



August 2009 Research Brief: Elements of Effective Academic Support

Schools in the United States have a long history of tracking students and reserving academically rigorous classes for only certain students. These practices persist despite research that shows that

when more students have access to rigorous curricula and the necessary academic support, they can and will meet high standards.¹ Though the practices of tracking and restricting enrollment in rigorous classes still exist, there are a growing number of programs, schools, districts and states that are working to ensure all students have access to a rigorous college prep curriculum.² As access to college prep classes increases, there is increasing interest in how to provide effective academic support to students struggling to meet high standards. This research brief explores the elements of effective academic support from the perspective of programs working with students outside of the school day.

Monitor student progress

In order to effectively support students' academic success, programs must monitor students' academic progress so that they know when and where students are falling behind. At the very least, programs should track students' courses and grades. Research on middle schools that successfully prepare students for rigorous classes and high schools that successfully enroll high percentages of students in college prep classes found that these schools "teach all students to the same challenging standards, provide extra help and extra time for those who need it, and require students who earn below a "C" at any time to get extra help to strengthen their performance."³ Students' grades are a key indicator of academic progress, but programs that wish to more closely monitor their students' academic performance should create relationships with students' schools and teachers so that there is regular and reciprocal sharing of information about the student.⁴ In addition to grades and teachers, parents and students themselves are invaluable sources of information about academic performance and close relationships should be cultivated with both students and their families to assist programs in monitoring student progress. Programs should be careful though not to rely solely on students themselves to come to them when they need extra help. Programs should be proactive in reaching out to the students who need help and not wait for students to come to them.

¹ Education Trust. (2003). *Thinking K-16: A New Core Curriculum for All: Aiming High for Other People's Children*. Washington, DC.; Cooney, S. & Bottoms, G. (2003) *Middle Grades to High School: Mending a Weak Link*. Atlanta, GA: Southern Regional Education Board & Oakes, J. (2003). *Critical Conditions for Equity and Diversity in College Access: Informing Policy and Monitoring Results*. Los Angeles, CA: UC/ACCORD.

² *Education Week*. "Several States Making College-Prep Courses the Default Curriculum" April 20, 2005.

³ Cooney, S. & Bottoms, G. (2003)

⁴ Stonehill et al. (2009). *Enhancing School Reform Through Expanded Learning*. Naperville, IL: Learning Points Associates; Huang, D. & Cho, J. (2009). "Academic Enrichment in High-Functioning Homework Afterschool Programs," *Journal of Research in Childhood Education* Vol 23, No 3.

Intervene quickly

Programs should use all the information sources available to them – grades, tests, teachers, parents, and students themselves— to determine when students are falling behind and should intervene quickly when it is apparent that students are struggling. Interventions (e.g., tutoring, additional instruction, more opportunities to practice and apply the skills with which students are struggling) should be implemented quickly and intensively with the goal of getting students up to speed as quickly as possible.⁵

Provide individualized academic support based on student need

The success of an academic intervention depends not only on timeliness, but also on how well the support is tailored to students' needs. Students should be provided with academic support that is individualized and based on their particular academic needs. Using data and assessments (formal and informal), as well as information from students' teachers, can help programs design interventions that meet students where they are, but advance them quickly to where they need to be.⁶ One of the benefits of programs like Breakthrough is its small program size and low student-teacher ratios which enables individualized academic support to be delivered one-to-one or in a small group setting by teachers and staff who know students well, which research and practice shows is most effective for providing academic support that meets students' needs.⁷

Ensure instructional activities are focused, intentional, appropriately structured and “complement, but not replicate, in-school learning”⁸

Small program size and low teacher-student ratios certainly facilitate individualized support for students, but do not guarantee effective academic instruction. Instruction should be well-planned and deliberate. Instructional activities should be focused on developing a set of skills or knowledge; intentional in how the activities will build those skills and knowledge; explicit about connecting those skills and knowledge to students' longer-term academic and professional goals; and structured in such a way that engages students (e.g., building on students' individual interests; incorporating opportunities for hands-on application of skills; and exploring specific skills and content in greater depth.)⁹ When working with students who are getting C's or lower in their academic classes, programs should provide extra academic support that explicitly addresses the skills and content with which students are struggling in their classes. In addition to meeting a student's immediate needs, instruction should also

⁵ Asher, C. & Maguire, C. (2007) *Beating the Odds: How Thirteen NYC Schools Bring Low-Performing Ninth-Graders to Timely Graduation and College Enrollment*, Providence, RI: Annenberg Institute for School Reform; Dolejs, C. (2006) *Report on Key Practices and Policies of Consistently Higher Performing High Schools*. Washington, DC: National High School Center at the American Institutes for Research; Horwitz, A. & Snipes, J. (2008). *Supporting Successful Transitions to High School*. Washington, DC: Council of Great City Schools.

