be argued that missing the application deadline should make a district ineligible to receive funding. The only effect of strictly enforcing the statutory deadline would be to make more funds available to districts that meet the deadline by denying funds to those that do not.

***School district funding is based on the number of at-risk students who achieve at least three of five statutory performance objectives.***

The funding each district receives is based on the number of at-risk students who achieve at least three of five statutory performance objectives, as reported by the district. For each such student, a district can receive up to 10.0 percent of its per pupil state equalized aid amount, which varies by district. However, because the \$3.5 million Children At Risk appropriation is insufficient to fully fund reimbursements to all districts under this formula, the reimbursement amount to each district is prorated. As shown in Table 2, school districts received 64.7 percent of the amount for which they were eligible in the 1999-2000 school year; this declined to 51.0 percent in 2003-04. However, districts received a greater percentage of the funding for which they were eligible in 2003-04 than in the prior two years because fewer students achieved at least three of the performance objectives.

***In the 2003-04 school year, 21 of 23 eligible school districts participated in the program.***

In the 2003-04 school year, 23 school districts were eligible to participate in the Children At Risk program based on their 2002-03 dropout rates. All but two of those districts—the Neenah Joint School District and the Wabeno School District—chose to request funding. The Neenah district did not request funding because district officials believed it would be insufficient to cover costs of reporting to DPI. The Wabeno district did not receive any reimbursement for the only year it participated in the program, the 2001-02 school year, because none of its 27 at-risk students met performance objectives. This may have influenced its decision to not participate in 2003-04.

Table 2

**Prorated Reimbursement Level**  
1999-2000 through 2003-04  
(In Millions)

School Year	Number of Participating School Districts	Number of At-Risk Students Who Achieved at Least Three Performance Objectives <sup>1</sup>	Maximum Amount of Funding for Which Districts Qualified <sup>2</sup>	Statutory Funding Provided	Prorated Reimbursement Amount <sup>3</sup>
1999-2000 <sup>4</sup>	13	10,637	\$5.4	\$3.5	64.7%
2000-2001	19	13,162	6.9	3.5	51.1
2001-2002	24	13,961	7.5	3.5	46.5
2002-2003	21	14,543	8.1	3.5	43.2
2003-2004	21	11,918	6.9	3.5	51.0

<sup>1</sup> As reported by school districts.

<sup>2</sup> Based on 10 percent per member aid for each at-risk student who was enrolled in a program and achieved at least three of five performance objectives.

<sup>3</sup> Represents the percentage of funding for which districts qualified that was actually reimbursed.

<sup>4</sup> For this year, school districts with 50 or more dropouts or a dropout rate of 5 percent of total high school enrollment were required to participate, and schools with 40 or more dropouts were allowed to participate. Beginning in 2000-01, any district with 30 or more dropouts, or a dropout rate exceeding 5 percent of its total high school enrollment, is allowed to request funding.

***For 2003-04, Milwaukee Public Schools will receive the most funding at \$1.9 million.***

As shown in Table 3, Milwaukee Public Schools will receive the largest amount of Children At Risk funding for the 2003-04 school year, \$1.9 million, which is 54.3 percent of the \$3.5 million allocated. In contrast, the School District of Rhinelander will receive the smallest amount, \$6,638, which is less than 1 percent of the total. Appendix 2 provides information on the amount of Children At Risk funding received by each district from 1999-2000 through 2003-04.

Table 3

**Distribution of Children At Risk Funds  
2003-04 School Year<sup>1</sup>**

School District	Number of At-Risk Students Who Achieved at Least Three Performance Objectives <sup>2</sup>	Funding Amount Provided	Funding Amount per Student Who Achieved at Least Three Performance Objectives
Beloit	400	\$ 135,870	\$340
Fond du Lac	336	84,952	253
Green Bay Area	341	90,190	264
Hartford UHS	77	17,341	225
Janesville	686	190,406	278
Kenosha Unified	1,027	282,060	275
La Crosse	153	37,577	246
Madison Metropolitan	190	19,798	104
Manitowoc	125	31,202	250
Menominee Indian	30	9,401	313
Merrill Area	27	7,796	289
Milwaukee Public Schools	6,001	1,900,538	317
Oshkosh Area	221	57,628	261
Racine Unified	1,384	398,271	288
Rhinelanders	38	6,638	175
Sheboygan Area	158	46,677	295
Stevens Point Area	204	51,690	253
Superior	141	40,384	286
Watertown Unified	54	13,277	246
Wausau	71	19,210	271
West Allis-West Milwaukee	254	59,094	233
<b>Total</b>	<b>11,918</b>	<b>\$3,500,000</b>	<b>294</b>

<sup>1</sup> Funding based on performance in the 2003-04 school year will be paid in May 2005.

<sup>2</sup> As reported by school districts.

## Evaluating District Use of Children At Risk Funds

***Districts do not comply with the statutory requirement to allocate funding to specific at-risk programs.***

Section 118.153(5)(b), Wis. Stats., requires a school district receiving Children At Risk funds to provide a specific amount to each of its at-risk programs, based on the ability of at-risk students in each program to achieve the five statutory performance objectives. Districts have generally disregarded this requirement, even though Children At Risk funding could be tracked separately in accounting systems and districts could choose to create separate accounts for their at-risk programs. Instead, districts have typically reported that they deposit Children At Risk funding into their general fund, which can be used for any district expenditures. Districts justify this practice because the amount of Children At Risk funding they receive is small compared to their expenditures on programs and services for at-risk students. However, this practice makes it difficult to isolate the effects of the Children At Risk program.

