

THE IMPACT OF AN EARLY WARNING SYSTEM SUPPORT STRUCTURE FOR AT-RISK NINTH GRADE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

by

TREVOR METZGER

(Under the Direction of Jami Royal Berry)

ABSTRACT

This study utilized a team approach to develop a student support structure for at-risk ninth grade students with disabilities at one high school in a suburb of a large city in the southeastern United States. This research was guided by three research questions:

1. How does the action research team describe the process of designing and implementing an early warning system support structure for at-risk ninth grade SWD?
2. How can school leaders support the process of designing and implementing an early warning system support structure for at-risk ninth grade SWD?
3. How do teachers describe the impact of an early warning system support structure for at-risk ninth grade SWD?

The research team built this support system under the Core Theory of Success framework. The foundation of this support system was relationships. Identified targeted areas in need of support indicated clearly defined tier-one, tier-two, or tier-three interventions. The action research team quickly determined that supporting student attendance typically required additional supports in behavior, course completion, or social-emotional needs.

This six month case study involved two research cycles. The first cycle involved developing interventions for the identified support areas. The second cycle involved implementing the identified interventions. This study was informed by both qualitative and quantitative methods with the emergence of three themes for each research question.

The researcher noted the prevalence of the findings and recognized the limitations of the study, primarily the impacts of the COVID-19 global pandemic and the various levels of impact this had on the implementation of and outcomes of the study.

Keywords: tiered-interventions, absenteeism, system of supports, students with disabilities

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TREVOR METZGER

BA, Maryville College, 2006

MS, Walden University, 2012

Ed. S., Kennesaw State University, 2014

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial
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TREVOR METZGER

Major Professor:	Jami Royal Berry
Committee:	Karen Bryant
	Jamon H. Flowers

Electronic Version Approved:

Ron Walcott
Vice Provost for Graduate Education and Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
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DEDICATION

I begin by thanking my wife and my rock, Whitney. Thank you for supporting me on this journey. I promise that I will not pursue other degrees!

To Katie Grace, Riley, Zach, and Anna Lauren, I want this to serve as motivation for you to go out and achieve your dreams. This was my professional dream and I did not let anything interfere with the finish line. Set your goals high and do not stop until you have exerted everything you have. Never Quit! I will support you 100% of the way!

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CHAPTER 1

THE IMPACT OF AN EARLY WARNING SYSTEM SUPPORT STRUCTURE FOR AT-RISK NINTH GRADE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this action research study was to develop an early warning system to provide support to at-risk ninth grade students with disabilities (SWD) in the areas of attendance, behavior, course completion, and social-emotional learning.

Research Questions

To address the purpose of this study, the following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. How does the action research team describe the process of designing and implementing an early warning system support structure for at-risk ninth grade SWD?
2. How can school leaders support the process of designing and implementing an early warning system support structure for at-risk ninth grade SWD?
3. How do teachers describe the impact of an early warning system support structure for at-Risk ninth grade SWD?

The Problem

Since the 2016-2017 school year, more than 60% of SWD at Richardson High School (RHS) missed more than six school days per year. Three factors that had an impact on attendance were behavior, lack of appropriate social-emotional skills, and interrupted or incomplete courses. This study highlights the importance of using a system of supports for at-risk ninth grade SWD at RHS.

Problem Framing in the Context

This action research study addressed an attendance problem at RHS. An analysis of the data revealed that SWD missed at least six days of school at an alarming rate. During the 2016-2017 school year, 65% missed more than six days, 69% during the 2017-2018 school year, 61% during the 2018-2019 school year. These data, as displayed in the following tables, overshadowed the attendance rate as compared to all students in RHS, all SWD students in RCS, all SWD students in the state of Georgia, and all SWD students in similar high achieving schools.

Table 1.1

Attendance percentage for all students at RHS during the 2016-2017, 2017-2018, and 2018-2019 school year.

RHS Student Attendance	6-10 Days	>10 Days	Total
2016-2017	26.6%	32.6%	59.2%
2017-2018	25.7%	32.7%	58.4%
2018-2019	25.6%	29.4%	55%

An analysis of the SWD attendance rate for all students in our school district revealed even a greater discrepancy when just compared to students at RHS.

Table 1.2

Attendance percentage for all SWD students in RCS during the 2016-2017, 2017-2018, and 2018-2019 school years

RCS SWD Student Attendance	6-10 Days	>10 Days	Total
2016-2017	26%	21%	47%
2017-2018	27%	26%	53%
2018-2019	26%	26%	52%

When comparing the SWD attendance rate of RHS to the SWD attendance rate of all students in Georgia there continued to be a discrepancy. However, the gap was not as large when compared to SWD students in RCS.

Table 1.3

Attendance percentage for all SWD students in Georgia during the 2016-2017, 2017-2018, and 2018-2019 school years

Georgia SWD Student Attendance	6-10 Days	>10 Days	Total
2016-2017	39.16%	17.69%	56.85%
2017-2018	39.66%	18.54%	58.2%
2018-2019	39.23%	18.74%	57.97%

In addition to the comparisons with the school, school system, and state, this study compared RCS to other high schools in the state with very similar academic achievement.

Table 1.4

Attendance percentage for RHS SWD and similar high performing high school SWD subgroup

SWD Student Attendance (>6 days)	RHS	HS #1	HS #2	HS #3	HS #4
2016-2017	65.6%	45.3%	33.6%	37.7%	38.7%
2017-2018	69.7%	44.8%	40.3%	50%	47.5%
2018-2019	61.1%	43.5%	41.4%	44.7%	47.6%

Problem Framing in the Literature

Chronic Absenteeism

The United States Department of Education (2016) released a study that found 16% of the student population missed 15 or more school days during the 2015-2016 school year. Under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), signed into law December 2015, states were given the flexibility to design and implement their own accountability systems and define

chronic absenteeism (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). In addition to reporting academic achievement and graduation rates, the ESSA now requires states to include chronic absenteeism data in their school report cards (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The accountability system for Georgia schools, College and Career Ready Performance Indicator (CCRPI), reports attendance as the percentage of students absent less than 10% of enrolled days. Using the state defined formula, this percentage is one important factor that is used in the overall ranking of Georgia school systems. Accurate attendance data allows schools and districts to assess the needs of its students and to provide appropriate interventions (Chang & Romero, 2008).

Absenteeism

Student attendance and engagement have both academic and social-emotional roots. Students in today's classrooms require a wide range of services that address the needs of the "whole child". Gottfried and Gee (2017) found that children who displayed greater frequencies of approaches to learning (or who expressed liking school) were less likely to be chronically absent. While this may seem obvious, it reiterates the importance of removing barriers that negatively impact a student's ability to connect, engage, and establish a firm foundation in school.

Absenteeism is a strong indicator of diminished social and life success (Demir & Akman Karabeyoglu, 2016). Furthermore, it has also been established that absenteeism causes students to feel a greater sense of alienation from their classmates, teachers, and schools and may have larger frequencies of negative interactions and social disengagement when returning to school (Gottfried, 2019). As absenteeism increases, students are inclined to experience psychological problems such as depression or behavioral disorders. They may also exhibit behavioral patterns such as becoming involved in violence inside and outside of the school, teenage pregnancy,

quitting school and acquiring harmful habits (Gottfried, 2009; Demir & Akman Karabeyoglu, 2016).

Research and experience show chronic absence can be reduced when schools, communities, and families work together to build a culture of attendance and remove barriers to school attendance (Chang & Romero, 2008).

Student Achievement

The educational system is founded on the assumption that students will attend school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Demir & Akman Karabeyoglu, 2016). It has been established that greater numbers of school absences are linked to a range of negative schooling outcomes (Gottfried, 2019) such as falling behind, having lower grades and test scores, having behavioral issues, and, ultimately, dropping out (U.S. Department of Education 2016; Gottfried and Ehrlich 2018). Chronically absent students also produce a congestion effect on the public good by frequently slowing instruction and reducing the educational outcomes for others in the class when actually present in the classroom (Gottfried, 2019). Balfanz & Byrnes (2012) determined that chronic absenteeism is a better predictor of school dropout compared to grades and test scores. A 2016 presentation by the Georgia Department of Education found that 9th graders who missed 15 or more days of school had a 30.73% chance of graduating in four years (Georgia Department of Education, 2016).

A growing research body indicates that high rates of absenteeism (and its consequences) emerge as early as pre-kindergarten (Connolly & Olsen, 2012). Chang and Romero (2008) point toward the importance of identifying chronic early absence or students missing an extended period of school when both excused and unexcused absences are taken into account. Students with high absenteeism in elementary school are at greater risk of later school absenteeism, lower

academic achievement, grade retention, eventual dropout, as well as disengagement and poorer socioemotional functioning in and out of the classroom (Simon, Nylund-Gibson, Gottfried, & Mireles-Rios, 2020). Additionally, London, Sanchez, & Castrechini (2016) found that chronic absenteeism in multiple years is more harmful than in only one year as supported by lower achievement test scores.

Factors Impacting Attendance

Chang, Bauer, & Byrnes (2018) group root causes of chronic absenteeism in four categories: barriers, negative school experiences, lack of engagement, and misconceptions. Students from families with fewer resources tend to have parents with higher rates of depression and mobility, both of which have been directly linked to absenteeism (Chang & Romero, 2008; Gottfried, 2019). School-level factors such as teacher–pupil relations, availability of health personnel, and program interventions are also highlighted as critical (Marvul, 2012). Furthermore, negative school experiences including struggling socially, suspensions, lack of accommodations for disabilities, and negative parental attitudes towards school- and lack of engagement- including a lack of meaningful relationships or culturally relevant or engaging instruction and unwelcome school climate are impactful, but more influential in later schooling when students have greater autonomy over choosing to attend school (Chang, Bauer, & Byrnes, 2018). Finally, schools serving students with disabilities are more likely to have high chronic absenteeism, as are schools with higher poverty levels (Chang, Bauer, & Byrnes, 2018).

Schools in which students perceive the school climate as positive, where their work is displayed and expectations are high, have lower levels of absenteeism (Gottfried and Gee, 2017)

Social Emotional Learning

Results from a 2013 study entitled “The Missing Piece” indicated that social and emotional learning (SEL) is the missing piece to boost outcomes and transform schools (Bridgeland, Bruce, Hariharan, Enterprises, & Hart, 2013; Housman, 2017). An estimated 5% to 26% of children demonstrate serious social, emotional, and behavioral learning challenges (Brauner & Stephens, 2006). Educational programs across the country are facing an epidemic of students lacking age-appropriate social-emotional skills which contributes to negative relationships with teachers and peers and academic achievement difficulties (Conroy, Sutherland, Algina, Werch, & Ladwig, 2018).

Students with poor social-emotional competence are at an increased risk for low academic achievement, emotional and behavioral problems, peer rejection, and school dropout (Denham, 2006). This lack of skills manifests itself into work refusal, explosive outbursts, physical aggression, and elopement. Experiencing limited behavioral and academic success negatively impacts a child’s perceived competence which has significant impacts on social and emotional development (Klaver, Palo, & DiLalla, 2014).

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (2012) has determined that the goals of SEL programs are to foster the development of five inter-related sets of cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. Numerous studies indicate that SEL programs are associated with positive results such as improved attitudes about self and others, lower levels of emotional distress, increased prosocial behaviors, and improved academic performance (Durlak, Dymnicki, Taylor, Weissberg, & Schellinger, 2011). Further studies indicate children who learn social-emotional skills early in life tend to be more self-confident,

trusting, empathic, and better capable of relating well to others (Cohen, Onunaku, Clothier, & Poppe, 2005).

Determining appropriate SEL programs to meet the needs of students and implementing with fidelity is a monumental task and critics offer many reasons why these programs have negative impacts on the health and well-being of students. Jones and Kahn (2017) identify a number of barriers that undermine efforts to bring comprehensive SEL programs to scale: implementation challenges, limited local buy-in, lack of financial and personnel resources, poor integration into educational practice, and low sustainability. Additionally, programs tend to be expensive, require significant training and ongoing support, and limit individual autonomy and choice (Bailey, Stickle, Brion-Meisels, & Jones, 2019). Kristjansson (2006) argues that SEL places an excess of emphasis on success and offers an insufficient understanding of ethics. Furthermore, Hoffman (2009) believes that SEL is ideologically manipulative and instrumentalist because of its palpable desire to create better and more cheerful citizens.

Today's schools place a strong emphasis on developing programs and using curriculum that address the whole child. There has been a significant increase in the number of schools implementing SEL programs. This growth is supported by research indicating that high-quality SEL programs can improve students' academic, mental health, and behavioral outcomes (Bailey et al., 2019).

School, Parent, and Community Partnerships

Research indicates that when a collective group of school, family, and community stakeholders work together, achievement gaps decrease (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Bryan & Henry, 2011). Furthermore, Chang & Romero (2008) stated, "Chronic absence decreases when schools and communities actively communicate consistently to all students and their parents, and

reach out to families when their children begin to show patterns of excessive absence” (p. 4). The more closely parents are connected to the school; the more they set high expectations, attend school events and parent teacher conferences, and have an open line of communication with teachers and school officials— the more likely their child is to develop good attendance patterns (Sheldon, 2007).

Perhaps the most popular typology of partnerships is Epstein’s (1995) six types of partnership involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. Partners collaborate in planning, coordinating, and implementing programs and activities at home, at school, and in the community that build strengths and resilience in children to enhance their academic, personal, social, and college-career outcomes (Epstein, 1995; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Bryan & Henry, 2011). Partnership programs can also create the environments, relationships, and experiences that reduce risks, build social capital, increase academic achievement and attendance, decrease behavioral issues, enhance school climate, foster resilience, and create developmental assets for children and adolescents (Bryan & Henry, 2011).

Theoretical Framework

This study utilized a framework that focused on the importance of relationships when developing structures and supports that yield high-quality results. The Core Theory of Success model was developed in order to bring relief to organizational problems in corporate fields as managers confronted new challenges and increased performance expectations (Kim, 2018). Schools are under immense pressure to establish and maintain high academic achievement results as the needs of students increase. This theory is transferable to the academic setting because it is a continuous improvement cycle with a foundation that is grounded in relationships.

The structure and guiding questions developed using this theory and utilized to drive this action research study were:

Relationships: How do we build relationships and make school be a place of value?

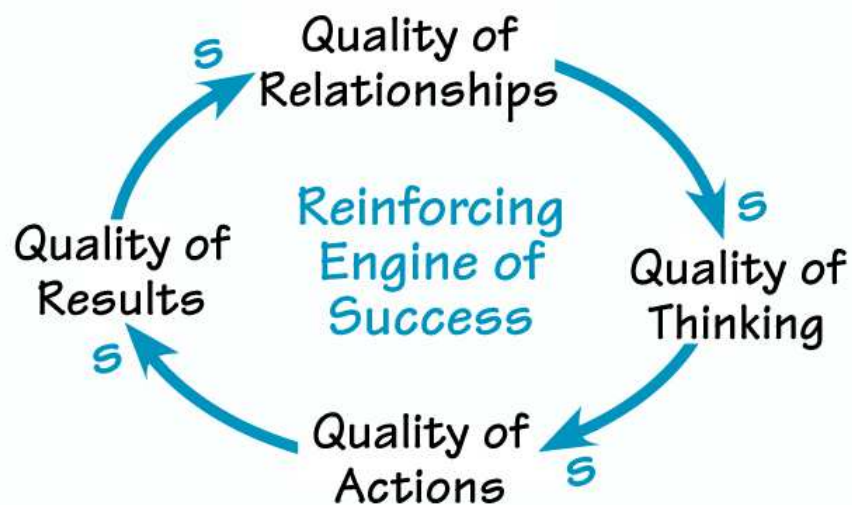
Thinking: Why is it important for kids to be in school?

