Proactive Approaches For Improving Outcomes For At-Risk Students

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ABSTRACT

This article outlines innovative approaches to reducing dropouts and enhancing the rate of school success among students labeled "At-Risk". The article emphasizes the need for fundamental change in educational philosophy and operational frameworks as the basis for meaningful change. Significant aspects of the processes used to improve student outcomes are provided.

Introduction

The principles of continuous improvement are currently impacting all areas of society. Business, government, and educational organizations are all applying these principles to improve the delivery of services to their customers (Payne and Blackbourn, 1992). Lynch and Kordis (1988) emphasize the need to search constantly for the next stage in an ongoing sequence of continuous improvement. These modifications often involve change that is revolutionary, innovative, and involves fundamental modifications (Blackbourn, Papasan, Vinson, & Blackbourn, 2000; Kuhn, 1962; 1976; 1990). In essence, improving service delivery is not a final goal or destination, but merely a step in a continuing journey.

Fundamental change in operational procedures is the key element in significant improvement (Blackbourn, Papasan, Vinson, & Blackbourn, 2000; Skirtic, 1991; Synge, 1990). Much of the reason for the lack of meaningful change has to do with the standards and framework upon which the improvements are based. Using experience which is not current as a guide for problem solving is analogous to driving a car while only looking in the rearview mirror (Deming, 1987). Knowing how problems were dealt with in the past may not be helpful in solving current problems, especially if one's vision is not futuristic or forward reaching. One must "look down the road" to anticipate future obstacles, difficulties, or problems (Blackbourn, 1999).

Guidelines and standards which focus on customer satisfaction, reduction of waste, and continuous improvement would foster fundamental change in educational organizations through enhancing the understanding of the requirements of quality, excellence, a sharing of information on successful quality strategies and benefits of implementing a quality process, and the awareness of quality as the vital element in our ultimate ability to compete on a global scale (United States Department of Commerce, 1993).

This manuscript outlines two approaches for improving outcomes for students at risk for academic failure. Both take a systemic approach to the problem (Synge, 1990) in that they focus on how specific circumstances (some rooted in an individual's distant past) create a reality of failure for many students and how short term "fixes" may, over the long term, exacerbate the problem.

Promotion/Retention

The promotion/retention decision is one of the most significant in the educational experience of students at risk for academic failure. Many students are retained based upon a standardized set of guidelines which relate to their academic performance, age in

comparison to their peers, classroom behavior, or teacher perceptions and pay little attention to those critical factors rooted in the experiences of the retention year.

An informal review process that focuses on the comprehensive records of students, who had been previously retained, is the starting point of a successful promotion/retention process. The students should be divided into two groups according to current academic functioning (i.e. successful or unsuccessful). In addition, staff members must document: (a) the reason for consideration of retention, (b) nature of the decision (retained or promoted), and (c) outcome of the decision (was it helpful). Examination of these factors allow staff members to develop a profile (i.e. "What each type of student looks like.") of those students who were helped by the decision made for them and those that weren't helped by the retention decision.

Results of such a process can identify those aspects of the retention/promotion decision that relate most directly to eventual student success. These can include, but not be limited to:

1. Teacher Beliefs -Those students who were most likely to be helped by the promotion/retention decision would reflect a belief by the teacher that they could be successful with appropriate intervention.
2. Comprehensive Planning - If a teacher had a clear plan or idea to address a child's specific deficiencies, then that student would be significantly more likely to benefit from the promotion/ retention decision.
3. Parental Support -- Parental support of the promotion/retention decision and the on-going intervention prescribed for their child was a critical factor in the eventual success of the student. In addition, support available for the child in non-school environments was critical.

Much of the time student retention is based upon factors such as poor attendance, lack of reading skills, and/or lack of math skills. Questions concerning whether or not to retain a student are rarely framed as "Would retention improve attendance?" or "Would retention improve reading?" Review and examination from a systemic perspective not only identifies the features that relate to a successful outcome from the promotion/retention decision, but also a focus on the question: "Will the student be helped by retention/promotion?" The guiding principle and the only valid basis for retaining or promoting a student is the welfare of that student.