Conclusions about the effectiveness of any single at-risk program are difficult to draw because:

- districts do not collect data linking students who met the statutory performance objectives to the specific programs in which they participated;
- districts do not often differentiate between those students who meet the statutory definition of at-risk and other students participating in at-risk programs who require additional support; and
- at-risk students may participate in more than one at-risk program or receive more than one type of service during the school year.

***It is not possible to isolate the effect Children At Risk funding has on the overall effectiveness of any district program.***

Furthermore, it is not possible to isolate the effect Children At Risk funding has on the overall effectiveness of any district program. Although few districts separately budget for and track their total at-risk program expenditures, those that could provide us with program expenditures show that the funding provided through the Children At Risk program typically represents a small percentage of any single district at-risk program or service. For example, in the 2003-04 school year:

- the Madison Metropolitan School District received \$15,843 in Children At Risk funding, which represented less than 1 percent of the \$2.2 million it spent on four at-risk programs, including an alternative high school;

- the Wausau School District received \$11,097 in Children At Risk funding, which represented only 2.0 percent of the \$561,700 it spent on an alternative high school;
- the Oshkosh Area School District received \$54,912 in Children At Risk funding, which represented 4.8 percent of the \$1.1 million it spent on at-risk programs; and
- the Kenosha Unified School District received \$235,697 in Children At Risk funding, which represented 5.5 percent of the \$4.3 million it spent on programs for credit-deficient high school students and other at-risk students.

Section 118.153(5)(c), Wis. Stats., requires districts to provide a preference in allocating Children At Risk funds to alternative schools, charter schools, schools within schools, and private agencies. Although many districts are funding these types of alternative programs for at-risk students, none have formal policies indicating a preference that these types of programs receive Children At Risk funding. Furthermore, Milwaukee Public Schools is one of the few districts that has formal contracts with private agencies to serve at-risk students.

In addition to providing educational services that will allow at-risk students to graduate from high school, Milwaukee Public Schools' contracts specify that partnership schools are to provide instruction that will help prepare students for future employment. As shown in Table 4, Milwaukee Public Schools contracted with 16 partnership schools in 2003-04 to serve 1,565 at-risk students. However, at a standard rate of \$7,305 per student, the total cost to the district was \$11.5 million, or approximately six times greater than the \$1.9 million in Children At Risk funding Milwaukee Public Schools will receive for the 2003-04 school year. Moreover, these 1,565 students represented only 9.1 percent of the 17,152 students identified as at-risk district-wide.



Table 4

**Contracted Classroom Seats with  
Milwaukee Public Schools Partnership Schools<sup>1</sup>  
2003-04 School Year**

School	At-Risk Seats	Expenditures <sup>2</sup>
Assata	60	\$ 438,300
Aurora Weier Educational Center	75	547,875
Cornerstone Achievement Academy	100	730,500
El Puente	100	730,500
Grandview (Seeds of Health)	225	1,643,625
HR Academy	100	730,500
HR Educational Possentem	60	438,300
Learning Enterprise High School	150	1,095,750
Loyola Academy (Council for Spanish Speaking)	90	657,450
Milwaukee Area Technical College	75	570,166
Milwaukee Spectrum	90	657,450
Northwest Opportunities Vocational Academy	100	730,500
Shalom High School (Trans Center for Youth)	100	730,500
Silver Spring Neighborhood Academy	80	584,400
Spotted Eagle	100	730,500
United Community Center	60	438,300
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,565</b>	<b>\$11,454,616</b>

<sup>1</sup> A partnership school is a nonprofit, nonsectarian, community-based agency operating under contract with Milwaukee Public Schools.

<sup>2</sup> Includes funds paid to the partnership schools, as well as the cost of employing a Milwaukee Public Schools teacher at each site.





## At-Risk Student Achievement ■

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As the number of identified at-risk students has increased in participating school districts, their achievement of statutory performance objectives has declined. Achievement levels vary considerably by district and grade level. However, district-wide graduation and dropout rates have improved in participating school districts.

### Identification of At-Risk Students

***Although all school districts identify at-risk students, only those that receive program funding report these data to DPI.***

All school districts are required by statute to identify at-risk students annually, but only districts that request Children At Risk funding report these data to DPI. At-risk students may be identified by a team of school staff that typically includes the principal, a counselor, a teacher, and possibly a social worker, or the classroom teacher may be the primary staff person responsible for identifying at-risk students and reporting relevant information to the principal or a school counselor, who then arranges for appropriate services and programs. As noted, districts typically identify students in need of additional services based on a broader definition of “at risk” than that provided in statutes.

