

School Factors Related to Increasing the Odds for Student Success

I. THE TIME FACTOR

Schools can:

1. Extend time for selected courses; in some schools this time extension may need to be provided for both high failure and Advanced Placement courses;
2. Provide tutorials during the school day for selected students – possibly offer some tutorials after school hours for other students;
3. Permit students in foundation courses, such as Algebra I, who initially do not receive a grade of “B” or higher to repeat the course. There is evidence that students who receive at least a grade of “B” in certain foundation courses have less difficulty mastering the content of related higher level courses. If students make an “A” or a “B” in the repeat course, they will be encouraged to repeat such courses by counting the first course as an elective and making sure the initial “C” or “D” does not count in determining their overall GPA. Regardless of the grade made in the repeat course, the higher grade should be used for purposes of formulating GPA.
4. Build interventions throughout high failure, sequential courses, such as Algebra I.
5. Reduce time for some students; also accelerate some students. A schedule that allows acceleration or “doubling” of two courses in the same discipline during the same school year is critical if students are allowed to delay certain courses until adequate skills can be developed. The idea here is to work from a prevention strategy rather than from the traditional “take course/fail course/repeat course” format. This strategy also is important in small schools if one desires to reduce the number of teacher preps and to balance the workload of both teachers and students.

Note: School scheduling is a critical factor in how time is used to accomplish the above strategies. If increasing student success is the primary goal, we must think of time as a resource – not a standardized period of time for all courses and all students. Schedules should be based on student needs, which will vary with different groups of students. Too often we determine a schedule format and HOPE/EXPECT all students to fit!

II. THE TEACHER FACTOR

Administrators and Teachers can:

1. NAG: Teachers who “nag” effectively understand the difference in making it difficult for students to fail and in making it difficult for students to get good grades without much work and re-work. They bombard students with various teaching strategies and continually express confidence that the student can learn, even when the student is giving little reason to believe this. The teacher who nags keeps expectations high and does not give up on students easily even when students appear to give up on themselves.
2. Provide specific (focused) feedback and allow corrections to be made; for some students it is important that teachers not only nag but also that they provide support in order to keep students working until acceptable work is completed. Some students have to be “led/guided/pulled” until they learn “how it feels” to be successful!
3. Establish clear goals and make sure students understand what is expected.
4. Teach students how to meet extended goals by establishing short, incremental tasks along the way.
5. Empower students to help themselves when they “mess up” (e.g. Aunt Matilda system). If students are working, they must not see teachers and school policies as “setting traps” that keep them from being successful.
6. Provide assignments that are meaningful to students – not assignments just viewed as busy work or assigned for purposes of power and control!!

Note: The odds are increased that more teachers will use the above practices if they are provided a balanced work load, such as a reduced number of preps and a reduced number of students for whom they are responsible during any one school term, semester, or school year.

III. THE STUDENT FACTOR (Motivation)

Educators can:

1. Monitor school policies to see if they foster “effort-based learning” rather than preventing/discouraging students from doing work.
2. Review grading policies and practices to see if assessments and grades are used primarily for purposes of improving teaching and learning and assisting students in mastering content or primarily for “sorting and selecting” students.
3. Provide schedules that do not require students failing early in a course to stay in the course for an entire school year and waste that period of time. This practice not only may create “wasted time” but it also may provide time that is spent destructively which ultimately can decrease the odds for success for years to come. This factor is especially important in courses that have “high sequence” to them, such as most math and other types of skill-building courses.
4. At least in Grade 9, not only delay students’ taking selected high failure courses until skills have been improved but also balance the workload of students relative to reading/writing requirements and homework assignments.

Note: School policies and grading practices need to be reviewed to see if they are congruent with current views regarding human motivation; for example, there is little evidence that “repeated failure” will make people more responsible.

Repeated failure often makes human beings give up; yet, some teachers will defend their practices of repeatedly failing students with the belief that they are making students more responsible and preparing them for the work force once they leave school. As Dr. Phil would say: “Is it working?” “Has it ever worked?” This is not to say that schools and teachers can prevent all failure.

IV. THE CURRICULUM FACTOR

Teachers can:

1. Make certain that the content they are teaching is related to the accountability factors the school or state has put in place (curriculum alignment).
2. At least some of the time, use assessments designed in the format of the high-stakes tests.
3. In Grade 9, delay enrolling students in selected courses until sufficient reading/writing/math skills can be developed that will increase the chances of student success in later courses.
4. Provide periodic feedback to students/parents on how students are progressing; a letter grade does not provide this function. Some type of content graphic for each discipline/ course showing where the student has been, where he/she currently is, and where he/she needs to be can be a supplement to typical grading reports.
5. Try to make content both meaningful and relevant to the experiences of students and the working world; for example, with computers take students to a lumber yard and show them how carpenters use fractions when building houses.
6. Engage students actively in their learning; for example, use Socratic seminars to motivate students to write position papers; involve them in using graphic organizers to summarize critical content; if classroom management is under control, let students work in pairs and then square the pairs at appropriate times during the lesson. Except for low level information, one of the best strategies for increasing the retention level of content is to engage students in their learning. Students need to become “more the worker” and become less passive in classrooms!

Note: Schedules are critical in helping teachers perform several of the above functions. Short, single-period schedules encourage/dictate certain types of teaching behaviors. If students are to become more active and engaged in their learning, longer blocks of time can increase the odds that such will occur.

Note: Four benefits of the 4/4 (semester-semester) block schedule, IF used correctly: It is the only schedule that can easily (1) balance the workload of students and (2) the workload of teachers. It also provides a structure that best (3) facilitates acceleration of both high and low achieving students, and (4) it institutionalizes interventions for failing students at least once during the school year.