Developmental "Hot Spots"

Havighurst (1953), Havighurst and Neugarten (1962), and Havighurst and Taba (1949) described the nature of developmental tasks imbedded within the structure of schools. Mastery of academic developmental tasks at any grade level form the foundation of success at subsequent grade levels. Certain grade levels possess more tasks to be mastered than others. These grade levels become areas within a school organization

where instruction is challenging, behavior management is difficult, and student failure is more frequent. Such areas are "hot spots," areas of critical concern where large numbers of students struggle to master skills critical to their future success.

A systematic examination of students who have dropped out over a ten year period, using the statistical process control technique (Hamby & Blackbourn, 1999), and plotting: (a) the number of dropouts annually, (b) the statistical upper control limit, and (c) the statistical lower control limit, can be used to identify such "hot spots." Through this process, the staff is able to determine if the number of dropouts annually are due to a systemic problem rather than due to a special cause.

An in-depth examination of the records of student dropouts can reveal a further feature of their school experience. For example, two "hot spots" might be identified as areas of concern for school staff. Areas of concern at 3rd grade (a minor "hot spot) and 7th grade (the major "hot spot") might be identified. Through an examination of the records of individual students who dropped out of a school district's programs, one might find that approximately 50% of those students who eventually dropped out of school were retained or experienced significant academic difficulty in 3rd grade and 90% of those students who eventually dropped out of school failed or experienced significant academic difficulty in 7th grade.

Based upon the information available, the administration and faculty at the elementary middle school levels can develop and implement several strategies to enhance student success and reduce the dropout rate district-wide. These might include:

1. Grade Level Teams (Middle School)-The use of teams at the 7th grade level could allow enhanced communication between faculty concerning students experiencing difficulty and foster the implementation of a curricular approach integrated across content areas.
2. Block Scheduling (Middle School)-When combined with the team approach, the extended planning could allow for more detailed lesson planning, consistent disciplinary practices, and extended availability to students for extra support.
3. Success Room (Middle School)-An area adjacent to the workroom for the grade level teams could be designated as a "success room." This room might be computer terminals with Internet access. Software on the computers could support both the text used in the classroom and the content presented there.
Tables for group work or for student/teacher consultation could also be included in the room. Access to teachers during their planning time, resources related to academics, and space for work cooperatively all would contribute to improved academic performance.
4. Looping Teachers (Elementary School)-Several elementary teachers might be allowed to begin at the kindergarten level and remain as the teacher of that class through 2" or 3rd grade, then return to kindergarten to pick up another group. These teachers, because of the smaller class size, greater understanding of individuals student learning styles, and deeper knowledge concerning specific student deficiencies, might be able to better prepare children for a successful 3rd or 4'h grade experience.

5. <u>Accelerated School Model</u> (Elementary School)-This model, designed to move all at-risk students into the educational mainstream by the end of elementary school, features challenging and stimulating activities structured to facilitate academic growth (Hopfenberg, et al., 1993). The result of establishing an accelerated school at the elementary level could be a building-wide unity of purpose, a focus on all parts of the elementary school as an integrated system, site-based governance, effective communication, and improved student outcomes.

The impact of such strategies on the dropout rate would initially be indeterminable. Systemic solutions often do not have an immediate impact. Rather, the impact is often cumulative in nature and must necessarily be so to bring about significant improvement.

Summary

This perspective is radical in that it goes to the root of many problems facing schools today. The emphasis on the cause and effect problem-solving paradigm not only prevents the identification of basic causes of systemic problems, but also actually exacerbates these problems. This occurs through the application of solutions that bring about short-term relief, but no fundamental change in systemic conditions (Rader, 1998; Senge, 1990). The inability to make fundamental change in an educational system severely limits the degree to which individual learning and development can be supported and ultimately fails to adequately meet the needs of those to whom we owe our professional existence.

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