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Freshman Transition and the Effect of RTI Programming on Academic Performance

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Acknowledgements

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract

There is an epidemic of high school non-completion in the United States, leaving non-graduates at a significant disadvantage financially, emotionally, and socially. Academic performance in ninth grade is a critical predictor of high school completion, however, achievement loss is common in 9th grade. In addition to increased academic demands, Freshmen face unique developmental, social and emotional challenges. Educators recently developed Response to Intervention (RTI): systematic programming to address students' educational and behavioral needs. RTI delivers services via three tiers, which increase respectively in their intensity of support. This quantitative study focused on one high school's implementation of RTI to freshmen to address their academic needs and minimize achievement loss. The researcher examined the correlation between RTI and academic performance by comparing GPAs of at-risk students enrolled in RTI to those who would have been eligible last year, prior to the program's implementation. Results showed that the GPAs of students enrolled in RTI displayed significantly less of an achievement loss than at-risk students, who were not enrolled in the program the year before, therefore suggesting that the RTI program was effective in improving academic performance of freshmen.

The Importance of Successful Freshman Transition and the Effect of RTI Programming on

Academic Performance

Graduation rates in United States' public schools are dismal, with some states' graduation

rates as low as 40% (Fields, 2005). Disaggregated data shows that minority students lag

significantly behind in on-time graduation, at about only 50%, while their White and Asian

American peers graduate receive diplomas in four years at least 75%. Non-graduation leads to

several problems later in life such as unemployment, poverty, decreased earning power,

incarceration, and reliance on public assistance, creating a financial burden for taxpayers (U.S.

Department of Education, 2010; Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin & Palma, 2011). Individuals

without high school diplomas also face emotional difficulties and are more likely to suffer from

depression (Helfin & Iceland, 2009) and substance abuse disorders (Henkel, 2011). Considering

the serious repercussions that come with non-graduation, educators are working to reform

schools to keep students on track.

Academic achievement in freshman year of high school is a reliable predictor of future

high school completion (Fields, 2005; Langenkamp, 2010, Neild, Stoner-Eb, & Furstenberg,

2008). Almost all students, regardless of achievement level, experience a drop in GPA upon

entrance to ninth grade (Barone, Augirre-Deandreis, & Edison, 1991), which suggests that

additional support is needed for all students during this transition. Risk of dropout increases by

33% for every class a student fails (Seidman, 1994).

Much of the ninth grade academic decline that occurs can be attributed to unsuccessful

transition to high school. Students enter a new environment, struggle with more difficult classes

with higher expectations, have to and navigate a new social scene with more freedom (Akos &

Galassi, 2004). They are more likely to be truant and disengaged, further distancing them from

their increasingly difficult studies (Pellerin, 2005; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000).

Regardless of these obstacles, students report that they want to succeed (Somers, Owens, &

Piliawsky, 2009). Success can be made possible with support from school professionals (Falbo &

Amador, 2001; Langenkamp, 2009; Newman, Lohman, Newman, Myers, & Smith, 2000) and

families (Barone et al, 1991; Falbo & Amador, 2001; Gutman & Midgley, 2000).

Educators have the task of creating systematic change for the betterment of their students.

Response to Intervention (RTI) refers broadly to data-driven, methodical programming designed

to close achievement disparity and attending to students' educational and behavioral needs (New

York State Education Department, 2010). RTI groups students by three tiers. The levels increase

in level of support, respectively. Tier I should reach 100% of students, and the intervention alone

should sufficiently support at least 80% of those students. Tiers II and III consist of about 5-10%

and 1-5% of students, in that order, who require additional resources and support. RTI is

comprehensive in nature, and involves all school faculty to collaborate.

School counselors play an essential role in the implementation of RTI, as they are trained

in communication, collaboration, leadership and data analysis (ASCA, 2005). Counselors have a

professional duty to provide *all* students with curriculum designed to address their academic,

career and personal-social needs, and to advocate for students who are struggling (ASCA, 2008).

The purpose of the current study was to measure the effectiveness of an RTI initiative to

support academically at-risk freshmen in its pilot year. The research questions were:

1) How did the GPAs of the entire 2011-2012 freshman class compare to the GPAs of the entire

2012-2013 freshman class?

2) How did the GPAs of RTI-Enrolled 2012-2013 freshman compare with the GPAs of the entire

2012-2013 class?

3) How did the GPAs of RTI-Eligible 2011-2012 freshman compare with the GPAs of the entire 2011-2012 freshmen class?

4) How did the GPAs of Not-RTI-Eligible 2011-2012 freshman compare with the GPAs of Not-RTI-Enrolled 2012-2013 freshman?

5) How did the GPAs of RTI-eligible 2011-2012 freshman compare with RTI-enrolled 2012-2013 freshman?

At the time of data collection, April 2013, Quarter 4 GPA data from 2012-2013 school year was unavailable, thus it could not be compared to Quarter 4 GPA data from the 2011-2012 school year. Also due to the date of data collection, true end-of-year (i.e. June 2013) cumulative GPA for the 2012-2013 school year was also unavailable, and Cumulative GPA from April 2013 was used in its place. Therefore, this research examines only 8 months of 2012-2013 RTI-enrolled students' GPA and does not fully describe the nature of their academic advancement.

School counselors have an ethical obligation to be involved in the academic, career, and personal-social development of students (ASCA, 2010). The RTI program, examined in this study, identified at-risk students and provided a systematic way to provide them with support. Data collection and accountability are an essential part of the counselor's role in ensuring effectiveness (ASCA, 2010). This study identified how school counselors participated in an RTI program. Additional recommendations are offered as a result of the study findings.

Review of the Literature

Nationwide, it is estimated that only 60% of America's youth graduate high school on time (Fields, 2005). In 2010, 7.4% of 16 to 24 year olds in the United States either dropped out of high school or did not receive a high school degree or GED (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). African American and Hispanic males represent a disproportionate percentage of this population (10% and 18%, respectively). Twenty-five percent of boys and 39% of girls who did not graduate from high school are living in poverty, and half of those are unemployed (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Nearly 10% of non-graduates collect public assistance and 33% receive food stamps (Sum et al., 2011). People who have dropped out of high school pay less in taxes than they receive in assistance from the government, making their net contribution -$1,510 as opposed to +$5,020 for high school graduates.

Men who dropped out of high school earned less than men who have a high school degree. In 2009, men who did not graduate from high school only made $28,000 per year, whereas those with a high school degree made an average of $39,000, and those who held a bachelor's degree earned $62,000 (U. S. Department of Education, 2010). Less than half the students who had dropped out of high school have become homeowners (Sum et al., 2011).

In addition to poverty, decreased earning power, and dependence on governmental assistance, 15% of all male non-graduates and 30% of African American male non-graduates were incarcerated. The cost of housing a prisoner for 1 year is $60,000 (Hendrichson & Delaney, 2011), whereas the cost of educating a student for 1 year is only about $10,694 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Given the costs, high school non-graduation presents challenges on a societal and individual level.

It has been established that people who do not graduate from high school have decreased chances of employment. Long-term unemployment is significantly related to increased incidences of major depressive episodes (Hämäläinen, et al., 2005). Poverty and major depressive disorders are strongly correlated (Heflin & Iceland, 2009). People who are unemployed are more likely to suffer from alcohol and drug dependence, and to smoke cigarettes (Henkel, 2011). Furthermore, it has been documented that people who do not graduate from high school are more likely to be incarcerated. Incarceration is associated with lack of social contact, loneliness, and low self-efficacy (Friestad & Hansen, 2005). These individuals have trouble setting and meeting goals, and lack resilience.

Failing to Negotiate the Transition to High School

It is well documented that academic performance in ninth grade is a critical and significant predictor of high school graduation (Fields, 2005; Langenkamp, 2010; Neild et al., 2008). Students, who are not promoted past freshman year on time, are five times more likely not to graduate (Fields, 2005). Achievement loss (grade point average decrease) in ninth grade was a predictor of dropping out of high school (Langenkamp, 2010). Specifically, ninth grade individual course failure had a positive correlation to school both disengagement and non-graduation (Neild et al., 2008).

