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NeMTSS Research Brief

Academic Supports & Tutoring

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NEBRASKA CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON CHILDREN, YOUTH, FAMILIES & SCHOOLS

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Academic Supports & Tutoring: An NeMTSS Research Brief

Key Points:

- Academic supports are programs and strategies used by schools to increase the academic achievement of students, particularly for students who may be at risk academically (Leung et al. 2018).
- Efforts to improve student achievement have also taken place through the application of Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS).
- Overall, by providing students with organized and sustained extra help and support to develop reading, mathematics, and other skills, they can succeed when faced with challenging curriculum and higher standards.
- Supports such as academic tutoring, academic mentoring, increasing motivation, computer-based instructional or remedial programs, and small learning communities have been shown to improve student academic performance.

Introduction

Each year more than 500,000 students drop out of school (McFarland et al., 2016). There are many factors linked to student dropout such as experiencing learning difficulties, or low academic achievement (Gubbles et al., 2019). Students who often feel overwhelmed and start to disengage as they fall behind in their coursework, eventually giving up hope that they will be able to catch up with their peers. In many cases, this pattern develops early, as students who fail eighth grade English or math are 75% more likely to drop out of high school than their peers (Convissor, 2010). Schools offering extra help and support, especially in the early stages of a student's education, can guide at-risk youth on the path towards academic success, diminish the likelihood of behavior problems, and increase the likelihood of high school graduation (Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007).

Supporting Students Academically

A substantial connection between student internalizing and externalizing problem behavior and lower academic performance has long been acknowledged in research (Okano et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2019). Programs aimed at improving student's behaviors show positive outcomes for student's academic and social-emotional outcomes (Fossum et al., 2017; Ianlongo et al., 2019). In addition to student behavior, school culture is closely aligned with academic performance, and improvement in behavior supports is likely to lead to improved student academic performance (Sugai & Horner, 2011). As a result, efforts such as Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) (Center on PBIS, 2025), aimed at reducing behavior problems and improving school culture may also help increase academic performance. For more information on the implications of disruptive behaviors on academics and PBIS view the existing briefs on the NeMTSS website here or on the recommended citations section at the end of this brief.

In addition to strategies and programs aimed at behavior and school climate, academic supports can be used to support students' academic needs. Academic supports are programs and strategies used by schools to increase the academic achievement of students, particularly

for students who may be at risk academically (Leung et al., 2018). The objective of academic supports is to raise achievement (Southern Regional Education Board, 2010). Though not explicitly referred to as “Academic Supports,” a similar term, specially designed instruction is defined under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA) states that specifically designed instruction is making adaptations as needed for a child based on the content, methodology, or delivery of instruction (Hume, 2021). To meet the individualized needs of a child based on their disability and have access to the general curriculum, schools must “meet the educational standards within the jurisdiction of the public agency that applies to all children” (Hume, 2021; 300.39 (b) (3)).

Academic Support and Multi-tiered Systems of Support

Efforts to improve student achievement have also taken place through the implementation of MTSS. NeMTSS defines MTSS as a framework designed through the lens of continuous improvement to guide school districts, schools, and all educators to ensure each and every student has access to learning experiences that enhance their educational outcomes. MTSS is comprised of Tier 1—Core, Tier 2—Targeted, and Tier 3—Intensified with Tier 1 being the least intensive and Tier 3 being the most intensive. Tier 1 supports focus on classroom curriculum and teaching strategies to support all students in the classroom. Tier 2 and 3 supports are more intensive and provide a variety of other academic supports. Academic supports are integrated into a MTSS. Specifically, academic supports can be used in the classroom (Tier 1) as part of core instruction such as increasing student motivation, giving high interest reading materials, and computer based instructional or remedial programs. Tier 2 and 3 supports can include academic tutoring, mentoring, small learning communities, and computer-based or remedial programs can be used to improve student’s academic performance.

Why are Academic Supports Important?

A considerable amount of research has shown that providing academic support in the form of extra help opportunities provides an obtainable path towards success (e.g. Yue et al. 2018; Arco-Tirado et al. 2019). Research has shown that academic supports improve student outcomes including:

- Increasing interest and reducing drop (Johnson et al., 2022; Yue et al., 2018)
- Improved academic performance (Leung et al. 2018; Arco-Tirado et al., 2019)
- Increased social support and belonging which supports learning motivation (Chen et al., 2023; Yue et al., 2018).
- Decreased anxiety and increased confidence (Voisin et al., 2023).

