

Minnesota Principals Academy – Action Learning Project

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A Dirty Little Secret:

Reforming Student Selection Processes for High School Level Interventions and Support

Abstract

This Action Learning Project reformed how support personnel identified and placed academically at-risk students into available interventions and supports at a large traditional high school in greater Minnesota. The reform, the key initiative implemented by the newly-formed Multi-Tiered Systems and Supports (MTSS) team, was designed to confront an inadequate system of identifying at-risk learners for supports and interventions in existing intervention programs, and to build on those existing programs as a way of addressing the building site improvement goal of reducing the failure rate. The project examined current selection criteria in existing intervention programs—9th Grade Academy, Read 180, Standards Science Courses, Standards Social Studies Courses, and with stakeholder input and data analysis, developed expanded selection criteria for four key support programs for academically at-risk learners as well as implemented a pilot fifth support program, the Achievement Seminar, to augment the existing support options.

The evaluation of the pilot Achievement Seminar concluded that it indeed further reduced the overall failure rate of the institution. In addition, the hypothesis for the 2015-16 school year is that the reformed student selection process in all interventions and supports, will more accurately and comprehensively place students in programs that will help them be academically successful across the curriculum, thereby moving this Minnesota high school toward a zero percent failure rate.

Vision: A defensible system of selecting students to be placed in supports and interventions, leading to all kids passing all classes.

Background/Context: This change to the previous approach to 9th Grade Academy and other intervention/support selection criteria was developed and implemented over a two-year time period. The “failure rate” is defined as the percentage of students who fail a class or more. Demographics of the student body of 1239 students: 1059 white (86.5%); 125 Hispanic (10%); 27 Asian (2.1%); 25 Black (2%); American Indian 3 (.02%); FRL 245 (19.8%); Special Education 125 (10.1%).

Why a Change? While the first and largest intervention implemented as part of the MTSS program, the 9th Grade Academy, was very successful in decreasing the failure rate of 9th grade students, the process of selecting students for the Academy was insufficient in that it was based on a single data point—a standardized reading test score, and anecdotal information provided my middle school support staff. This insufficiency lead initially to doubt among some parents who questioned their student’s placement in the Academy program, and subsequently lead to the conclusion that a better, data-based system was needed for not only selecting students for the Academy, but also for all interventions and supports offered at the school. Additionally, and quite simply, our failure rate still isn’t zero.

What We Did: As a result of collaboration with administrative and support staff, we developed a selection system that was based on at least four data points for each of the interventions and supports: 9th Grade Academy, Read 180, and standards-level courses in science and social studies. In addition, a new support, Achievement Seminar, was born out of the new selection process as a pilot to further address the building goal of a zero percent failure rate.

What We Found Out:

1. With the implementation of the pilot Achievement Seminar in 2014-15 as a by-product of the criteria reform process, our work toward a zero failure rate is improving.

Year	Sem 1 Failures	Sem 2 Failure	Year Total & %	Unduplicated %
2011-12	84 (6.7%)	69 (5.6%)	153 (12.3%)	124 (10%)
2012-13	83 (6.7%)	82 (6.6%)	165 (13.3%)	132 (10.6%)
2013-14	102 (8.2%)	91 (7.3%)	193 (15.6%)	158 (12.7%)
2014-15	53 (4.2%)	44 (3.5%)	97 (7.8%)	85 (6.8%)

2. (Ongoing) Our hypothesis as we move into 2015-16 with the students placed in interventions and supports using the reformed identification and selection process is that we will further, and significantly reduce the failure rate among 9-12 grade students.

Implications:

1. Moving forward, our time spent justifying and defending student placement in interventions/supports should decrease dramatically, as the body of evidence supporting the placement has significantly increased. A similar multiple data point process has occurred in our mathematics department for over 10 years, and the number of placements that are questioned or appealed are minimal. A similar result can be expected with MTSS.
2. By looking at longitudinal data, specific to the selection of Academy students pre- and post- selection process reform, we hope that we can begin to predict at an earlier age which students will benefit most from the support found in the Academy. Subsequently, we intend to investigate how this predictability can influence how we address the academic concerns of students prior to their arrival in 9th grade, thereby decreasing the need for the Academy program, as well as other interventions and supports similar to it.
3. Further, there is legitimacy to further subdividing the data into student subgroups—race, gender, FRL, to determine the effectiveness of individual interventions on those subgroups. This becomes particularly valuable to our school with our prominent and growing EL population, a significant percentage of which are FRL. To this point, an unintended consequence of this project is a newly pledged commitment on the part of our EL and administrative teams to use comprehensive data to place more accurately our EL students, be it in direct service or monitoring status, in order not only to ensure their success, but also to provide them the appropriate level of academic challenge and language acquisition opportunity.

