

# **Module II: Leadership as Praxis: Empowering At-risk Students of Color and Their Families**

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## **Overview**

This curriculum model focuses on the salience of race, ethnicity, culture, social class and disability for at-risk students of color and provides current and future school leaders with opportunities to develop strategies to meet the needs of these students and their families. Students of color often experience schooling differently than their White peers (Joyner, et al., 2004; Norwood, et al., 1997; Tillman, 2003). This reality may be exacerbated when students of color are placed at-risk by various external (outside of the school) and internal (inside of the school) risk factors, and because of their socio-economic status and/or disability. Families (parents, caretakers, guardians, etc.) may also be at-risk. Thus, various types of at-risk factors can negatively impact opportunities for student achievement as well as family access to and participation in the educational process.

Dryfoos (1996) reported that all students can be placed in high risk, medium risk, and low or no risk categories and that all adolescents are at risk due to risky environments. That is, every student, particularly by adolescence, participates in some type of risky behavior or is placed at-risk by circumstances beyond their control. Dryfoos, identified several factors that can place students at risk: school dropout, substance abuse, involvement in the court system, sexual activity, weapons, truancy, and suicidal thoughts and attempts. Today, students are exposed to additional risk factors that include poverty/low SES, community and school violence, disability (special education placement, mental, physical), lack of cultural capital, lack nourishment and adequate health care, language barriers, and negative perceptions of school personnel. The

variables of race and poverty are often significant factors with respect to students of color and their families and may contribute in varying degrees to levels of at-riskness.

This module provides current and future leaders opportunities to review the literature and to discuss and reflect on the impact of race, ethnicity, culture, social class and disability on students of color in the school and the larger society. Activities in this module are designed to encourage participants to think about leadership from a praxis-oriented perspective that will allow them to combine critical leadership theory with action (Foster, 1986) in their work with teachers, students, parents, and the community. Future school leaders will be encouraged to critically reflect on their assumptions about leadership relative to working with at-risk students of color and their families.

Additionally, participants will investigate and make recommendations about strategies that enhance the participation of families of color in the education of their children.

This module aligns with the four tenets of social justice as articulated by the National Institute on Leadership, Disability and Students Placed at Risk. Participants will discuss and reflect on their own meanings of the term “social justice” as a precursor to addressing the following tenets:

➤ **Developing school cultures that include all students.**

Participants will review the literature on at-risk students and their families, and discuss ways to transform schools into learning communities that value every student and upholds their right to an equitable and socially just education.

➤ **Ensuring literacy for all learners.**

The case study will allow participants to discuss and reflect on ways leaders and teachers promote literacy as a form of empowerment for students and their parents

(particularly second language learners, and learners who have weak language and literacy skills).

➤ **Creating cultures of empowerment.**

The case study will allow participants to discuss and reflect on the meanings of a “culture of empowerment” in the context of schooling and organizational change.

Participants will consider what ideals and forms of support must be present in the learning community to promote and maintain a “culture of empowerment.”

➤ **Ensuring that families and community perspectives are at the heart of school.**

Linking a culture of empowerment to this tenet, participants will identify specific factors within the school community that should be in place to ensure that at-risk students of color experience social, emotional, and academic success. The participation of parents and their concerns about the education of their children is central to the vision, goals, and objectives of a socially just learning community.

## **Instructional Agenda**

### **Goals of Module**

The goals of this module are to (a) make explicit what principals should know in order to assist at-risk students of color and their families who seek to access and participate in schooling; and, (b) assist future leaders in determining how to implement strategic practices based on their knowledge and understanding of at-risk factors and the existing educational context for students of color and their families.

## **Objectives**

The objectives of the module are to (a) identify major challenges facing at-risk students of color and their families; (b) identify how these challenges negatively impact educational outcomes and family access and participation; (c) re-conceptualize school-family relations for students of color and their families who are in at-risk circumstances; and, (d) consider Tillman's Praxis-Oriented Leadership Framework in the design and implementation of a leadership plan intended to address the major challenges identified in part a.

Students will form leadership teams to work on the case study and apply Tillman's framework to complete the assignment at the end of the case study.

## **Guiding Questions for the Module**

1. How can school leaders identify major challenges that negatively impact opportunities for student achievement and family participation for at-risk students of color?
2. How can school leaders re-conceptualize traditional school-family relations to more effectively meet the needs of students of color and their families who are in at-risk circumstances?
3. How does Tillman's framework assist in the design and implementation of praxis-oriented leadership practices intended to address the major challenges facing at-risk students of color and their families?

## **Estimated Total Time**

The module consists of three assignments to be completed over two class periods:

1. First class:
  - a. Power point presentation and class discussion (90 minutes)
  - b. Participants will form leadership teams, discuss the case study and the reflective questions, and design a leadership plan.
2. Second class:
  - a. Leadership teams will present their plan and discuss how the plan addresses the four tenets of social justice and the guiding questions.
  - b. Each participant will submit a two page reflective essay.

Participants will articulate their personal definition of social justice and how, as a leader, he/she would attend to the four tenets of social justice when working with at-risk students of color and their families.

### **Readings/Materials**

Introduction to the module

Dryfoos (1996) article

Tillman (2003) article

Comer Parent Team Narrative

Tillman's Praxis-Oriented Leadership Framework

Epstein's overlapping spheres

Case Study

## Instructional Process

- Introduce purpose of the module (see Overview, Goals and Objectives)
- Students should have read Dryfoos and Tillman articles, Comer Parent Team narrative, and reviewed Epstein's diagram of overlapping spheres of influence.
- Begin power point presentation by summarizing the Dryfoos article. Instructor encourages participants to
  - discuss specific examples of risk factors identified by Dryfoos that are evident in their own schools
  - identify additional risk factors in the school community and in the larger society
- Continue power point presentation by summarizing the Tillman article.

