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Systems of Prevention and Intervention to Address Student Achievement

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As schools across the country look to address student achievement and the achievement gap between subpopulations, the conversation often turns to the specific intervention and/or prevention strategies that are being used to help all students meet specified academic and behavioral standards. With the introduction of *No Child Left Behind* and the requirement for schools to meet *Annual Yearly Progress* (AYP), the level of accountability has been raised and the need to ensure documented success for all children has become a mandate.

Schools are constantly examining creative and innovative ways of documenting achievement for students. This article will examine a set of key principles that can contribute to enhanced student performance and achievement at all levels as well as measurable results in student performance.

BELIEF SYSTEMS

Designing effective systems of prevention and intervention begins with an examination of institutional beliefs. Beliefs are often reflected in a mission statement. It is likely that every school in America has written a mission statement that hangs in the hallways or classrooms of the school. In addition, the mission statement is often strategically placed in school publications and documents. There is no question that a well crafted mission statement that is adhered to and valued by all can serve as a driving force in decision making and can assist a school in achieving its vision.

The mission statement should reflect the beliefs, attitudes and behaviors of faculty and staff. As a foundation piece it is critically important that all key stakeholders understand, value and have in some way contributed to crafting the mission statement that it is a living document, not just merely words on a piece of paper (Blankstein, 2004).

Most mission statements allude to meeting the needs of *all children*. It is unlikely that there is a mission statement in a school that references being successful with only some students. For systems of prevention and intervention to be successful educators

must believe that the mission of the school is to meet the needs of *all children*. This can be accomplished with a one sentence response to the following questions: *What is the primary purpose of school?* Why do schools exist as an institution? Although asking an entire faculty and staff these questions can lead to very revealing answers and a lively discussion, it is nonetheless very important to discuss staff beliefs. Regardless of how the questions are answered there should always be an addendum: "whatever it takes".

Students do not come to school with the same set of experiences and skills. Regardless of the child's age or grade level, each student has a variety of life experiences that have shaped his or her development. Because of this, it is only logical to believe that each child will need a menu of options to assist him in being successful in school.

Building a model that meets the needs of all students takes creativity, flexibility, commitment and a belief that nothing is impossible. Children come to schools each day with a variety of backgrounds and challenges; we must meet them with prevention and intervention strategies that are designed to meet their diverse needs.

DEALING IN REALITY

In designing effective prevention and intervention strategies it is important to clearly understand the current reality. This only happens with accurate data collection and analysis. What are the current challenges being faced in your school? How do you know they are challenges? Which students are being successful, and which ones are not? What prevention and intervention initiatives are currently in place? Are they working, and how do you know? An assessment of your present reality is an important first step. Too often, decisions are made about programs based on limited information because in many cases, little or no evaluation has been conducted to determine if prevention or intervention initiatives already in place are achieving predetermined outcomes. In far too many cases, schools implement new prevention and intervention initiatives without considering how their effectiveness will be determined. Any new prevention or intervention initiative must begin with outcomes in mind. In essence, completing the statement "*this initiative will be successful if...*" causes schools to identify specific and measurable outcomes.

Starting with outcomes in mind allows for benchmarking along the way which serves as a means for evaluation and periodic adjustments. Often with any new initiative immediate results are not observable; it may take considerable time before positive results are measurable. Fullan (2004) refers to this as the *Implementation Dip*. With a new intervention, it may first appear as if conditions are getting worse. Any new initiative places stress on the system, which can cause an immediate reaction that the new initiative is not working. Often, schools quickly abandon the new strategy without giving it adequate time for successful implementation and measurable results.

Several years ago, our staff was confronted with an increasing percentage of failing ninth graders. After collecting a great deal of data, we determined that establishing looped interdisciplinary teaching teams in ninth and tenth grade would provide students with a more intense level of intervention and prevention. However, full implementation of this initiative took five years. In the first year of implementation, the staff was faced with many challenges and little empirical evidence that the program was improving student achievement. Many wanted to abandon the initiative. Over time, however, the *implementation dip* began to level out as program adjustments were made. Soon we were able to measure the targeted outcomes. On-going program evaluations have demonstrated a profound impact on student performance both academically and behaviorally. Fifteen years later the intervention continues to provide students with important skills that contribute to their individual and collective success in school.

COLLABORATION

Building successful systems of prevention and intervention requires a high degree of collaboration. One of the most significant impediments to any educational reform initiative is the fact that, in many schools, teachers and administrators still operate in isolation. The structure for a collaborative model is not in place. Many people talk about collaboration, but what is it? What does it look like in practice? Collaboration occurs when teams of teachers have the opportunity to meet on a regular basis and discuss individual and collective strategies based on relevant data that impact student achievement. Achievement should include academic, social and emotional development, and focusing on only one domain will impact the effectiveness of any prevention and/or intervention initiative.

