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School principals have always embraced the role of instructional leader. And, the recent "academic intervention services" (AIS) mandate reinforces the role like none other. While schools provide academic assistance to students in need, AIS ratchets up the pressure to do more and do it better. The accounting of each student's learning is paramount. Solutions to monitor student performance formatively and act in a timely manner become critical. Data and information from AIS trigger adjustments in the nature and intensity services while influencing just about every aspect of a school's educational programming. In this environment the principal orchestrates the arrangements to create systemic harmony resulting in student success.

Last year, boards of education approved a plan to carry out AIS. In the meantime you and your staff have moved to implement the plan as it impacts your school. Now, it is time to begin the process of learning where your school stands regarding AIS. Here are some questions that need to be answered concerning the primary mission of schools: improved student performance to the standards:

- o What effective measures to determine a student's need for AIS have been identified, beyond those related to State assessments?
- o Who are the students in my school in need of AIS?
- o What academic deficiencies do they exhibit, particularly as those deficiencies relate to NYS learning standards and core curriculum?
- o What instructional interventions and supports services are available in the school and district?
- o Have these services proved effective? How do you know?
- o What school restructuring (e.g., rescheduling, teaming, etc.) needs to be considered to meet the AIS challenge?
- o Is there adequate resource support available to address AIS effectively?
- o Is AIS being managed so as to inform timely intervention?

With the raising of the bar for graduation, new academic requirements from Albany are demanding significant changes in learning outcomes and how schools operate. The move toward a single, quality diploma (i.e., Regents endorsed) for all students sets up the challenge for all students to pass five Regents exams. Some provision is provided for students who may not be able to meet the challenge. However, such provision is limited. The purpose of the AIS requirements is noble, and perhaps long overdue. One thing is for sure, the AIS impact on school organization, staffing, training, resource support, and management appears daunting.

The concern for improved student performance is nothing new. Aren't the requirements for compensatory (Title 1 and PCEN) and special education designed to do what AIS now mandates. So, what are these new requirements?

Academic Intervention Services (AIS)

In July 1999, the Board of Regents revised Commissioner's Regulations relating to students, assessments, and graduation requirements. In essence the revisions require that school districts provide academic intervention service (AIS) to students who score below the State designated performance level on State assessments or who are at risk of not achieving the State learning standards. Included in the mandate was the requirement that school districts complete a description of their academic intervention services with board approval by July 1, 2000. Then, they were to implement their academic intervention services by September 1, 2000. However, these services were to commence no later than the beginning of the semester following a determination that a student was in need of them.

AIS was adopted to help students achieve the State learning standards in English language arts and mathematics in kindergarten through grade 12 and social studies and science in grades 4 through 12. These services include two components:

- o additional instruction that supplements regular classroom instruction; and
- o student support services needed to address barriers to improved academic performance.

An interesting aspect regarding interventions and support services is the idea of intensity based on the student's performance. So, for students scoring in the lowest level, i.e., level 1 on the State 4-level scoring guide, there should be a greater degree of intensity in the way of intervention services. The key for intensity may involve student-teacher ratio, number of sessions a week, length of a session, and duration.

AIS Determination

Within the district's AIS description of services, sometimes called the district's AIS plan, the criteria or measures used for determining who receives AIS are to be clearly delineated. The failure to perform at or above the designated level on a State exam or failure to obtain a passing score on a Regents exam automatically determines the need for AIS. However, on the off grades (i.e., those grades at which the State does not assess learning) districts must establish a uniform and consistent procedure based on multiple measures for determination of student participation in AIS. Parents may request AIS for their children.

Multiple measures may include criteria based on a standardized assessment, teacher recommendation, grade reporting, etc. Districts are cautioned to use the best and most appropriate of measures. What is important is that staff, students, parents, and board of education members understand the process for AIS determination, and it is applied in a uniform manner from grade to grade throughout the school district.

AIS Participants

At the beginning of this article, a reference was made to traditional services provided students through compensatory and special education programs. What appears to be unique about the AIS regulations is that students being served through Title 1/PCEN (i.e., compensatory education) and special education are to be served within AIS as well. And, it is suggested that every student in AIS have an AIS record. Therefore, students with disabilities who are in special education and are not achieving the State learning standards and have an individual education program (I.E.P.) will also have an AIS record of service

that exceeds those academic services in the I.E.P., with reference to any accommodation. One may be inclined to wonder: What is the purpose of the I.E.P.? This statement is not to criticize the legitimate need to support and serve students in all groups within the school system. It is, however, to question the effectiveness of current special education and compensatory programming to address student academic needs.

Therefore, AIS is to serve all students in the systems that do not demonstrate a readiness to acquire the learning standards. This includes students with disabilities, those identified for services through Title 1 and PCEN programs (compensatory education), and what may now be a new stratum of students who might not have found themselves in this universe in the past. This new group may include those students who in the past would graduate in 13 years, and now may not graduate on time. The AIS universe of students may be quite large. Clearly, the intent of AIS is to stem the tide of student leaving the elementary grades not prepared to take on the challenge before them at the intermediate or middle level. And, of equal if not greater importance is the number of students who carry AIS baggage into the high schools where programming may have to be radically adjusted to accommodate and correct student performance in order to pass Regents exams.

AIS Management and Connections

Without a doubt, AIS generates a great deal of rich data and information to help improve teaching, learning, and assessment at each school. For example, examination of student AIS records may show that there are common areas of difficulty that large percentages of students are unable to currently meet. This type of information must be managed and used as the basis for analysis, insight, decision-making, action, and improvement. Questions dealing with resource needs based on the AIS challenge in individual schools may now be data-driven and not gut reactions and hyperbole. Schools need to implement AIS systemically, and principals need to employ the tools that will help them gain these insights. Tools that deal with backend data warehousing provide the data mining capacity necessary for districts to work smarter, not harder.

Instructional Leadership

At the beginning of the article, you were prodded to act critically as a school principal. So, your questions and involvement in AIS place instruction at the heart of what school leadership is all about: improving student performance. This is about knowing where you (the school) are, and where you need to go? What will it take to get there? How will you know when you have arrived? Heaven forbid that you live the proverbial warning: If you don't know where you're going, and road will take you there.

Principal-guided analysis of AIS data, as addressed earlier, has implications for curriculum and staff development in each school. The strengthening of the regular curriculum each school is the target, rather than moving limited resources to build a secondary, remedial curriculum. Also, the quality of instructional delivery and staff access to powerful strategies become essential. Therefore, the principal's call for district support directed to the needs of an individual school establishes a relationship in which the school uses released time for improving the performance of its students and not taken off task to address someone else's priorities.

Support for AIS

In closing this article, I am compelled to address the issue of financial and resource support for AIS for each school. While no funding stream is directly labeled AIS, there are federal and State funding sources which contribute to the AIS challenge. There is special education and Title 1/PCEN (Pupils with Compensatory Education Needs) funding, which is very limited for many school districts. And, districts have already added to this support with local dollars. Is it enough? Student performance results on State, national, and international assessments indicate that much more needs to be done. Powerful instructional interventions and support services such as tutoring and counseling are extremely expensive; and, yet, these are the kinds of services that will be needed if districts are to address student academic needs successfully. Support for AIS will require data and the ear of Regents and State legislators. This may only be forthcoming if the data and information are there to clearly portray the level of challenge that school leaders face in preparing all students to acquire the NYS learning standards and core curriculum.

About the Authors

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