Instructor encourages participants to

- discuss their own assumptions about parental involvement
- discuss strategies for working with African American parents
- apply the Dryfoos and Tillman readings to at-risk children of color and their families. Consider:
  - how does race, ethnicity, culture, social class, disability and low SES impact levels of at-riskness for students of color in your school
  - whether the variables of race, ethnicity, culture, social class, disability, and low SES require different styles of

leadership? If so, give examples.

- Complete power point presentation
- Instructor poses the following reflective questions:
  - What are your perceptions about the role of the leader in working with at-risk students of color and their families?
  - What specific types of knowledge does the leader need to possess to assist at-risk students of color and their families?
  - How does the leader identify praxis-oriented leadership practices that will be most effective in working with at-risk students of color and their families?
  - What does the leader need to do to implement effective leadership practices that are intended to meet the needs of at-risk students of color and their families?
  - What are some possible barriers to working with students from various racial, ethnic, cultural, social class and disability groups?
  - What are some possible barriers to parent access and participation for at-risk families of color?
- Discuss Epstein's overlapping spheres of influence. How can the school work to accomplish positive overlapping?
- Provide an overview of the Washington Elementary School case study.
- Instruct participants to form leadership teams, discuss the case, answer the questions using Tillman's Praxis-Oriented Leadership framework, and design a year-long plan for Washington Elementary School.

- Leadership teams present their plan in the next class.
- Instruct participants to submit a two-page reflective essay that articulates their personal definition of social justice and how as a leader, he/she can attend to the four tenets of social justice when working with at-risk students of color and their families.

### **Student Assessment**

- Participants will respond orally to questions posed in the power point presentation.
- Participants will form leadership teams and design a year-long strategic plan for Washington Elementary School. Each leadership team will present its plan in class.
- Each participant will submit a two-page reflective essay that articulates their personal definition of social justice, and addresses how, as a leader, he/she can attend to the four tenets of social justice when working with at-risk students of color and their families.

### **Handouts**

1. Comer Parent Team Narrative
2. Tillman's Praxis-Oriented Leadership Framework
3. Epstein's overlapping spheres
4. Case Study

## **Case Study**

Washington Elementary School is located in a large urban school district in the Midwest. The 450 students at Washington come from several mostly middle class neighborhoods populated by African Americans and Whites. Over the past several years the school has had a relatively stable student population and student test scores have remained at or just above the district average. None of the teachers live in the school district, but many of them have taught at the school for over ten years and are familiar with the neighborhood, the students, and their families. While the school has experienced stability, during the last school year the principal, Mrs. Norris, noted a gradual increase in the number of referrals to school and social service agencies for students of color who have been classified as at-risk. The principal did not believe there was an urgency to implement initiatives intended to address particular challenges faced by at-risk students of color (for example, high absenteeism, poor academic achievement, special education referrals, discipline referrals, counseling for students with emotional problems). Rather, the principal has asked teachers and other support staff to “keep an eye out for any problems with these students.”

Principal Norris has been notified that the school will merge with two other elementary schools in the upcoming school year. The student population will increase to approximately 800 students. Upon hearing about the merger, many of White parents notified the principal of their intent to transfer their children out of Washington Elementary. With the exodus of a significant number of White students, the student demographics will change to approximately 50% African American, 10% White and 40%

Hispanic. Based on records of incoming students principal Norris has determined that Washington Elementary School will have a larger population of students and families who need assistance in accessing school and other social services. Communication between parents, teachers, counselors and central office personnel will also become a priority. The Executive Director of Elementary and Middle Schools has asked principal Norris to determine the most pressing challenges that place many of the students and their families at risk, identify the students and families who need particular kinds of assistance, meet with parents, teachers and other support staff, and design a year-long plan to begin to meet the needs of the students and their families.

The change in demographics will bring new challenges to the leadership and teaching staff at Washington. Many of the incoming Hispanic students are recent immigrants and speak very little English, while many of the incoming African American students come from low SES families. Many of the incoming students and some of the returning students at Washington are placed at risk by a variety of factors that include high incidences of crime in their neighborhoods, low SES, and language barriers. The school population will also see an increased number of students who are special education placements. Principal Norris is faced with several challenges prior to the beginning of the school year:

- Parents of returning students have expressed concerns about merging the school and question how the teacher-student ratios and the quality of instruction will be affected.
- Parents of returning and incoming students have expressed concerns about the accessibility of a range of school and social services including counseling, free

and reduced lunch, ESL instruction, and special education evaluation and placement. Additionally, some of the parents of incoming students are concerned about how they will be received by the leadership and teaching staff.

- Some teachers have expressed resistance to the merging of the schools and have notified the principal that they plan to transfer to other schools.

### **Assignment**

After reading the case, designate a member of the leadership team to be the school principal. Using Tillman's Praxis-Oriented Leadership Framework, develop a year-long strategic plan that will begin to address the needs of at-risk students of color and their families at Washington Elementary School. Consider how you will address the following:

1. How will you identify risk factors affecting at-risk students of color and their families?
2. How will you identify what types of services are needed for at-risk students of color?
3. What factors will affect your ability to meet the needs of at-risk students of color and their families?
4. How will you obtain the support of central office and engage the school staff to work collaboratively to create a learning community that values and attends to the needs of every student, especially at-risk students of color who may face challenges that are different from their White peers?
5. How will you cultivate the support and involvement of parents?
6. How will you cultivate the support of the community (grass roots

organizations, business, industry)?

7. How will you evaluate the impact of the leadership practices and the leadership plan on the social, emotional, and academic performance of at-risk students of color as well as parents' interactions with the school?

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