What are we talking about when we talk about "at-risk students"?

prepared for the Education Interim Committee of the Montana Legislature by Pad McCracken, Committee Staff, January 2018

We might be talking about Montana's **statutory definition**, which is in one sense very broad, but also is limited to **environmental conditions**.

From 20-1-101, MCA:

"At-risk student" means any student who is affected by environmental conditions that negatively impact the student's educational performance or threaten a student's likelihood of promotion or graduation.

These environmental conditions might include economic disadvantage, transience, family disruptions, and so forth.
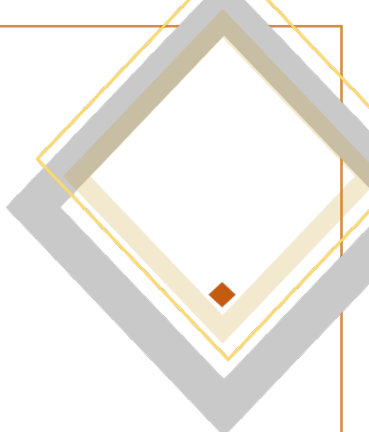

We might be talking about the **state at-risk student payment** and how it is allocated to districts based on the allocation of **federal Title I, Part A,** money.

Title I, Part A, allocations are largely based on the percentage of **students from low-income families** in a school, an environmental factor that correlates with an increased risk of lower achievement and a need for greater resources to develop a student's educational potential.

Or, we might instead be talking about factors other than environmental conditions.

When schools identify students they are concerned about and might call "at-risk," they will likely consider environmental factors but also behavioral factors and achievement measures, such as attendance, discipline, grades, and test scores.

OPI's **Early Warning System** uses this kind of holistic, multiple-metric approach.

"Providing additional resources to schools serving disadvantaged, struggling students is a priority [in top-performing countries]. More teachers are typically allocated to such schools, with the best teachers serving in the most challenged ones. Inversely, American students from the wealthiest communities are most likely to get the best teachers and the finest facilities because of the way we structure our finance systems."

From NCSL's Study Group on International Comparisons in Education "No Time to Lose" report (p 12-13)

Two frequently used **measures of economic disadvantage** for students are:

1. **Federal poverty levels** established by the US Census based on income and family size (for example, the 2017 federal poverty threshold for a family of 4 is $24,600; roughly 17% of Montana students are from households at or below the federal poverty level); and
2. **Eligibility for free or reduced price lunch** (for students whose families are at or below 185% of the federal poverty level; roughly 45% of Montana students).