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## CHILDREN AT RISK PROGRAM

The Children At Risk program was created in 1985 with the broad goal of reducing the number of students at risk of failing in, or dropping out of, school. The program requires all school boards to identify "children at risk"-including dropouts, habitual truants, parents, or adjudicated delinquents in grades 5 through 12 who are behind their age group in either basic skills or high school credits-and to develop a plan to meet their needs. In addition, school districts with a high number of dropouts and high dropout rates are eligible for state funding if the students meet certain performance criteria.

Funding for the program, which is administered by the Department of Public Instruction, has remained constant at \$3.5 million since fiscal year 1990-91, and the program's purpose has not changed since its establishment. However, its structure did change significantly in 1993 Wisconsin Act 16, in response to concerns about program effectiveness. These changes, which went into effect during the 1993-94 school year, narrowed the State's definition of children at risk; narrowed school district funding eligibility requirements; and required that aid payments be based on the performance of individual at-risk students, rather than on group performance.

### Few Districts Receive Program Funding

The program as it exists today is not relevant to most school districts. First, of the State's 427 school districts, only 16 have applied for and received program funding since the program changes went into effect. Of these districts, only ten have received funds in each of the three years since the program was modified. Second, only two school districts, Milwaukee Public Schools and Racine Unified School District, have been required to apply for aid in each year since the program was modified. Third, Milwaukee has received two-thirds of the \$8.6 million distributed during the past three years. As a result, the program can no longer be considered a statewide program designed to improve the State's overall dropout and graduation rates.

### The Effect on Student Performance Is Questionable

Within the ten districts that have received program funds in each year since the program was modified, it is difficult to generalize whether the program has had any effect. First, although the average graduation rate of all high school seniors in these ten districts remained fairly constant, the rate in the three districts that received the vast majority of funding-Milwaukee, Racine, and Janesville-declined. Second, although the average dropout rate for the ten districts declined, in only one district-Milwaukee-did the dropout rate decline consistently over the three-year period.

The performance of at-risk students within the ten districts is also mixed. While the percentage of at-risk students meeting program performance goals declined or did not change in eight of the ten districts, the percentage meeting the goals in Milwaukee and Racine increased. However, the improvement within Milwaukee appears to be attributable to a broader interpretation of student performance criteria than was initially used by the district in determining student performance.

### The Program Is Not Fulfilling Its Intended Purpose

Given the program's current structure, it may not be reasonable to expect it to have an effect on student performance. In particular, the funding available through the program is limited. The average per pupil aid received for the 1995-96 school year was \$167, an amount that cannot purchase a wide range of at-risk services. As a result, although the

program was intended to have an effect on dropout and graduation rates, it has become little more than a way through which general purpose revenues are passed from the State to a limited number of districts.

### **Only Milwaukee Contracts with Private Agencies for At-Risk Services**

Milwaukee is the only school district to take advantage of statutory provisions that allow contracting with private agencies for at-risk educational services. During the 1996-97 school year, Milwaukee had contracts with 18 non-sectarian, nonprofit "partnership schools" to provide 1,605 seats for at-risk students at a total cost of \$8.1 million. We found that a larger percentage of at-risk students enrolled in these schools meet the State's performance criteria and graduate than do at-risk students enrolled in district-administered programs. We also identified several concerns about the relationship between Milwaukee and the partnership schools, including an instance in which the district inappropriately used its contracting authority under the program to purchase services for students who did not meet the State's definition of children at risk.

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