Statutes also require districts that request Children At Risk funding to report the number of at-risk students enrolled in at-risk programs. Districts are to enroll students in specific programs upon the request of the student or the student’s parent or guardian. Although districts are required to report how many of the enrolled students achieved each of five statutory performance objectives, a number of districts

do not comply with this requirement. For example, 6 of the 21 districts participating in the 2003-04 school year reported a greater number of at-risk students achieving the performance objectives than were reported as enrolled in at-risk programs. Officials in three other districts reported that they automatically consider all at-risk students as enrolled in a program because offered services are not typically refused. Because of these reporting inconsistencies, we focused our analysis on the number of at-risk students that school districts identified, rather than the number they reported as enrolled in a program.

### **Achievement of Statutory Performance Objectives**

***In 2003-04, 40.2 percent of at-risk students achieved at least three performance objectives.***

Districts have had mixed success in increasing the likelihood that at-risk students will graduate from high school. As shown in Table 5, 40.2 percent of identified at-risk students achieved at least three of the statutory performance objectives in the 2003-04 school year. This was the smallest percentage in five years and represents a one-year decline of 2,625 at-risk students. Nearly all of the decline occurred in four school districts: the Racine Unified School District, Milwaukee Public Schools, the Green Bay Area Public School District, and the School District of Superior.

Table 5

#### **At-Risk Students Achieving at Least Three Statutory Performance Objectives**

School Year	Number of Districts	Number of Students Identified as At-Risk	Number Who Achieved at Least Three Performance Objectives <sup>1</sup>	Percentage Who Achieved at Least Three Performance Objectives
1999-2000	13	22,749	10,637	46.8%
2000-2001	19	25,323	13,162	52.0
2001-2002	24	27,360	13,961	51.0
2002-2003	21	26,346	14,543	55.2
2003-2004	21	29,669	11,918	40.2

<sup>1</sup> As reported by school districts.

Districts have attributed student achievement declines not to worsening performance, but to variations in procedures for identifying at-risk students and to data collection and processing errors. We also identified several examples of inaccurate reporting by school districts. For example, Milwaukee Public Schools reported a greater number of 12<sup>th</sup> grade at-risk students graduating than it had identified as at-risk. However, because school districts typically do not use these data for purposes other than reporting to DPI, reporting is unlikely to improve.

***School districts had varying success helping at-risk students achieve statutory performance objectives.***

As shown in Table 6, more than 80.0 percent of at-risk students in both the School District of Janesville and the Stevens Point Area Public School District achieved at least three performance objectives in the 2003-04 school year, compared to 25.0 percent or fewer at-risk students who achieved at least three objectives in the Green Bay Area School District, the Madison Metropolitan School District, the Menominee Indian School District, Merrill Area Public Schools, and the School District of Rhinelander. It should be noted that district performance data are self-reported, and variations in district performance may be partially attributable to differing interpretations of the broadly defined performance objectives.

We also found wide variation among districts in achieving each of the five performance objectives. For example, the Menominee Indian School District reported that 100.0 percent of its at-risk 12<sup>th</sup> grade students graduated from high school, whereas the Watertown Unified School District reported a graduation rate of only 15.3 percent of its at-risk 12<sup>th</sup> graders. Overall, 60.7 percent of at-risk 12<sup>th</sup>-grade students served by districts receiving Children At Risk funds graduated from high school.

Furthermore, as shown in Table 7, while 54.6 percent of at-risk students remained in school in the 2003-04 school year, only 38.4 percent made gains in reading and math. On this latter indicator, the success rate ranged from 8.3 percent for the Merrill Area Public Schools to 80.7 percent for the Stevens Point Area Public School District.

Table 6

**At-Risk Students Achieving at Least Three Statutory Performance Objectives, by District  
2003-04 School Year**

District	Number of Students Identified as At-Risk	Number Who Achieved at Least Three Performance Objectives <sup>1</sup>	Percentage Who Achieved at Least Three Performance Objectives
Beloit	812	400	49.3%
Fond du Lac	529	336	63.5
Green Bay Area	1,503	341	22.7
Hartford UHS	136	77	56.6
Janesville	853	686	80.4
Kenosha Unified	1,816	1,027	56.6
La Crosse	357	153	42.9
Madison Metropolitan	885	190	21.5
Manitowoc	288	125	43.4
Menominee Indian	148	30	20.3
Merrill Area	108	27	25.0
Milwaukee Public Schools	17,152	6,001	35.0
Oshkosh Area	525	221	42.1
Racine Unified	2,503	1,384	55.3
Rhineland	164	38	23.2
Sheboygan Area	280	158	56.4
Stevens Point Area	249	204	81.9
Superior	523	141	27.0
Watertown Unified	162	54	33.3
Wausau	256	71	27.7
West Allis-West Milwaukee	420	254	60.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>29,669</b>	<b>11,918</b>	<b>40.2</b>

<sup>1</sup> As reported by school districts.

