



The Prevention and Intervention Services Program's Link to Academic Improvement

Topical Report

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Introduction

The prevalence of substance use among youth enrolled in Washington State public schools has been well documented (Einspruch, Gabriel, Deck, and Nickel, 1998; Gabriel, 1996). Nationally, the results of the Monitoring the Future study indicate that among American adolescents “over half (54%) have tried an illicit drug by the time they finish high school” (Johnston, O’Malley, and Bachman, 2001). Linking the effects of adolescent substance use with academic achievement has not always been straightforward. A few studies have, however, shown that early substance use may contribute to poor academic achievement (Bradley, 1982; Brook, Balka, and Whiteman, 1999; Galambos and Silbereisen, 1987; Hendrin and Haas, 1985; Hundleby, 1985; Marston, Jacobs, Singer, and Widaman, 1988), and a recent study by the University of Washington found a negative correlation between peer substance use and below-standard Washington Assessment of Student Learning test scores for middle school students (Washington Kids Count, 2000). Although these findings are not surprising, they do document a relationship between substance use and academic performance.

Washington State’s Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction funds a statewide student assistance program, the Prevention and Intervention Services Program, which aims to prevent and intervene in adolescent substance use, enabling students to be ready to learn and achieve academically. Thus whereas the primary focus of the program is to implement strategies that prevent substance use and violent behavior or to intervene early, the ultimate goal is to prevent declines in students’ academic performance and classroom attendance and avert school failure.

These outcomes are important for both the Prevention and Intervention Services Program and the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction in terms of advancing education reform benchmarks. Furthermore, if local projects can document these positive academic outcomes in addition to improved behavioral outcomes, teacher and administrator buy-in becomes less of a public relations responsibility for program staff and the program can become better integrated into the academic structure of school culture.

Although students may still perform adequately in school while they are experimenting with alcohol or other drugs, performance suffers as the severity of substance use increases. Students referred to the program who meet clinical criteria for substance abuse or dependence typically show poor academic performance. After intervention from the Prevention and Intervention Services Program, however, these students have shown significant increases in grade point average (GPA; Deck and D’Ambrosio, 1999) and improvements in attendance. The majority of students who become program participants

“The program is sort of one step removed from academics, but through addressing drug and alcohol needs of students we hope to improve the academics and attendance of students participating in the program.”—Grant coordinator in an urban district

tend to be referred to the program when exhibiting behaviors that predict risk for engaging in substance use or early signs of substance use. Hence most students participating in the program have not progressed to the point of decreased academic performance. In fact, many students have average or above academic records prior to their involvement in the program, and academic improvement among these students has been minimal (Deck, 2001). Without the program, however, many more of these students could reach the point of substance abuse and dependence and experience the resultant decline in academic performance.

Accordingly, the purpose of this report is to document the ways that the Prevention and Intervention Services Program promotes a supportive learning environment in concert with other school reform initiatives designed to boost academic achievement. This report describes how this program contributes to the supportive learning environment within schools and the assistance the program provides to individual students. The evaluation team conducted a qualitative study to examine how project coordinators and intervention specialists strive to effect improved academic performance among participating students. Qualitative data and anecdotal information detail the range of ideas and practices used and enhance understanding of the strategies that program staff perceive as effective at improving the academic performance. The presentation of this information enables the sharing of strategies for academic improvement across local projects.

Methodology

The primary data collection method was telephone interviews with grant coordinators. Open-ended questions inquired about the grant coordinators' ideas and the strategies they employed to strengthen the link between the Prevention and Intervention Services Program and academics. The evaluation team based its selection of nine grant coordinators for participation in the interviews on its knowledge of local project activities and their coordination with other, more academically focused school-based programs. Six of these grant coordinators participated in the interviews. A secondary data collection effort involved follow-up telephone interviews with intervention specialists recommended by grant coordinators. These interviews sought detailed descriptions of the strategies the intervention specialists used. Five intervention specialists participated in follow-up interviews.

The analysis of this study focuses on the data gathered through the telephone interviews of the grant coordinators and intervention specialists. The analysis attempts to delineate the primary strategies that local projects and intervention specialists use to address the academic needs of participating students. In addition, the analysis describes the connection between the key principles of education reform in Washington—Educational Academic Learning Requirements (EALRs)—and the program and how local projects align their activities and interventions with the EALRs.

The data collected and analyzed are not representative of all the strategies local projects and intervention specialists use to address the issues of academic improvement and education reform across the state. Rather, the information obtained through the interviews illustrates the types of activities employed to support the academic achievement and attendance of the students participating in the Prevention and Intervention Services Program and indicates the types of links this nonacademic program has to classroom performance.

