

PBIS Forum 15 Practice Brief: Focusing on Freshmen within MTSS

Introduction

Freshmen supports can take many forms, but need to have a set of key features. These features follow those of Schoolwide PBIS: Leadership team, Use of Data for Decision Making, Identify and Teach Expectations,



Consequence System, Acknowledgement System, and Classroom Systems. Effective support of freshmen as a whole group within a school requires a Freshmen Leadership Team to guide implementation of freshmen efforts and to monitor both fidelity and outcome data at the freshmen level.

If schoolwide systems for consequences and acknowledgements are in place, then the freshmen work can utilize those systems and no new system needs to be developed. If those systems are not in place, however, then the freshmen leadership team will need to develop them for freshmen.

Many schools, when focusing on freshmen, identify a set of knowledge and skills that they want all freshmen to learn. These are not a new set of broad behavioral expectations like those that are developed schoolwide, but instead are a more specific set of learning behaviors that are

layered on top of the schoolwide behavioral expectations. These are often in line with “how to do school” and include academic support skills such as specific note-taking strategies and use of a planner, as well as basic high school how-to like reading a transcript or how to access help through various resources. Similar to the schoolwide expectations, these additional expectations must be clearly defined and explicitly taught to all freshmen students, and then classroom systems need to be developed to support them. There are numerous classroom systems that schools use, but one of the most efficient is the use of “teacher agreements”. Teacher agreements are a set of practices that all teachers of freshmen agree to implement consistently as a mechanism to support all freshmen in all classes. Many teacher agreements should align with the freshmen expectations discussed above as a means to support the students in acquiring and practicing these skills. Some examples of Teacher Agreements include making time in each class for students to write assignments in their planners, writing assignments on the board in a similar location, adopting a timeline for updating grades (i.e. 1st and 15th of each month), or making one positive parent phone call home per week. Having a set of teacher agreements in place as a common classroom system across all freshmen classes supports a consistent and predictable environment for students and their families. Such agreements can be scaffolded across the year (i.e. fewer in place second semester) or into the 10th grade year as students begin to build fluency with these skills.

Rationale

The national high school dropout rate averages nearly 25%, with substantially poorer outcomes for some minority groups (Aud et al., 2013). For example, Hispanic youth drop out at a rate of almost 30% and African

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American youth 34% (Aud et al., 2013). The negative effects of dropout persist well into adulthood and affect employment, earnings, incarceration, parenting experiences, and overall family income (Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin, & Palma, 2011; Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin, & Palma, 2009). Data from U.S. Department of Labor reflected an average joblessness rate in June of 2014 of 8.2% for young high school dropouts, compared to 5.6% for high school graduates (www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t04.htm). Even dropouts who find work have mean annual earnings nearly 50% lower than their peers who have completed high school. Ultimately, over their working lives, the average high school dropout will *cost* taxpayers nearly \$5,200, while the average high school graduate will make a positive lifetime net fiscal *contribution* of \$287,000 (Sum et al., 2009; 201).

Substantial research documents that, for many students who drop out, the path begins with the transition into high school, specifically during the 9th grade year (Allensworth & Easton, 2005; Benner, 2011; Heck & Mahoe, 2006; Jerald, 2006; McIntosh, Flannery, Sugai, Braun, & Cochrane, 2008). A research study in the Chicago Public Schools found that students who fell behind in credit accumulation during their 9th grade year had a 22% graduation rate, as compared to an 81% graduation rate for students who were “on track” in 9th grade (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). The most powerful predictors of whether a student will complete high school include course performance and attendance *during the first year of high school* (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). In fact, according to Jerald (2006), low attendance during the first 30 days of the 9th grade year is a stronger indicator that a student will drop out than any 8th grade predictor, including test scores, other indicators of academic achievement, and age. Even high achieving 8th grade students struggle in the move to 9th grade. In a large multi-high school study in Chicago Public Schools, 25% of students performing *in the top quartile of their 8th grade class* were found to be off track by the end of their 9th grade year (Allensworth & Easton, 2005), demonstrating that even high-performing students lack the necessary skills to be successful in high school.

Specific Implementation Freshman Support Examples

Supporting Teachers

Teacher teaming

Many high schools have adopted a freshmen teaming model as a structure for instruction and teacher collaboration. Freshmen teaming is an organizational structure that groups freshmen students into “teams” or “houses” that have a common set of teachers for their core academic classes. A key part of freshmen teaming is the teacher collaboration time that is built into the school schedule, providing each team of teachers with a common period during the school day to plan, problem solve, and implement supports for students on their team. The freshmen leadership team meets monthly and monitors student attendance, behavior and course performance data, and uses this data to plan a variety of interventions and supports.