Academic Decline in 9th grade

Academic decline in ninth grade can be predicted by previous failure. Research has shown that low academic achievement (Belfanz, Herzog & Mac Iver, 2007; Benner & Graham, 2009; Langenkamp, 2010; Neild et al., 2008), grade level retention (Belfonz et al., 2007; Weiss & Baker-Smith, 2010), low attendance (Belfanz et al., 2007; Neild et al, 2008), and behavioral issues (Belfanz et al., 2007) in middle school were significant indicators of ninth grade course

failure. These findings exemplify the importance of collaboration with middle school staff to identify at-risk students upon their entrance to high school.

It has been established that poor academic performance in 9th grade predicts non-graduation (Langenkamp, 2010, Neild et al., 2008). This problem is common, as 75% of students moving up to ninth grade saw their grade point averages drop an average of .29 points, from a 2.58 to a 2.19 (Barone, et al., 1991). Twenty percent of these students dropped a full letter grade. Even students who had stable academic grades in middle school experienced a significant decrease in academic grades in grades 9 and 10 (Benner & Graham, 2009). For each class a student failed, the risk of dropping out increased by one-third (Seidman et al., 1994). Students who had repeated a grade level were at a higher risk for dropping out as well.

Transition to Ninth Grade

Contrary to the widespread problem of achievement loss in ninth grade, students have reported that they want to succeed (Somers et al., 2009). In one study, almost all at-risk ninth graders indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed with wanting to finish high school and avoid misbehavior. Students also reported that they understood the importance of education in fulfilling personal and financial goals. In spite of their struggles with transition, ninth graders identified having more freedom, making new friends, participating in extracurricular activities, and attending school events as the most positive parts of high school (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Before ninth graders can feel confident in the transition, they must overcome several hurdles: (a) time management, (b) higher academic expectations, (c) attendance, (d) freedom, (e) environmental change, (f) stress, (h) weak study skills, (i) social adaptation.

Time management. Students from a suburban district reported that one of the hardest challenges they faced was time management (Letrello & Miles, 2003). Specifically, they reported having less time to socialize.

Higher academic expectations. Higher expectations take the form of more homework and more difficult classes. Students reported having more homework each night (Letrello & Miles, 2003). This is especially problematic as students' motivation to complete homework decreases from eighth to ninth grade (Otis, Grouzet & Pelletier, 2005).

Half of students from an urban district reported academic challenges in their first year of high school (Newman et al., 2000). Students found it hard to fulfill the higher expectations of teachers (Letrello & Miles, 2003) and reported difficulty in striving for good grades (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Urban students reported that they experienced an increase in difficulty of classes (Newman et al., 2000). When polled on reasons for not performing well academically, 36% of students replied that they did not study enough, and 32% had problems with teachers (Newman et al., 2000). About 25% reported that skipping class was to blame. Other factors included too large of a workload, boredom, and a lack of determination. Academic distress predicted lower grades after 1 year, and a decrease in academic self-esteem 2 years later (Roeser et al., 2000). Conversely, students who had higher perceptions of their own academic competence had higher GPAs (Gutman & Midgely, 2000).

Attendance. Attendance declined significantly in 65% of students upon entrance to high school (Barone et al., 1991). Absences increased on average from 8 to 10 days per year from eighth to ninth grade, respectively. Absences continued to increase throughout the course of freshman year by two days, on average, from the first to second semester of ninth grade (Barone et al., 1991). De Wit, Karioja, and Rye (2010) found that absences increased by a half day per

six-month period. Boys tended to miss more school than girls (De Wit et al., 2010). Strictness

on attendance policy also increased in high school, and absences led to course failure (Smith,

Akos, Lim, & Wiley, 2008).

Freedom. Freedom can be construed as a positive or negative force. Ninth graders from

an urban district reported their perception that school staff did not care if they skipped class or

did not do their homework (Newman et al., 2000). They reported a difference in their teachers'

attitudes about work completion. In eighth grade, teachers insisted work was handed in; in ninth

grade, "…they don't really ask you….Then at the end of the quarter you say oops! If you're

behind, you're behind" (Newman et al., 2000, p. 395). Students reported that they received the

message that, "absences just don't matter," and "…if you want to cut, go ahead; it's not hurting

me, it's hurting you" (Newman et al., 2000, p. 394-395).

Environmental change. Students reported struggling with navigating a larger building

(Akos & Galassi, 2004; Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005; Letrello & Miles, 2003). Freshmen suggested,

in hindsight, that having more thorough tours of the building would have been helpful to their

transition (Akos & Galassi, 2004). The experience of high school is clearly different than the

experience of middle school. The building is generally larger and students have more choices

and opportunities for interesting classes (Butts & Cruziero, 2005), and more freedom (Letrello &

Miles, 2003). Other environmental changes include:

1. Block scheduling. Students from a suburban district reported that the hardest

   challenges they faced were time management and getting used to block scheduling

   (Letrello & Miles, 2003).

2. Extracurricular activities. There are more extracurricular activities availability in

   high school than in middle school (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Letrello & Miles, 2003).

3.   More teachers. Students reported that they received less support from their

teachers and 32% had problems with teachers (Newman et al., 2000).

4.   More variation. For example, students vary from class to class. Friends from 8th

grade may be in different classes. The classmates in English are different from those

in Global History. Students reported struggling with having classes without their

friends (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005).

Stress. Students experienced increased stress due to academic and social challenges

during their transition to high school (Talmi, 2002). Students with higher levels of life event

stress, such as divorce or the birth of a sibling, reported lower levels of satisfaction with school

and had more trouble transitioning than students who reported no major life changes (Barone et

al., 1991).

Weak study skills. High school courses cover a heavier content load than middle school

classes, and require students to have more advanced study skills and habits (Fulk, 2003).

Students especially struggled with note taking, allotting enough time to study for a test,

organizing academic material, and coping with test anxiety. Freshmen reported that they

struggled with study skills and that they would advise upcoming eighth graders to be prepared to

practice adequate study skills and complete assignments on time (Akos & Galassi, 2004).

Social adaptation. Students reported struggling with having classes without their friends

(Akos & Galassi, 2004; Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005), not making friends, and being among older

students (Letrello & Miles, 2003). Students in urban settings reported an increased exposure to

risky behaviors factors such as drugs, gangs, drinking, sex, and peer pressure (Newman et al.,

2000). These factors have led to emotional distress. Emotional distress is directly related to

misbehavior in school, such as truancy, fighting, or theft (Roeser et al., 2000).

To avoid these negative outcomes, freshmen students recommended that upcoming freshmen embrace new opportunities and people, and get involved in clubs and activities (Akos & Galassi, 2004). They also suggested having high school students speak to the middle school students about their first hand experiences.

Emotional challenges related to the aforementioned

Not only did freshmen face traditional difficulties like getting lost or struggling with harder classes, but they faced social and emotional challenges as well. Anxiety and loneliness (Brenner & Graham, 2009), low emotional intelligence (Parker et al., 2004; Qualter, Whitely, Hutchinson, & Pope, 2007), and economic disadvantages (Seidman et al., 1994) were associated with having a negative impact on the transition to ninth grade.

Anxiety and loneliness. Anxiety and loneliness decreased as students progressed through middle school, yet after the transition to high school, anxiety increased (Benner & Graham, 2009). Some level of anxiety is vital to the transition to high school because it provides the student an opportunity to develop coping skills (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008). Students, however, must be provided with a supportive environment to accomplish this task. Immaturity or low emotional intelligence can exacerbate both anxiety and loneliness.

Emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence (EI) is a concept that captures how students thrive in the following areas: interpersonal relationships, intrapersonal relationships, stress and anxiety management, mood, and flexibility regarding their environment (Qualter et al., 2007). Compared to sophomores, juniors and seniors, freshmen scored significantly lower on interpersonal and intrapersonal scales, and had lower total EI. High levels of EI have appeared to serve as a protective shield against the difficulties of transition for ninth graders (Qualter et al., 2007). Students who performed better academically also had higher levels of total and

individual measures of EI (Parker et al., 2004). There was a significant positive relationship

between students' EI and their ability to manage the transition to high school (Qualter et al.,

2007). Teens with high and average EI received higher academic grades than those with lower

EI scores.

Students with high EI also had fewer behavior referrals and higher feelings of self-worth

than their lower-EI counterparts. Students with a baseline low EI level benefited from psycho-

educational activities around friendships, bullying, and emotions. Students with higher EI also

reported higher scores of scholastic self-esteem and higher belief in their athletic ability. That is,

the more emotional intelligence students had, the more they felt capable of completing their tasks

at school.

