Future Focused: An Intervention Plan for Raising College and Career Readiness in a Rural Middle School Setting

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Madison County Middle School's College and Career Readiness Performance Index (CCRPI) has dropped significantly from 81.9 in 2019 to 64.4 in 2024, indicating a concerning decline in how well students are being prepared for their future career journeys. The CCRPI measures critical areas like content mastery, student progress, readiness indicators, and the closing of achievement gaps, and these factors all contribute to students' future success. A score this low suggests that students may not be mastering essential academic skills, developing at expected growth level, or engaging in readiness activities that prepare them for post-secondary pathways. Not only does this decline impact individual student opportunities, but it also reflects broader school-wide challenges that require immediate attention.

Focusing on the readiness category specifically, the school saw a 7% decrease, declining from 83 to 77 from the 2019 to 2024 school year. This decline in readiness is especially important because it signifies students' preparedness for life after graduation, including participation in college and career exploration, attendance, and engagement in relevant coursework. To reverse this trend and better support student futures, I plan to implement a targeted counseling intervention to improve college and career readiness across grades 6-8. In addition to having the potential to help raise the overall CCRPI score, improving readiness will also better equip students to navigate future challenges and career opportunities. My intervention will focus on strengthening the middle school's college and career readiness program and support, addressing potential gaps in the current program, and fostering a culture that prioritizes career exploration and future planning for students.

Evidence-based Foundation

Research has consistently shown that middle school is a critical period for developing the foundational skills necessary for future academic and career success. According to a report by

the American College Test (ACT, 2008), students who fail to meet essential benchmarks in reading and mathematics by the end of eighth grade are at a significantly higher risk of falling behind in high school. The research also found that academic achievement in eighth grade is one of the strongest predictors of college and career readiness, underscoring the importance of early intervention. As a result, ACT researchers strongly advocate for the implementation of targeted, evidence-based programs in middle schools to build students' readiness in core academic areas and future planning skills. By targeting readiness at MCMS, I can help support students in developing skills, knowledge, and experiences they need to successfully transition into high school and beyond.

While I cannot move forward with a specific intervention program before first conferring with my counseling team, I do know that my program will need to address college and career readiness through developing students' future planning skills, increasing their exposure to postsecondary and career options, and providing opportunities for goal setting and decision-making. An evidence-based framework I could potentially use is the Career Readiness Metrics Framework developed by Advance CTE. The Career Readiness Metrics Framework provides a comprehensive set of indicators to assess and enhance career readiness across educational stages, including middle school. These indicators are categorized into seven key areas: access and equity, education accumulation, skill development, work-based learning, transition readiness, learner agency and belonging, and post-program outcomes (Advance CTE & Education Strategy Group, 2021). For middle school students, the framework emphasizes the development of foundational skills, career exposure, transitional readiness, and experiences that lay the groundwork for future career success (Advance CTE & Education Strategy Group, 2021).

To align with the evidence-based Career Readiness Metrics Framework, possible interventions could focus on several key areas highlighted in the framework's indicators. For example, hosting a career-day event would directly support career exposure and skill development by connecting students with professionals across various industries, allowing them to explore diverse career pathways firsthand. Similarly, organizing career-related field trips or virtual tours would provide experiential learning opportunities that promote work-based learning and deepen students' understanding of different fields and work environments. Incorporating career exploration small groups could foster non-cognitive skill development as students also explore their interests, identify their strengths, and set personal goals. Implementing career inventory assessments paired with targeted classroom lessons on career exploration would serve to increase students' self-awareness and decision-making skills, supporting the transition readiness domain by equipping them with knowledge and tools to plan their academic and career pathways. Transcript and schedule breakdowns could also be a critical intervention that aligns with the education accumulation indicator. This approach helps students understand how their course selections and credits impact their future goals, enabling informed decision-making about their academic trajectories and ensuring alignment with college and career objectives.

Research Design

With the research design question of, "What impact does a structured college and career readiness intervention have on middle school students' future planning skills and career exploration compared to students who do not receive the intervention?" I seek to evaluate the effectiveness of a targeted, multi-tiered counseling approach in improving students' preparedness for postsecondary pathways. The ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors that the intervention will

address are, “M.6- Understanding that postsecondary education and lifelong learning are necessary for long-term success” and “B-LS 7.- Long- and short-term academic, career and social/emotional goals.” By aligning the intervention with these ASCA standards, the students will gain awareness of future opportunities, develop planning skills, and be motivated to pursue meaningful academic and career goals.

MCMS is separated into two “houses,” and students are sorted into their house during their sixth grade year. I will only be working with one house, so my intervention will automatically have a control group to compare its effectiveness against. Moreover, this makes my general programming, such as classroom lessons, career day, and career assessments, a tier-1 intervention. My small group counseling intervention will be a tier-2 intervention, which I plan to consult with my counseling supervisor to decide the parameters of who should be included. However, I do hope to prioritize underrepresented student populations in my small groups to ensure a variety of MCMS’ students are receiving college and career guidance.

To ensure the intervention produces meaningful and measurable outcomes, it is structured around immediate, proximal, and distal goals that address students' development over time. The immediate goal is to increase students’ awareness of postsecondary and career options. My proximal goal is for students to develop non-cognitive skills such as the ability to set short and long-term goals and to make informed decisions that align with their personal strengths and future aspirations. The distal goal is to contribute to long-term school improvement by increasing MCMS’s College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) score as it will reflect progress in college and career readiness among students. To measure my intervention’s effectiveness, I plan to give a pre- and post-test to all of the school’s students to measure their growth in career knowledge, future planning skills, and overall readiness for high school and beyond. By

analyzing the results across both houses, I can identify strengths and areas for improvement in the intervention, while also gathering evidence to support its potential for broader implementation across the school.

References

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