

Minnesota Principals Academy – Action Learning Project

Name: Amanda Holstrom

Building Success: The Impact of Structured Study Halls on At-Risk Freshmen

Abstract

Providing time to work is not enough to create long-term academic success for at-risk 9th-grade students. To support at risk freshman, educators must provide intentional mentoring, coaching and support to develop essential skills for academic success. This session looks at changes made in classroom instruction and study sessions-to ensure that students connect these study strategies directly to their coursework. Additionally, we will discuss the importance of positive relationships between students, peer leaders and educators, fostering an environment where at-risk learners feel supported, motivated, and equipped for long-term success.

Vision

The TYL (Team Year Long) program, students had access to dedicated, structured time for students to receive academic support and stay on top of their assignments (Seminar). Originally Seminar occurred once a week, giving students a consistent opportunity to seek assistance from core (Math, Science, English) teachers, receive content-specific coaching, and work toward assignment completion.

As the program evolved, TYL expanded to two additional sessions per week—Tuesdays and Thursdays—allowing greater access to academic support. Students were able to connect with all of their teachers, receive both targeted instructional help and extension activities based on their academic interests, and benefit from the consistent academic structure.

This school year, the Seminar periods now include support from senior student mentors who work alongside 9th grade students. These mentors help model effective academic behaviors, clarify assignments, assist with organization, and encourage motivation and follow-through, further enriching the support environment and fostering a culture of peer leadership and collaboration.

Background and context

Our school currently has a 9th grade at risk program Team Year Long (TYL) to support struggling learners. We currently have 3 teachers that have redesigned the typical block schedule for this subset of students to accommodate 3 core courses into two blocks that have been spread out to cover the same core content as their peers over the entire year versus a semester course. We are looking for the most impactful approach to coach the students during their built in Seminar and Sabre Time classes to improve their overall study skills, academic performance while supporting their metacognitive growth.

Rationale for program/change

We observed that many students were becoming overwhelmed by their academic workload and lacked the independent study skills necessary to succeed in future classes. While some students experienced short-term success within the structure of the TYL program, they often struggled to

apply those skills independently in their other courses. This gap in skill transfer highlighted a need for more intentional development of time management, organization, and self-directed learning strategies.

The inability to build and sustain these skills not only impacted students' immediate academic performance but also had long-term consequences, including falling off track for graduation. Patterns emerged that connected these struggles with an increase in credit-deficient seniors, many of whom had previously participated in academic support programs without lasting impact. In response, we expanded the TYL program to include additional study time and peer mentorship, providing consistent support while reinforcing transferable academic behaviors that are critical for long-term success.

What we did

To better support the academic and developmental needs of 9th grade students, the TYL (Team Year Long) program has expanded to include additional structured study time and peer mentorship. Many freshmen face challenges with organization, time management, and completing assignments as they transition into high school. By increasing the frequency of TYL sessions, students now have more opportunities each week to receive content-specific help from teachers, complete coursework, and build critical academic habits in a supportive environment.

To further strengthen this support, senior mentors have been integrated into Seminar periods to work alongside 9th graders. These mentors provide peer guidance by modeling effective study strategies, clarifying assignments, and offering encouragement. This mentorship fosters a stronger sense of connection, accountability, and motivation among freshmen, while also promoting leadership and responsibility in upperclassmen. These enhancements are designed to create a more structured, collaborative learning culture that helps all students succeed.

What we found out

While providing additional time for study and support is valuable, more time alone does not automatically lead to improved studying or organization. Students who paired this structured time with the active use of skills and tools taught in class—such as planning, prioritizing, and self-monitoring—were more likely to experience meaningful and lasting academic success. In contrast, students who remained dependent on peer tutors or instructors to drive their learning often saw only short-term gains and may continue to need targeted interventions to build the independence necessary for sustained progress in future coursework. Moving forward, it will be essential to continue monitoring long-term outcomes such as class pass rates, MCA assessment performance, and overall graduation rates to evaluate the effectiveness of these supports and guide ongoing improvements to the program.

Implications

Although adding these supports into the existing programming has shown positive short-term results, the implications suggest that continued support may be necessary as students progress into more rigorous future courses. While current data reflects improvement in engagement, assignment completion, and academic confidence, it offers only a limited snapshot of students' overall standing. This partial view highlights the need for ongoing monitoring and intervention to ensure these gains are sustained over time. To fully understand the long-term impact, academic performance, skill development, and progress toward graduation must be continuously tracked throughout the remainder of this cohort's high school experience.