Looking at the definition of collaboration provided above it is important to address the key elements of the definition. "Teams of teachers" should comprise both grade level and content area teachers that have the opportunity for horizontal articulation. Teachers across grade levels should also meet to provide insight and feedback on prevention and intervention strategies for vertical articulation. The combination of both horizontal and vertical articulation is critical to the sustainability of prevention and intervention strategies.

Another component of the definition is that teachers have the time to meet on a regular basis. Ideally time is built in the school day for collaborative efforts to occur. Meetings once a quarter or once

a month is going to have little to no impact on student performance (Marzano, 2003). For long-term measurable results to occur, teams must meet at minimum once per week. Giving teams time is merely a first step, but time without structure is often wasted time. Team meeting time needs to be structured to maximize results. Agendas need to be provided that indicate the actionable items and outcomes of the meeting, next steps and team member's responsibility for specific tasks. Furthermore, the team meetings should focus on specific strategies used by individual teachers and how those strategies impacted student performance based on specific individual and collective student data. Review of student assessments and time for sharing, feedback and reflection both by the team and individually is important to enhance student achievement which must be measured against a predetermined standard. Once students have been identified who have not met standards of proficiency, individual and group interventions should be established.

Establishing the framework and structure for collaboration is essential for the development and implementation of sustainable and results-driven prevention and intervention programs. Without collaboration, initiatives are left to the best intentions of individuals. Collectively, however, initiatives have greater opportunity for measurable results and sustainability.

BEING DATA DRIVEN

Making decisions without the use of quantitative and qualitative data leads to decisions based purely on assumptions. As mentioned earlier, an important first step is to know where you are. This can only be accomplished by constructing a strong base that is a result of data collection and analysis. Beyond the initial data collection it is important to establish benchmarks when any new prevention or intervention strategy is introduced. Keeping in mind that outcomes may not be immediately apparent, positive results of any initiative take time; staying with initiatives and making adjustments along the way is critical to effective measurement of results.

Decide on what data will be necessary to determine the effectiveness of the program. Only collect data that is needed based on predetermined outcomes. Bernhardt (2004) suggests that there are four sources of data that should be considered when examining any initiative: demographics, perceptions, student learning and school processes. Examples of demographic data include but are not limited to gender, grade level, ethnicity and the number of students receiving free or reduced lunch. Perception data includes values, beliefs and attitudes, and student learning data can be derived from state assessments, local district assessments and classroom observations and assessments. Arguably the most challenging of the four data sources to collect is school processes. Information gathered from this domain may include specific programs that are operating in the school, teaching strategies and classroom practices.

Collecting data from only one of the four domains limits the depth and scope of the information and may cause individuals to make

decisions that are not only inaccurate, but also counter-productive to student achievement. However, collecting data from all four areas ensures a much more comprehensive analysis. The intersection of all four sources of data provides educators and schools with the richest information. Looking at all four areas over time will assist schools in the evaluation of current programs and the opportunity of adjusting or discontinuing programs, activities or initiatives that are ineffective (Bernhardt, 2004).

The importance and value of data collection cannot be overstated. Decisions made without a comprehensive analysis of the data can negatively impact student achievement and learning and cost schools valuable time.

EARLY IDENTIFICATION

Identifying gaps in student learning is critical to enhancing student achievement. Gaps need to be identified for groups of students and for individual students. The earlier the identification of learning gaps takes place the sooner adjustments can be made, and the less likely the problem will worsen and lead to other associated problems. For example, let's look at a student who is reading below grade level. Without properly identifying gaps in reading skills, implementation of appropriate interventions that could assist this student will certainly be delayed. In the interim, the student's frustration with reading increases, and as is often the case, the student may become a behavior problem. The student, who is then disciplined for behavior, is still not treated for the root causes of the misbehavior, which then likely continues (or escalates). Quickly, the student falls farther behind, the misbehavior increases, and the cycle continues. Clearly, not identifying gaps expediently and accurately only increases the learning gaps and creates other associated issues.

However, early identification of challenges that impact student learning and student achievement can significantly reduce stress for both teachers and students. One process to identify students who are experiencing difficulty is to institute a fifteen day student identification plan. On the fifteenth day of school, students are identified based on four categories: lack of basic skills, misbehavior, failure to complete out of class assignments, and attendance. Along with administration, teams of teachers establish the criteria for identification in different categories. The categories above are only provided as examples; each school will need to identify categories based on unique challenges with respect to student achievement.