Economic disadvantage. High school transition affected the self-system in economically

disadvantaged students (Seidman et al., 1994). Financially struggling students often experienced

a decrease in self-esteem, social support, and extracurricular activities. Students in this study

also expressed an increase in school difficulties, which may have led them to feel devalued in

school. Such stress on the self-system can damage school engagement.

School engagement. School engagement is defined as: the belief that students are

learning, a high level of interest in school subjects, a high level of enjoyment regarding school,

and a sufficient amount of effort put forth (Neild et al., 2008). Conversely, disengagement is

defined by behaviors, such as: skipping class, tardiness, coming to class unprepared, and not

completing homework (Pellerin, 2005). Students who reported being more engaged in school in

eighth grade were less likely to drop out of high school (Roeser et al., 2000). Engagement in

school was positively related to the following: ability to complete work, understanding the long-

term purpose of schoolwork, and being supported by others (Roeser et al., 2000). Students

increasingly disengaged from school from ninth to twelfth grade. Specifically, the occurrence of skipping class nearly tripled on average from freshman to sophomore year. Tenth grade African American and Hispanic students were more likely to be disengaged than their Asian and White peers, and they were more likely to drop out in 10th, 11th or 12th grade (Pellerin, 2005).

School socialization. Another factor that influences students' engagement is school socialization style (Pellerin, 2005). Differences were seen in their levels of engagement with students, strictness, and standards. The climate of the school affected staff behaviors and interactions with students (i.e. reactions to students when they broke rules). Schools' climates were defined as authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and indifferent. Authoritative schools had the fewest disengaged students on average (Pellerin, 2005).

Students who found school exciting and engaging were less likely to engage in academic dishonesty, be truant, or get into fights with peers (Roeser et al., 2000). Research found that it was more effective to motivate students through engagement and demonstration of academics' relevance to their future, rather than with the threat of consequences (Roesser et al., 2000). Despite so many challenges, students fare better if they have some protective factors upon entering high school.

Protective factors. Students with peer support (De Wit, Kanoja & Rye, 2010; Langenkamp, 2009, 2010; Neild et al., 2008), parental support (Barone et al., 1991; Falbo, Lein, & Amador, 2001; Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Newman et al., 2000), and school support (Falbo et al., 2011; Langenkamp, 2009; Newman et al., 2000; Somers et al., 2008) fare better than students who lack adequate support.

Peer support. Contrary to the fears of students, many ninth graders reported that the easiest aspects of ninth grade were making friends and participating in extracurricular activities

(Letrello & Miles, 2003). Upon reflection on their transition, ninth graders reported that visiting the high school and talking with older friends eased their anxiety about entering ninth grade (Newman et al., 2000). Students who achieved high social status in school received higher grades in ninth grade (Langenkamp, 2009, 2010), and were placed in higher-level courses than those who reported having fewer friends (Langenkamp, 2010). Peer support was also positively correlated with higher levels of school attendance (De Wit et al., 2010). Students whose friends did not engage in risky behaviors were less likely to drop out of high school than those with friends who did engage in risky behaviors (Neild et al., 2008).

Students' levels of engagement in social behavior also affected their chances of dropping out later (Neild et al., 2008). Students were surveyed on the quality of their social interaction at school. Students were less likely to complete high school if they: (a) knew fewer of their peers, (b) reported having unsuccessful peer interactions, and (c) felt socially excluded (Neild et al., 2008).

Parental support. Students with higher levels of support at home received higher GPAs (Gutman & Midgley, 2000), experienced less anxiety during the school day, and had an easier time navigating their new environment (Barone et al., 1991). Sixty-six percent of urban students turned to their mothers for support when facing freshman challenges (Newman et al., 2000).

From interviewing families, researchers have found that higher levels of parental monitoring were associated with successful school transition (Falbo et al., 2001). Monitoring activities included ensuring that their children were completing assignments and attending school. Parental intervention, if the student began to fall behind in these areas, was also positively correlated with success. Parents' involvement with school activities (i.e.,

communication and attendance at extracurricular events) increased their children's chances of success (Falbo et al., 2001).

Ninth graders who reported higher educational expectations from their parents had significantly higher GPAs than those who reported that their parents had lower educational expectations of them (Chen & Gregory, 2010). Higher levels of both parental grade expectation and educational attainment expectation were correlated with higher levels of participation in class. Most students reported looking up to their parents as role models, providing motivation for staying in high school (Somers et al., 2009). Parental support was positively correlated with recognition of the monetary worth of education, higher levels of perseverance, and an increased feeling of control of their school performance (Somers et al., 2008).

School support. Twenty five percent of students turned to their teachers for support during their transition to high school (Newman et al., 2000). Students who reported having good relationships with teachers in middle school were correlated with higher grades in ninth grade (Langenkamp, 2009). It is likely that their ability to bond with teachers at a younger age translated to seeking positive relationships with high school teachers. Students who reported receiving higher levels of teacher support had higher levels of school attendance (De Wit et al., 2010). Support from teachers was also associated with the students' desire to continue education after high school, be more dedicated to their studies, and recognize the importance of education to their quality of life (Somers et al., 2008).

It has been established that school support is a key element in student success, however, even among students who performed well academically, only 28% reported positive feedback about their teachers, which demonstrates that this support is lacking (Newman et al., 2000).

Seventy seven percent of both high and low performers reported negative feedback about their teachers, such as poor attitudes, lack of support, and spending less time with students.

9th Grade Transition as a problem for school counselors

Students' failure to successfully transition to high school is a significant problem for school counselors, who are employed to help students achieve academic, personal, social, and career success (ASCA, 2004). As stated before, failure to transition to ninth grade is related to problems in all of these areas. School counselors view and work with students holistically, making them highly qualified to develop and implement programming to assist students during this challenging transition (ASCA, 2004).

School counselors base their curriculum on the American School Counselor Association's National Standards (ASCA, 2004). Academic Standard B states, "Students will complete school with the academic preparation essential to choose from a wide range of substantial postsecondary options…" (ASCA, 2004, p. 109). Failure to transition to high school threatens the goal of graduation, and eliminates many postsecondary options.

School counselors deliver curriculum to assist students in developing competencies across academic, personal/social, and career domains (ASCA, 2004). Many of the school counseling competencies correspond with the challenges faced during ninth grade transition. Competencies that may help with transition to ninth grade include goal setting, improving academic self-concept, developing persistence and perseverance in school, time-management and study skill development, and managing stress and conflict.

Solutions to Aid 9th Grade Transition

It is essential that schools provide scrupulous academic and social supports for students who are at risk for nongraduation (Belfanz, 2007). Effective interventions must include

collaboration between administrators, school counselors, students' families, mental health professionals, social workers, and outside community resources (Chang & Romero, 2008; Cole, 2011; Sheldon, 2007). Possible solutions include the following.

Study skills/Time management workshops. Study skills workshops have been shown to be effective in improving academically at risk ninth-graders' grades. Researchers developed a psychoeducational study skills group for academically at-risk students (Kayler & Sherman, 2009). The group focused on time management, homework, study skills, test taking strategies, test-anxiety reduction, and organization. The program was a collaborative effort, and involved communication between counselors, students, administrators, parents, and teachers. Students were given pre and posttests designed to measure their study skills level. Sample questions included, "I review my notes after class," and "I complete written assignments on time" (Kayler & Sherman, 2009, p. 436). They found that after this six-week study skills workshop, students' study skills scores increased significantly, and many students' GPAs increased. Communicating with parents and teachers about the group also increased the visibility of school counselors' role in students' academic success and growth.

Another program entitled "Freshman Focus" included a curriculum, designed to help students develop academic skills (organization and time management), and life skills (the importance of getting enough sleep, responsibility, teamwork, and being proactive (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010). Students displayed an increase in academic achievement after nine weeks of the program. Further, students expressed that they felt cared about, were supported, and felt a sense of belonging.

Establishing a caring school environment. A caring environment is an essential element in leading students toward success (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010; Fields, 2005). According to

developmental theorist Erikson (1968), teens are working toward developing a sense of self, which includes their belief of ability and self esteem (as cited in Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010). Schools must acknowledge where these students are developmentally and provide a caring school community that is responsive to these developmental needs. In caring school environments, adults display and act on positive beliefs about their students, provide supportive and positive relationships, and help to foster students' life and academic skills (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010). When students have positive relationships with adults in school and feel cared for and encouraged, they are more likely to put forth greater effort in their academic performance (Fields, 2005).