Actions: What reinforcing behaviors are necessary to improve attendance?

Results: Did attendance improve?

Figure 1.1

Core Theory of Success



Conceptual Framework

The action research and implementation teams developed and applied a change model using a four-step process. Understanding “why” change was necessary was the first step of the plan-do-check-act cycle. Implementing interventions and determining necessary supports were the next focus areas of the change cycle. Reviewing reports and evaluations allowed the teams to

measure the impact of the intervention. Reflecting on results and determining ways to improve was the fourth step in the cycle.

Figure 1.2

Plan-Do-Check-Act Cycle



Overview of the Methodology

This study involved the work of an action research team and design team. The action research team consisted of a special education coordinator, student support services coordinator, assistant principal, and lead special education teacher from RHS. The action research implementation team consisted of a special education coordinator, three school counselors, assistant principal, ninth grade special education teachers from RHS, system 504 coordinator, MTSS coordinator, and data collection coordinator. This study utilized a collaborative problem solving approach between teachers, counselors, administrators, and families to address student

attendance, behavior, course completion, and/or social-emotional learning needs through a tiered intervention model. Richardson High School refers to these needs as the “ABCS”.

Intervention

This action research study consisted of two cycles. The action research and implementation teams received professional development to properly identify and document identified “ABCS” needs. Each action research cycle involved a critical review of data for attendance trends and patterns related to discipline, social and emotional needs, course completion. A Google Doc was developed to provide teachers at RHS a simple way to communicate “ABCS” concerns. The framework for each cycle was developed by the design team. The first action research cycle involved an initial review of “ABCS” data for SWD. The action research team was able to specifically identify targeted needs that could be supported through the collaborative problem solving model. Tiered-interventions were developed to support behavior, course completion, attendance, and social-emotional needs through a collaborative problem solving model. Once the intervention was implemented, the action research team reviewed data and met with the implementation team regularly to determine if student absences decreased, behavior improved, and/or students were on track to complete courses.

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter 1 provides an overview of this dissertation and gives an overview of the research questions, the problem of practice, and methods for the study. Chapter 2 details a review of the related literature for the study with a focus on school and parent partnerships. Chapter 3 describes the research design and methodology of this work. Chapter 4 provides a description of the case and its context. Chapter 5 details the findings of each action research cycle as related to

the research questions of this study. Chapter 6 provides a summary of the major findings and provides implications of the research for practitioners, researchers, and policy makers.

CHAPTER 2

The Impact of School and Family Partnerships on Student Success

More than 60% of Students with Disabilities (SWD) at Richardson High School (RHS) have missed more than six school days a year since the 2018-2019 school year. Factors that have had a negative impact on attendance were student discipline, inadequate social/emotional skills, and incomplete or failed courses. The purpose of this review is to evaluate the literature behind school and family partnerships, SWD discipline, social-emotional learning, course completion, dropout prevention, and collaborative problem-solving teams to improve student attendance.

Review of Literature

School and Family Partnerships

When a collective group of school, family, and community stakeholders work together, achievement gaps decrease (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Bryan & Henry, 2011). Bryan & Henry (2011) suggest that the very essence of school, family, and community partnerships is the shared responsibility between the home, school, and community of working collaboratively to address students' needs and concerns. The closer parents are connected to the school; the more they set high expectations, attend school events and parent teacher conferences, and have an open line of communication with teachers and school officials— the more likely their child is to develop good attendance patterns (Sheldon, 2007). Furthermore, Chang & Romero (2008) stated, “Chronic absence decreases when schools and communities actively communicate consistently to all students and their parents, and reach out to families when their children begin to show patterns of excessive absence.” (p. 4)

Fitzgerald (2004) stated, “To establish partnerships with families connections need to be made, information exchanged, and links developed in a way that values and respects the

contributions of the children, their family, and the setting” (p. 7). Cavanagh and Romanoski (2005) suggest that commitment and responsibility for the child’s learning should be shared between parents, teachers and the child in a framework of trust, respect and agreement. Coleman (2013) provided three very important “reality checks” as teachers create a family involvement philosophy. First, teachers must be proactive in reaching out to parents. Next, teachers need to give up their own family values in order to respect the family values of others. Finally, teachers must look for family strengths rather than challenges (p. 29).

Perhaps the most popular typology of partnerships is Epstein’s (1995) six types of partnership involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. Partners collaborate in planning, coordinating, and implementing programs and activities at home, at school, and in the community that build strengths and resilience in children to enhance their academic, personal, social, and college-career outcomes (Epstein, 1995; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Bryan & Henry, 2011). Partnership programs can also create the environments, relationships, and experiences that reduce risks, build social capital, increase academic achievement and attendance, decrease behavioral issues, enhance school climate, foster resilience, and create developmental assets for children and adolescents (Bryan & Henry, 2011).

Epstein (2018) uses an abundance of research to support the claim that teachers who feel more competent about their connection with parents are more likely to conduct partnership activities. She further elaborates on the importance of teaching teachers the importance of involving parents as partners and in order to develop meaningful relationships they have to understand family diversities, community resources, student experiences in and out of school,

and how to use all available resources to maximize student learning and success. Epstein (2018) stated the following:

Many schools who develop strong family partnerships have teams or committees consisting of parents, administrators, parents, and others who take on a leadership role in order to plan, implement, evaluate, and continually improve partnership activities that improve student attendance, reading, health, science, and other goals for student success.”

Friesen et al. (2020) detail the importance partnerships have on supporting children with a disability. The authors describe a process called “fund to knowledge” that helps teachers learn about family composition, beliefs, and practices which play important roles when developing parent partnerships. Bryan & Henry (2011) suggests that partnerships between schools and families have the ability to foster educational resilience and to increase access to a range of learning opportunities that develop both academic and nonacademic competencies.

School and Family Partnership Strategies

An abundance of research details effective supports and strategies that have improved family and school partnerships. The research of Christenson & Reschly (2010) and Yotodying et al. (2020) outline effective approaches to developing strong partnerships.

Christenson & Reschly (2010) outline a three-tiered Response to Intervention (RTI) approach. Tier 1 focuses on effective home and school communication which is believed to be the foundation when engaging parents. Tier 2 supports are more targeted to parental needs such as a lack of resources to support learning at home, inability to manage a child’s behavior at home, and inability to assist with student work at home. Finally, Tier 3 represents intensive, ongoing support. This includes personalized, regular contact which slowly develops a level of trust that over time will assist parents in their ability to believe they can make a difference.

Yotoding et al. (2020) proposed four standards that have positively impacted family and school partnerships in Germany. These standards include welcoming all families into the school community, communicating effectively, supporting student success, and speaking up for every child. Furthermore, the researchers developed an instrument that evaluated parental perceptions of these four standards. The results revealed that the highest rated quality features of family and school partnerships were a welcoming culture and various/respectful communication.

School and Family Partnership Challenges

There are many barriers that interfere with a teacher or school's ability to develop strong partnerships. Much of the literature tends to present a view of the relationship between teachers and families as being somewhat one sided, with much less emphasis on mutuality, reciprocity and shared decision making, and more on the teacher as the expert (Berthelsen & Walker, 2008; García Coll et al., 2012; Hadley, 2014; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker & Sandler, 2005). Conversely, other studies found that many families lack confidence in their own competence to successfully assist their children (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Ihmeidah & Oliemat, 2014; Martin, 2006).

An international study by Yotodying et al. (2020) found that a child's age, German language fluency, parental educational background, and cultural capital in the home were barriers to family and school partnerships. Yull et al. (2018) explains that traditionally parent involvement means attendance at school functions like conferences and/or volunteering and is based on a Eurocentric model involving behavioral practices of White middle-class parents. When parents of color do not participate in these events as measured by the traditional definition then they are considered as "not involved" or "disengaged." Dissecting the complexities of poverty and race is necessary in order to integrate culturally responsive practices that support the development of partnerships between schools and families.

In special education, Xu (2020) found that partnership challenges occur when parents do not agree with the support and structures that are already in place. She states that these parents are identified as “problematic” and those who get along with and agree with existing models are viewed as “good.” Furthermore, this research identified other barriers that impacted family partnerships such as parent perception, cultural expectations of education, and type of disability.

School Leaders Impact on School-Family Partnerships

Studies have suggested that school leaders are well-positioned to influence the general quality of school-family partnerships (Donaldson, 2006; Hands, 2012). Auerbach (2012) found that the actions and practices of school leaders can play a defining role in determining whether schools are welcoming and inviting places for families and whether necessary resources for establishing personal connections between individual family members and educators are available. Additionally, Epstein et al. (2018), found that when principals create a positive culture around school and family then parents are more prepared to be engaged and support student learning.

School leaders are responsible for the culture, climate, and temperature in their school building. Furthermore, school district leaders are responsible for ensuring school leaders have the necessary tools to support instruction and learning. In order to strengthen school and family partnerships, school leaders must model the expectations which will shape the attitudes practices of teachers toward family engagement (Hands, 2012). Addi-Racah and Ainhoren (2009) found that positive teacher attitudes about parent involvement were most likely to occur under school governance that empowers both teachers and families equally. The importance of school leaders making school-family partnerships a priority cannot be overlooked because it is the teacher, not

the leader, who is best positioned to have consistent interactions and maintain the closest relationships with families (Jung & Sheldon, 2020).

SWD and Discipline

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) outline procedural safeguards that require schools to examine behavioral infractions in light of each student's unique set of circumstances (Hurwitz, Cohen, & Perry, 2021). While these safeguards are in place to support and protect SWD, studies have found a high percentage of discipline occurring within the SWD subgroup. Fabelo et al. (2011) disseminated special education discipline data for seventh through 12th graders in Texas. They found that 74.6% of SWD received at least one suspension or expulsion between seventh and 12 grade. The scope of this study was expanded to include eligibility subgroups for SWD. Forty-eight percent of students with emotional disturbance who received a suspension or expulsion also had contact with the juvenile justice system, as compared with 24% of students with learning disabilities, 5.8% of students with other disabilities, and, importantly, 13.1% of students without disabilities (Fabelo et al., 2011). This study falls in line with a large body of research that found exclusionary school discipline reduces academic achievement, increases the risk for school dropout, exacerbates misbehavior, and places students at a high risk for involvement with the juvenile justice system (Hurwitz, Cohen, & Perry, 2021).

Discipline Disproportionality

Although federal law (IDEA, 2004) affords greater protections, limiting the circumstances under which students in special education programs can receive exclusionary disciplinary actions, students with a disability label are more than twice as likely to receive an out-of-school suspension (OSS) compared with students without a disability label (U.S.

Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). Some researchers have argued that the overuse of exclusionary discipline with SWD contributes to their overrepresentation in youth detention (Sullivan, Van Norman, & Klingbeil, 2014). In the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA, racial and ethnic disproportionate representation was designated one of the top three priorities by Congress (Albrecht et al., 2012). According to Section 618(d)(2)(b) of IDEA (2004), when a state determines that a local education agency (LEA) has significant racial or ethnic disproportionality in exclusionary discipline practices for students with disabilities, that LEA is mandated to apply 15% of its Part B funds on coordinated early intervention services supported by research. In addition, local policies, practices, and procedures are to be reviewed and a plan put in place to resolve the disproportionality (Green, Cohen, & Stormont, 2018).

Green, Cohen & Stormont (2018) identified four critical actions schools can take to reduce or prevent disproportionality: establish an equity team, create or reevaluate discipline policies, support use of schoolwide evidence-based methods for decision making, and use disaggregated data to monitor disproportionality. In 2017, the District of Columbia Public Schools implemented an effective, data-driven RTI process; early screening plan; and menu of evidence-based, trauma-focused interventions to reducing disproportionality in discipline referrals and special education (Williams et al., 2017). One of the most researched areas in supporting student discipline and disproportionality is Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports. A substantial body of literature supports the use of PBIS in promoting educationally significant academic, behavioral, and organizational outcomes and identifies SWPBIS as a highly scalable approach to school reform (Zakszeski, 2021).

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

“PBIS is a proactive approach to schoolwide discipline, usually applied at the student level, and designed for use by all adults within a school. Throughout research and implementation models, PBIS is interchangeable also identified as School-Wide Positive Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) or Positive Behavioral Supports (PBS). Research shows that use of schoolwide PBIS improves the likelihood that students will engage in behavior that is effective, efficient, relevant, functional, and socially appropriate” (Hill & Flores, 2014). Many times teachers respond with negative consequences to inappropriate behaviors, but, as Horner et al. (2002) found, this may work in the short term but there is a high likelihood that these behaviors will return in the long term. PBIS is a proactive approach to school discipline and is an effective intervention across all three tiers of instruction (Hill & Flores, 2014).

Tier One instruction involves teaching and learning that occurs within the general education classroom environment. It is expected that all students in a school benefit from Tier one instruction. At this level, PBIS includes the following: (a) defining and teaching positively stated behavior expectations, (b) providing feedback and acknowledgment for students who follow the behavior expectations, (c) establishing instructional responses to problem behavior, and (d) establishing efficient procedures for requesting assistance and professional development (Horner & Sugai, 2015). The Center on PBIS (2021) outlines the representative expectation for a school based team. The Tier one implementation team includes the following: school administrator(s), classroom teacher(s), student(s), and family(ies). The team members must have knowledge about student academic and behavior patterns, coaching expertise, and a clear understanding of how the school operates across grade levels and programs.

Tier Two (secondary) and Three (tertiary) interventions typically are more intense and used with students either in a small group or individualized environment. “Secondary prevention is designed for students who are not responding to tier one supports. Secondary prevention practices are conceptualized as intervention strategies made up of efficient behavior change strategies that are implemented in a similar manner across all students receiving the intervention” (Horner, Sugai, & Anderson, 2010). Tier two interventions require additional data collection to measure student response to an intervention. “Tertiary prevention supports are for students whose behavior has not responded (or is unlikely to respond) to the primary or secondary interventions in a school. Tertiary supports are individualized to the multiple and unique needs of each student” (Horner, Sugai, & Anderson, 2010). The intensity at which the intervention is required typically involves SWD or students who are in the special education referral process. Common examples of tier two interventions that are used to support SWD include Check and Connect or Check-In/Check-Out. At tier three, one of the main supports are Functional Behavioral Assessments.

Course Completion and Dropout Prevention

A review of the literature found minimal research on high school course completion, but a slightly stronger research interest was in dropout prevention programs for high school students. However, the research base significantly reduced when focused specifically on SWD. Wilkins and Huckabee (2014) identified over 500 academic journal articles reporting on dropout prevention strategies and found just 19 that either touched or focused exclusively on SWDs. Wilkins and Huckabee (2014) found that the most common interventions in this select body of literature involved increased mentoring, services, and support

“Most scholars agree that dropout is the culmination of a process of disengagement. Finn’s seminal model of school engagement contends that as students’ participation in and identification with school decreases over time, their risk for school dropout increases” (Sullivan and Sadeh, 2014). Scrutiny of successful dropout prevention programs suggests that four elements support students’ engagement in school: (a) experiencing academic success, (b) perceiving that adults in school care about them, (c) receiving support to manage immediate personal concerns, and (d) connecting what they do in school to important personal goals (McPartland, 1994; Eisenman, 2007).