Table 7

**Percentage of At-Risk Students Achieving Specific Performance Objectives, by District<sup>1</sup>**  
2003-04 School Year

District	Gain in Reading and Math <sup>2</sup>	Earned at Least 4.5 Credits <sup>3</sup>	Attendance of at Least 70 Percent	Remained in School	Graduated <sup>4</sup>
Beloit	16.1%	32.4%	49.3%	49.3%	74.5%
Fond du Lac	60.7	47.4	76.6	82.0	70.0
Green Bay Area	15.3	19.5	62.1	66.1	39.8
Hartford UHS	66.2	38.2	54.4	64.7	23.7
Janesville	27.9	44.1	93.4	84.5	78.1
Kenosha Unified	46.9	42.4	66.1	92.0	84.7
La Crosse	42.9	52.1	79.3	84.0	69.4
Madison Metropolitan	11.6	17.2	65.9	91.1	28.3
Manitowoc	41.0	33.7	66.0	82.6	87.5
Menominee Indian	17.6	23.0	35.1	54.1	100.0
Merrill Area	8.3	23.1	37.0	58.3	31.0
Milwaukee Public Schools	40.6	28.8	54.2	36.1	— <sup>5</sup>
Oshkosh Area	39.8	26.1	72.4	74.7	66.1
Racine Unified	45.1	62.0	82.4	92.6	67.0
Rhineland	25.6	10.4	59.1	67.7	23.5
Sheboygan Area	49.3	54.3	66.1	77.5	46.9
Stevens Point Area	80.7	81.9	81.1	95.2	85.9
Superior	30.0	29.6	43.6	56.6	52.4
Watertown Unified	16.0	16.7	62.3	72.8	15.3
Wausau	29.3	14.5	59.4	63.7	30.7
West Allis-West Milwaukee	39.3	32.6	80.7	81.9	68.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>38.4</b>	<b>33.2</b>	<b>60.7</b>	<b>54.6</b>	<b>60.7</b>

<sup>1</sup> As reported by school districts.

<sup>2</sup> The gain made in reading and math is to be commensurate with duration of enrollment in the program. Districts use testing, course completion, or teacher evaluation to assess whether this objective has been reached.

<sup>3</sup> Only the Racine Unified, Stevens Point Area, Superior, and Wausau school districts reported credits earned for students in grades five through eight. All others reported credits earned for high school only.

<sup>4</sup> This percentage is based only on 12<sup>th</sup>-grade students. Total excludes Milwaukee Public Schools.

<sup>5</sup> Errors in the data reported by Milwaukee Public Schools prevent us from reporting this objective.

As shown in Table 8, achievement of the statutory performance objectives also varied by grade level during the 2003-04 school year. Students in 8<sup>th</sup> grade were the least successful in achieving at least three objectives, whereas students in 12<sup>th</sup> grade were the most successful. The success of 12<sup>th</sup>-grade students in meeting at least three objectives can be partially attributed to the fact that they can meet one objective by graduating, which students in other grades cannot do.

Table 8

**At-Risk Students Achieving at Least Three Statutory Objectives, by Grade  
2003-04 School Year**

Grade	Number of Students Identified as At-Risk	Number Who Achieved at Least Three Performance Objectives <sup>1</sup>	Percentage Who Achieved at Least Three Performance Objectives
5	451	151	33.5%
6	1,474	591	40.1
7	2,542	1,034	40.7
8	3,643	620	17.0
9	6,116	2,066	33.8
10	5,441	2,207	40.6
11	5,125	2,569	50.1
12	4,877	2,680	55.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>29,669</b>	<b>11,918</b>	<b>40.2</b>

<sup>1</sup> As reported by school districts.



In addition, as shown in Table 9, greater percentages of 11<sup>th</sup>- and 12<sup>th</sup>- grade students earned at least 4.5 credits, because the majority of school districts do not count credits earned until 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Only the Racine Unified School District, the Stevens Point Area Public School District, the School District of Superior, and the Wausau School District reported credits earned for 5<sup>th</sup>- through 8<sup>th</sup>- grade students.

Table 9  
**Percentage of At-Risk Students Achieving Specific Performance Objectives, by Grade<sup>1</sup>**  
 2003-04 School Year

Grade	Gain in Reading and Math	Earned at Least 4.5 Credits <sup>2</sup>	Attendance of at Least 70 Percent	Remained in School	Graduated <sup>3</sup>
5	23.5%	15.5%	74.7%	55.4%	N/A
6	47.0	10.4	69.1	59.6	N/A
7	48.9	10.6	67.9	60.4	N/A
8	45.5	8.2	60.9	30.4	N/A
9	31.8	32.9	45.9	52.9	N/A
10	35.9	39.5	56.0	61.4	N/A
11	41.1	51.1	64.8	66.0	N/A
12	34.4	47.0	72.3	50.4	60.7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>38.4</b>	<b>33.2</b>	<b>60.7</b>	<b>54.6</b>	<b>N/A</b>

<sup>1</sup> As reported by school districts.

<sup>2</sup> Only the Racine Unified, Stevens Point Area, Superior, and Wausau school districts reported credits earned for students in 5<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

<sup>3</sup> This percentage is based only on 12<sup>th</sup>- grade students. Excludes Milwaukee Public Schools because of problems with data reported.

***Determining gains in reading and math may become easier as school districts implement new federal testing requirements.***

Several districts reported difficulty in determining whether students were making math and reading gains, particularly in districts and grade levels in which annual testing was not done. In these cases, district officials reported evaluating academic improvements based on teachers' judgments or whether students received passing grades in math or English classes. Some officials believe that determining gains in reading and math will become easier in some grade levels as districts implement the testing requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, which will require annual testing in reading and math in 3<sup>rd</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grades beginning with the 2005-06 school year.