By analyzing school and student data, teams and teachers can select categories that will best assist them in early identification of gaps in student learning and achievement. In turn, they will then be able to design intervention strategies that best meet student needs. Once educators analyze the data and determine appropriate categories, they can then begin to identify students who are falling behind in one or more of these areas. On the fifteenth day of school, teachers compile a list of those students from individual classes or teams who are not meeting acceptable levels in one or more of the categories. As it is early in the year, this information is often more subjective. However, the goal of

the fifteen day identification is to act as a safety net for those students who are at risk for falling behind in one or more of the identified areas.

Once students are identified, teachers need to share that information with administration. Teachers and administrators then meet to collectively develop intervention strategies. Whenever possible, intervention strategies should emanate from the micro to the macro. They should begin at the classroom or team level, and then progress to the grade level, school, district and community. With some students, interventions may need to be put in place at multiple levels at the same time. Tracking interventions is important to determine their effectiveness for both individual and groups of students. In addition, tracking intervention strategies can provide valuable information that can be used in the development of prevention strategies.

Throughout this process of identification and intervention development, the importance of collaboration can not be stressed enough. When teams of teachers and administrators collaborate with each other and share ideas and successful strategies, a greater number of students will benefit. Collaboration across the board helps in many different ways, including collection and interpretation of data, as well as development and implementation of interventions.

Early identification of gaps in student learning is not a new phenomenon, but the process by which schools, teachers and administrators analyze information and design intervention and prevention strategies is often missing or under developed in many schools. Furthermore the evaluation of prevention and intervention strategies happens even more infrequently. But schools that adhere to a process of collaborative gap identification, intervention and prevention design, and strategy evaluation have greater success in meeting the needs of all learners.

ALIGNMENT

An important consideration in maximizing efficiency for student learning is the alignment of standards, assessments, learning activities, strategies, and materials. The first step is to ensure that all those who have responsibility for student learning and achievement are well versed in state and district content standards. Discussing content and grade level standards at multiple levels is essential to ensure that there is a clear understanding of what students are expected to know, understand, and apply. Collaborative discussions between coordinators, administrators, and teachers across grade levels and content areas provides a check and balance system to ensure that all parties have a clear understanding of the standards. Clear understanding and mutual agreement of the standards is a critical starting point; without it, expectations by key stakeholder groups may vary.

The next step is to design assessments that align with state and local standards. Again, the same group of stakeholders should be involved in designing assessments. Periodic assessments allow teachers to identify strengths and gaps in student learning. Assessments need not be intrusive to instructional time. Short,

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well-designed assessments can provide teachers with valuable information to drive decision making. Throughout the year, assessments designed by specific content or grade level teachers, coordinators, and administrators should be administered to students. Following this, teams of teachers should review the findings to identify gaps and make necessary adjustments in instruction. Also, they should design and implement interventions for students who have not demonstrated competency on specific skills.

Educators question how often students should be assessed. In reality, students are being assessed formally or informally every day. Teachers are constantly gathering information on their students and using that information to make adjustments in planning and practice. However, a short, uniform formal assessment should be given by content-specific or grade level teachers every three weeks. The obvious criticism to this is that schools are already an assessment-driven culture. However, the reality is that many assessments currently used often do not align with content, district, or state standards. So rather than adding a new formal assessment in addition to testing that is already done, schools should instead look to revise current assessments to align with established standards. The next step to the aligned assessments is to provide teachers the opportunity to evaluate their findings and plan interventions.

Contrary to what is being done in most classrooms across the country, assessments of this type need to be designed prior to the selection of teaching materials, strategies and learning activities. These materials and activities should focus on skills that are necessary for students to be successful on the assessments and, in turn, demonstrate mastery of specified state and district standards. This is not an example of “teaching to the test.” This is structuring teaching to ensure that all students meet established standards, which should have already been agreed upon by educators and administrators.

Focusing on alignment will ensure that essential skills are mastered and assist educators in identifying areas of weakness and help them design effective intervention strategies. A collaborative model for success of this process is absolutely critical. Educators working in isolation will only ensure that instruction and attainment of standards is fragmented at best, non-existent at worst. Collaboration, not isolation, provides important feedback to better meet the needs of all learners.

FINAL THOUGHTS

There are many elements necessary in the design of effective prevention and intervention strategies to enhance student achievement. This article has focused on a select few, starting with a common belief system. It is also important to ensure that all stakeholders deal in reality, adhere to a collaborative model, use data to drive decision-making, identify gaps early, and align assessments to support established standards. Although it is important to consider each section in this article when building a comprehensive model to meet the educational needs of all students, it is by no means an exhaustive list of strategies schools should consider. For example, other factors, such as creative use of time, structure of the school day, teaming, looping, and transition periods are other avenues for implementing interventions to help students. However, these are often out of reach for a teacher who is looking to establish interventions for students falling behind. But by focusing on aligning assessments for established standards and collaborating with other teachers, educators can immediately begin to take steps to meet the needs of all students.

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