Early warning indicator systems. Researchers have established what types of programs should be in place to help academically at-risk students, but it is important to analyze how to identify the students who should be enrolled in these types of solutions. Research suggests that half of students who do not complete high school could statistically be identified by previous failing grades prior to the entrance of high school (Neild, 2009). Sixteen states now use an early warning indicator system to target students at risk for non-completion of high school (Sparte, 2011). Eighth graders who functioned two or more years under their grade level on reading or math standardized exams had a 50% chance of failing a course or not completing high school (Neild & Belfanz, 2006; Neild, 2009). Students who miss 10% of all school days are at increased risk for non-graduation (Neild & Belfanz, 2006). By reviewing records, students who need interventions can be indentified.

Tailored small learning communities. Fields (2005) studied characteristics of successful schools and found that they pay careful and diligent attention, and provide extensive resources especially designed for ninth grade students. Small learning communities led to

increased academic performance, particularly because they foster opportunities for closer relationships and support between educators and teachers and families.

In a case study of one high school in Texas, the ninth grade class was broken into teams to provide a smaller learning community for students. An assistant principal, school counselor, and attendance secretary were assigned specifically to the freshman class to ensure needs were addressed in a systematic, focused and thorough manner. Team teachers met with ninth grade counselor and administrator once per week to discuss progress and student issues. They went to great lengths to involve parents with conferences and monthly parent meetings.

After the implementation of their program, freshman course success rates improved from 53% to 80% (Field, 2005). Their freshman students out-performed other previously comparable high schools in math and science test scores. The graduation rate increased by six percent and school attendance also improved drastically. Before the program was put into place less than half of their students attended school 90% of the time. After the freshman program was implemented, 93% attended 90% of school days.

Individual and group counseling. Individual counseling was positively correlated with academic improvement with underachieving students (Wilson, 1986). Longer-term counseling (greater than eight weeks) was shown to be more effective than shorter-term counseling (Finney, 1969; Wilson, 1986;).

Group counseling was found to be an effective intervention for students who are academically struggling (Page & Chandler, 1994). A weekly discussion group, described as an open and supportive place for students to share personal concerns, and to give and receive feedback, had a positive significant effect on students' GPAs. Another study of a similar group

counseling technique (where students explored their thoughts and feelings around their academic and life problems) has also been shown to be related to increased attendance (Finney, 1969).

Response to Intervention

High school mission statements often include a statement of the belief that all children can learn (Field, 2005). In order for schools to accomplish this undertaking, strategic interventions should be implemented to address students who are not learning and demonstrating academic success.

RTI is a broad educational term referring to systematic programming to close achievement gaps and address students' educational and behavioral needs (New York State Education Department of [NYSED], 2010). RTI programming is directed by data and helps school officials, educators, teachers, and counselors make informed decisions regarding their curricula, programs, and processes. RTI consists of three groups of students: Tier I, II, and III, which increase respectively in intensity of support.

Components of RTI. There are four components of RTI: (a) A school-wide, multi-level instructional and behavioral system for preventing school failure; (b) screening; (c) progress Monitoring; and (d) data-based decision making for instruction (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010).

Tier I consists of targeting 100% of students, but the interventions only sufficiently serve 80 to 90% of students (NYSED, 2010). These students receive preventive curriculum and support because they have not displayed academic or behavioral risk factors. The objective of Tier I is to keep students continuing in the direction of progress.

Tier II includes 5 to 15% of students who exhibit behavioral and or academic risk factors. Students in Tier II are those who are not responding to the preventive support and curriculum of

Tier I. The goal of Tier II is to provide these students with the extra support and resources they need to get back on track.

Tier III supports 1 to 5% of students, who are considered the highest risk for academic issues. That is, they are not improving their academic status or behavioral condition with Tier I and II interventions. Students at Tier III receive highly individualized and specific supports.

RTI is different from other solutions because it demands systematic identification of students, so students do not 'slip through the cracks.' Students may move from Tier to Tier depending on their performance status and responsiveness to the intervention (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010).

RTI is technically a framework for intervention, and therefore research is specific to each particular program or school. The National Center on Response to Intervention (2010) stated that for an RTI program to be effective, the primary Tier (Tier I) should ensure the success of 80% of the students, to demonstrate that the needs for Tiers II and III are not simply an indication of insufficient curriculum and instruction at Tier I.

Role of School Counselors in RTI

School counselors view students holistically and are trained to assist them in achieving academic, career, and personal-social success, and, therefore, have a professional responsibility to assist students during this difficult period of their lives (ASCA, 2005). According to Field (2005), having specific counselors assigned only to the ninth grade is often very beneficial to student success, as it fosters a relationship and allows for highly individualized involvement.

RTI is a possible solution for ninth grade achievement loss. The following is according to ASCA's literature on how school counseling programs should align with RTI (ASCA, 2008). At Tier I, school counselors are responsible for creating and delivering or managing a curriculum

that meets standards and addresses competencies to all students, individual student planning, and

creating a Curriculum Results Report (ASCA, 2008). ASCA states that at the Tier II level,

school counselors should provide responsive services, consultation, and a Closing the Gap results

report. At the Tier III level, school counselors should provide individual counseling and referral

to community resources, in addition to the services provided at Tiers I and II (ASCA, 2008).

As it was established, students have benefitted from increased school and family support.

RTI is a collaborative effort involving administrators, teachers, counselors, parents, and

community resources. Part of the definition of *school counseling* is that it is "conducted in

collaboration" (ASCA, 2005, p.16). Counselors have the responsibility to advocate for students

and to lead the way in management of programming and collaboration between administrators,

teachers, social workers, support staff, and the community, and to help connect students to

resources.

NYSED emphasizes that RTI interventions should be culturally responsive, and sensitive

to students' various backgrounds (NYSED, 2010). Counselors are trained to be multiculturally

competent and to advocate for educational programs that promote the success of all students

(Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2009).

School counselors are equipped to consult with other disciplines, understand the interaction of

students and their families, and are cognizant of the effects of environmental factors on learning.

Therefore, counselors are well qualified to take the lead in ensuring that RTI programming

addresses multicultural differences, and to encourage and educate other educators on issues of

diversity.

Researchers found that school principals and administrators believe that there is a great

need for RTI. They found it challenging, however, to put these programs in place, and to

implement a data collection system that measures their effectiveness (Sansosti, Noltemeyer & Goss, 2010). Accountability is an operational component of the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2005). Counselors have a duty to measure and evaluate the effectiveness of their programs with data (ASCA, 2005; 2008). School counselors are heavily involved in the delivery, management, and development of such a program, so it is logical that they evaluate it. This is a great opportunity to demonstrate the value of their work and leadership of others, and its effect on students' success.

School counselors receive rigorous training in interpersonal skills, collaboration, and understanding human development, all of which are pertinent assets to successfully deliver and manage RTI (CACREP, 2009). School counselors are trained to be leaders guiding other school professionals toward systemic change. Counselors are responsible for delivering the counseling curriculum individual student planning, responsive services, and system support. As leaders, counselors are also responsible to help manage programs through developing calendars, action plans, and agreements (ASCA, 2005).

Gaps in the Literature

Freshman-specific programs are a relatively new trend. Using RTI is also a relatively new approach to supporting student academic success and associated long-term outcomes. ASCA has suggested that school counselors align their programs to RTI, specifically pointing to the identified roles and responsibilities of school counselors as naturally supportive to RTI efforts. Missing from the literature is the empirical evidence that RTI programming can specifically improve the academic success of freshmen. Furthermore, there is a lack of evidence on the success of school counseling related curriculum delivered through the RTI framework.

Present Study

A local suburban high school implemented an RTI initiative this year to support academically at-risk freshmen. The main goal of the program was to intervene early and provide these students with support, knowledge, and skills to successfully transition into high school and graduate on time. The RTI program addressed the following domains: academic grades, attendance issues, and personal and social support. The high school's RTI program required the collaboration of school professionals, including counselors, administrators, and teachers. Counselors played a key role in the successful implementation and delivery of this program because their main objective as professionals was to help students achieve academic, career, and personal-social success (ASCA, 2005).