## Graduation and Dropout Rates

The best indicators of the success of the Children At Risk program may be comparative graduation and dropout rates for participating and nonparticipating but otherwise similar students. Because school districts do not track this information, we reviewed aggregate trends in district-wide graduation and dropout rates for the 11 districts that received Children At Risk funding in each of the past five years.

School districts are required to report student enrollment, dropout, and graduation information to DPI annually. With these data:

- DPI calculates the dropout rate by dividing the number of dropouts by the enrollment in grades 9 through 12 on the third Friday in September. A dropout is defined as any student who stops attending school, does not return, and is not in attendance on the last day of class.
- DPI calculates the graduation rate by comparing the number of graduates to the number of students who could have graduated if no one from that class had dropped out over the prior four years.

***Graduation rates increased in 8 of 11 participating school districts.***

We found that the graduation rate increased in 8 of the 11 school districts participating in the Children At Risk program each school year from 1999-2000 through 2002-03. In addition, the average graduation rate increase for these districts was greater than the statewide increase, as shown in Table 10. The greatest graduation rate increase over this period occurred in Milwaukee Public Schools, where it was 8.9 percentage points. Nevertheless, Milwaukee Public Schools continued to have the lowest graduation rate among all districts statewide.

Table 10

**Graduation Rates of School Districts That Participated  
in the Children At Risk Program**

District	1999-2000	2002-03 <sup>1</sup>	Percentage Point Change
Beloit	86.0%	81.6%	-4.4
Green Bay Area	86.5	91.2	4.7
Janesville	88.4	92.3	3.9
Kenosha Unified	82.6	89.8	7.2
La Crosse	94.7	94.1	-0.6
Manitowoc	92.9	87.6	-5.3
Milwaukee Public Schools	51.8	60.7	8.9
Oshkosh Area	91.4	92.2	0.8
Racine Unified	73.0	76.7	3.7
Sheboygan Area	87.3	90.4	3.1
Stevens Point Area	91.4	94.6	3.2
Average of Participating Districts	71.1	77.6	6.5
Statewide Average	89.3	91.8	2.5

<sup>1</sup> The most recent data available from DPI. Data for the 2003-04 school year will not be available until April 2005 or later.

***Dropout rates decreased  
in 10 of 11 participating  
school districts.***

As shown in Table 11, 10 of these 11 districts reduced their dropout rates from 1999-2000 to 2002-03, and 6 of the 11 districts had dropout rates below the statewide average of 2.0 percent. The largest decrease, 2.7 percentage points, occurred in the Racine Unified School District. Only the Oshkosh Area School District did not reduce its dropout rate. The Milwaukee Public Schools dropout rate, which was 10.1 percent in 2002-03, remained above both the statewide rate and the rates of the other participating districts.

Table 11

**Dropout Rates of School Districts That Participated  
in the Children At Risk Program**

District	1999-2000	2002-03 <sup>1</sup>	Percentage Point Change
Beloit	4.8%	3.1%	-1.7
Green Bay Area	3.2	2.0	-1.2
Janesville	3.3	1.6	-1.7
Kenosha Unified	4.2	1.7	-2.5
La Crosse	1.5	1.2	-0.3
Manitowoc	2.5	1.7	-0.8
Milwaukee Public Schools	10.4	10.1	-0.3
Oshkosh Area	1.3	1.8	0.5
Racine Unified	7.5	4.8	-2.7
Sheboygan Area	3.4	2.2	-1.2
Stevens Point Area	2.5	1.7	-0.8
Average of Participating Districts	6.5	5.4	-1.1
Statewide Average	2.3	2.0	-0.3

<sup>1</sup> The most recent data available from DPI. Data for the 2003-04 school year will not be available until April 2005 or later.

Because funding for the Children At Risk program represents only 1.2 percent of funding considered to benefit at-risk students, and because separate programs or services are not provided exclusively with Children At Risk funds, it is not possible to directly assess the program's effectiveness. On one hand, increasing district graduation rates and declining district dropout rates suggest overall services provided to at-risk students are increasingly successful. On the other hand, it may not be reasonable to attribute improved student performance to the Children At Risk program, particularly when achievement of the performance objectives has declined.



## Future Considerations ■

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If the Children At Risk program is continued, additional efforts should be taken to ensure compliance with statutory planning requirements. In addition, the Legislature could consider a number of options with respect to the future of the program, including consolidating funding with that of similar programs.

### **Developing Effective Plans for Serving At-Risk Students**

***In 2003-04,  
12 participating  
school districts reported  
not having updated  
plans to serve  
at-risk students.***

Of the 21 school districts that participated in the 2003-04 school year, only 9 reported having updated plans for at-risk students. Officials in most of the 12 districts without updated plans indicated that they were in the process of creating or revising plans, but several had not updated their plans in a number of years.

Both s. 121.02(1)(n), Wis. Stats., and s. 118.153(2)(a), Wis. Stats., require every school district, regardless of whether it participates in the Children At Risk program, to annually develop a plan describing how it will meet the needs of at-risk students. Furthermore, s. PI 25.03, Wis. Adm. Code, requires the plan to include information on the district's process for determining whether a student meets the statutory definition of being at-risk and provides examples of several additional plan elements. As shown in Table 12, these elements include how students will be enrolled in at-risk programs and services, how the district will evaluate at-risk programs, and how parents will be involved.