Students with disabilities drop out of high school at a significantly higher rate than students without disabilities (Faircloth, Toldson & Lucio, 2014). Researchers have found that students with disabilities were more likely to have multiple dropout risk factors than their nondisabled peers, and that students at risk for dropout can be identified in elementary school through low achievement, retention, absenteeism, mobility, aggression, problem behaviors, and low socio-economic status (Hammond et al., 2007). In order to support SWD and reduce the dropout rate, Wilkins and Huckabee (2014) found that SWDs benefit from increased flexibility in educational contexts. In particular, they noted that SWDs were more likely to graduate from high school in states that provided increased flexibility in terms of graduation requirements, exemption from exit exams, and the option of obtaining a diploma based on individualized education plan (IEP). This finding also aligns with Dynarski et al. (2008) conclusion that schools need to personalize the learning environment and instructional process in order to reduce school dropout. They continued by noting that a high degree of personalization allows schools to focus intensively on why students are having difficulty and actively work to address the sources of difficulty.

Self-Determination and SWD

While the research base of school completion is minimal for SWD, the impact self-determination has on school completion for SWD is well documented. “According to self-determination theory, self-determined motivation includes intrinsic motivation (I do something because I enjoy it) and identified or integrated regulation (I do something because it will help me reach a personal goal)” (Eisenman, 2007). Vallerand, Fortier, and Guay (1997) found that students who indicated that their teachers, parents, and administrators acted in more supportive ways were more positive about their autonomy and competence and had higher levels of self-determined motivation. Furthermore, Hardre and Reeve (2003) found that having the motivational resources of perceived competence and self-determination directly influenced students’ intentions to stay in school, and these factors also influenced their academic performance.

Promoting self-determination through interventions and supports is recognized as best practice, particularly in secondary education and transition services (National Technical Assistance Center on Transition, 2017), because of the documented association between self-determination and in-school and post-school outcomes for students with disabilities (Shrogen et al., 2019). Skills associated with self-determination, including choice-making, decision making, problem solving, goal setting and attainment, planning, self-management, self-advocacy, self-awareness, and self-knowledge, enable students with disabilities to make purposeful major decisions and daily choices in their lives (Nota et al., 2007). A widely used self-determination theory in the disability field is Causal Agency Theory. This theory identifies three essential characteristics of self-determination: volitional actions, agentic actions, and action-control beliefs (Toste et al., 2021). Causal agents are people who have the skills, abilities, and supports

to set and work toward goals that they value in their lives, using critical executive processes and self-regulatory skills (Shogren et al., 2015). High self-determination abilities in students with disabilities have been found to predict more positive outcomes for students with disabilities in school and post-school (Shogren et al., 2020).

Another well-documented, research based theory is the Self-Determination Theory (SDT). According to SDT, a person develops internal motivation when environments are supportive of satisfying their psychological needs (Dean et al., 2021). SDT describes three psychological needs: autonomy (acting based on interests); competence (mastery of important self-identified tasks); and relatedness (interacting and being connected to others) (Ryan & Deci, 2000). When psychological needs are met, a person is more able to direct their actions (and therefore their life) in response to contextual demands (Dean et al., 2021).

Social-Emotional Learning

Social–Emotional Learning (SEL) programs are school based preventive interventions that aim to improve children’s social–emotional skills and behavioral development (Jones & Doolittle, 2017). In general, SEL programs aim to change student behaviors by supporting children in recognizing/managing emotions, setting and achieving goals, appreciating the perspectives of others, establishing and maintaining positive relationships, making good decisions, and handling interpersonal situations constructively (Elias et al., 1997). Participation in SEL programs can support young children to develop core skills of self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision making, and relationship skills (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2012). While there is an extensive research community for SEL and SWD, the primary focus of these studies is specific to individual disabilities and not the collective SWD subgroup. Additionally, there is limited research specific

to high school SWD. The primary research base is documented in elementary and middle school settings.

SWD and SEL

Studies often report poor social skills, low peer acceptance, higher feelings of loneliness, and lower self-perception among learning disabled students compared to their non-learning disabled peers (Sharabi and Margalit, 2011). “The challenges of students with LDs in the process of creating and maintaining social support are often a product of low social awareness and underdeveloped social skills and difficulties in keeping up in conversations with peers” (Idan and Margalit, 2014). Elias (2004) found that students with learning disabilities often have difficulty recognizing their own emotions. This was particularly true for emotions beyond happy, sad, and mad. In order for students to master content objectives and develop the social, emotional, and behavioral skills needed to maintain positive relations and work collaboratively with others, they must receive foundational behavioral instruction across multiple settings (Rivera and McKeithan, 2021).

In 2015, Espelage, Rose, and Polanin found that after three years of SEL instruction, SWD report card grades increased from a C to an average of B+. One possible reason for this is that as students are better able to control their feelings, thoughts, and actions, academic learning is optimized (Durlak et al., 2011). In addition to classroom performance, there has also been a higher percentage of SWD involved in some form of bullying. In a regional study of middle and high school youth (n = 21,646), students with disabilities were twice as likely to be identified as proactive (bully) and reactive (fighting) perpetrators and victims than students without disabilities (Rose, Espelage, & Monda-Amaya, 2009). Another finding from Espelage, Rose, and Polanin (2015) was a significant reduction in bullying perpetration among SWD.

Collaborative Problem-Solving

Collaborative Problem-Solving (CPS) is defined as “a process whereby two or more agents attempt to solve a problem by sharing the understanding and effort required to come to a solution and pooling their knowledge, skills and efforts to reach that solution” (OECD, 2015, p. 6). Separate from individual problem-solving, CPS requires a social component that requires communication, the exchange of ideas, shared identification of the problem, negotiated agreements, and relationship management (CITE). Reigeluth (1999) found that collaborative problem-solving fosters the development of critical thinking skills, encourages the exploration of content from multiple perspectives, and cultivates supportive, respectful relationships among learners (p. 246-247).

At ground level, the problem-solving cycle requires problem identifying and defining, strategy developing, knowledge organizing, mental resources allocating, progress checking, and adjustment testing. The CPS cycle is very similar to the overall problem-solving cycle, but it places great emphasis on the importance of collaboration. This process is broken up into three parts. First, a shared understanding of the problem must be shared and maintained. Next, the team must take appropriate actions to solve the problem. This includes identifying the activities that are needed to solve the problem and to follow the appropriate steps to reach a solution. Finally, team organization must be established and maintained by considering team member assets, understanding roles, and reflecting on the success of the team’s organization (Fiore et al., 2017, p. 14).

Conclusion and Further Research

Every school is different and there is no universal model or solution that ensures strong school and parent partnerships, successful social-emotional learning. As a leader of a school district that continuously evaluates ways to improve relationships between parents and teachers, I plan on using this research to further guide our conversations and begin communicating strategies in teacher trainings. However, there is a large research gap in the area of course completion for high school SWD. I hope to contribute to this research field and use the documented research findings to further investigate successful strategies for family and school partnerships and social-emotional learning that were not investigated in this literature review.

CHAPTER 3

ACTION RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this action research study was to develop an early warning system support structure for at-risk ninth grade SWD. The action research design and implementation teams worked to identify ninth grade SWD who were off-track or at-risk for dropping out of school or not graduating in four years. After students were identified using an “ABCS” locally developed rubric, they received a targeted intervention to support the areas of concern. The three research questions that guided this study were:

1. How does the action research team describe the process of designing and implementing an early warning system support structure for at-risk ninth grade SWD?
2. How can school leaders support the process of designing and implementing an early warning system support structure for at-risk ninth grade SWD?
3. How do teachers describe the impact of an early warning system support structure for at-risk ninth grade SWD?

This chapter discusses the research design and methodology used for this study. It includes the theoretical and conceptual frameworks, details the action research and design teams, and provides the timeline of interventions. Additional information about the research design, data collection methods and analysis, reliability and validity of the study, and the researcher’s positionality is also included.

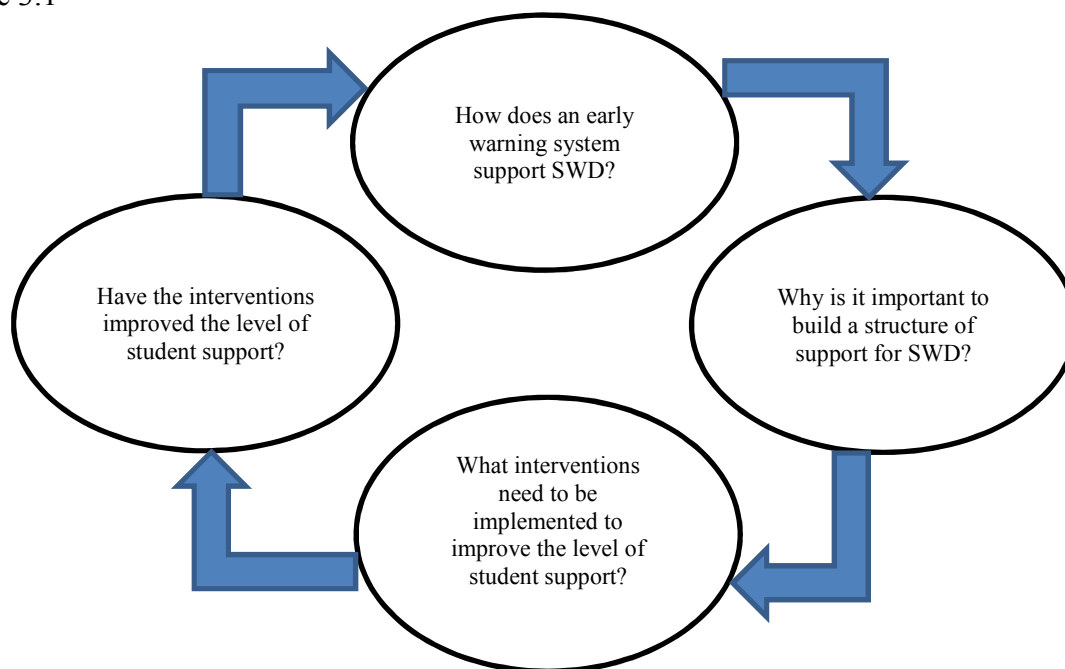
Theoretical Framework

This study utilized Daniel Kim’s Core Theory of Success framework (Figure 1.1). The foundation of this theory is relationships, and in summary, relationships are an important component when striving to obtain quality results (Kim, 2016). “Achieving high quality results

has a positive effect on the quality of relationships, creating a reinforcing engine of success” (Kim, 2016). While this theory was developed for managers in the corporate world, the theory was appropriate for this action research study because relationships are an important part of supporting at-risk SWD in ninth grade. Kim (2016) concluded that mutual respect and trust create an opportunity to share more facets of an issue. This leads to better planning and coordination which increases the quality of results (Kim, 2016). The action research team developed a tiered, data based intervention support structure specific to student needs as they matriculated through ninth grade.

The action research team utilized the Core Theory of Success to design and implement an early warning system support structure. The team, in conjunction with school administration and district level personnel, structured this research study using the “ABCS” model that was in the initial implementation stage at RHS. The “ABCS” data collection tool provided a surface level understanding of areas of weakness that impacted student success. The action research team, using the Core Theory of Success, created a framework around questions that aligned with Kim’s (2016) model (Figure 3.1) in order to find a deeper understanding of how an early warning system supported at-risk ninth grade SWD.

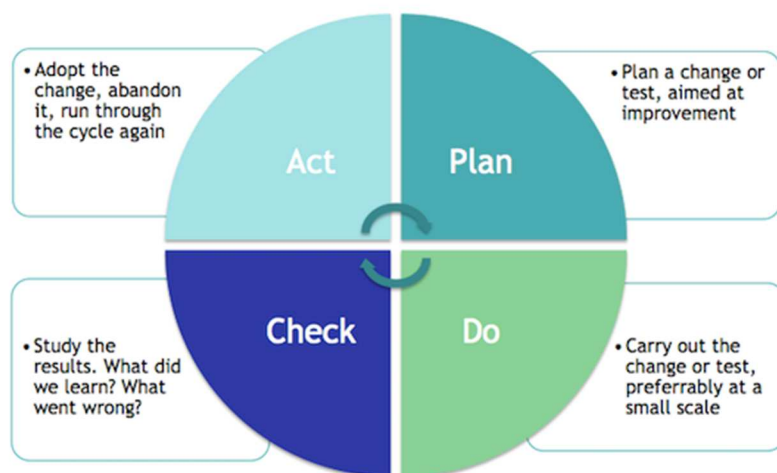
Figure 3.1



These guiding questions connected the theoretical conceptual frameworks. While relationships are an integral recipe for change, they become stagnant without action. The conceptual framework uses relationships as the foundation for action plan.

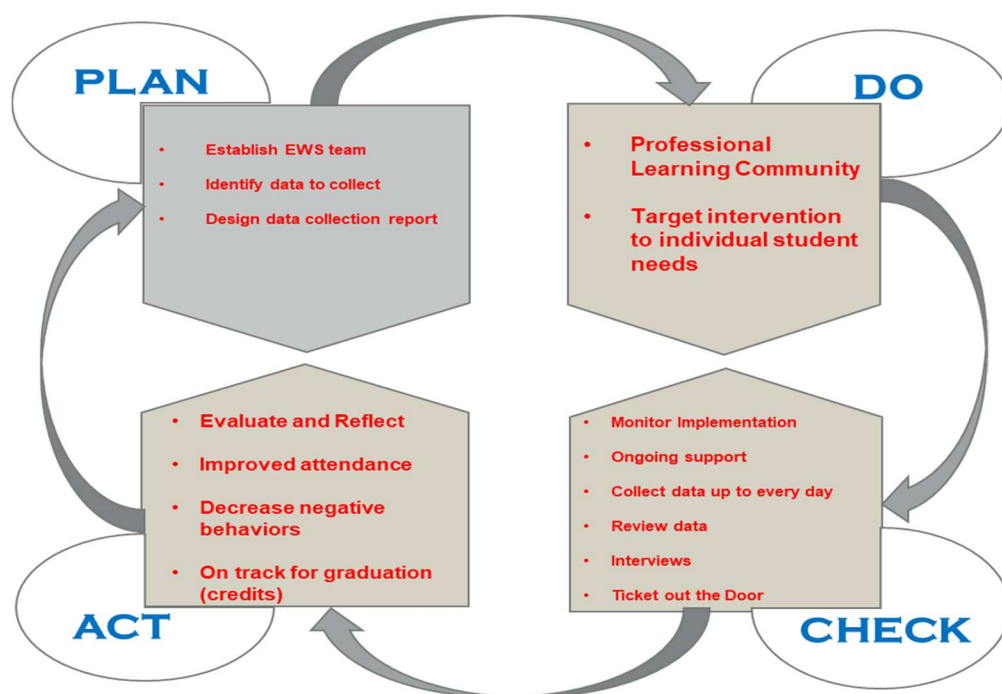
Conceptual Framework

Introduced in 1950 by W. Edwards Deming, the Deming Wheel described a four-step cycle of designing a product, making the product, selling it, then figuring out what users think about the product. In 1951, a group of Japanese executives reworked the Deming Wheel into the Plan, Do, Check, Act (PDCA) cycle (Figure 3.2). This problem-solving cycle begins with defining a problem, implementing a solution, evaluating the results, then either returning to the plan step if unsatisfactory results were obtained or standardizing the solution if the results were satisfactory (Moen and Norman, 2010)

Figure 3.2*Plan-Do-Check-Act Cycle*

The Core Theory of Success served as the foundation for this conceptual framework. The action research team utilized the PDCA framework to spark significant change using relationships and student supports to create an environment where school is valued. The action research team established and supported an early warning system implementation team to identify at-risk ninth grade SWD and target interventions to meet individual needs. The implementation team participated in professional development to increase understanding of the intervention. When implemented with fidelity, this intervention was designed to meet student needs through a tiered system of supports that began with whole group instruction and, if needed, more intensive individualized interventions. The long term goal of this framework was to develop and implement an effective support structure that, in the future, could benefit all students at RHS (3.3).