Teacher supports

Professional Learning Communities (PLC) for educators who teach primarily freshman provide opportunities to share concerns and target freshman specific needs. In some school systems PLCs are integrated into the professional development calendar. In other systems, PLCs are optional and educators receive credits towards salary advancement. In both cases the message is clear that freshman have specific needs and that districts are committed to providing support for teachers.

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Organizational Restructuring

Freshman Academy (advisory)

Some high schools build a freshman only advisory class into the schedule. At the universal level, students are taught behavioral and academic expectations to students, as well as delivering specific lessons designed to increase overall school engagement. Students earn a range of acknowledgements for meeting the expectations, in team celebrations or freshmen-wide recognition ceremonies. In some schools there is a separate bell schedule to accommodate the different schedule.

Common lunch period

Many high schools utilize a building wide common lunch period that allows freshman (all students) to access academic support, small group support for social emotional needs, and extracurricular clubs. The academic support is determined by data such as missing assignments, course grades below a particular benchmark and skills development. Small groups that aim to support development of pro-social behaviors, academic behaviors (time management, task initiation, organization, etc.) are provided and placement may include recommendations from administration, teachers, and/or self-placement. Finally, extracurricular activities are offered for students who are not demonstrating a need for academic or social/emotional supports. Research indicates high school completion is correlated with student engagement. Extracurricular clubs and activities provide opportunities for students who may not have time or after-school transportation the opportunity to get involved in an area of interest. This model requires coordination of schedules, access to data to inform placement for students on a weekly basis and communication between the organizers and the faculty/staff. High schools utilizing this model report hearing positive feedback from multiple stakeholders: students, faculty/staff and families.

Family Engagement

Summer Freshman Academy

Typically, family involvement decreases significantly once students enter high school. However, research indicates family participation has positive outcomes for students: improved attendance, academic outcomes, and decreased behavioral infractions. Some high schools have taken measures to include families. Dorchester High School offered a summer academy for incoming freshman and their families. The academy sessions were held in the evenings and on weekends. Each session was offered multiple times to accommodate varying work schedules. Topics included strategies for academic success, using the agenda/planner, getting involved in extracurricular activities, asking for help, and peer mentoring opportunities. Local service agencies such as the food bank, family support agencies, community recreation facilities and faith-based organizations were involved and offered information and support to families and youth. Attendance at the academy increased each summer and community groups assumed the fiscal responsibility for the event.

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Eighth grade family night

High schools will often host the families of feeder middle schools were invited to an information night at the high school. Freshman teachers spoke about expectations, important benchmarks, assessments, and opportunities to get involved. Athletic coaches, sponsors of the performing and visual arts, freshman deans and administrators, and high school seniors spoke to the group. Feedback was very positive, families felt welcomed and better prepared to support their youth.

Frequently asked questions

Q: How can schools facilitate a schoolwide conversation around making freshmen a priority?

A: Sharing the research and your school's own data can be an effective way to start off a schoolwide focus on supporting 9th graders. All roundtable participants emphasized the need to ensure that a freshmen focus is a building-wide focus, as additional resources are often required.

Q: What data should be monitored for freshmen?

A: The data to be monitored includes Attendance, Behavior, and Course Performance data. As with schoolwide data monitoring, data should be monitored at least monthly. It is also helpful to gather 8th grade data on incoming 9th graders as soon as it becomes available so that supports can be designed and implemented to allow students to be supported from the first day of their 9th grade year.

Q: Does focusing on freshmen create a 10th grade “cliff”?

A: The schools that participated in the roundtable all spoke of a need to provide a continuation of supports in the upper grades, as well. Where increased support is universal at the 9th grade level, similar supports are delivered in more of a targeted fashion in 10-12th grades.

Q: What role can upperclassmen plan in supporting freshmen?

A: In a number of schools, upperclassmen are being used as mentors for freshmen. These mentors in some cases are more formal, matched and trained mentors. In other cases, they are placed in classrooms like Academic Assistants and act more as informal academic ‘coaches’ for the freshmen, working with them on academic skills, overall school engagement and generally, how to “do” school.

Additional resources/references

Powerpoint presentations and a webinar are available on PBIS.org