Table 12

**Elements of an At-Risk Plan**


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The process for determining whether a student meets the statutory definition of being at-risk.

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How the district will meet the needs of at-risk students.

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The enrollment process for programs and services.

---

How parents will be informed and involved in the programs or services.

---

Which programs may be available for students below 5<sup>th</sup> grade to prevent them from becoming at-risk.

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How the district will evaluate the success of services provided under the plan.

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What accommodations can be made to support at-risk student achievement through:

- curriculum modifications;
  - adaptive instructional strategies;
  - alternative education programs;
  - pupil support services;
  - school-to-work programs;
  - community services;
  - coordinating services provided by the district, community agencies, and other organizations; and
  - eliminating systemic barriers that may cause pupils' success at school to become at-risk.
- 

Maintaining an updated at-risk plan can be useful to school district managers, educators, and parents. For example:

- the process of developing a plan can provide school district staff a means to assess the appropriateness of services provided and to identify gaps in coverage;
- having a plan can ensure that all district staff are aware of programming options and follow the same procedures for identifying and providing appropriate services to at-risk students; and
- an at-risk plan that contains a process for systematic evaluation of programs and services could also be used to identify those programs and services that are the most effective.

In addition, an at-risk plan can be useful to parents and others in the community interested in the success of at-risk students. For example, a plan can provide parents with an opportunity to request specific services for their children and to become involved in school activities. A plan can also be used by community service providers to assess areas in which they may be able to offer additional programming to students.

Having an annually updated plan for at-risk students is not only a statutory requirement, it is also a useful planning and evaluative tool. Therefore, we reviewed at-risk plans maintained by school districts that participated in the Children At Risk program in the 2003-04 school year. We identified the following best practices:

- A number of districts described which staff are responsible for identifying at-risk students. Including this type of specific information can be important to effective service provision because it allows school staff to know whom to contact with concerns about at-risk students.
- Detailed program descriptions, as well as what types of at-risk students may benefit from each program, are useful for school staff in understanding the array of options available to at-risk students and in determining the most appropriate services for each student. However, in plans we reviewed, the detail of these descriptions varied greatly, from simply listing the names of programs to providing enrollment criteria and details about each program's goals, services, and activities.
- The Hartford Union High School district plan describes how parents of at-risk students can become more involved in both school activities and the specific activities of their children.
- The School District of Superior's at-risk plan includes details on how to identify struggling students in kindergarten through 4<sup>th</sup> grade and describes programs and services to prevent those students from becoming at-risk.
- The Beloit School District includes information on how it evaluates the at-risk programs and services it provides.
- The Stevens Point Area Public School District and the School District of West Allis-West Milwaukee include information in their plans on the use of non-district service providers, such as those providing mental health services or alcohol abuse counseling. Although all districts provided examples of community agencies with which they worked or of which they were aware, none routinely prepare a formal, written list of community agencies within five miles that can provide educational services.

## Future Funding Strategies

*The Legislature could consider several options for the program's future.*

As the Legislature deliberates the State's 2005-07 biennial budget, it may wish to consider:

- eliminating the Children At Risk program;
- merging Children At Risk program funding with other sources of funding for at-risk students; or
- maintaining current funding levels and administrative requirements.

### Eliminating the Program

As noted, Children At Risk program funding provides a small percentage of the total funding for at-risk services statewide; districts typically do not explicitly allocate Children At Risk funds to programs for at-risk students; and meaningful evaluation of individual at-risk programs that receive Children At Risk funds is not possible.

In addition, most participating districts do not currently comply with one or more statutory requirements. As noted, districts generally do not:

- annually update plans describing how the district will meet the needs of at-risk students;
- identify private, nonprofit, nonsectarian agencies located in the school district or within five miles of the school district that can provide programs to at-risk students;
- provide a specific amount of Children At Risk funding to each district program enrolling at-risk students;
- provide funding to district programs based on their ability to meet the statutory student performance objectives; and
- provide a preference in allocating Children At Risk funding to alternative schools, charter schools, schools within schools, and private agencies.



Furthermore, school district reporting of at-risk student achievement to DPI has often been inaccurate, and it is unclear whether districts will be able to improve their processes for tracking at-risk student performance. As noted, we found several errors in the reports submitted by districts.

Because most district officials with whom we spoke believe that providing at-risk services is a priority, they indicated that other district programs, and not at-risk services, may be reduced if Children At Risk program funding were to be reduced or eliminated. Consequently, there would likely be little effect on services for at-risk students if the program were eliminated.

### **Consolidating Program Funding**

***Funding for the Children At Risk program could be merged with other similar funding.***

If the Legislature wishes to maintain the \$3.5 million in funding for at-risk students, it could merge funding for the Children At Risk program with other similar funding. One approach would be to combine Children At Risk funding with the \$5.0 million annually provided through the Alternative Education Grant program, which was created by 1999 Wisconsin Act 9 to fund alternative education programs for at-risk students. In FY 2003-04, 15 of the 21 districts receiving Children At Risk program funding also received funding through the Alternative Education Grant program.