Figure 3.3



Action Research

“Action research is a collaborative activity among colleagues searching for solutions to everyday, real problems, experiences in schools, or looking for ways to improve instruction and increase student achievement” (Ferrence, 2010, p. 6). In this study, collaborative action research was used to develop and evaluate an early warning system support system for at-risk ninth grade SWD. This research method was most appropriate for this study because, as explained by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), its purpose was to put a support structure in place that would enhance positive student experiences.

This action research study involved two cycles and spanned from September 2021 to February 2022. Before the implementation of Cycle One, the action research team evaluated

data, reviewed research, and then planned for implementation of the intervention. The primary intervention that the action research team considered was an early warning system to identify and support at-risk ninth grade SWD. This support was focused on the areas of attendance, behavior, course completion, and social-emotional needs.

The “ABCS” data collection tool was new to RHS during the 2021-2022 school year. A new school administration wanted to use an easily accessible communication tool for all teachers to be able to report attendance, behavior, course completion, and social-emotional concerns to school administration. Before implementation of the intervention, RHS administration completed initial implementation of this data collection method during the first semester of the school year.

Before developing and implementing an intervention, the action research team had to develop a data collection method. The action research team had to define attendance, behavior, course completion, and social-emotional needs that would drive the data collection for the intervention. Attendance was defined as number of absences excluding quarantines. Behavior was defined as disciplinary infractions that resulted in loss of instructional time. Course completion was defined as courses with a grade below 70%. Social-emotional needs were defined as any other concerns that resulted in loss or interruption of instructional time. The action research team developed the data collection tool below (Table 3.1).

Table 3.1*Data Collection Tool*

Student Name	Attendance	Discipline	Course Completion	Social-Emotional Needs

The action research team developed a support structure for ninth grade SWD who were identified as at-risk in any of the four areas. Using a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework, the support structure went from less-intensive (Tier One) to more-intensive (Tier Three). The identified intervention was implemented up to five days a week during a 20 minute intervention period. Identified students were placed in an intervention group with their special education case-manager.

Action Research Design Team

Collaboration is an essential component to the overall success of RCS. The action research team was composed of the special education director, special education coordinator, student support services coordinator, RHS assistant principal, and RHS lead special education teacher (Table 3.2). All members of the research team supported RHS in different ways. The special education director and coordinator led the overall special education process across the entire school district. This involved all aspects of each educational experience for SWD that had a significant impact on their academic achievement. The student support services coordinator was responsible for assisting families with supports needed to improve each student's overall quality of life. The assistant principal evaluated all school level special education teachers. The

lead special education teacher was a liaison between the district and school and ensured teachers had all necessary resources in order to support students.

Table 3.2

Action Research Team

Position	Location	Years of Service
Special Education Director	Central Office	15
Special Education Coordinator	Central Office	19
Student Support Services Coordinator	Central Office	2
Assistant Principal	RHS	14
Lead Special Education Teacher	RHS	19

All members of the action research team had a significant interest in this study.

Supporting at-risk ninth grade SWD should have a positive impact on educational outcomes.

The action research team had regular interactions with these students and families. Additionally, the majority of the action research team has or did participate in annual IEP meetings and helped to develop accommodations, supports, goals, objectives, etc. Each member of the action research team agreed that the quality of relationships determines the quality of results.

Action Research Implementation Team

The implementation team was dedicated to implementing the early warning system in order to support students as they matriculated through ninth grade. The team was composed of the special education director, special education coordinator, assistant principal, three school counselors, lead special education teacher, and three ninth grade special education teachers (Table 3.3). The experience level of the implementation team varied from one year to 26 years. The majority of the team had spent at least five years at RHS; however, two of the three counselors had only one year of experience in the school system. This team was very diverse in

experience and knowledge which allowed for authentic conversations and in-depth ideas about how to support students.

Table 3.3

Action Research Implementation Team

Position	Location	Years of Service
Special Education Director	Central Office	16
Special Education Coordinator	Central Office	20
Assistant Principal	RHS	17
Assistant Principal	RHS	17
Student Support Services Coordinator	Central Office	2
MTSS/Gifted Coordinator	Central Office	15
504 Coordinator	Central Office	22
Data Specialist	Central Office	26
Special Education Teacher	RHS	16
Special Education Teacher	RHS	17
Counselor	RHS	1
Counselor	RHS	7
Counselor	RHS	19

The action research implementation team members had a significant interest in this study. All members of the team knew the impact a successful ninth grade year had on a student's high school career. The special education teachers served as a teacher or co-teacher and had close contact with the identified students by serving as the special education case-manager. This required regular communication with the student, family, and other teachers. The counselors helped monitor student social-emotional well-being in addition to grades. The counselors worked very closely with the teachers, school, and district administration to ensure proper supports were in place for students. The special education director and coordinator provided school administration, counselors, and all special education teachers, with the resources and support needed to ensure all students had a great opportunity to be successful. The overall

success for ninth grade SWD was a collaborative effort in which positive results have a tremendous impact on future success.

Action Research Timeline

The action research timeline was limited to late July 2021 through February 2022. The majority of the data collection and analysis was completed during the first semester of the school year. The action research study entailed two interventions guided by the PDCA framework.

Intervention

After receiving consent and having initial conversations with the researcher to answer questions about the study, the action research design team met in September 2021. The action research team reviewed the purpose of the study, discussed how the work would impact at-risk ninth grade SWD, and began the initial review of “ABCS” data. The action research team focused interventions on students who were identified at-risk using the rubric provided in Table 3.1. The interventions followed a tiered structure. Prior to implementation of the intervention, the researcher conducted interviews with the action research team. This research study involved two intervention cycles. Each cycle included professional development, professional learning communities (PLC), regular data collection, ongoing support, and interviews. The second cycle included implementation of the interventions. After the second intervention cycle, the researcher conducted a post-interview with the action research team. An overview of the intervention timeline is outlined in Table 3.4.

Table 3.4***Intervention Timeline***

Cycles	Activities	Participants	Timeline
Pre-Cycle 1	1. Obtain consent	Action Research and Implementation Teams	July 2021
	2. Pre-interviews	Action Research Team	September 2021
	3. Review purpose	Action Research Team	September 2021
	4. Initial review of “ABCS” data	Action Research Team	September 2021
	5. Discuss intervention	Action Research Team	September 2021
Cycle 1	1. PLC #1	Action Research and Implementation Teams	October 2021
	2. Development of interventions	Implementation Team	October 2021 – November 2021
	3. PLC #2	Action Research and Implementation Teams	December 2021
Cycle 2	1. PLC #3	Action Research and Implementation Teams	January 2022
	2. Implementation of interventions	Implementation Team	January 2022 – February 2022
	3. Teacher and counselor interviews	Implementation Team	February 2022
	4. PLC #4	Action Research and Implementation Teams	February 2022
Post-Cycle 2	1. Post-interviews	Action Research Team	February 2022
	2. Comprehensive review of data	Action Research Team	February 2022
	3. Presentation to administration	Researcher and Principal	February 2022

Professional Learning Community

The action research team facilitated a professional learning committee (PLC) for staff who were implementing the intervention. The PLC sessions were held regularly throughout the intervention cycles. These PLC sessions allowed for new information to be presented, collaboration of all staff members, conversations to provide support, and answer questions. Participants completed a ticket-out-the-door after each session in order to provide feedback on the session contents and the usefulness of the presented information.

Tier-One Intervention

Tier-one interventions are intended to be for all or most students. Students who had less than three absences, failed zero classes, had no more than one discipline referral, and/or no

social-emotional learning concerns were identified as tier-one. For this action research study, the action research implementation team focused on two specific tier-one support areas. First, the team simply recognized all areas in which students were successful. The special education teacher conversed with each student to emphasize the importance of all four areas. During the conversation, the teacher highlighted student success and worked with the student to identify any barriers. Recognizing the positive is a PBIS focus area and helps students understand that they “matter.” This conversation provided an opportunity to develop and strengthen the teacher-student relationships. Second, the teacher worked with the student to develop a plan to continue and build upon the success. This data was tracked using the intervention data log.

Tier-Two Intervention

When a student did respond to tier-one interventions, they moved to tier-two. Any ninth grade SWD who was identified at-risk was automatically placed at tier-two from the onset of the intervention. Students who had more than three absences, failed at least one class, had more than one discipline referral, and/or some level of social-emotional learning concerns were identified as needing tier-two interventions. At this tier, the team determined “why” the identified student was having difficulty in one of the four areas. Once the problem solving team determined this reason, for the purpose of this action research study, the action research implementation team chose an appropriate intervention.

Tier-Three Intervention

When students required individualized interventions, they moved to tier-three. Students who received these interventions were not successful with tier-two interventions. For the purpose of this study, a student had to be progress monitored on a tier-two intervention for a minimum of six weeks before transitioning to tier-three. The intervention was intensified and data was

collected more frequently. Tier-three interventions incorporated school and/or community resources in addition to teachers, administrators, and counselors to assist with continued barriers to student success.

Table 3.5

Intervention Plan

Proposed Intervention	Action Research Team Activities	Anticipated Outcome and Connection to Theoretical Framework	Proposed Timeline	Data Collection
Professional Learning Community	1. Four Meetings 2. Review Data	1. Increase understanding of tiered interventions 2. Strengthen staff awareness of student barriers	October 2021 – January 2022	1. Ticket Out the Door 2. Intervention Data 3. Meeting Notes
Tier One	1. Recognize Success 2. Continued Success Plan	1. Strengthen student-teacher relationship 2. Recognition of student success	October 2021 – January 2022	1. Weekly data collection
Tier Two	1. Individual Success Plan 2. Check-In/Check-Out	1. Strengthen student-teacher relationship 2. Improved area of weakness 3. Positive individual success plan	October 2021 – January 2022	1. Weekly Data Collection (3x/wk)
Tier Three	1. One-on-One Problem Solving 2. Community agencies and supports	1. Strengthen student-teacher relationship 2. Improved area of weakness 3. Partnerships to support barriers	November, 2021 – January 2022	1. Weekly Data Collection (5x/wk)

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative approach. Qualitative research was used to strengthen understanding as to “why” and “how” the identified problem impacted ninth-grade SWD at RHS.

This research method required the researcher to work directly in the field with the design and implementation teams to identify the problem of practice, develop an action plan, organize and analyze the data, then take action and share results (Zepeda, 2019).

This study required the design and implementation teams to apply a collaborative approach throughout the research process. Creswell and Poth (2018) stated that researchers conduct qualitative studies “because of a problem or issue that needs to be explored” and “because we need a complex, detailed understanding of the issue” (p. 117). The action research team designed the interventions, but the most important role they played was supporting the implementation team throughout the implementation of the intervention. This further strengthened the research team’s understanding of the problem and gain further analysis about the day-to-day impact of the intervention.

The research design followed a cyclical process supported by the conceptual framework of Plan, Do, Check, Act. Each stage of this process informed the next and offered the action research team opportunities to learn and reflect. This methodology and design benefitted the teams and school as a whole because it modeled a change process that used current data to improve future outcomes. This change process was coupled with other identified needs within the school setting.

Table 3.6*The Research Plan*

Research Questions	Data Collected	Analysis	Timeline
How does the action research team describe the process of designing and implementing an early warning system support structure for at-risk ninth grade SWD?	1. Pre/Post interviews	Recorded and transcribed interviews	Pre-Cycle 1 (September 2021) and Post-Cycle 2 (January 2022)
	2. Early warning system support data 3. Ticket Out the Door 4. Meeting minutes 5. Teacher/Counselor interviews	Coding system used to identify themes	October 2021 – January 2022
How can school leaders support the process of designing and implementing an early warning system support structure for at-risk ninth grade SWD?	1. Pre/Post interviews	Recorded and transcribed interviews	Pre-Cycle 1 (September 2021) and Post-Cycle 2 (January 2022)
	2. Early warning system support data 3. Ticket Out the Door 4. Meeting minutes 5. Teacher/Counselor interviews	Coding system used to identify themes	October 2021 – February 2022
How do teachers describe the impact of an early warning system support structure for at-risk ninth grade SWD?	1. Early warning system support data 2. Ticket Out the Door 3. Meeting minutes 4. Teacher/Counselor interviews	Coding system used to identify themes	October 2021 – February 2022

Contextual Setting

This action research study was completed at a high achieving high school in a suburb of a major metropolitan city in the Southeastern United States. The high school served approximately 1,400 students. About 11% of those students were served in special education. There was a large gap in the percentage of white students compared to any other race; however, the school system has seen an increase in black and Hispanic students over the past three years. Traditionally, over 90% of students graduated after four years and a large percentage either attend postsecondary schools or work upon graduation.

Selection

This study utilized purposeful sampling when selecting the participants. Purposeful sampling involved identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that were especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest. The selected participants noted the importance of availability and willingness to participate, and the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner (Palinkas et al., 2015). The participants in this study included teachers, counselors, and administrators from both the school and district levels who had a vested interest in improving outcomes for SWD.

In July 2021, after IRB approval, the action research team participants received an email invitation to participate in discussion about the study. The included information outlined the purpose of the study, timeline, data collection, and targeted supports. The researcher shared the research questions and frameworks to provide a strong foundational understanding of the methodology and research design.

Most of the participants taught or served the school district in a supportive or administrative role for more than five years. The majority of the research and implementations teams had a strong knowledge base of the processes and procedures at RHS. Additionally, they had a good understanding of the support RHS had received and expectations from district level personnel.

Mr. Luke Bennett had served as a teacher for 16 years. Throughout this study he maintained the caseloads of most of the ninth grade students. During his 16 years in education, he served as a business education teacher, middle school inclusion teacher, and high school special education teacher. He has also coached baseball, football, and golf.

Ms. Beverly Wallace has served as a teacher and administrator for 22 years. She previously served as a special education self-contained high school teacher before receiving a promotion to the district level 504 coordinator for the 2021-2022 school year. Her understanding of special education and ability to develop relationships with students were important qualities she brought to the action research team.

Ms. Andrea White has served as a counselor for 19 years. Previous to her current role, she served in an academic advisement role. Her understanding of course schedules and graduation plans were important when developing academic interventions for students who had a weakness in course completion.

Mr. William Spratling has served as a teacher for 17 years. He has served in various roles such as special education teacher, general education teacher, and special education department chair. His strong passion for SWD, ability to disseminate data were, and understanding of differentiated instruction were important qualities that assisted the team.

Ms. Jennifer Greene has served as a counselor for seven years. She recently transferred from a large school district in a neighboring state. She brought a diverse background working with students who had academic and behavioral weaknesses. Her knowledge about behavior and attendance provided the team with a deeper knowledge of the supports students need to be successful.

Ms. Jamie Diaz has served as a teacher and district specialist for 26 years. Her new position as the school district's data specialist started at the beginning of the school year. Her vast experiences as a middle school math teacher, department head, gifted coordinator, mentor teacher, and team leader provided the team with an extensive wealth of knowledge related to all areas of curriculum and instruction.