RTI programming was personalized for each student, depending on need. Examples of interventions for Tier I students were: distribution of a survey to all freshman to assess needs, course selection, and psycho-educational activities (i.e. time management, study skills workshops), and freshman class attendance monitoring. Tier II interventions included: individual and group counseling, student recommendations to Twilight Academy (an after school resource), Regents exams preparation, credit recovery enrollment, attendance interventions (letters home, truancy referrals), phone calls to parents, meeting with parents, meeting with administrators and teachers, referrals to Family Access and Connection Team (FACT), and routinely checks with students in regard to their personal and social well-being. Tier III interventions included more frequent: individual counseling sessions, parental contact, and team meetings.

Students who were considered academically at risk were enrolled in Tier II programming if they meet one of the following criteria: they scored in the lowest tier on the eighth grade ELA

or Math state tests and continued to struggle in their current coursework; they failed a class in eighth grade, or they were failing a 9th grade course. Additionally, the 9th grade counselors collaborated with the middle school counselors and identified students, who historically struggled emotionally and behaviorally.

As stated previously, school counselors have a professional duty to prove, through data-driven results, that their programs are effective (ASCA, 2005; 2008). To best serve students, stakeholders, and the community, it was vital to examine the effectiveness of the RTI program on students' academic performance.

It is important for counselors to share programmatic successes with administrators, school boards, and communities (ASCA, 2005). Given school counselors played such a major role in this RTI initiative, the program's success can validate the importance of hiring more school counselors in high school settings. Evaluating the program will also shed light on how it can be improved in the future.

Rationale

As previously mentioned, academic grades were found to be the greatest predictor of successful completion of high school. Several social and emotional risk factors help or hinder students along the way, which make counselors highly qualified for leading and co-leading programs designed to help these students. As stated previously, there were gaps in the literature on the effectiveness of specific RTI Programming on Students' academic performance. Results of this study may help guide school counselors and administrators to continue to develop and improve the program. Specifically, this research demonstrated the effectiveness of the newly initiated RTI program, and provided insight on areas that require fine-tuning. This study examined the program holistically and compared student performance between at-risk students.

Research Questions

1) How did the GPAs of the entire 2011-2012 Freshman Class compare to the GPAs of the entire 2012-2013 Freshman Class?

2) How did the GPAs of RTI-Enrolled 2012-2013 freshman compare with the GPAs of the entire 2012-2013 freshman class?

3) How did the GPAs of RTI-Eligible 2011-2012 freshman compare with the GPAs of the entire 2011-2012 freshman class?

4) How did the GPAs of Not-RTI-Eligible 2011-2012 freshman compare with the GPAs of Not-RTI-Enrolled 2012-2013 freshman?

5) How did the GPAs of RTI-eligible 2011-2012 freshman compare with RTI-enrolled 2012-2013 freshman?

Method

Through RTI Programming, a local high school hoped to intervene with ninth graders early, before they strayed too far from a successful trajectory. The purpose of the current research was to examine and evaluate the RTI program's effectiveness in getting ninth graders back on track academically and preventing achievement loss.

Specifically, this study examined Grade Point Averages GPAs of 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 ninth grade classes to determine if academic performance differences exist between those enrolled in RTI programming and those not enrolled in RTI programming. Furthermore, students receiving RTI programming to intervene with their academic performance were compared with the previous year's ninth graders who would have been eligible (i.e. they were at-risk and met the same standards) in the year prior to the program's implementation.

Setting

This study was conducted in a suburban high school in Western New York, which serves grades nine through twelve. According to school-wide data from the 2012 NYS Report Card, about 35% of students received public financial assistance, 24% qualified for free lunch, and about 5% of students did not complete high school. The racial/ethnic origin demographics of the high school were as follows: 80% white, 9% African American, 8% Hispanic/Latino, 1% Asian or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, and 1% American Indian/ Alaska Native.

Background

In the beginning of the 2012-2013 school year, high school administrators and counselors enrolled 2012-2013 ninth graders into RTI programming if they met the following criteria (indicating that they were at-risk): (1) scored in the Level 1 range in the 8th grade ELA or Math tests and continue to struggle in their current program (as determined by report card grades); (2)

failed a class in 8th grade; (3) failing in current class (as determined by first 5-week progress report). The study was conducted during the inaugural year of the RTI programming, therefore the program was not offered to 2011-2012 9th graders.

Participants

This study was a records review of the 2012 – 2013 Freshman class ($N = 283$) and the 2011 – 2012 Freshman class ($N = 251$) and utilized purposive sampling. Data from all students in both cohorts were collected. Students enrolled in RTI programming (specifically Tiers II and III) were further identified in the data collection process. To maintain consistency in the study, students, who transitioned in or out of the school district in the middle of the school year, were excluded from the sample, as they were missing grade information.

Of the 2012 - 2013 Freshman, 48% ($N = 135$) were female and 52% ($N = 148$) were male. Seventy % ($N = 209$) were white, 14% ($N = 39$) were African American, 9% ($N = 26$) were Hispanic/Latino, 2% ($N = 5$) were Asian, 1% ($N = 2$) were American Indian/Alaskan, and, 1% ($N = 2$) were multiracial.

Of the 2011- 2012 freshman, 49% (N = 124) were female and 51% (N = 127) were male. Seventy-eight % ($N = 197$) were white, 14% ($N = 34$) were African American, 2% ($N = 5$) were Asian, and 6% ($N = 15$) were Hispanic/Latino.

Intervention

The intervention examined in this study was Response to Intervention (RTI). This study was a records review and the researcher was not responsible for providing the interventions. RTI is a general term used in education that refers to systematic programming that attends to students' varying levels of academic and behavioral needs (New York State Education Department of [NYSED], 2010). RTI generally consists of three tiers, or levels, of intervention

or support; Tier I being the lowest level of support (provided to all students in their curriculum) and Tiers II and III including more intensive support, increasing in intensity, respectively.

For the purpose of this study, students who were "enrolled in RTI" refers to enrollment in either Tier II or Tier III, as the high school administrators did not specifically label students as being in Tier II or III. Students moved between Tier II and III, as needed depending on their academic performance and progress. The interventions used by the school included the following: monitoring the performance of students who were failing courses; individual counseling to address social and emotional issues; meetings with administrators and counselors to help students develop a plan of action to raise grades in failing courses (these meetings occurred every five weeks); enrollment to Twilight Academy or Academic Center; 9th Grade Team Meetings with counselors, teachers, and administrators; and parent phone calls and conferences.

Apparatus and Materials

Materials included a computer with access to Infinite Campus (academic record database) and a data-collection sheet created on Microsoft Excel. Microsoft Excel, SPSS, and GraphPad Prism were used to analyze data.

Procedure

Academic records of both 9th grade cohorts were examined to determine GPAs for each quarter and end-of-year cumulative GPAs. The researcher compared (2011 – 2012) students, who were enrolled or eligible to be enrolled in RTI Tier II and III, as of the first quarter of the 9th grade year. The researcher did not include students, who became eligible after the first quarter mark, to maintain consistency in the study by comparing similar groups of students (those who struggled upon entrance to high school).

The data were analyzed to address the following research questions:

1) How did the GPAs of the entire 2011-2012 Freshman Class compare to the GPAs of the entire 2012-2013 Freshman Class?

2) How did the GPAs of RTI-Enrolled 2012-2013 freshman compare with the GPAs of the entire 2012-2013 freshman class?

3) How did the GPAs of RTI-Eligible 2011-2012 freshman compare with the GPAs of the entire 2011-2012 freshman class?

4) How did the GPAs of Not-RTI-Eligible 2011-2012 freshman compare with the GPAs of Not-RTI-Enrolled 2012-2013 freshman?

5) How did the GPAs of RTI-eligible 2011-2012 freshman compare with RTI-enrolled 2012-2013 freshman?

The experimental design was pre-test post-test. Participants were not assigned conditions. Rather, the researcher examined the relationship between the groups, as they naturally existed.

The independent variables were: Ninth grade class (Nominal: either 2011-2012 or 2012-2013) and RTI Status (Nominal variable: either Enrolled or Not-Enrolled [for '12-'13] or Eligible or Not-Eligible for ['11-'12]). The dependent variable is GPA (Ratio variable: expressed by numeric grades 0-100).

The researcher examined and compared the GPAs of students in the following six groups: 2011-2012 cohort; 2011-2012 RTI-Eligible; 2011-2012 RTI Not-Eligible (i.e. students who were not at risk); 2012-2013 cohort; 2012-2013 RTI-Enrolled; and 2012-2013 RTI Not-Enrolled (i.e. students who were not at risk).