Strategies Employed

The Prevention and Intervention Services Program is primarily a substance use and violence prevention and intervention program, and thus specializes in providing counseling and case management services in support of the educational process. Local projects and individual intervention specialists do, however, employ a variety of strategies that directly address academics, attendance, and education reform. These strategies tend to be at three levels: the project level, the school level, and the student level. The strategies at the project level are apt to be global in nature—that is, used across several or all of the local projects. The strategies of the intervention specialists interviewed encompassed these broad approaches while also including specific school-level techniques for coordinating services within schools. The student-level strategies include academic-related activities that intervention specialists employ when working directly with students both in groups and individually.

“We try to work counseling goals around low academic performance and low attachment to school.”—Grant coordinator in a rural district

Project-Level Strategies

Alignment with the EALRs. The foremost strategy mentioned by the interviewees (grant coordinators and intervention specialists alike) was alignment of the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction’s education reform initiative, the EALRs, with program activities and support group lesson plans. The alignment is predominantly based on the Health and Fitness and Communication EALRs because of the appropriate connection the Prevention and Intervention Services Program has with these particular EALRs (e.g., making healthy lifestyle choices and improving interpersonal and communication skills). Grant coordinators have provided to their intervention specialists training on the EALRs and their alignment with program activities, as well as training on academic benchmarks and Washington Assessment of Student Learning testing. One grant coordinator asserted that intervention specialists should also be “cognizant of student issues around homework, classroom behaviors, attendance, and other academic issues.” Intervention specialists illustrated how their activities are aligned with the EALRs; for example, “choosing from a variety of social skills to avoid risky situations” is aligned with Health and Fitness Essential Learning 3, Benchmark 2 (Social Skills) and “developing strategies to manage stress” is aligned with Health and Fitness Essential Learning 2, Benchmark 3 (Safe Living).

Training contracted staff to work in the school setting. Several local projects use contracted staff from community chemical dependency treatment agencies as intervention specialists. These contract intervention specialists are experienced in working with the substance use problems of youth, but many have never worked in a school environment. In these local projects, the grant coordinators provide the contract intervention specialists with training on effectively working in the school environment with all levels of school staff and the ways in which the Prevention and Intervention Services Program can support learning.

Continuum of services. Two local projects serving small rural school districts integrate Prevention and Intervention Services Program funding with funding from other sources as a strategy to build a continuum of services within districts and schools. These projects combine Prevention and Intervention Services Program and Readiness to Learn dollars to fund intervention specialists who serve students at all grade levels. The primary focus of these two local projects is the development of a continuum of prevention and early intervention services targeted at elementary and middle schools. The integration of Prevention and Intervention Services Program and Readiness to Learn funding results in intervention specialists who provide a mix of services through both programs.

A third local project uses multiple funding sources to build a continuum of services from early intervention through substance abuse treatment. This project has integrated Prevention and Intervention Services Program funds with county treatment funds to place certified chemical dependency counselors in schools to provide both program services and school-based treatment. These types of funding integration strategies help rural districts and schools provide a continuum of services with minimal community resources.

**“Healthy students learn better.”
—Grant coordinator in a rural district**

Additionally, Educational Service Districts, in conjunction with the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, have initiated a movement toward a more global approach to substance abuse and violence prevention through Prevention Centers. The prevention center concept calls for the Educational Service Districts to consolidate various prevention-oriented funding streams into a central site for the dissemination of materials and resources.

School-Level Strategies

Outreach to and training of school staff. Communicating with principals, teachers, core teams, and other school staff about how the Prevention and Intervention Services Program can support academics is another key strategy. One grant coordinator characterized this effort as public relations to inform school staff of the program and its goals to assist students in leading a healthier and drug-free lifestyle, which tends to improve students’ attendance and academics. A fundamental tenet of the program is that students cannot learn in the classroom if they are using substances or worried about family problems, and if the program addresses these issues students will be better able to learn.

Coordination with school staff and other school-based programs. Interviewees cited coordinating with school staff and making appropriate referrals to guidance counselors and teachers as one of the main ways local projects address the specific academic needs of participating students. At a general level, intervention specialists case manage their students by working through life problems and substance use issues and coordinating with school staff and other school resources to address academic issues. Specifically, this coordination includes working and communicating with core teams and ensuring that students have access to homework assignments and academic assistance when they enter residential treatment programs. Intervention specialists also coordinate with other available school resources, such as Readiness to Learn or 21st Century Community Learning Centers programs, school nurses, and psychologists. This coordination may take the form of making or taking appropriate referrals, providing group and individual counseling services, or serving as another resource for students.