Ms. Candace Wright has served for three years in different roles. Prior to becoming a school counselor, she served as the high school attendance clerk. She has served as one of the high school counselors for 1.5 years. She has a great ability to develop relationships with students and families. Additionally, she has helped many students with social-emotional concerns. Her experiences with both of these areas greatly benefitted the action research team and brought clarity when the team determined appropriate interventions.

Ms. Jackie Atwell has served in many roles throughout her 15 years in education. Her roles included special education teacher, general education teacher, 504/RTI coordinator, building level ESOL coordinator, new teacher mentor, and track coach. During the 2021-2022 school year she transitioned to the district level role of gifted coordinator and MTSS coordinator. Her keen knowledge of interventions and supports was vitally important when the team developed the three-tiered interventions for all targeted categories.

Mr. Jamison Richards joined the RHS staff at the beginning of the 2021-2022 school year. He served as one of three assistant principals. Throughout his 17 years in education he has served as both a teacher and administrator. Mr. Richards brought the “ABCS” data collection from a previous school district.

Ms. Eloise Barnett has served in education for two years as the district level student support services coordinator; however, she previously worked as a hospice social worker. Her wealth of knowledge around social-emotional learning and ability to partner with communities and families made a tremendous impact on our school system. She supported the team with strategies and ideas for implementing interventions.

Ms. Kristen Diamico has served in education for 17 years. She has served as an assistant principal for three years. Prior to becoming an administrator, she served as a mathematics teacher. Ms. Diamico’s importance at RHS is difficult to measure because she is involved in all aspects of the school. Personally, I believe Ms. Diamico is the “heartbeat” of RHS. Her ability to see the “big picture” and put ideas into practice provided the action research team with direction. Her support helped the team gain buy-in from other professionals in the school.

Ms. Beth Dutton served as the district level special education coordinator. Her wealth of experience and knowledge is a critical asset to any team. During her 20 years in education she has served as a special education teacher, lead teacher, and special education administrator. Ms. Dutton is gifted in many areas of education and she contributed greatly to the design and implementation of interventions. An important role she also played was motivator. Ms. Dutton kept the team motivated and challenged us to put our best foot forward every day.

Data Collection Methods

Qualitative data were collected throughout this study to understand how an early warning system provided support in the areas of attendance, behavior, course completion, and social-emotional learning for at-risk ninth grade SWD.

Prior to the start of Cycle One and after Cycle Two the action research team participated in individual interviews with the researcher. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The purpose of the pre-interview was to gather information to support the need for a tiered intervention system to support at-risk ninth grade SWD. The purpose of the post-interview was to summarize the findings and provide administration with data that could support or continue this initiative with other subgroups at RHS.

The action research and implementation teams participated in regular PLC meetings.. The researcher took detailed notes during each PLC session. After each PLC session, the action research implementation team provided feedback via a ticket-out-the-door. This provided the research team with information detailing the implementation teams understanding of the interventions. Additionally, it provided the research team with information that was used for planning future PLC sessions.

Throughout the intervention cycles, the implementation team maintained student data on the early warning system rubric. During the first PLC session the team received training on tracking student data. This data was collected using intervals outlined in the intervention description. The collected data was formally reviewed at PLC sessions to support the research team with measuring the progress of the support system.

Finally, teachers and counselors participated in semi-structured interviews at the end of Cycle Two. The action research team developed a protocol that linked back to the research

questions and provided a formal opportunity for the research team to gather information related to the implementation of the support system and how this intervention could continue with other subgroups at RHS.

Data Analysis

The researcher collected data from interviews, professional development feedback, teacher data collection, observations, and meeting notes. Data were organized to allow the researcher to find patterns, themes, associations, and interrelationships (Glanz, 2014, p. 138). The researcher took notes for each interview. This data was evaluated line by line and coded to identify emerging themes. Similar themes were identified and assigned to specific research questions. Intervention data was discussed at PLC meetings and the research team used this data to identify percentage of students who were identified at-risk and the categories of identification. Finally, the ticket-out-the-door was evaluated and the action research team identified data that supported any of the identified themes.

As an administrator, the researcher protected the integrity of the data by understanding and removing biasness to the greatest extent possible. Data was protected and kept in a locked filing cabinet located in the researcher's office. Ultimately, the purpose of the data was to support the researcher's responses to the research questions.

Reliability and Validity

Marshall & Rossman (2010) state, "Triangulation is the act of bringing more than one source of data to bear on a single point." The researcher utilized more than one method of collecting data in order to enhance the credibility of the research. The action research team used qualitative data in the form of interviews, data records, and PLC feedback to support findings. Data was regularly discussed and reviewed throughout the research process. The design team

thoroughly reviewed the coded interviews, feedback, and “ABCS” data to ensure accuracy of the data.

Researcher Subjectivity

The researcher’s understanding of barriers faced by SWD derived from both personal and professional experiences. At a young age, the researcher was introduced to disabilities through a sibling who was diagnosed with Cerebral Palsy. The daily challenges that faced both the family and child molded the researcher’s drive to make a difference for SWD. The researcher’s personal experience of living within a world where a disability created obstacles in all facets of life impacted the researcher’s desire to serve as a special education teacher.

The researcher has served as an educator or administrator in three different school systems. As a teacher, the researcher used the power of relationships to motivate and help students understand the importance of learning. As a leader, the researcher ensured educators and administrators had the necessary tools and training to help all students succeed.

At the time of this study, the research served in a position of power as a district administrator. The researcher was in this position for three years prior to this study and strove to create a climate and culture of the school system that welcomed support from district administrators. However, it was understood that a district administrative position was subject to biasness in this study. The researcher worked with the action research design and implementation teams to maintain the integrity of the research and avoid influencing any responses that impacted the outcome of the study.

Chapter Summary

This chapter detailed the methods of data collection and analysis for this action research study. Because the purpose of this study was to design and implement an early warning system

support structure, the researcher used individual interviews, observation data, focus group interviews, and feedback via a ticket-out-the-door to capture the action research and implementation team perspectives. This qualitative data provided findings for each of the research questions.

The next chapter informs the reader of the story and outcomes of this study. It includes detailed information about the interventions and cycles. It also provides an overview of the research process as detailed in journal notes.

CHAPTER 4

THE CASE

The Context

Located approximately 60 miles from a major metropolitan area in the Southeastern United States at the base of the Appalachian Mountain Range is a small community with a rich history. Established in 1796, Robinson County was named after a general from the Revolutionary War. The county originally was composed of 1,800 square miles; however, today it is only 337 square miles. Currently, Robinson County is home to Richardson and eight other cities or towns. The county is home to many warehouses, shopping, winery, golf courses, parks, and is easily accessible to a major interstate and highways. It is interesting to note that Robinson County was the original home for the flagship university which is located 30 miles away.

Established in 1800, Richardson spans 22 square miles and has a population of 10,195. Richardson is a family friendly town with a steadily growing workforce. One of the most important assets to this community is the school system.

Established in 1818, Richardson City Schools was and continues to be the focal point of the community. Richardson City Schools consistently ranks as one of the highest performing school districts in the state. Within a one mile radius and only separated by a railroad track stand four schools. Since 2009, the student population in the school district grew from 2,800 to over 4,000. During the 2020-2021 school year, the student demographics were 78.4% white, 7.6% black, 3.9% two or more races, 2.02% Asian, and .17% American Indian. Additionally, 13.29% of all students were served in gifted, 10.8% in special education, and 2.3% are English Language Learners. Only 24.5% of students received free and reduced price lunch. Over 18% of all

students in Richardson City Schools lived outside of the school district during the same school year.

Richardson High School is comprised of 1,184 students. Demographically, there are many similarities when compared to the overall student population in the school district. The demographic breakdown was as follows: 77.7% white, 8.7% black, 2.7% two of more races, 2.02% Asian, and .17% American Indian. One percent of students at RHS were English Language Learners, 8.2% were served in special education, and 17.1% received gifted services. The 2019 College and Career Readiness Performance Index (CCRPI) score for RHS was 88.3.

Serving the school district as the Director of Special Education required strong partnerships with administrators, teachers, parents, and community members. There were over four hundred students and approximately forty special education teachers in RCS. Additionally, the special education department at the central office was comprised of a Special Education Coordinator, Student Support Services Coordinator, two School Psychologists, and a secretary. In addition to ensuring our department had clear direction, processes, and procedures, I was responsible for reviewing many types of data including student achievement, discipline, and attendance. The action research team identified an important need to improve student attendance at RHS and understood the reality that not improving attendance can lead to negative student outcomes.

Problem Framing in the Context

As described in Chapter 1, during the 2016-2017, 2017-2018, and 2018-2019 school years at least 60% of SWD at RHS were absent six or more school days. This high rate of absences were higher than the overall percentage for the all SWD subgroup in RCS. There was a particularly high discrepancy when compared to similarly high achieving high schools in the

state of Georgia. Determining this discrepancy rendered an urgency to implement change with the SWD population at RHS.

There were many obstacles to overcome throughout this project. The main obstacle were the challenges cause by COVID-19. Improving student attendance during a pandemic was a difficult task due to the high rate of absences due to COVID exposures or diagnosis'. The action research team had to carefully review the data and consider the impact of COVID related absences.

Problem Framing Based on the Site

The action research team believed that improving SWD attendance at RHS had to start with identifying students in ninth grade. The team believed that early intervention provided the best opportunity for improved outcomes. This action research study targeted SWD in the ninth grade at RHS. The students were identified based off of the caseloads of the special education teachers who consented to participate in this study. Each special education teacher had regular access to these students and had already developed a relationship that further supported the work of the action research team. Additionally, the special education teachers schedule provided ample time to implement and monitor the identified intervention.

The Story and Outcomes

This action research study spanned from September 2021 through February 2022. RHS started the school year with a new principal and assistant principal. This new administration began the school year with an intense focus on attendance, behavior, course completion, and social-emotional learning. The high school teachers were provided with guidance on how to report concerns in any of the four identified areas. Once concerns were reported, the high school needed a plan for addressing and supporting students in these four areas. The researcher and

action research team used this opportunity to develop a support structure for at-risk ninth grade SWD. This action research study consisted of two cycles.

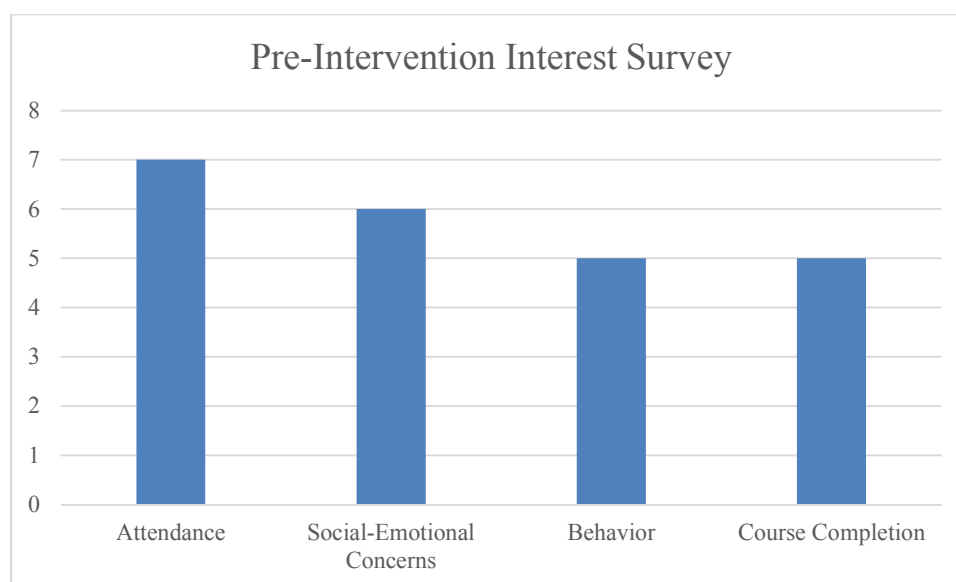
Pre-Cycle

The action research team met in September 2021 and discussed the need for a targeted support system for at-risk ninth grade SWD. The team agreed on developing the support structure around these four areas: attendance, behavior, course completion, and social-emotional needs. The team developed a short survey for the action research implementation team in order to determine the order in which the team would work on developing interventions.

During the first action research implementation team meeting in October 2021, the team completed the survey using a ranking system of one to four.

Figure 4.1

Pre-Intervention Interest Survey



The team ranked attendance as the most important intervention to develop supports. This was followed by social-emotional needs, behavior, and course completion. Furthermore, the

team provided additional information about the positive and negative responses or outcomes when developing the overall support structure.

Table 4.1

Action Research Team Informal Information

Positive Outcomes	Potential Barriers
Having a formal process	Time and resources
Reduction in kids "falling through the cracks"	Staff buy-in
Identification of early intervention strategies	Variables outside our control
Meeting individual needs	Inconsistency across environments
Team approach to support students	Ensuring fidelity

Cycle One

The first cycle of the action research project began with a professional learning session with the action research design and implementation teams. Both teams needed a foundational understanding of MTSS at the secondary level and how it correlated with an early warning system. We focused on an assortment of topics ranging from what MTSS looks like in secondary session, how to identify early warning indicators, how to start an early warning system, and how to measure the implementation and effectiveness. The team truly bought into the work and committed to the development of this support structure.

The action research team met weekly for seven weeks to develop the tiered intervention support structure in all four identified areas. The team intended to follow the order of identified importance in the pre-intervention interest survey; however, throughout our conversations the reality of following that order was very difficult. The team began with attendance followed by behavior, course completion, then social-emotional concerns.

In order to identify when an intervention needed to be implemented, the team defined each targeted area and determined when an intervention was necessary. This is summarized in table 4.2. The tiered-intervention charts that are explained below are summarized in Appendix I.

Table 4.2

Identifying Intervention Needs

Attendance	Behavior
Measured every four weeks	Measured every semester
Target is less than 10% of excused/unexcused absences	Target is less than two days of ISS or OSS
Course Completion	Social-Emotional Concerns
Measured every semester	Measured regularly by teacher and/or counselor
Target is no more than one "F" per semester	Dependent on circumstances

Attendance

Students who had less than 10% excused or unexcused absences in any 20 day period were identified as tier-one. Tier-one attendance interventions were those provided to all students. At the tier-one level, RHS staff focused heavily on relationships. Relationships are the fabric of student success at RHS and are deeply embedded in the culture of the school. Parallel to relationships was positive communication. The staff at RHS emphasized positive communication to students and parents. All means of communication including face-to-face conversations, phone calls, online meetings, and cards sent home were products of the intense focus on positive communication. The third tier-one intervention was the ability to participate in extra-curricular activities. This opportunity is available to all students who are regularly present at school and academically eligible.

Students with 10% or more unexcused or excused absences in any 20 day period were identified as tier-two. At the tier-two level, students received either an intervention with a counselor or were partnered with a peer tutor. Only students who were unsuccessful at the tier-two level were referred to tier-three. At tier-three an individual success plan was developed in a formal meeting with the student attendance review committee (SARC). This committee consisted of the student, parent(s), counselor, and school administrator. The success plan was a roadmap for supports that could be implemented to improve attendance.

Behavior

Students who had less than two days of ISS or OSS during the semester received tier-one supports. Consistent with attendance interventions, RHS staff focused heavily on relationships and positive communication. Additionally, students had the opportunity to participate in extracurricular activities.

Students who received between two to four days of ISS or OSS during a semester were identified as needing tier-two supports. These students were provided with one or both of the following interventions: assigned a mentor and/or participated in a weekly FIRE instructional period with the system's behavioral specialist. The action research team felt an urgency to make sure these students had a mentor and believed this action research project provided a great opportunity to reach out in the community to recruit more mentors.