Participants' GPAs were recorded at the following times: Quarter 1 Report Card, Quarter 2 Report Card, and Quarter 3 Report Card. The participants' cumulative GPA at the end of the

year was also calculated (note: the 2012-2013 Freshman class' cumulative GPA was calculated in April 2013, two months before the quarter officially ended). Participants' ethnicity and gender were also recorded.

Means and Standard Deviations for each of the six groups were calculated. Further, independent t-tests were conducted between all combinations of the six groups to determine if there was a significant difference between RTI-Enrollment and GPA.

Results

Overview: Eligibility/Enrollment of RTI

Thirty three percent ($N = 82$) of the 2011-2012 freshman class was eligible for Tier II or III RTI by the completion of the first quarter. Twenty nine percent ($N = 83$) of the 2012-2013 freshman class was enrolled in Tier II or III RTI by the completion of the first quarter.

RTI Enrollment/Eligibility by Demographic

Table 1

Race of Students Enrolled in the 2011 – 2012 and 2012 – 2013 Freshmen Class

	2011-2012 Freshman Class	2011-2012 Non-RTI	2011-2012 RTI-Eligible	2012-2013 Freshman Class	2012-2013 Non-RTI	2012-2013 RTI-Enrolled
White	$N = 197$ (78%)	$N = 141$ (83%)	$N = 56$ (68%)	$N = 209$ (74%)	$N = 155$ (78%)	$N = 54$ (65%)
African American	$N = 34$ (14%)	$N = 14$ (8%)	$N = 20$ (24%)	$N = 39$ (14%)	$N = 18$ (9%)	$N = 21$ (25%)
Hispanic/Latino	$N = 15$ (6%)	$N = 10$ (6%)	$N = 5$ (6%)	$N = 26$ (9%)	$N = 21$ (11%)	$N = 5$ (6%)
Asian	$N = 5$ (2%)	$N = 4$ (2%)	$N = 1$ (1%)	$N = 5$ (2%)	$N = 5$ (3%)	$N = 0$
American Indian/ Alaska Native	$N = 0$	$N = 0$	$N = 0$	$N = 2$ (1%)	$N = 0$	$N = 2$ (2%)
Multiracial	$N = 0$	$N = 0$	$N = 0$	$N = 2$	$N = 1$ (0.5%)	$N = 1$ (1%)
Total	$N = 251$	$N = 169$	$N = 82$	$N = 283$	N = 200	$N = 83$

Findings are consistent with literature on the achievement gap in the United States, which states that African American students across the country perform consistently lower academically than their White and Asian American peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

In this study, African Americans were disproportionately represented in the RTI-Eligible and

RTI-enrolled category. In both 2011-2012 and 2012-2013, African American students

represented only14% of their entire class, yet made up 24% of academically at-risk students.

Table 2

RTI Enrollment/Eligibility by Gender

	2011-2012 Freshman Class	2011-2012 Non - RTI	2011-2012 RTI- Eligible	2012-2013 Freshman Class	2012-2013 Non - RTI	2012-2013 RTI- Enrolled
Male	$N = 127$ (51%)	$N = 80$ (47%)	$N = 48$ (59%)	$N = 148$ (52%)	$N = 99$ (50%)	$N = 49$ (59%)
Female	$N = 124$ (49%)	$N = 89$ (53%)	$N = 34$ (41%)	$N = 135$ (48%)	$N = 101$ (50%)	$N = 34$ (41%)
Total	$N = 251$	$N = 169$	$N = 82$	$N = 283$	$N = 200$	$N = 83$

Males were overrepresented in the RTI Eligible and RTI Enrolled groups. In 2011-2012,

males made up 51% of the class population, and 59% of the RTI Eligible group. Similarly, in

2012-2013, males made up 51% of the class population and 59% of the RTI Enrolled students.

Term and Rolling Cumulative End of Year GPAs

Table 3

Mean and Standard Deviation for Grade Point Averages (GPA) of 2011-2012 Freshman Class and 2012-2013 Freshman Class

	2011 – 2012 Students	2011-2012 Students NOT eligible for RTI	2011-2012 RTI-Eligible Students	2012-2013 Students	2012-2013 Students NOT Enrolled in RTI	2012-2013 RTI-Enrolled Students
N	251	169	82	283	200	83
Term GPA Q1	$M = 83.0$ $SD = 9.8$	$M = 87.9$ $SD = 5.7$	$M = 73.0$ $SD = 9.0$	$M = 83.6$ $SD = 10.6$	$M = 88.7$ $SD = 5.5$	$M = 71.2$ $SD = 8.3$
Term GPA Q2	$M = 80.6$ $SD = 10.7$	$M = 85.8$ $SD = 7.4$	$M = 70.1$ $SD = 8.2$	$M = 82.1$ $SD = 11.2$	$M = 87.4$ $SD = 7.2$	$M = 69.3$ $SD = 8.5$
Term GPA Q3	$M = 80.4$ $SD = 14.9$	$M = 87.0$ $SD = 7.3$	$M = 66.7$ $SD = 17.1$	$M = 79.9$ $SD = 14.4$	$M = 86.5$ $SD = 7.3$	$M = 63.9$ $SD = 14.8$
Term GPA Q4	$M = 78.5$ $SD = 17.7$	$M = 85.9$ $SD = 8.3$	$M = 63.1$ $SD = 21.8$	Not available	Not available	Not available
Cume. GPA	$M = 80.6$ $SD = 12.6$	$M = 86.7$ $SD = 6.8$	$M = 68.1$ $SD = 12.7$	$M = 81.8$ $SD = 11.5$	$M = 87.5$ $SD = 6.3$	$M = 68.2$ $SD = 9.6$
Net GPA (Difference Between Q1 & End of Year Cume)	2.4	1.2	4.9	1.8	1.2	3

Note. *Rolling Cume calculated at Q3 for 2012-2013 cohort, as data collection ended in April 2013

The 2012-2013 freshman class had higher End-of-Year Cumulative GPAs than the 2011-2012 freshman class, 81.8 and 80.6, respectively. The 2012-2013 freshmen also scored higher than 2011-2012 freshman class in GPA for Quarter 1 (83.6 and 83.0, respectively) and Quarter 2 (82.1 and 80.6, respectively). In Quarter 3, 2011-2012 freshmen scored a higher GPA than the 2012-2013 students: 80.4 and 79.9, respectively. The 2011-2012 freshmen scored an average of 78.5 in Quarter 4. Quarter 4 GPAs were not available for 2012-2013 freshman class at time of data collection.

Overall, 2012-2013 RTI-enrolled freshmen had higher End-of-Year Cumulative GPAs than 2011-2013 RTI-eligible freshmen: 68.2 and 68.1, respectively. However, 2011-2012 RTI-eligible freshmen scored higher than 2012-2013 RTI-enrolled freshmen in GPA for Quarter 1 (73.0 and 71.2, respectively), Quarter 2 (70.1, 69.3, respectively), and Quarter 3 (66.7 and 63.9). In Quarter 4, RTI-Eligible 2011-2012 students scored 63.1. Quarter 4 GPAs were not available for the 2012-2013 freshman class at time of data collection.