⁶Ivey, G & Fisher, D. (2006). *Creating Literacy-Rich Schools for Adolescents*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD; Dolejs, C. (2006) Horwitz, A. & Snipes, J. (2008)

⁷ Ivey, G & Fisher, D. (2006)

⁸ Stonehill et al. (2009)

⁹Stonehill et al. (2009); Ivey, G & Fisher, D. (2006); Chait, et al. (2007) *Academic Interventions to Help Students Meet Rigorous Standards: State Policy Options*. Washington, DC: National High School Alliance; Forum for Youth Investment (2003) *Out-of-School-Time Policy Commentary #5: Inside the Black Box: What Is the “Content” of After-School?* Washington, DC; Harvard Family Research Project (2008). *After School Programs in the 21st Century: Their Potential & What it Takes to Achieve It*. Cambridge, MA; Bedsworth, W., Colby, S. & Doctor, J. (2006) *Reclaiming the American Dream*. The Bridgespan Group.

address the skills and content that the student will need to master in order to be prepared for college prep classes. In other words, instruction should focus on both “catching up” and acceleration. The learning that happens out of school should support and build on the learning that happens in school. However, programs should not just provide more of the same instruction that students receive in school. Out of school programs should take advantage of the flexibility they have to be innovative and creative with their instruction, while also balancing academics with engaging co-curricular and extracurricular activities that are designed to promote youth development and learning.¹⁰

Hire and train high quality program staff

Ultimately, effective academic support depends on the teacher, tutor or mentor that provides the support. As articulated by the Forum for Youth Investment, “the successful transfer of any specific content ultimately rests on the staff’s ability to deliver that content effectively.”¹¹ Programs can increase their capacity to deliver effective academic support by consulting with expert professional teachers to design and implement interventions, hiring teachers and staff who have the appropriate content knowledge to meet the needs of their students; providing training on instructional strategies and activities that are most effective in addressing students’ skills gaps and encouraging the development of close and long-lasting relationships between students and teachers.¹²

Conclusion

If Breakthrough programs are to reach the goal of preparing students to attend college prep high schools and four year colleges, then programs need to not only increase students’ engagement in learning, but must also provide the necessary academic support for students to meet the high standards we set for them. Fortunately, Breakthrough programs, with their small size, low student-teacher ratios, long-term relationships with students, and committed staff and teachers are well-positioned to provide the kind of academic support that research shows is most effective (i.e., support that is responsive, individualized, timely and very intentional). The diagram on the next page summarizes the steps Breakthrough programs can take to capitalize on their strengths and enhance the effectiveness of their academic support.

¹⁰Stonehill et al. (2009)

¹¹ Forum for Youth Investment (2003)

¹² Ivey, G & Fisher, D. (2006); Forum for Youth Investment (2003); Harvard Family Research Project (2008).

At a minimum, programs should:

- Know when and where students are struggling by tracking courses and grades.
- Stay in close contact with students and their families to help monitor students' academic progress.

More advanced programs will:

- Be proactive about understanding students' academic strengths and weaknesses by establishing relationships with students' schools and teachers such that information about students' academic performance is shared regularly between program staff and students' teachers.
- Stay in close contact with students and their families and initiate conversations about students' academic performance.

When programs discover a student is having or is likely to have academic difficulties, they intervene quickly and intensively to catch the student up and use the opportunity to preview more advanced material and accelerate student learning

Based on prior knowledge and available information, provide tutoring or additional opportunities for students to learn and practice the skills/content with which the student is struggling

Use data and assessments to target the specific skills/content with which the student is struggling and continue to use data and assessments to gauge progress and ensure the student has mastered the material

- Have clear objectives & goals for the student
- Design instructional activities that are intentional & clearly focused on developing a particular set of skills/knowledge
- Have a plan for how instructional strategies and activities will build students' skills & knowledge and will support students' in-school learning
- Connect skills & knowledge that student is currently learning to students' longer-term academic and professional goals
- Structure intervention to best suit students' needs (e.g., would 1:1 tutoring be more helpful than small group work?)
- Design instruction that engages students (e.g., builds on students' individual interests; provides opportunities for hands-on application of skills; explores content in greater depth)

- Hire teachers that have appropriate content knowledge to meet students' needs
- Provide training on effective instructional strategies and activities

- Work closely with expert professional teachers to design & implement interventions
- Match students with teachers with whom they can develop a relationship over a long period of time
- Evaluate the effectiveness of teachers in the program

References:

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