Students who received more than four days of ISS or OSS during a semester received tier-three supports. At the tier-three level, the interventions were individualized. These students served as part of a behavior intervention team alongside the counselor, school administrator, and parent(s). This plan identified specific behaviors, provided an outline for how the team could

support the behavior, detailed positive reinforcement, and also provided guidance on future discipline.

Course Completion

Students who received no more than one “F” per semester were identified as tier-one. The action research team used this indicator because it was not uncommon for a student to fail one class during his or her high school career. The team understood that if the failure was more of a big picture problem and not just one bad semester then the child may receive more intensive support. Every child who failed only one class during the first semester was reviewed individually to determine if more intensive supports were needed. At the tier-one level, students received the same supports as described in the attendance and course completion interventions. Additionally, students who were identified tier-one for course completion also had weekly FIRE periods to remediate any classwork or make-up any tests.

Students who received two “F’s” per semester were identified as needing tier-two supports. Students who failed a course with a grade of either 68 or 69 were eligible for a credit repair course. This accelerated course allowed a student to retake the class in two or three weeks and improve his or her grade to a 70. Students who failed a course with a 65, 66, or 67 were provided an opportunity to reseat in a course and recover the credit. This was referred to as a credit recovery course. At the tier-two support level students were placed in intentional weekly FIRE sessions where they would check-in/check-out with an assigned teacher. This provided an opportunity to review grades and coursework and develop a plan for addressing any barriers. Students participated in this weekly FIRE session for at least one nine-week period.

Students who failed more than two courses were identified as needing tier-three supports. At the tier-three level, a team composed of the student, parent(s), administrator, counselor, and

teacher(s) developed an individualized academic plan. The team used the individual graduation plan template to determine needed credits then transferred this to a formally developed plan that provided the road map for obtaining those credits. The team also included any additional supports, both inside and outside of the school, which could assist the student and his or her family.

Social-Emotional Needs

Identifying tier-two and tier-three students for social-emotional concerns was the most difficult out of all four areas. All students received SEL lessons monthly during an extended first period class. Students who were identified at tier-two expressed concerns that rendered counselor intervention. These students participated in check-ins with a counselor or trusted adult. Students who needed more frequent check-ins participated in a FIRE period with the counselors a couple of times per week. Students who were identified at tier-three required individual interventions and probably had a referral to an outside agency. Students who expressed suicidal ideation or were recently hospitalized were identified as tier-three. These students were referred to outside agencies and the school worked with the agency when the student reintegrated to the school building.

Cycle Two

After developing the tiered-interventions, the second cycle of this action research project was to implement the interventions with a specific subgroup of identified ninth grade SWD. The subgroup was identified using the caseloads of the two participating special education teachers. On both caseloads there was a total of 10 ninth grade SWD.

The second cycle began in the second week of January 2022 and went until the second week of February 2022. The action research team used first semester grades, behavior, and

attendance data to identify the appropriate interventions for each student. The action research team developed data collection charts to measure the effectiveness of the identified intervention.

Three out of the 10 students received tier-two course completion interventions. During the data collection period, two students met over 90% of the check-in/check-out goals. One student met only 8% of the check-in/check-out goals. The student who received the lowest percentage also missed seven out of the 20 days data was collected.

Four out of the 10 students received tier-two attendance interventions. These students met with the school counselor for four weeks. During this time period, attendance improved for three out of the four students. The student who did not make progress was absent for medical reasons.

Participants

The action research team was comprised of committed professionals who understood the challenges faced by at-risk ninth grade SWD. As the lead researcher, I shared an overview of the study before each member consented to the study. Each member of the action research team invested time and effort into this project from mid-September 2021 through February 2022.

Researcher Journal Notes

October 20, 2021

This was the initial implementation team meeting. This meeting allowed for the opportunity to provide the team with an overview of the action research project. The overview included a summary of attendance data, the purpose of the research study, the roles of the implementation and design teams, and a layout of the two research cycles. The implementation team reviewed the current process for collecting “ABCS” data and discussed how this data could be used to develop a three-tiered early warning system. The implementation team began to brainstorm elements of this tiered system. Furthermore, the team discussed how this tiered

system could benefit the current 9th grade special education caseload for the two participating special education teachers. Finally, the researcher had the team complete a ticket out the door. The primary focus of this ticket out the door was to determine the order between attendance, behavior, course completion, and social-emotional learning that the team will focus on the tiered system. The results indicated the team would focus on developing a tiered-system in the following order: Attendance, Social-Emotional Learning, Behavior, and Course Completion.

October 27, 2021

This was the second implementation team meeting. The team started the meeting by reviewing data collected from the previous week's ticket out the door. The team then reviewed the research behind tiered interventions and early warning systems. Following the discussion about the research, the team started brainstorming about how to identify a student who is at-risk in the areas of attendance and behavior. The team discussed five, seven, and ten days as targets for interventions. The team agreed upon students being identified as at-risk when they have 10% or more absences. Students in the green zone had less than 10% absences. Students in the yellow zone had 10% or more absences. Students in the red zone were identified after tier-two interventions had been implemented and determined unsuccessful. Student attendance will be reviewed every four weeks. The team identified green, yellow, and red zone interventions for behavior. Students with two days of in-school or out-of-school suspension will be placed in the yellow zone. Students with four days of in-school or out-of-school suspension will be placed in the red zone. As the tiered-interventions are developed, the team discussed the importance of being proactive rather than reactive when supporting student behavior.

November 3, 2021

The purpose of this meeting was for the implementation team to begin drafting the tiered-intervention charts. The team focused on all four areas. The team agreed that relationships are the foundation of the attendance chart. At the tier-two level, counselors will begin to intervene teacher communication will increase. At the tier-three level, a committee consisting of the student, parent(s), administration, and counselor will develop an attendance contract that will be monitored regularly. The discussion about behavior was more brainstorming then putting a plan together. The committee did agree that at the tier-three level a behavioral intervention plan will be developed. Similar to the discussion about student behavior, the committee brainstormed many ideas for course completion. The consensus for tier-three was to develop an academic plan that involved the student, parent(s), administration, and counselor. Additionally, if any outside resources are available or needed, the committee will also involve individuals from that resource. The most difficult to address was social-emotional learning. The committee did determine that monthly social-emotional learning lessons during the extended first period established the foundation for the tiered interventions.

November 10, 2021

The implementation team continued to discuss about the tiered intervention charts. In addition to a focus on relationships for the tier-one level of attendance, the committee also discussed the importance of positive communication and the ability to participate in extra-curricular activities as long as one is present at school. At the tier-two level, the team discussed the importance of interventions that heled determine the “why” a student is missing school. The team added the intervention of peer-tutoring to the tier-two level. At tier-three, the team added a home visit to the intervention chart. The team determined that the tier-one interventions for

attendance also directly relate to the necessary tier-one behavioral interventions. At the tier-two level, the team believed involving a mentor and utilizing our behavioral specialist for a FIRE period class would further support students who are exhibiting behavioral concerns. The team struggled with determining any additional interventions at the tier-three level. In addition to working on the intervention charts, the team read and discussed an article describing one family's story about a son who committed suicide and the importance of mental health resources in schools.

December 1, 2021

The team spent the majority of the meeting disseminating student course completion and attendance data. The school system's data analyst coded the data using red, yellow, orange, and red colors. While this data did not reflect the intervention group for this project, it did assist with the conversation about how the tiered-interventions could be used to support students who have academic and attendance concerns. During this meeting the committee further discussed the tiered-interventions. The committee felt confident in the tiered interventions for attendance and behavior. The team added "intentional FIRE placements" and credit repair/recovery for tier-two course completion interventions. Credit recovery is available for students who received an overall semester grade of 65. Credit repair is available for students who received an overall semester grade of 68 or 69. The credit recovery course is completed in the computer lab and counts as one of a student's four classes in a semester. The credit repair course is an amended version of the original course and can usually be completed in 10 days. The highest grade a student can receive in a credit repair course is 70. During this meeting the team also finalized the tier-two interventions for social-emotional learning. The committee determined the need to add the intervention of frequent check-ins with a counselor or trusted adult. Since the tiered

interventions were completed, the team discussed an action plan that began at the start of the second semester.

January 12, 2022

The team began the meeting by reviewing the tiered intervention charts. The majority of the conversation was focused on the course completion chart. The team clarified the tier-three intervention of an individualized academic plan. After this discussion, the team reviewed first semester data on 10 students. Three of the students were identified as needing a course completion intervention and four were identified as needing an attendance intervention. There was a strong correlation between the course completion and academic interventions as three of the four students needed both. The intervention data charts were completed and data collection began the following week.

January 19, 2022

This meeting was held with the lead researcher, student support services coordinator, and school counselors. The purpose of this meeting was to review the implementation of interventions involving the school counselors. The team made a few adjustments to the data collection due to some of the students missing many days since returning from Christmas break.

Chapter Summary

This chapter detailed the context, problem, research cycles, participants, and journal notes. This action research project consisted of two cycles. During the first cycle, the action research team developed tiered interventions to support identified students in the areas of attendance, behavior, course completion, and social-emotional needs. The second cycle provided an opportunity for the action research team to implement the interventions on a targeted subgroup of ninth grade SWD. Data was collected to determine the impact of the interventions.

The next chapter provides an overview of the findings. These findings are reported as they relate to the action research questions. Additionally, the researcher detailed the connection of the findings to the theoretical framework.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to develop a targeted support structure to support at-risk ninth grade SWD. To address the purpose of this study, the following research questions guided this study:

1. How does the action research team describe the process of designing and implementing an early warning system support structure for at-risk ninth grade SWD?
2. How can school leaders support the process of designing and implementing an early warning system support structure for at-risk ninth grade SWD?
3. How do teachers describe the impact of an early warning system support structure for at-risk ninth grade SWD?

In this chapter, data from multiple sources were used to gather findings for each of the three research questions. Responses to interviews were analyzed and summarized into themes. Data from the implementation of the interventions was also used to support research question findings.

Table 5.1

Summary of Research Findings

Research Question	Research Findings
RQ1: How does the action research team describe the process of designing and implementing an early warning system support structure for at-risk ninth grade SWD?	Theme 1: Data driven decision making Theme 2: Teacher buy-in Theme 3: Multi-tiered system of support
RQ2: How can school leaders support the process of designing and implementing an	Theme 1: Leadership team of interested individuals

early warning system support structure for at-risk ninth grade SWD?	Theme 2: Responsibility distribution Theme 3: Incentives for students
RQ3: How do teachers describe the impact of an early warning system support structure for at-risk ninth grade SWD?	Theme 1: Importance of support and collaboration Theme 2: Importance of school/district attendance expectations Theme 3: Partnerships within the school, with families, and with the community

Data Collection Connected to Research Questions

Research Question 1: Process of Design and Implementation

The researcher used the data collected from interviews, meeting notes, and teacher observations to determine three major themes. The action research team determined that implementation of a support structure must be a collective, multi-tiered support effort driven by the data. Implementing and designing this support structure for the students at RHS required teacher and staff buy-in.

Theme 1: Data Driven Decision Making

While developing the tiered support system, the team informed the researcher that attendance data was rarely shared or discussed with teachers and staff. Besides attendance data reported on a transcript or report card, there was no uniform process for measuring student attendance. One team member stated:

I didn't know that the majority of SWD at JHS missed more than 6 days. The more open we are with the data is going to help teachers, too. We see they miss "this" many days

but many days you get lost in teaching the material. Teachers have to know exactly what the data is and understand what to do with it.

All members of the action research team shared the importance of obtaining and understanding attendance data when developing interventions to support students.

During action research cycle two, three students received tier two interventions for attendance and course completion. While the data collection time period was limited, it was interesting to identify similarities between absences and failed courses. During the intervention window, each student missed 20% of the school days. Out of the days the students were present, they were prepared for class, participated in the lesson, and completed assigned work over 90% of the time. While it was a short time period, it was interesting for the team to identify the correlation between absences and failed courses. The other seven students in the study did not need an attendance intervention and none of them were failing any classes.

The action research team worked with school and district administration to develop a process for sharing school-wide attendance data. Moving forward, this data will be shared with the special education team on a monthly basis. The data will be used to plan and determine interventions. Once a student is identified as tier-two or tier-three, the pre-determined times of measuring attendance will begin.

Theme 2: Teacher Buy-In

The majority of the action research team agreed that in order to implement change at RHS there must be teacher buy-in. The team discussed the difficulty with obtaining teacher buy-in when the requirement added a heavy burden to an already full workload. Implementing a new initiative for ninth grade SWD required teachers to see the “big picture” and understand the “why” behind the need for a targeted support system. A team member commented:

You have to have buy-in. Everybody has to be on board with it. Everybody needs to believe in it. If they believe in it then it will be easier to implement in the classroom.

The design team developed a professional development plan to train staff on the early warning support structure. For the purpose of this study, the professional development only involved two special education teachers and three school counselors. Implementing these new interventions on a smaller scale strengthened our implementation strategy as we integrate a larger student population next school year.

Theme 3: Multi-Tiered System of Support

The design team members agreed about the importance of embedding this targeted support structure throughout the MTSS system at RHS. During the design process, the team discussed the importance of involving counselors in the MTSS process. In many situations, counselors were overlooked and not a part of student support systems. This support structure provided counselors with a very important role with defined expectations when supporting at-risk ninth grade SWD.

This targeted support structure addressed a critical needs area that did not have a tiered intervention system. Student attendance was always handled in a negative light through the discipline rules or board policy. The design team worked to ensure positive reinforcements and rewards were embedded supports.

Summary of Findings for Research Question 1

All participants on the action research team had great interest in developing and implementing an early warning system for at-risk ninth grade SWD. The majority of team members expressed concern that attendance data was not shared on a regular basis; however, the team was committed to solutions and developing procedures for when and how this information

would be shared. In addition to the importance of teacher buy-in, some of the team members expressed the importance of parent buy-in when implementing the support structure.

The action research team acknowledged that supporting students with a significant number of absences also required school staff to evaluate course completion, behavior, and social-emotional concerns. The team developed a tiered intervention process for these additional areas. The team agreed that very structured professional development is necessary before full implementation. The data obtained from this small sample size implementation will be used when developing full implementation professional development.

Connection of Research Question 1 Findings to Theoretical Framework

A major part of the theoretical framework was continuous improvement. Providing access to student attendance data on a regular basis provided the implementation team with the necessary information to measure and evaluate student attendance progress. Based on those results, the team was able to identify new students who require more intensive interventions. For those students who were receiving interventions, this data allowed the team to adjust and either maximize or minimize the intensity of the intervention.

Research Question 2: School Leaders Supporting Design and Implementation

Theme 1: Leadership Team of Interested Individuals

The action research team shared the importance of having a leadership team of staff who express a sincere interest in the support structure. The responsibility begins with district level leadership who set the tone for the district and have the resources to support the implementation. One team member stated:

The overarching support for this work begins with support from district leaders. District leaders have the ability to provide the school with necessary resources to implement and sustain this work.

The primary expectation for district level leadership in RCS is to support our schools.

Throughout this research process, district level leadership were committed to this work at RHS.

School level leaders have been involved in the development of this support structure and were committed to implementation. Another team member explained:

Our assistant principals are the curriculum experts in this building. They already have strong relationships with school staff, so when the team is ready to implement this intervention school-wide, teachers will already have buy-in simply because they have a strong belief in our assistant principals.