**“Intervention specialists try to manage life problems and drug and alcohol issues, and then they coordinate with school staff around academic content.”
—Grant coordinator in a rural district**

Coordination with after-school programs. Intervention specialists attempt to coordinate services and resources with after-school programs, where they are available, by making referrals and maintaining open lines of communication. This type of coordination, whereby intervention specialists offer Prevention and Intervention Services Program group and individual services to students after school, has begun in schools with 21st Century Community Learning Centers or other community programs. During the after-school period, students have access to tutoring and additional instruction and student-parent support groups and can work with the intervention specialist on nonacademic issues. Though the link to academics is not direct, coordinating with after-school and 21st Century Community Learning Centers programs increases intervention specialists’ connection with the academic needs of the students they serve.

Alternative learning opportunities. Some intervention specialists have the opportunity to run school programs or alternative classes that are not directly related to the Prevention and Intervention Services Program. For example, one intervention specialist leads a “pace” class at the Grade 9 level for students who are failing out of school. This self-paced class has the goal of helping students meet the requirements to enter Grade 10. In another district, the local project is linked up with a districtwide alternative program for students completing high school credits while in recovery. Students in this alternative program must have completed the initial phases of a chemical dependency program and be in the continuing care of a treatment program. The students must also have the desire and motivation to discontinue any use of substances. The alternative program supports a clean and sober lifestyle and assists students in transitioning back to mainstream school from treatment. In addition to offering academic classes that are aligned with the district’s content standards and the EALRs, this alternative program also offers group and individual counseling.

Linkages to educational enrichment programs. One grant coordinator related how his local project had linked up with Project Gear-Up, a school program that identifies low-income middle school students for special encouragement and support, including college tuition resources, to make college a future goal. Intervention specialists coordinated services with school counselors to assist the students participating in Project Gear-Up.

Prevention activities. Many schools have been awarded violence prevention grants by the Governor’s Office. Intervention specialists collaborate with these grant programs to provide students and teachers training on school safety and the prevention of violence, substance use, harassment, and other similar topics. One intervention specialist (who also works halftime as a guidance counselor) leads his school’s mentor program, which connects students to 70 volunteers. In addition, in his role as guidance counselor this intervention specialist works with the school’s most at-risk and needy students, who also tend to be involved in the mentor program. The intervention specialist provides assistance to about half of these students through the Prevention and Intervention Services Program, but because he also serves as a guidance counselor to these students, he has the opportunity to provide prevention services to all of the students he works with regardless of whether they are in the Prevention and Intervention Services Program or not.

**“The important thing is having someone here to help kids . . . building a team of people to support students, both academically and socially.”
—Intervention specialist in an urban district**

Participation in parent conferences. One intervention specialist described using parent conferences as an opportunity to follow up with students and their parents. This intervention specialist uses the academically focused conferences as a means of communicating to parents how substance use effects behavior and schoolwork.

Student-Level Strategies

Use of skill-building curricula. Intervention specialists put EALR alignment into practice by implementing curricula, such as Second Step and Project Alert, that focus on building positive behavior and social skills (which correspond to the Health and Fitness Essential Learning 3, Benchmarks 1–3), positive decision-making and refusal skills (which correspond to the Health and Fitness Essential Learning 2, Benchmarks 1–3), violence prevention (which correspond to the Health and Fitness Essential Learning 3, Benchmarks 1–3), and anger management (which correspond to the Health and Fitness Essential Learning 3, Benchmarks 1–3). The grant coordinators interviewed asserted that skill building is one avenue by which intervention specialists, through addressing substance use and other social issues, can help improve the academic achievement and attendance of participating students.

Coteaching classes. Some intervention specialists have the opportunity to coteach in the classroom. Coteaching opportunities may take the form of implementing specific prevention curricula, such as Here's Looking at You or Character Counts, in regular elementary school classrooms or in health or physical education middle school classes, or coordinating lesson plans within the health curriculum at the middle and high school levels. These lesson plans might present the pharmacology of chemicals and how different chemicals effect the body and physical functioning and might provide information about the impact of chemical dependency on family functioning and family roles. Through coteaching classes, especially health or physical education, intervention specialists have a more direct impact on the knowledge and skills development of students. Furthermore, coteaching classes allows intervention specialists to reach the mainstream student population rather than only students referred to the Prevention and Intervention Services Program. Many intervention specialists also periodically conduct classroom presentations in which they address issues ranging from building social skills to decision making and goal setting to pregnancy prevention.

**"We are trying to create a safe school environment because when students feel safe they learn better."
—Intervention specialist in an urban district**

Journal writing. Journal writing is one strategy that introduces education components into Prevention and Intervention Services Program counseling activities. Keeping a journal can help students express and work through their life experiences while practicing reading and writing skills. The intervention specialists' use of the reading and writing exercises within the context of counseling does not seem to be coordinated in any way with formal English instruction, but the strategy is one method intervention specialists use to more directly improve the academic achievement of participating students.