Merging these two programs could improve program efficiency. For example, districts receiving funding through the Alternative Education Grant program are required to submit an annual application to DPI that includes many requirements similar to those of the Children At Risk program, such as describing:

- why a program for at-risk students is needed;
- the types of pupils who will be served;
- the community agencies the district will employ to provide services to enrolled students; and
- how the district will measure program success.

Additionally, merging these programs could increase accountability, as districts participating in the Alternative Education Grant program are required to submit reports to DPI regarding program expenditures, whereas no financial reporting is required for the Children At Risk program.

***Merging revenue sources may result in a redistribution of program funds.***

However, depending on how program requirements were structured, merging program funding with other funding sources may have the effect of redistributing the \$3.5 million currently provided through the Children At Risk program, because funding provided through the Alternative Education Grant program is limited to five years for each grant recipient. Placing this restriction on Children At Risk funds—or eliminating the restriction for Alternative Education Grant funds—would significantly affect which districts benefit from these funds. For example, Milwaukee Public Schools' current Alternative Education Grant ends after the 2004-05 school year.

Alternatively, Children At Risk program funding could be merged into general school aids, which would benefit all school districts. Because most districts that currently receive Children At Risk funding use it to offset overall operations, instead of dedicating it to their at-risk programs, redistribution through general school aids would likely be consistent with current uses of the funding. However, such redistribution would reduce the amount of funds targeted to the 21 districts currently participating in the Children At Risk program, while nonparticipating districts would receive a small amount of additional funding with no additional obligation to serve at-risk students.

### **Maintaining Existing Program Requirements**

The Governor's FY 2005-07 biennial budget proposes a continued level of funding of \$3.5 million annually for the Children At Risk program. Maintaining the program as currently structured may have advantages. For example, continuing to provide \$3.5 million annually in program funding and requiring annual district reports would allow DPI to track whether districts are able to improve their reporting.

Maintaining program funding may also help to ensure that services for at-risk students in participating districts are not reduced. District staff indicated that although Children At Risk program funding is small compared to total district budgets, demands on available funding for district programs have placed an increased emphasis on maintaining all available funding sources.

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Appendix 1

**Sources of School District Funding to Serve At-Risk Students**

FY 2003-04

Program and Type	Description	Source	Amount
<b>Statutorily Defined At-Risk Funds<sup>1</sup></b>			
Alternative Education Grant	Provides five-year grants for alternative education programs serving at-risk students	GPR	\$ 5.0
Children At Risk Program	Provides funding to serve children at risk of not graduating from high school	GPR	3.5
Neglected and Delinquent	Provides funding for education services for children and youth in juvenile and adult correctional facilities	Federal	1.8
School-Age Parents	Provides aid covering a prorated level of costs for providing services and instruction to school-age parents through graduation or age 21	GPR	1.2
<b>Subtotal</b>			<b>11.5</b>
<b>Other At-Risk Funds<sup>2</sup></b>			
<b>Low-Income</b>			
Title I—Basic Grant	Provides funds to supplement instructional programs for educationally disadvantaged students from low-income families	Federal	143.4
Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE)	Provides funding to implement a statewide class size reduction initiative in kindergarten through 3 <sup>rd</sup> grade	GPR	94.8
Preschool to Grade 5	Provides supplemental funding to assist 38 schools in the Beloit, Kenosha, Milwaukee, and Racine school districts to develop and implement programs for economically disadvantaged students	GPR	7.8
Even Start Family Literacy	Provides funds to help low-income children and their families improve literacy skills	Federal	2.0
Reading First	Provides funding to establish comprehensive reading instruction programs in kindergarten through 3 <sup>rd</sup> grade	Federal	1.2
Rural and Low-Income School Program	Provides funds to rural schools to improve reading and math achievement for students from low-income families	Federal	0.2
<b>Subtotal</b>			<b>249.4</b>

Program and Type	Description	Source	Amount
<b>English as a Second Language</b>			
Bilingual/Bicultural Education	Supports programs to improve English comprehension, speaking, reading, and writing of limited-English speaking students	GPR	\$ 8.3
English Language Acquisition	Provides funds to provide enhanced instructional opportunities for immigrant children and youth	Federal	3.4
Refugee Children School Impact	Provides funds to improve the academic performance and social and cultural integration of refugee children	Federal	0.7
Migrant Education	Provides financial and program assistance to school districts serving educationally disadvantaged migrant students	Federal	0.4
<b>Subtotal</b>			<b>12.8</b>
<b>Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse</b>			
Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse Grant Program	Provides grants to districts to develop and expand alcohol and other drug abuse curricula and services	GPR	5.9
Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities	Provides funding for drug and violence prevention programs	Federal	4.7
<b>Subtotal</b>			<b>10.6</b>
<b>Low-Performing</b>			
21 <sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers	Provides funds for expanded academic after-school programs for children attending low-performing schools	Federal	5.9
<b>Homeless</b>			
Education for Homeless Children and Youth	Provides funds to address the enrollment, attendance, and success of homeless children in school	Federal	0.5
<b>Total</b>			<b>\$290.7</b>

<sup>1</sup> Includes programs that provide services to students most likely to meet the definition of at risk under the Children At Risk program in s. 118.153(1)(a), Wis. Stats. Does not include a \$285,000 grant awarded by the Wisconsin Technical College System Board to the Private Industry Council of Milwaukee County under s. 38.40(4m), Wis. Stats., to provide school-to-work training to students meeting the statutory definition of children at risk.