One of the assistant principals at RHS was very influential and had a lot of input into the day-to-day operations. She supported the work of this action research team and will be instrumental when this work is fully implemented. The team was confident that her support and ability to develop teacher leaders will carry this work a long way.

Theme 2: Responsibility Distribution

The action research team understood the importance of not adding too much to teachers. The teachers at RHS and throughout the school district navigated and will continue to navigate disrupted waters caused by COVID and all of the everyday areas of life impacted by it. It is important that what this team required of teachers was reasonable and not overwhelming.

Carla Fowler, system data coordinator, stated:

When we try to implement something like this, all the responsibility can't go to the teachers. You can't add that to their plates. Teachers are a big part of students wanting

to come to school, but when we make them keep up with every absence, every day, it becomes too much.

The action research team developed a plan that involved teachers, counselors, administrators, parents, and community members. The responsibilities of all are detailed on the intervention charts. Balancing these responsibilities not only helped with burnout but also provided opportunities for team members to grow in areas they were not familiar.

Theme 3: Incentives for Students

One of the weaknesses revealed in our project was the lack of incentives for students at RHS. In our conversations, it was clear that the main incentive is strictly “having an opportunity to come to school.” This mindset has worked for RHS; however, it is no longer motivating enough to some students to just “come to school” and receive the reward of an education. Some students need something different and as a team we considered this when developing the student supports.

One team member spent a lot of time researching resources and incentives. She shared the following with the team:

There are a lot of really neat incentives that school are doing revolving around attendance. These programs are very organized, very well communicated, and have very clear expectations. We have to think outside the box and put a team together who is willing to think outside the box and get something going with fidelity.

The action research team recognized that there are additional incentives that need to be considered; however, for this project, those incentives could not be considered because they required financial resources that would have to be approved the Board of Education. Some of

these considerations included student attendance cards where points can be earned toward rewards like lunch, student athletic event passes, and free parking passes.

Summary of Findings for Research Question 2

The leadership teams at the district and school levels are accountable for ensuring teachers, students, and families have the tools and resources necessary to provide students with an opportunity for success. The action research team understood the importance of leadership support when developing the tiered intervention system of supports. Administrators from both the school and district level served on the action research team and shared the information with additional administrators across the school district. These three findings were integral to the development and will be even more important when full implementation begins.

Connection of Research Question 2 Findings to Theoretical Framework

Developing and implementing this system of supports required strategic planning and collaboration. The theoretical framework, while developed for the business world, stressed the importance of these importance characteristics when implementing change. Sustaining this system of supports will continue to take planning and problem solving with all stakeholders in order to maintain the level of support some students will need.

Research Question 3: Teachers Description of an Early Warning System

Theme 1: Importance of Support and Collaboration

When a ninth grade students transitions from middle school to high school, RHS staff have a basic level of knowledge about each student. The majority of this information does not come from personal understanding. Rather, the eighth grade teacher provides ninth grade administration and counselors with a recommendation form for courses. This is based off of

previous performance. The action research team agreed that developing a more personal understanding of each student needed to be added to the transition process.

One team member stated:

It would be really helpful if eighth grade teachers and counselors helped with incoming ninth graders. They know who we need to watch out for and who to target immediately at the beginning of the school year.

Another team member stated:

RHS special education teachers sit in on transition plan meetings with eighth grade teachers. This gives us an opportunity to know who is coming, what are their issues, how are their parents, what are their interactions with eighth grade teachers. This gives us an idea of who each student is.

The action research team discussed a process that included meetings, parent nights, and teacher collaboration sessions. Throughout this research process, the team has seen through research and practice that it is critical to intervene early with high school students. Taking this process from paper to practice will build a foundational relationship with parents and students before he or she ever begins ninth grade.

Theme 2: Importance of School/District Attendance Expectations

Throughout this study it was evident that the school district had not consistently enforced compulsory attendance requirements. While a process had been created, it was not being enforced or monitored. This process included everything from letters being sent home, parents being held accountable through an attendance review process, and students not being allowed to make up or complete work when absences were unexcused. One team member stated:

The state of Georgia has established a compulsory attendance law to support local school districts. We must evaluate our processes and procedures to ensure they are aligned to the law and the support it provides us.

The action research team has to further collaborate with district administration on the processes and procedures moving forward, but the problem was recognized and will hopefully be addressed.

Theme 3: Partnerships with the School, Family, and Community

This work took a team approach and required everyone, and will probably require more people, moving forward. Capitalizing off of the strong relationship between RHS and the community was vital when developing this tiered support system. Many of the identified at-risk students in this study had mentors or some other community organization support. The action research team unanimously agreed that we need to continue improving our relationships with families and community organizations in order to improve this identified weakness in our school district.

One team member stated:

Attendance is a risk factor for so many things. This includes mental health, problems at home, and school refusal.

The difficulty many students faced when returning from the COVID-19 shutdown had carryover effects into their daily lives. Over the past two school years, RHS has dealt with mental health, school avoidance, and problem behaviors that interfered with student attendance like never before. RHS holds true to its commitment with parents and community agencies and understands that it will take all of us to support students in this new day and age.

Summary of Findings for Research Question 3:

Teachers are on the frontlines when supporting students. They have to be supported and know that there are processes and procedures in place to support them. The RHS teachers who participated on this team felt supported at the school level, but expressed concerns that the district overlooked the attendance needs of the school. The teachers reiterated the need for accountability and believed that until this is in place then the problem will continue.

Connection of Research Question 3 Findings to Theoretical Framework

Relationships are at the core of the theoretical framework. The relationship between school staff, administrators, and community organizations is critical when implementing a new system of supports that address the needs of the whole child. The majority of the time it is the teacher who identifies the need for an intervention. The relationship between the teacher and student is integral when implementing an intervention. In contrast, the teacher must have a strong relationship with the administration to ensure they have the necessary materials and support to provide the intervention. Once an intervention is individualized at the tier-three level, the school, family, and possible community organization must have a strong relationship in order further support the student.

Chapter Summary

This chapter summarized the findings of the action research project. The researcher identified three themes for each research question. Additionally, the researcher connected the research findings to the theoretical framework. The following chapter provides additional information related to the findings.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this study was to develop a targeted support structure to support at-risk ninth grade SWD. The research was guided by the following research questions:

1. How does the action research team describe the process of designing and implementing an early warning system support structure for at-risk ninth grade SWD?
2. How can school leaders support the process of designing and implementing an early warning system support structure for at-risk ninth grade SWD?
3. How do teachers describe the impact of an early warning system support structure for at-risk ninth grade SWD?

This chapter provides a summary of the findings, connections to the literature, study limitations, and implications for practitioners, policy makers, and future researchers.

Summary of the Findings

This study addressed a significant need at RHS. The research team identified three themes for each research question. Additionally, findings related to the literature were identified. This study, while limited to the 2021-2022 school year, provided an opportunity for district and school level staff to restructure MTSS processes and procedures at RHS.

Prior to this study, student attendance data analysis was not prioritized. Discussions among the action research team found that since student achievement results and overall graduation rates were consistently among the top in the state of Georgia, the district did not notice a problem with student attendance. Since 2016, the gap between SWD attendance for

RHS and other high performing school districts was disproportionate as compared to other subgroups.

Clearly defined tiered interventions for supporting student attendance and other important factors that impacted attendance were developed for the targeted subgroup of ninth grade SWD. The action research team built upon the recently implemented “ABCS” data collection procedure. This study created the necessary momentum to support all students at RHS and it is expected that implementing the developed interventions will become a consistent practice.

Major Findings Related to Research Questions

Findings Related to Research Question 1

Implementing change at RHS had to be strategic and collaborative. Based on the data gathered, the action research team found that teacher buy-in, data driven decision making, and a clearly defined MTSS process were necessary for implementing the support structure for SWD. The team spent a large majority of the first semester clearly defining a process that met the needs of RHS while carefully acknowledging teacher and staff responsibilities that have been impacted as a result of COVID-19.

Teachers and staff at RHS were familiar with previous MTSS procedures but had very limited knowledge of student attendance data. The action research team had to share the attendance data with teachers in order to provide them with a clear understanding of the problem. Doing so, strengthened the partnership between the data team and teachers which assisted with teacher buy-in when implementing the interventions. The action research team had to consider members of the MTSS team that were historically overlooked. This study required counselors to be a part of the MTSS team.

The action research team worked to consider all of the factors that impacted or were impacted by student attendance. These included course completion, discipline, and social-emotional needs. The action research team felt confident in the system of supports developed for attendance, course completion, and discipline. Developing a system of support for social-emotional needs was difficult simply due to the vast majority of social-emotional needs exhibited by students. Most of these needs really require an individualized intervention and clearly defining that intervention was almost impossible.

Findings Related to Research Question 2

Implementation of the developed tiered-interventions was a collaborative effort that required a shared interest between all stakeholders. The action research team identified one of the assistant principals to lead this work because of her knowledge and relationship with the school. As detailed throughout this study, implementing change at RHS is difficult, but involving a highly respected leader who had the ability to gain buy-in and distribute leadership responsibilities was necessary for implementation.

Incentivizing students for good attendance was not part of the processes and procedures at RHS prior to this study. The action research team determined that school leaders need to embed student incentives into the tiered-interventions. These incentives will need to be continually revisited and refined, but documenting on the tiered-intervention charts and providing training to teachers and staff was a great start before full implementation.

Findings Related to Research Question 3

The action research team found inconsistencies with the school districts attendance expectations. While processes and procedures were written in board policy and student handbooks, they were rarely followed in each school. The action research team shared this

information with district administrators and felt confident that the processes and procedures would be reviewed, revised if needed, and then followed.

Overall, the school district has a strong relationship with the community and families. The action research team found that when a student requires an individualized intervention it is important to involve the student's family and/or community resources in order to support the identified need. Involving community partners and resources in our schools has been a goal of the school district over the past few years and this is one way to support that district goal.

Major Findings Related to the Literature Reviewed

The action research team found that developing and implementing interventions required a team approach. Starting with the importance of developing relationships in tier-one to involving parents, administrators, and community resources in tier-three, the developed interventions require a team of professionals who have knowledge of the problem and an ability to develop and sustain a positive relationship with the student. Reigeluth (1999) found that collaborative problem-solving cultivates supportive, respectful relationships among learners. As described in the CPS in chapter two, there needs to be a shared understanding of the problem, appropriate actions must be taken to solve the problem, and organization of the team must be established and maintained to reach a solution.

This study supported the conclusions determined by Gottfried (2019) that greater number of school absences are linked to falling behind in coursework, having lower grades, and having behavioral issues. The action research team found similarities between absences and failed courses in cycle two. Three out of ten students who were failing courses were also absent at least 20% of the school days during the measured period of time. The other seven students missed very few days and were not failing any classes.

Hill & Flores (2014) found that PBIS improves the likelihood that students will engage in behavior that is effective, efficient, relevant, functional, and socially appropriate. The action research team found that one missing piece of a solid PBIS model at RHS was the ability for students to earn incentives. The team found that historically the incentive for coming to school was coming to school. Building from the PBIS framework, the team worked to embed incentives into the tiered intervention model; however, the team also understood that more investigation was necessary to build more incentives into the interventions.

Limitations of the Current Study

In March of 2020 the educational landscape of RCS shifted from face-to-face to virtual instruction. This instructional shift created challenges our school district had never experienced. While our school district returned to face-to-face instruction in July of 2020, the impact the pandemic had on student attendance was significant. Attendance was impacted by a significant amount of quarantines and exposures. Also, throughout the school year parents made tough decisions to keep children home due to factors beyond the school's control such as it being in the best interest of the family.

The study was also limited in scope. RCS is a small school district located outside of a large city in the southeastern part of the United States. There is only one high school in the district and within the school only one grade level of SWD was represented in this study. Replicating this study in a larger, more diverse school district would allow for a larger scale for data analysis the potential for findings that are more generalizable to other contexts.

While MTSS has been a buzz-word within education over the past several years, it is relatively new to the practices and procedures at RHS. Another limitation was that the majority of staff had a limited understanding of MTSS as a whole. Replicating this study in a school with

a stronger understanding of MTSS would allow the opportunity for conversations of greater depth and detail. This in turn could lead to stronger, more detailed interventions.

Implications and Recommendations for Practitioners

This study provided a structure for supporting student attendance at RHS. Evaluating student attendance also required a review of individual student performance in courses, discipline history, and other identified social-emotional needs. The action research team identified these three areas as the most prominent to interfere or become impacted by student attendance. The findings of this study could enhance the MTSS practices of schools and districts who are still in the beginning stages of MTSS implementation.

As a district level administrator, I have a close relationship with other district level administrators within my area. There are regular communications between the school districts regarding MTSS and strengthening these practices at the middle and high school levels. This study could be extended into neighboring school districts to support the development or strengthening of MTSS practices at the high school level.

One unexpected finding of the team was the overwhelming stress teachers face in light of coming out of the pandemic. It is important for practitioners to have an understanding of the time and energy teachers are expending to meet the needs of students and families. In RCS, this has led to increase stress and some feelings of inadequacy simply due to the number of needs that have to be met. The role of teachers in implementing a new initiative or adding to the other has to be carefully considered and measured as to not impact teacher effectiveness.

Implications and Recommendations for Researchers

The pandemic has significantly changed the public educational landscape across the nation. Completing this study at the beginning of a once in a lifetime pandemic created many

challenges. Obtaining a clear measurement for student attendance was difficult because of the number of student absences that were COVID-19 related. Future researchers might want to investigate the impact of a targeted support structure once absences related to COVID-19 significantly decrease.

The subgroup for this study was ninth grade SWD. Future researchers might expand this subgroup across other subgroups and/or grade levels. Expanding the sample size could provide data that larger school districts or schools with a larger subgroup or student population could use when implementing a similar targeted support structure for at-risk students. Also, extending the direct implementation of the intervention, as the action research team completed in cycle two, would give a researcher another data set that could be used to show the impact when implemented for a longer amount of time.

Implications and Recommendations for Policy Makers

Addressing the multitude of needs for SWD has been and will continue to be important in school districts across the country. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a significant increase in the amount of regression and learning loss among this subgroup. Schools must be provided the fiscal support to maintain or improve the level of support especially in the light of the pandemic. Policy makers will need to continue working with state, local, and federal governments to improve special education funding for school districts.

While funding will be critical to address learning loss, policy makers have to deal with the long term educational effects of COVID-19. From observations and discussions with other leaders, school districts are seeing a significant increase in negative behaviors, social-emotional concerns, and trauma. All of these are in addition to the increase in student absences. The long term impacts of these will be significant because each one of these only adds to the amount of

time a student misses instruction. Policy makers are going to have to work closely with school districts and provide support in these areas.

Chapter Summary and Final Thoughts

This chapter provided a summary of the findings related to the research questions and literature, limitations of the study, and implications for practitioners, researchers, and policy makers. Developing this tiered support structure in light of a pandemic was an incredible accomplishment by the action research team. The team was committed to developing a system of supports to ultimately improve outcomes for the students at RHS.

The action research team determined that supporting student attendance also required support in one or more of the following areas: course completion, behavior, and/or social-emotional support. The action research team found that implementing this support structure required teacher buy-in and transparency when sharing attendance data. This action research project will assist as RHS continues to evaluate practices and procedures to improve student outcomes. The researcher and action research team will continue to improve this process and hopefully expand it across grade levels and then to other schools throughout the school district.

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**Appendix A
University of Georgia
Consent Form**

**UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
CONSENT FORM
THE IMPACT OF AN EARLY WARNING SYSTEM SUPPORT STRUCTURE FOR AT-
RISK NINTH GRADE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

You are being asked to take part in a research study. The information in this form will help you decide if you want to be in the study. Please ask the researcher(s) below if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.

