Notes from Targets and Talk-Evaluation of an evidence-based academic counselling programme

Summary:

In 2004 the Starpath Project for Tertiary Participation and Success (Starpath) established a collaborative relationship with Massey High School (MHS), a mid-decile New Zealand secondary school. Since this time Starpath has worked with data from cohorts of students at MHS, using this information to identify barriers to educational success for particular groups of students. Early on, the work established the need for detailed and accurate school achievement data in order to carry out analyses linking school initiatives or activities to student achievement, both for individual students and particular groups (Shulruf & Tolley, 2004). Other Starpath projects (Madjar, McKinley, Jensen, & van der Merwe, 2009; Shulruf, Keuskamp, & Timperley, 2006; Shulruf, Tolley, & Tumen, 2005; Smith, 2007) have shown that school subject choice or course-taking plays a major role in shaping educational opportunities for students, particularly at the tertiary level. The introduction of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) and its implementation in schools has become a major focus of Starpath and MHS, since it has given schools the ability to expand their subject options and the subject choices presented to students and their parents/caregivers. MHS decided to trial an intervention in 2007 that placed more scrutiny on student achievement data, individual student NCEA subject choices, and student aspirations and pathways.

Outline:

In early 2008, MHS invited Starpath to conduct a formative evaluation of the Academic Counselling and Target Setting (ACTS) programme, which had been in place for one year in the school and was designed to:

• Increase the school's academic performance through a

systematic, whole-school approach to student achievement.
- Establish longitudinal data sets (academic profiles) for each individual student.
- Encourage staff to work together on the academic performance of the school.
- Help students gain strategies for achieving their academic aims.
- Review their progress.
- Increase student retention.

The evaluation investigated the experiences and impact of the ACTS intervention on the 2007 Year 11 student cohort, their parents/caregivers, their mathematics, English and Form teachers, the school Deans, and certain other key staff. There were three aspects to the intervention:

1. Restructured parent-student-teacher meetings, in which parents/caregivers (along with their child) met with their child's Form teacher for an in-depth overview of their progress.

2. Academic counselling, which involved a meeting between each student and their Dean two or three times in the year to discuss their progress, aims, and plans.

3. Target setting, including the setting of school-wide achievement targets, as well as individual targets for each Year 11 student in their mathematics and English external achievement standards.

Recommendations:

1. Preparation and Planning
Preparation and planning is vital for successful implementation of the programme.

- Leadership: Leadership was a key to the success of this programme, as it has been in the school generally. A management team, made up of the Principal, the Student Achievement Manager (SAM) and a Deputy Principal (Achievement), was established early to oversee the intervention. This team met regularly and had different leadership roles and responsibilities in the consultation process, although they all helped each other as well. The SAM led the implementation committee (comprised of teaching staff) and the DP led the parent-student-teacher meeting process. This model of a form of distributed leadership worked well for this school.

- Consultation: As with any new programme in a school, staff consultation and agreement is essential. This needs to work with what happens in each school. Staff consultation at MHS was extensive and

was carried out over time by a management team who reported regularly to whole-staff and departmental meetings.

• Staff preparation: Staff training is another key part of the intervention. MHS provided training and/or advice for its staff regarding the key elements of the ACTS programme, including phoning parents/caregivers, leading the extended parent- student-teacher meetings, engaging students in academic counselling, and using targets to speak with students about their academic performance, goals and strategies. Other professional development included staff sharing their expertise with others, for example, the Careers Advisors upskilling the Deans regarding the use of careers databases.

2. Data
If schools wish to 'track' students' academic progress over their school life, and help them reach their potential, they will need to collect detailed and well-documented longitudinal data and have well-developed systems for its storage, retrieval, and use.

3. Skilled Staff
To be able to use data to drive improved academic performance of students and schools, schools' staff will need increased levels of skills in the identification, collection, management, analysis and use of data.

4. Targeted Resourcing
To implement a substantial academic 'tracking' programme for each student requires targeted resourcing for teacher release and professional development.

5. Sustainability
Sustaining the programme, and its impact, is important.

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