<sup>2</sup> Includes programs that provide funding to serve at-risk students as defined more broadly than under s. 118.153(1)(a), Wis. Stats.

Appendix 2

**Children At Risk Funding Distribution**  
1999-2000 through 2003-04<sup>1</sup>

School District	1999-2000	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	Total
Appleton Area	Ineligible	\$ 50,448	\$ 53,983	\$ 45,343	Ineligible	\$ 149,774
Baraboo	Ineligible	Ineligible	15,359	Ineligible	Ineligible	15,359
Beloit	\$ 69,233	140,888	102,876	80,202	\$ 135,870	529,069
Delavan-Darien	Ineligible	Ineligible	2,962	5,351	Ineligible	8,313
Fond du Lac	DNP	32,710	19,222	65,379	84,952	202,263
Green Bay Area	104,136	115,647	122,426	168,441	90,190	600,840
Hartford Joint #1/UHS	Ineligible	7,701	9,943	Ineligible	17,341	34,985
Janesville	243,803	201,304	186,715	158,269	190,406	980,497
Kenosha Unified	334,523	265,601	225,982	235,697	282,060	1,343,863
La Crosse	12,152	32,063	31,633	32,716	37,577	146,141
Madison Metropolitan	DNP	DNP	9,224	15,843	19,798	44,865
Manitowoc	86,761	25,810	23,058	15,879	31,202	182,710
Menominee Indian	Ineligible	Ineligible	3,133	Ineligible	9,401	12,534
Merrill Area	Ineligible	Ineligible	Ineligible	27,828	7,796	35,624
Milwaukee Public Schools	2,069,266	1,872,548	1,740,156	1,688,592	1,900,538	9,271,100
Oak Creek-Franklin Joint	52,673	84,786	Ineligible	Ineligible	Ineligible	137,459
Oshkosh Area	37,511	57,381	60,553	54,912	57,628	267,985
Racine Unified	425,421	425,719	687,344	622,747	398,271	2,559,502
Rhineland	7,505	Ineligible	7,627	8,011	6,638	29,781
Sheboygan Area	27,502	15,078	27,408	33,799	46,677	150,464
Stevens Point Area	29,514	59,805	32,867	40,584	51,690	214,460
Sun Prairie Area	Ineligible	10,106	Ineligible	11,465	Ineligible	21,571
Superior	Ineligible	11,914	61,972	131,876	40,384	246,146
Watertown Unified	DNP	DNP	Ineligible	DNP	13,277	13,277
Wausau	Ineligible	44,678	23,726	11,097	19,210	98,711
West Allis-West Milwaukee	Ineligible	Ineligible	19,197	45,969	59,094	124,260
Wisconsin Rapids	Ineligible	45,813	32,634	Ineligible	Ineligible	78,447
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$3,500,000</b>	<b>\$3,500,000</b>	<b>\$3,500,000</b>	<b>\$3,500,000</b>	<b>\$3,500,000</b>	<b>\$17,500,000</b>

<sup>1</sup> Payments made to districts in the following school year.

Ineligible=District was not eligible to receive funding for this school year based on its prior-year dropout rate.  
DNP=Did not participate. District was eligible to request Children At Risk funds but chose not to participate.





## State of Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

Elizabeth Burmaster, State Superintendent

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February 25, 2005

Jan Mueller, State Auditor  
Legislative Audit Bureau  
22 E. Mifflin Street, Suite 500  
Madison, WI 53703

Dear State Auditor Mueller:

Thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on the evaluation of the Children at Risk program administered by the Department of Public Instruction. We commend your staff for their work.

The Children at Risk categorical aid program provides districts with a high number of dropouts with critical dollars to address the needs of students at risk of not graduating. We acknowledge the difficulty of isolating the effect of the Children at Risk program given that this specific categorical program typically represents a small percentage of dollars dedicated to these students. While underfunded, the program represents a dedicated source of funds to help districts progress toward closing the achievement gap and achieving yearly progress consistent with the reauthorized federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, also known as the No Child Left Behind Act.

We agree with the evaluation's assertion that comparative graduation and dropout rates for participating and nonparticipating students may be the best indicator of success for the program. We would emphasize the findings:

*We found that the graduation rate increased in 8 of the 11 school districts participating in the Children at Risk program each school year from the 1999-2000 through 2002-03. In addition, the average graduation rate increase for these districts was greater than the statewide increase . . . . The greatest graduation rate increase over this period occurred in Milwaukee Public Schools, where it was 8.9 percentage points.*

The Department of Public Instruction recommends continued categorical funding for the Children at Risk program with modifications, instead of the options documented in the "Future Funding Strategies" section of the evaluation. We believe a more effective and streamlined accountability process which includes modifications such as targeting services for 9-12<sup>th</sup> grade students with

retention and graduation rates as performance measures would strengthen accountability and maintain access to quality services for children at risk.

The Department of Public Instruction is committed to ensuring the opportunity of a quality education for every child and ensuring success for all students, and we continue to welcome the opportunity to work with the Legislature to this end.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Elizabeth Burmaster". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Elizabeth Burmaster  
State Superintendent

EB:jmh