Principal Investigator: Dr. Jami Berry
UGA EDAP
jamiberry@uga.edu

Co-Investigator: Trevor Metzger
UGA EDAP
trevor.metzger@uga.edu

The purpose of the study is to learn more about the impact student discipline, social-emotional learning, and family-community relationships have on student attendance for students with disabilities (SWD) at JHS. SWD at JHS have a significantly higher percentage of students absent 6 or more days as compared to similar, high-performing school districts. Utilizing an action research design, the action research design and implementation teams will evaluate data and implement interventions that will hopefully lead to positive outcomes for SWD. This action research study will be guided by the following questions:

1. How does the action research team describe the process of designing and implementing an early warning system support structure for at-risk ninth grade SWD?
2. How can school leaders support the process of designing and implementing an early warning system support structure for at-risk ninth grade SWD?
3. How do teachers describe the impact of an early warning system support structure for at-risk ninth grade SWD?

You are being invited to be in this research study because of your involvement with SWD at JHS. The other members of the action research design and implementation teams are district special education administration, student support services coordinator, one assistant principal, all JHS school counselors, and all special education teachers at JHS. This study will last approximately 18 weeks and the total estimated duration of participation is 18 hours. While your level of interaction differs, your impact and ability to make a difference is significant.

If you agree to participate in this study:

- We will evaluate special education attendance data as reported by the Governor's Office of Student Achievement, evaluate responses of semi-structured interviews from action research design team members, develop and implement interventions around the areas of discipline, social-emotional learning, and family-community relationships.
- As a part of the action research design team, we will ask you to participate in a pre and post semi-structured interview. Each interview will take about 30 minutes. These interviews will not be recorded, but notes will be taken only for the purpose of this study. The action research team will also meet monthly for up to one hour in order to discuss the implementation of the interventions. The initial meeting will also include developing a presentation to deliver to the action research implementation team.
- As a part of the action research implementation team, we will ask you to implement a targeted intervention focused on student discipline and family-community relationships. The implementation of these interventions will take up to 30 minutes per week. Additionally, we will meet monthly for up to one hour to discuss the implementation of the interventions.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to take part or stop at any time without penalty. Your choice of whether or not to participate in this research will have no effect on your employment, your performance evaluations, or your relationship with Jefferson City Schools.

Your responses may help us determine why SWD have a significantly higher absentee rate than SWD in other comparable school districts. Additionally, the interventions may have a positive impact that could support students across our school district.

We will take steps to protect your privacy, but there is a small risk that your information could be accidentally disclosed to people not connected to the research. To reduce this risk we will not directly identify you in this study. All participants, school name, location, and any other identifying information will be replaced with pseudonyms. For example, Jefferson High School will be identified as Richardson High School in this study. We will only keep information that could identify you in a secure location until the study is completed.

Even though the investigator will emphasize to all participants that comments made during the group sessions should be kept confidential, it is possible that participants may repeat comments outside of the group at some time in the future.

The information in this study will not be used or distributed for future research.

Please feel free to ask questions about this research at any time. You can contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. Jami Berry at 404-668-5106, jami berry@uga.edu. If you have any complaints or questions about your rights as a research volunteer, contact the IRB at 706-542-3199 or by email at IRB@uga.edu.

If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below:

Name of Researcher

Signature

Date

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Please keep one copy and return the signed copy to the researcher.

Appendix B

Action Research Team Interviews

Research Questions	Individual Interview Questions (Pre)	Individual Interview Questions (Post)	Analysis
<p>Research Question 1</p> <p>How does the action research team describe the process of designing and implementing an early warning system support structure for at-risk ninth grade SWD?</p>	<p>1. What is your role in supporting SWD at RHS?</p> <p>2. What do you see as barriers for SWD at RHS?</p> <p>3. What supports are in place (either schoolwide or within the classroom) to support ninth grade students who have either attendance, behavior, discipline, or social-emotional concerns?</p>	<p>1. How can problem-solving teams address other barriers that impact ninth grade SWD student success at RHS?</p>	<p>Coding for trends and themes</p>
<p>Research Question 2</p> <p>How can school leaders support the process of designing and implementing an early warning system support structure for at-risk ninth grade SWD?</p>	<p>1. What current support systems are in place to support at-risk ninth grade SWD and their teachers?</p> <p>2. How do you think the school or district could better support at-risk ninth grade SWD at RHS?</p> <p>3. How do you think the school or district could better support teachers or at-risk ninth grade SWD?</p>	<p>1. Based on the findings, what supports do school and district leaders need to provide in order to support at-risk ninth grade SWD?</p>	<p>Coding for trends and themes</p>
<p>Research Question 3</p> <p>How do teachers describe the impact of an early warning system support structure for at-risk ninth grade SWD?</p>	<p>1. How do you view the teacher's role in supporting at-risk ninth grade SWD?</p> <p>2. How do you view the counselor's role in supporting at-risk ninth grade SWD?</p>	<p>1. How can the findings support teachers in supporting at-risk ninth grade SWD?</p> <p>2. How can the findings support counselors in supporting at-risk ninth grade SWD attendance?</p>	<p>Coding for trends and themes</p>

Adapted from deMarrais, K. 2/20

Appendix C

Meeting 1 Agenda

Action Research Implementation Team

Agenda

1. Welcome & Thank You
2. Overview of the Action Research Project
 - a. Data Driven
 - Data summary
 - b. Design Team
 - c. Implementation Team
 - Two Cycles: October 25 – November 19; November 29 – January 19
3. ABCS Data
 - a. Current process
 - b. What is an Early Warning System?
 - c. Focus group (9th grade SWD)
 - d. Early Warning System Support Structure
 - Tier One, Tier Two, and Tier Three in all four areas
 - What could this look like?
4. Road Map
 - a. Develop EWS (Cycle 1)
 - b. Current Caseload
 - c. Utilize FIRE
 - d. Surveys – Will send soon
4. Ticket out the Door

Appendix D
Meeting 2 Agenda

Action Research Implementation Team

Agenda

1. AR Team Members
2. Ticket out the Door Data
 - a. Attendance, SEL, Behavior, Course Completion
2. What does research say?
 - a. Tiered Interventions
 - b. EWI Spreadsheet
 - c. National High School Center
3. What's next?

Appendix E
Meeting 3 Agenda

Action Research Implementation Team

Agenda

1. Complete Tier Charts (Attendance, Behavior, Course Completion, Social-Emotional Learning)

Appendix F
Meeting 4 Agenda

Action Research Implementation Team

Agenda

1. Continue Completion of Tier Charts (Attendance, Behavior, Course Completion, Social-Emotional Learning)

- Review information entered for Attendance and Behavior
- Determine information that needs to be considered for Course Completion and SEL

*Review SEL Article

Appendix G
Meeting 5 Agenda

Action Research Implementation Team

Agenda

1. Continue Completion of Tier Charts (Attendance, Behavior, Course Completion, Social-Emotional Learning)

Appendix H
Meeting 6 Agenda

Action Research Implementation Team

Agenda

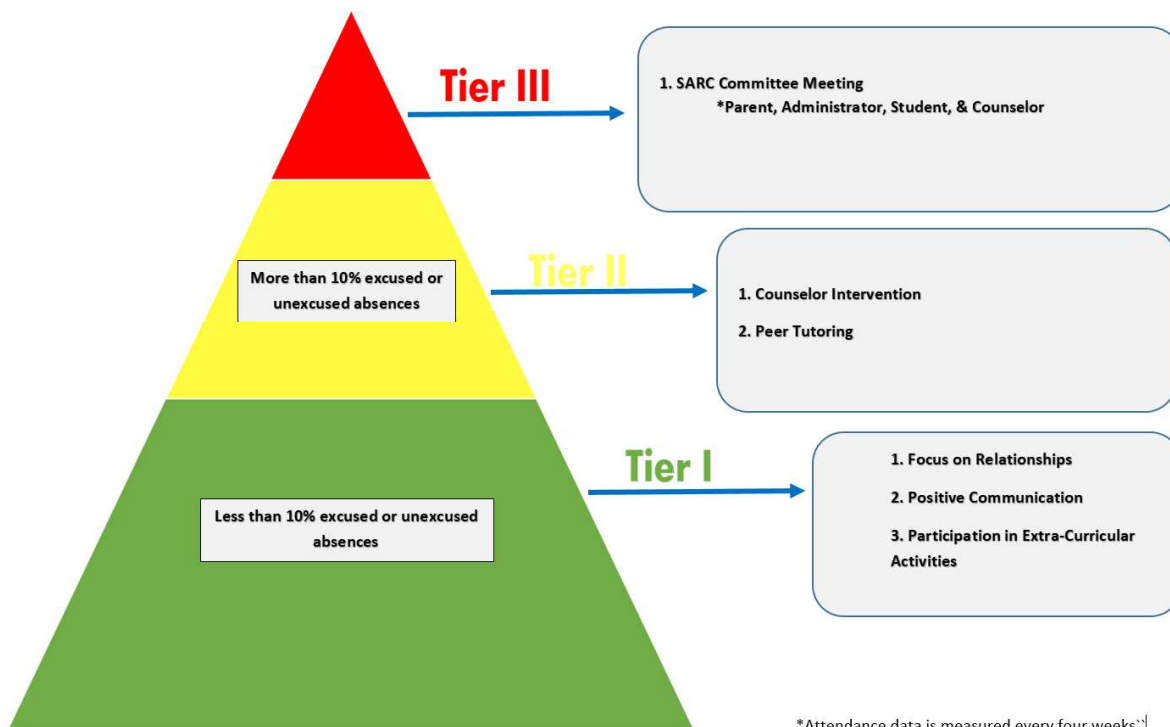
1. Review Tier Charts
2. Define Individualized Academic Plan
3. Review Student Data

Total of 10 ninth Grade SWD

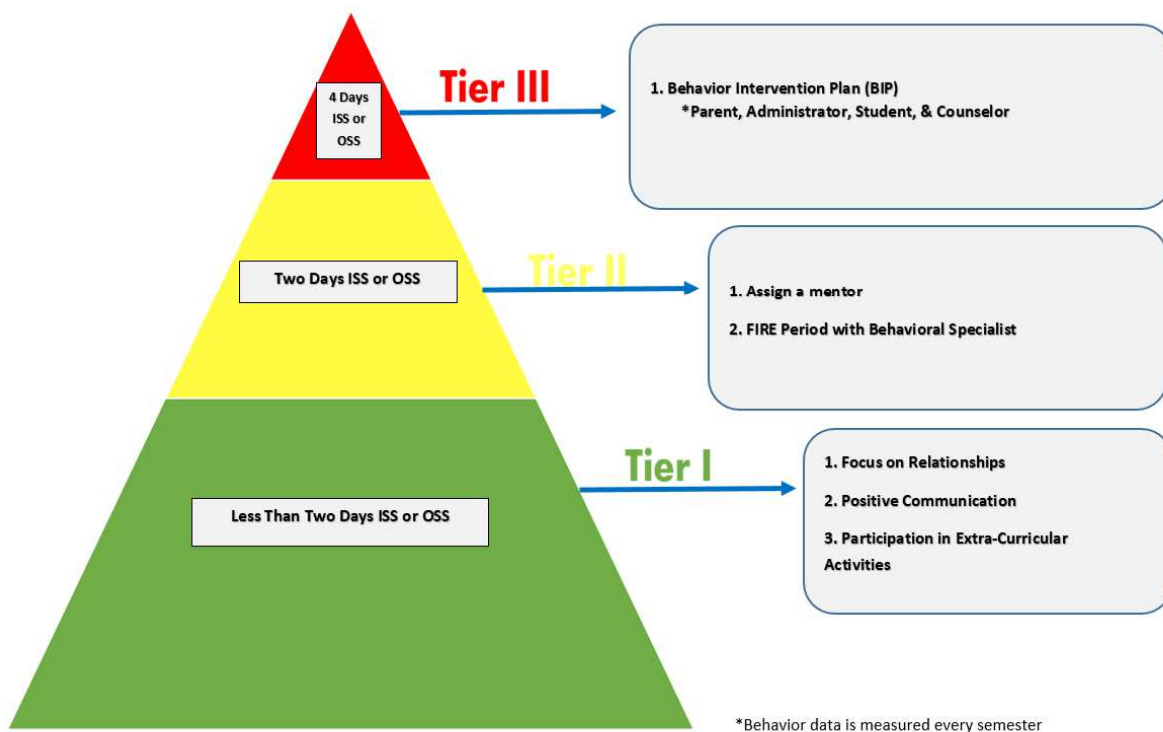
4. Determine Intervention Plan for Identified Students
5. Ticket out the Door

Appendix I Tiered Intervention Charts

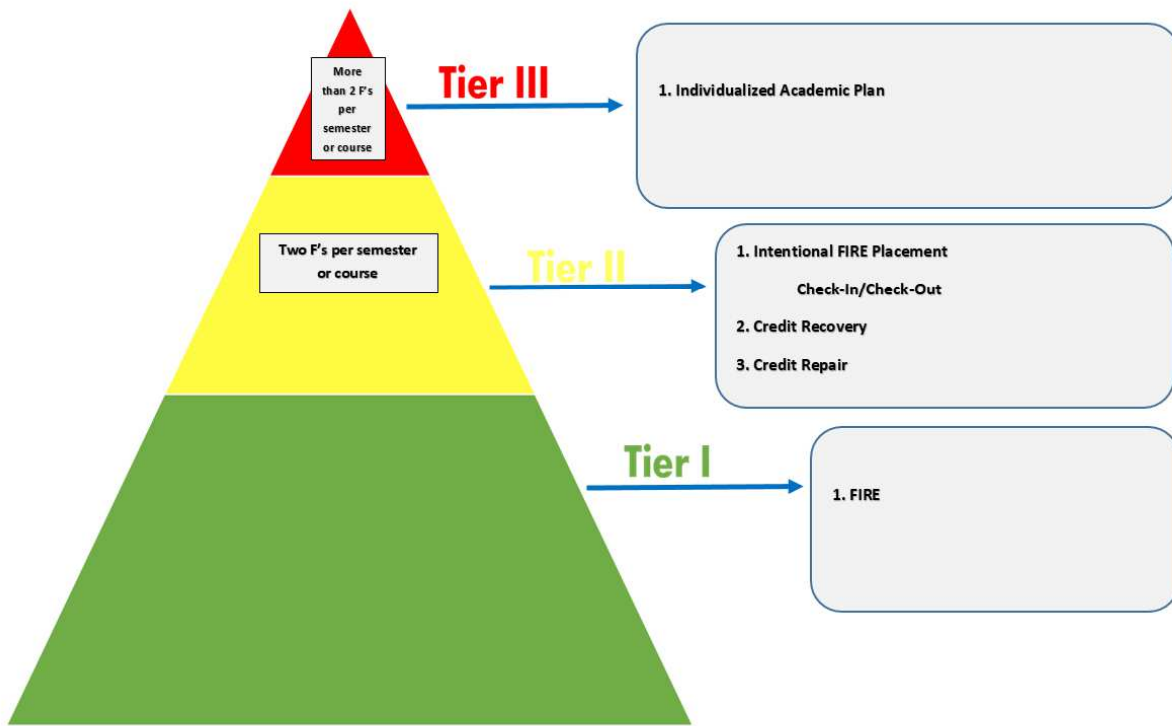
Attendance



Behavior



Course Completion



Social-Emotional Learning