Identification of educational needs. Intervention specialists who operate in elementary schools (especially schools with few resources) often receive student referrals based on low attachment to school, classroom behavior problems, or other problems indicative of low academic performance. In these situations, intervention specialists use the counseling process to identify the students' educational needs. Thus the intervention specialists link the Prevention and Intervention Services Program to academics by making referrals to the school personnel who can address the students' specific educational needs.

Groups for academically challenged students. When one intervention specialist realized that many of the students he was serving through the Prevention and Intervention Services Program were significantly behind academically, he created a support group for academically challenged students. One of the group's primary goals is to prepare students for life beyond school. The intervention specialist uses motivational counseling techniques to prompt the students to think about the future. He also reported conducting activities that build students' organizational and homework planning skills. Fieldtrips to the local employment office and community college are examples of effective activities conducted by this intervention specialist, who believed that the value of these fieldtrips lay in the

emphasis both organizations placed on the relationship between education and employment opportunities.

Task-oriented activities for students with Attention Deficit Disorder. One intervention specialist reported using task-oriented activities focused on building organizational and concentration skills to help Attention Deficit Disorder students stay on task and pay attention during class. This intervention specialist also reported employing specific counseling strategies that teach organizational skills and help Attention Deficit Disorder students organize their notebooks and homework assignments. Through the implementation of these types of strategies, this intervention specialists provides academic support to students with special needs.

Ideas for Better Promoting Academic Improvement

Grant coordinators and intervention specialists offered a few ideas for how the Prevention and Intervention Services Program might better promote the academic improvement of participating students. Strategies that are more directly academic include integrating the program curriculum with science curricula, adopting more academic-focused curricula that are aligned with the EALRs and academic benchmarks, and creating links between the program and career development services. Because intervention specialists already teach about the effects of substance use on the body, this curriculum could easily be integrated into the human biology portion of the science curriculum. Adopting more prevention and intervention curricula that are directly aligned to the EALRs and academic benchmarks and that use a common language could foster greater communication between intervention specialists and school staff and greater collaboration toward a common goal. The program could also provide links to vocation/education, school-to-work, and other career development programs for students with little interest in pursuing secondary education. One grant coordinator also suggested that intervention specialists be trained in tutoring and helping students improve their study skills.

One interviewee expressed the view that the program must become more integrated with the academic structure of the schools before intervention specialists can truly promote academic improvement. This intervention specialist believed that school personnel work in isolation, rather than together, because the program, teachers, and other school resources are fragmented. The intervention specialist suggested that school staff need to be better trained on substance use and its effects on students, and intervention specialists need to be better trained on the educational goals and practices. If the program can become more integrated into the operation of the schools and teachers and intervention specialists develop a better understanding of each other, intervention specialists will be better prepared to address the educational needs of participating students.

Discussion

The Prevention and Intervention Services Program is a school-based, nonacademic program that supports the school learning environment by providing substance use and violence prevention and intervention services. Moreover, as the program addresses students' family, peer, and substance use problems, the students tend to become more focused and ready to learn in class, and improved grades and attendance become a long-term program outcome. Grant coordinators and intervention specialists realize the potential impact the program can have on academic improvement and that this impact can be direct—not simply a side effect. Improved academic achievement is an increasingly important issue for the program and this study attempted to discover how grant coordinators and intervention specialists are conceptualizing the program's attempts to achieve this goal.

The main strategy for addressing academics is through the alignment of program activities with the Health and Fitness and Communication EALRs. This practice appears to be common among the local projects and is the program's primary method of connecting with education reform efforts. Other strategies tend to be either particular to local projects or, more likely, intervention specialists (e.g., strategies such as coteaching classes, journal writing, coordinating with after-school programs, and using techniques adapted for special needs students) or are not explicitly education focused (e.g., strategies such as using skill-building curricula, coordinating with school staff and other school-based programs, and communicating with school staff about how program services can support the learning environment). Nevertheless, these strategies as a whole point to the diversity of approaches the program can—and does—use to promote the academic achievement of participating students.

By coordinating the Prevention and Intervention Services Program curriculum with science curricula and establishing links between the program and career development resources, the program can become better integrated into the academic environment and more closely connected to students' academic performance and school attendance. Improving the academics of participating students is a natural evolutionary step for the program, especially as it becomes more integrated into school functioning and increasingly aligned with education reform efforts.

**“I monitor the grades and attendance of all my program students and the program definitely makes an impact.”
—Intervention specialist in an urban district**

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