Table 4

Correlation Between the Groups' Performance Independent T-Test Results

Comparisons	t	df	p	SE
2011 – 2012 Cohort to 2012 – 2013 Cohort				
Q1 GPA	0.68	532	0.50	0.89
Q2 GPA	1.58	532	0.12	0.95
Q3 GPA	0.39	532	0.69	1.27
Cumulative GPA	1.15	532	0.25	1.04
Non- Eligible RTI 2011 – 2012 to Non-Enrolled RTI 2012 - 2013				
Q1 GPA	1.37	367	0.17	0.58
Q2 GPA	2.10	367	0.04*	0.76
Q3 GPA	0.66	367	0.51	0.76
Cumulative GPA	1.17	367	0.24	0.68
RTI Eligible 2011 – 2012 to RTI Enrolled 2012 - 2013				
Q1 GPA	1.34	163	0.18	1.35
Q2 GPA	0.62	163	0.54	1.30
Q3 GPA	1.23	163	0.26	2.49
Cumulative GPA	0.06	163	0.95	1.75
2011 – 2012 Cohort GPA By Quarters				
Q1 GPA to Cumulative GPA	2.38	500	0.02*	1.01
Q1 GPA to Q2 GPA	2.62	500	0.01*	0.92
Q2 GPA to Q3 GPA	0.17	500	0.86	1.16
Q3 to Q4	1.30	500	0.19	1.46
2011- 2012 Non-Eligible for RTI				
Q1 GPA to Cumulative GPA	1.76	336	0.08	0.68
Q1 GPA to Q2 GPA	2.92	336	0.01*	0.72
Q2 GPA to Q3 GPA	1.50	336	0.13	0.80
Q3 GPA to Q4 GPA	1.29	336	0.20	0.85
2011-2012 RTI Eligible				
Q1 GPA to Cumulative GPA	2.85	162	0.01*	1.72
Q1 GPA to Q2 GPA	2.16	162	0.03*	1.35
Q2 GPA to Q3 GPA	1.62	162	0.11	2.09
Q3 GPA to Q4 GPA	1.18	162	0.24	3.06
2012 - 2013 All Students				
Q1 GPA to Cumulative GPA	1.94	564	0.05*	0.93
Q1 GPA to Q2 GPA	1.64	564	0.10	0.92
Q2 GPA to Q3 GPA	2.03	564	0.04*	1.08
2012- 2013 Not Enrolled in RTI				
Q1 GPA to Cumulative GPA	2.09	398	0.04*	0.59
Q1 GPA to Q2 GPA	2.03	398	0.04*	0.64
Q2 GPA to Q3 GPA	1.24	398	0.22	0.73
2012 - 2013 RTI Enrolled				
Q1 GPA to Cumulative GPA	2.15	164	0.03*	1.39
Q1 GPA to Q2 GPA	1.46	164	0.15	1.30
Q2 GPA to Q3 GPA	2.88	164	0.01*	1.87

Note. * $p < .05$.

Academic Performance: 2011-2012 students vs. 2012-2013 students

The entire '11-'12 class and the entire '12-'13 were not statistically significantly different when compared to each other in terms of GPA for Q1, Q2, Q3, or End of Year Cumulative GPA. The Non-Eligible for RTI ("not at risk") students in both classes were not statistically significantly different from each other except for in Q2 ($p = 0.04$). The RTI-Eligible (2011-2012) and the RTI-Enrolled students (2012-2013) were not statistically significantly different from each other in Q1, Q2, Q3, or End of Year Cumulative GPA.

Academic Performance: 2011-2012 students between quarters

Comparing GPAs within the 2011-2012 class between quarters, the following statistically significant differences were noted: the entire 2011-2012 students' Q1 GPAs were significantly higher than their Q2 GPAs ($p = 0.01$) and their End of Year Cumulative GPAs ($p = 0.02$). Non-Eligible for RTI Students' GPA dropped significantly between Q1 and Q2 ($p = 0.01$). RTI-Eligible 2011-2012 students' GPAs dropped between Q1 and Q2 ($p = 0.03$) and between Q1 and Cumulative GPA ($p = 0.01$).

Academic Performance: 2012-2013 students between quarters

Comparing GPAs within the 2012-2013 class between quarters, the following statistically significant differences were noted: the entire 2012-2013 Class, students' Q1 GPAs were significantly higher than their Q3 GPAs ($p = 0.04$) and their End of Year Cumulative GPAs ($p = 0.05$). Non-Eligible for RTI (i.e. not academically at-risk) students' GPAs dropped significantly between Q1 and Q2 ($p = 0.04$) and between Q1 and Cumulative Average ($p = 0.04$). RTI Enrolled students' GPAs dropped between Q1 and Q3 ($p = 0.01$) and between Q1 and cumulative GPA ($p = 0.03$).

Table 5

Entire Class Net Achievement Loss of GPA points Between Q1 & End of Year Cumulative GPA

Analyses	2011-2012 All Students	2012-2013 All Students
Mean Loss of GPA	2.12	1.7
SD	4.30	3.17
N	251	283
Independent t-test	$t = 1.30$	
	$df = 532$	
	$p = 0.20$	
	$SE = 0.33$	

Table 6

Not At-Risk Students' Net Achievement Loss of GPA points Between Q1 & End of Year Cumulative GPA

Analyses	2011-2012 RTI Not- Eligible	2012-2013 RTI Not- Enrolled
Mean Loss of GPA	1.20	1.19
SD	2.60	2.28
N	169	200
Independent t-test	$t = 0.04$	
	$df = 367$	
	$p = 0.10$	
	$SE = 0.25$	

Table 7

At-Risk Students' Net Achievement Loss of GPA points Between Q1 & End of Year Cumulative GPA

Analyses	2011-2012 RTI-Eligible Students	2012-2013 RTI-Enrolled
Mean Loss of GPA	4.83	3.04
SD	6.30	4.44
N	82	83
Independent t-test	$t = 2.11$	
	$df = 163$	
	$p = 0.04*$	
	$SE = 0.85$	

Means and standard deviations of students' net loss for all 6 groups were compared

across years. An independent t-test revealed that RTI Enrolled 2012-2013 students experienced

significantly less achievement loss than their 2011-2012 counterparts ($p = 0.04$). The

achievement loss of the Entire 2011-2012 class compared to Entire 2012-2013 was not

significantly different and the achievement loss of the Not RTI Eligible/Enrolled 2011-2012 and

2012-2013 classes were not significantly different.

Table 8

RTI Enrolled Students' Net Achievement Loss of GPA points Between Q1 & End of Year
Cumulative GPA by Gender

Analyses	Males	Females
Mean Loss of GPA	2.78	3.40
SD	4.28	4.71
N	50	34
Independent t-test	$t = 2.11$	
	$df = 163$	
	$p = 0.53$	
	$SE = 0.99$	

Of the students enrolled in RTI Programming, there was no significant difference found between

genders in achievement loss, which suggests both genders benefitted equally from RTI.

Discussion

Transition to high school is a delicate time for many students as they face several challenges. Freshman year achievement loss is a significant predictor of non-completion of high school (Langenkamp, 2010, Neild et al., 2008). Educators are working hard to find solutions to keep students on the trajectory of success, specifically through RTI.

In both 2011-2012 and 2012-2013, the mean GPA of the entire class, RTI-not eligible, and RTI Eligible/Enrolled students dropped from Quarter 1 to the end of the year. The GPA loss found in this study was consistent with research that found 75% of students experience a drop in grade point average in ninth grade (Benner & Graham, 2009).

Although both classes experienced achievement loss, 2012-2013 RTI-Enrolled students fared much better than 2011-2012 RTI-Eligible students. Specifically, they experienced less of an achievement loss between their Quarter One GPAs and their End of Year Cumulative GPAs. In 2011-2012, at-risk students' GPAs dropped an average of 4.9 points. In 2012-2013, at-risk students, who were enrolled in RTI, dropped an average of only 3 points. As a comparison, both 2011-2012 non-eligible for RTI and 2012-2013 non-eligible for RTI students dropped 1.2 points.

Experts determined that successful and complete implementation of an RTI program takes about three to five years (Hall, 2013). Even in its pilot year, however, the high school in the present study, experienced reduced achievement loss in the at-risk group after implementing an RTI program. Although, given the fact that 29% of the 2012 – 2013 students enrolled in Tier II or III interventions, there is evidence to suggest that the Tier I interventions that were initiated were not sufficient. The literature (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010) identified a minimum of 80% of students should be benefitting from Tier I interventions.

How the Strategies in the School's RTI Programming Align with Research

The school, which was studied, developed an RTI program during the 2012- 2013 school year specifically targeted Freshmen in the inaugural year. All freshmen received Tier I interventions, including: (a) student enrollment in a small learning community, and (b) increased parental contact for academic, social, or behavioral concerns and celebrations. Freshmen, who were identified by principals and school counselors as at risk, were further enrolled in Tier II and III programming. Students enrolled in Tier II and III programming received: (a) individual rapport building meetings with administrators, (b) individual counseling with school counselors, and (c) referrals to Twilight Academy and the Academic Center.

Tier I Interventions. The Tier I interventions included the development of small learning communities and more frequent communications with parents. All 9th grade students enrolled in this school received Tier I interventions.

Small learning communities. The freshman class was divided into three groups and assigned to teams of teachers. There were two counselors assigned to ninth grade students. Team teachers and school counselors met monthly to collaborate and address individual students' needs. The meetings were scheduled in advance and held in a systematic manner that ensured needs were met and students did not "fall through the cracks." The designation of ninth grade teams is aligned with research that states that small learning communities led to increased positive relationships between students and faculty, and improvement in academic performance (Fields, 2005).

