

Increasing Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Learning (SEBL) in Student Intervention Models

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Statement of the Problem

Organizational and procedural changes are realities schools have dealt with to maintain student progress and accountability to the public (Beycioglu & Kondakci, 2014). While the outcomes of organizational change can rest with the leadership of a school, it is also affected by the specific processes schools use for improvement, such as Response to Intervention (Sansosti & Noltemeyer, 2008). Instead of relying on top-down reform alone to improve student outcomes, stronger relationships *and* developed skillsets by educators are needed. Although poor academic achievement can contribute to negative effects for a student long term, such as poverty, those who are low functioning in social and emotional skills can have an increase in public health problems (Jones, Greenberg, & Crowley, 2015). Current studies are exploring how social and emotional behaviors affect performance across different areas of the learner in addition to those focused solely on academic achievement (Jones et al., 2015). Denton Independent School District (DISD) is exploring such an inclusive mindset to the revamping of its approach to students who need interventions.

The former intervention label that was used to monitor student progress in DISD was Response to Intervention (RTI). In the 2016-2017 school year, DISD began the process of moving from a Response to Intervention model to a Multi-Tiered System of Supports model. A central reason for the change in models was to better universalize practices in intervention including the screener process and instructional practices. During the initial phase of the process, DISD gathered data in conjunction with Hanover Research, which surveyed educators about the intervention process. The information provided by the survey allowed members involved in the initial phases of the planning process a better understanding of how teachers and administrators used and viewed the current model.

Four central groups/committees were identified to evaluate current practices: leadership, elementary curriculum specialists, secondary curriculum specialists, and a social, emotional, behavioral group. Although academic and behavioral components existed in current practices of Response to Intervention in DISD, they may not have existed in a balanced manner. For example, DISD followed an intervention model that promoted an equitable focus on academics and behavior. However, due to the lack of professional development that was needed to help teachers understand how to ensure a focus on both academics and behavior, the intervention model was not successfully implemented. Therefore, with the move to a Multi-Tiered System of Supports, evaluation of the current systems and process in DISD was necessary to ensure effective integration.

Each committee was charged with not only evaluating current practices, but also gathering evidence of these practices for the purpose of universalizing the practices. The social, emotional, and behavioral committee set out to respond to the following questions, due to their background being in the area that was a needed focus:

1. How would an increased emphasis on behavioral learning with students increase their academic progress?
2. How can we provide increased professional development for staff in the area of social, emotional, and behavioral learning?
3. How can a behavioral universal screener be implemented district wide?

Perspectives

Because this is the first year of collecting data, the current RTI process needs to focus on both academic and behavioral components for each child. Hence, preliminary data has been collected and includes an outline of the initial phases toward the move to increase social, emotional, and behavioral learning across campuses in a more balanced manner. The purpose of researching the effects of increased social, emotional, and behavioral learning will address two areas of focus: a decrease in conduct problems and an increase in academic performance. Because of the varied ways RTI can be implemented, the Hanover research suggests educators tend to focus more on the academic interventions, but may not remember that RTI can also help support the social, emotional, and behavioral side (Response to Intervention Survey Analysis: Prepared for Denton Independent School District, 2017). This is evident through the responses by staff members in the Hanover survey. Therefore, DISD has proceeded to implement an RTI process that includes a greater investment in the social, emotional, and behavioral learning of a student.

In order to accomplish this, universal screening for academic monitoring is a must and is seen as an important first step toward improving the RTI process. For DISD's purposes, universal screening is defined by a systematic assessment aligned to curriculum and instruction (Ikeda & Neesen, 2003). If a universal screener is strictly used to gather data, but not respond to the data, it is essentially worthless (Ikeda & Neesen, 2003). A universal screen for the social, emotional, and behavioral component has not yet existed in Denton ISD. Different campuses at both the elementary and secondary level are investigating universal screeners during the 2017-2018 school year. The beginning research will be informative for years to come and may turn into a longitudinal study.

The successful integration between cognitive and non-cognitive skills is easiest seen in the academic setting (Jones et al., 2015). Although intellectual ability is a driver for academic achievement, social and emotional skills, such as self-regulation are predictors of academic achievement (Jones et al., 2015; Dusenbury & Weissberg, 2017). This is a major reason why DISD is seeking information, through this study, to find the best way to implement a balanced RTI process.

Methods and Procedures

A basic quantitative method was and will continue to be used to gather and analyze data. The formed committees in spring 2017 Denton ISD used their knowledge

of current practices and data from the Hanover survey to better understand the state of the district. The included number of respondents of Denton ISD staff was 1,279. Respondents were only included if they completed the survey and indicated they were familiar with the Response to Intervention process at their school. The majority (53%) of the respondents were general education classroom teachers. The second largest responding group was special education teachers at 10%, coming from mostly elementary K-5 campuses. This is an ongoing study, therefore, this survey data will be collected annually.

Although many different social, emotional, and behavioral screeners can be used in the academic setting, the piloting campus chose to use the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA). The assessment will be implemented as a pre and post assessment at the beginning and end of year, similarly aligned to suggested implementation methods of the screener. In addition to the screener, social, emotional, and behavioral learning curriculum will be reviewed with students and teachers alike to establish common language and understanding of the goals for the piloting campus.

Results, Conclusions, and Potential implications

Over half of the respondents indicated high familiarity in their school's RTI process; however, familiarity was not consistent across all grade levels. Those involved at elementary campuses were more familiar with the school's RTI process than at the middle school or high school level. Although familiarity was a central theme in the results, the respondents do not believe guidelines are clear in the process; specifically, documenting student progress. Additionally, based on the Hanover data, respondents are more likely to know how to implement academic rather than behavioral interventions (Response to Intervention Survey Analysis: Prepared for Denton Independent School District, 2017).

Currently, clear documentation guidelines are being established by the curriculum committees for moving students through the RTI process, which includes tiers, in response to the survey results. Further, explanations are now defined at the elementary level for the universal, supplemental, and individual tiers. Moreover, consistency between the use of academic universal screeners is ongoing and will continue to be developed in future years. For example, while an Early Literacy Inventory or Developmental Reading Assessment may be used at the elementary level, a Scholastic Reading Inventory or English I scores may be used at middle and high levels.

In keeping with the need for consistent implementation between curriculum components across all grade levels, the social, emotional, and behavioral committees continue to explore the use of a universal behavioral screener. For this reason, the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment is being piloted at one elementary school in DISD with plans to expand the pilot to secondary campuses. In addition to screener data, curriculum developed by the DISD counseling department will be used to establish clear understandings of social, emotional, and behavioral learning with students and staff members.

Educational Importance of the Study

The importance of understanding the impacts and the effects of Response to Intervention (RTI) is needed, so that school leadership can implement proper professional development. Staff members feel least confident understanding the supplemental and individual tiers of behavioral support for students as indicated by the Hanover results (Response to Intervention Survey

Analysis: Prepared for Denton Independent School District, 2017). A consideration by the social, emotional, and behavioral committee is to incorporate more professional development towards behavioral learning across the district.

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