The ninth grade *team* initiative is an RTI Tier I intervention, meaning that all students receive the service, regardless of need or risk level. The intention of Tier I interventions are preventative in nature and based on the logic: when five team teachers all have the same students

and meet about them frequently, they will have more holistic views of students, and will notice student issues (i.e. falling grades, increased behavior referrals) much sooner than if teachers were working in isolation.

   Parent phone calls and meetings. Research shows that parental support and involvement in school is positively related to students' academic success (Falbo et al., 2001). Ninth grade teams held parent meetings to establish relationships with families and involve them in students' educational process. Counselors participated in the parent-teacher meetings and also held additional meetings with parents to address social and emotional concerns related to student progress.

   Counselors made frequent contact via phone with parents to communicate progress of students. The calls were made to communicate both challenges and successes. Parents were accustomed to only receiving calls when something "went wrong." During the course of the study, counselors made a point to contact parents to celebrate successes, such as, an increase in a course grade or attendance rate. The literature on RTI stated that high level of family involvement is critical to school reform efforts and is a common trait in high-performing schools (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Encouraging familial participation in school communication and activities were implemented as Tier I interventions.

   Tier II and III Interventions. Students, who were identified through the early warning indicator system as *at-risk*, were enrolled in the Tier II and III interventions. The interventions offered in Tier II and III included: (a) individual rapport-building meetings between students and principals, (b) referrals to additional academic support programs, and (c) individual counseling sessions with school counselors.

Early warning indicator systems. Fifty percent of students, who did not complete high school, could be indentified by previous failure in middle school (Neild, 2009). Students, who performed below grade level on state exams, had a higher probability of high school course failure (Neild & Belfanz, 2006) and not completing high school (Neild, 2009). In the present study, high school and middle school administrators and counselors collaborated in the summer (before the school year began) to identify the at risk students, as well as, students who were struggling socially and emotionally. The identified students were placed in the Tier II and III category. The advanced referral method was helpful to school counselors and administrators in identifying students who could benefit from higher level interventions and it allowed time to organize and plan the interventions.

Meetings with administrators. Each student enrolled in Tier II and III met with the building principal to develop a plan of action. The meetings were intended to empower students to be part of their own solution. Collaborative meetings offered the opportunity to have face time and build rapport between students and the principal, and shifted the role of the principal to a more authoritative style. It was the intent of the principal that the students left the meetings feeling supported, thereby increasing their chances of success. Student perception of being supported in the school is vital to their academic success. Research showed that students who reported having positive relationships with adults in the building received higher grades than those who did not (Langenkamp, 2009).

Twilight academy and academic center. As evidenced in the literature review, it has been established that students' motivation to complete assignments decreases in ninth grade (Otis et al., 2005). One of the major components of the Tier II and III programming was additional academic support offered at Academic Center (during students' study hall block) and Twilight

Academy (an after school support center located in the building). Twilight Academy and

Academic Center were staffed with building teachers from each core subject: math, science,

English Language Arts, and Global. The teachers, who worked there, were engaging, warm, and

built rapport with students, even providing hot cocoa and snacks. Counselors coordinated

referrals to Twilight and met with students to discuss the opportunity, develop goals and process

thoughts and feelings about seeking extra help. Counselors played the role of liaison and

introduced students to Twilight teachers to maximize students' comfort level. The effort to create

an inviting and warm atmosphere for learning is aligned with research that shows that a caring

environment facilitates growth, learning, and successful transition to high school (Ellerbrock &

Kiefer, 2010; Fields, 2005).

Time management issues (Letrello & Miles, 2003) and weak study skills (Akos &

Galassi, 2004; Fulk, 2003) have been identified as two major obstacles preventing ninth graders

from success. Research revealed that study skills workshops are positively related to GPA

(Kayler & Sherman, 2009). Twilight Academy was empirically based, offered content support,

and provided training on organization, time management, and study skills. Providing students

with resources to tackle and eliminate time management and study skill obstacles is believed to

prepare them with skills to finish assignments on-time, use study time wisely, avoid misplacing

assignments, and ultimately increase their academic success.

Individual counseling meetings. Each student enrolled in RTI met with his or her school

counselor individually to receive social and emotional support. The current study demonstrated

that addressing the social and emotional factors, which affect students' grades (i. e., students'

stress levels; Talmi, 2002), led to less academic loss. Students face increased exposure to risky

behavior and peer pressure (Newman et al. 2000) and increased levels of anxiety and loneliness

(Benner & Graham, 2009). Although some level of anxiety is necessary, as it motivates students, they need emotional support to develop coping skills and successfully navigate the transition to high school (Jindal-Snape, 2008). The current study supported existing research that suggested that having a safe and supportive place to vent personal concerns was positively correlated with academic success (Page & Chandler, 1994; Wilson, 1986).

Implications for School Counselors

Students struggle in their transition to high school academically (Barone et al., 1991; Smith, 2006), personally, and socially (Benner & Graham, 2009; Seidman et al., 1994; U.S. Department of Education, 2010). RTI addresses these aforementioned challenges by encouraging collaboration within the school team. School counselors should play a major role in leading the program, as they are professionally responsible to help students reach career, academic and personal-social success, and view students holistically (ASCA, 2005; CACREP, 2009). Further, school counselors also have a responsibility to collect and share data with other members of the school team (ASCA, 2005).

School counselors should consider presenting data from this study (and related studies) to promote RTI implementation in their schools. Specifically, they can implement the strategies shown to be effective in this school's RTI: small learning communities, intensive yet caring academic support centers, individual counseling, student-administrator meetings, and continuous communication with students' families throughout the year.

From this data, it is clear that African American students were considered at-risk more frequently than their White peers. School counselors have the professional and ethical obligation to serve and advocate for students in need and help provide all students with opportunities to achieve success (ASCA, 2005). Given the fact that RTI programming should culturally

responsive and sensitive to students' various backgrounds (NYSED, 2010), and this study

revealed a disproportional number of African American/ Black students in Tiers II and III,

school counselors should also examine the school environment for systemic barriers that hinder

students of color and lead to their being identified as at-risk. Furthermore, school counselors

should continuously strive to become more culturally aware through professional development

activities and supervision. Involvement in the community would also be beneficial, as it would

increase knowledge about issues students and families are facing, and also would help build trust

and rapport with students and families. Once students are identified as at-risk, school counselors

should advocate for these students in the school and community and connect students to school

and community resources for extra support.

Limitations

Quarter 4 GPA data from 2012-2013 school year was unavailable at the time of study and

therefore could not be compared to Quarter 4 GPA data from the 2011-2012 school year. True

end-of-year cumulative GPA for the 2012-2013 school year was also unavailable. Cumulative

GPA from April 2013 was used instead. Therefore, this study did not examine the *full* year of

2012-2013 RTI-enrolled students' GPA and did not capture the full duration of their academic

progress.

As evidenced in this study, the RTI programming made a significant, positive difference

in at-risk students' grades. The RTI program was multi-faceted, individualized for each student,

and consisted of many variables and supports. Further research could be done to establish which

components of the RTI program were the most effective, and which were less effective and

should be improved. This study does not account for different "types" of at-risk students. A good

question to address in future research is: How did students enrolled in Tier II and III, due to low

state test scores, perform compared to students enrolled because of a failing course in ninth

grade?

Summary

In summation, people who do not graduate high school are a fiscal burden on society and

are at an increased chance of mental health issues, poverty, substance abuse, and incarceration

(Sum et al., 2011; U. S. Department of Education, 2010). Educators are facing an epidemic of

non-graduation and low academic achievement (Neild et al., 2008; Newman et al., 2000).

Research has shown that ninth grade academic performance is a key predictor of graduation

status. The results of this study contribute to the wealth of research on ninth grade interventions,

and will aid the school in fine-tuning their program and increasing its effectiveness.

The high school's RTI program was promising, as during its pilot year it significantly

reduced achievement loss for at-risk students from an average of 4.8 GPA points to only 3.04.

Although, there was also evidence that the Tier I interventions were insufficient in reaching a

minimum of 80% of students, as 29% were enrolled in Tier II and III interventions. After a

minimum of five years (post program implementation) and with continued collaboration between

administrators, counselors, teachers, parents and students, further progress is anticipated.

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