Overall, by providing students with organized and sustained extra help and support to develop reading, mathematics, and other skills, they can succeed when faced with challenging curriculum and high academic standards.

Academic Support Strategies

There are a variety of academic support strategies that help struggling students and reduce the risk of future academic problems. There is evidence that academic tutoring, academic mentoring, increasing motivation, computer-based instructional or remedial programs, and small learning communities can improve student academic performance.

Academic Tutoring

There are many ways that academic tutoring can be delivered to students to support their academic needs. Tutoring can be delivered to students through the use of after-school programs, as a component of mentoring programs, and through supplemental instruction. Tutoring in after-school programs has been shown to increase reading abilities and test scores, especially when tutors are skilled at communicating and developing a relationship with students (Nelson-Royes, 2013). A more intensive academic tutoring at tier 3 can also be implemented through high-impact tutoring which involves a form of supplemental instruction one-on-one throughout the school year (Cortes et al., 2025). High-impact tutoring is especially promising. Cortes et al. (2025) found that students who received high-impact tutoring for oral reading fluency were more than two times more likely to reach target reading goals by the end of the school year.

Gordon et al. (2004) identified three motivational factors that are important to consider when implementing tutoring, including proximity of the tutoring to the student's regular environment (i.e., home, school or workplace), having a supportive learning community, and perseverance on the part of the student. Additionally, who is delivering the tutoring and instruction; adults, peers, or cross-aged students, is another factor that is important to consider.

Adult Tutoring

The most familiar tutoring situation is where an adult provides tutoring to a student in school. The adults may be educators within the school, or adults from outside of the school. Tutors should be knowledgeable enough to be able to answer student questions and provide appropriate scaffolding (VanLehn, 2011) and may benefit from training regarding teaching skills to support individual student needs, motivation, and behavior. When implemented with care, adult tutoring can be very effective at improving academic outcomes (VanLehn, 2011). Effective adult tutoring typically involves the tutor taking a step-based approach (i.e., providing corrective feedback on each step of a question or problem), rather than an answer-based approach (i.e., providing feedback on whether the final answer is correct). Step-based approaches are effective because they provide many more opportunities to learn and far more specific feedback than do answer-based approaches. When students solve a problem, they are integrating hundreds of concepts and choosing from among many potential strategies. While answer-based tutoring only provides binary feedback (i.e., whether or not the total process ended with a correct answer), step-based tutoring provides feedback every step of the way, which assists students in understanding where mistakes were made and where to try new strategies (VanLehn, 2011). Thus, scaffolding and specific, corrective feedback are critical components of adult tutoring.

Peer Tutoring

Peer tutoring involves similar aged students tutoring their same age peers. Peer tutors generally have a higher level of academic knowledge than the student receiving tutoring. It is important to have peer tutor training before the tutor begins tutoring (Stenhoff & Lignugaris-Kraft, 2007). Peer tutoring can occur in a classroom, study hall environment, or an after-school program. Peer tutoring can be done in several ways: heterogeneous grouping, homogeneous grouping, cross-age, and reverse-role (Stenhoff & Lignugaris-Kraft, 2007). A heterogeneous grouping includes a group of students who have different levels of academic knowledge and skills (An & Zhang, 2024b). Where homogeneous groups include a group of children that have similar academic knowledge and skills (An & Zhang, 2024b). A key takeaway from

homogeneous and heterogeneous grouping is that heterogeneous groups work to have students learn from their peers in addition to the tutor (An & Zhang, 2024b). When the tutor is older than the tutee, it is considered cross-age tutoring (Stenhoff & Lignugaris-Kraft, 2007). Reverse role tutoring is when the tutor is an individual who has a disability or is behind academically, is working with someone else with or without a disability to learn material and how to explain it to others (Stenhoff & Lignugaris-Kraft, 2007). Peer tutoring has been found to provide substantial academic benefits (Bowman-Perrott et al., 2013). It can be helpful in any subject and in any grade but is especially effective for middle and high school students and students with disabilities, particularly emotional or behavior disorders (Bowman-Perrott et al., 2013). A meta-analysis developed by Leung et al. (2018) found that peer tutoring is most effective when there are fewer training sessions per week, shorter tutoring sessions, when tutors and tutees are randomly assigned, when sessions were more structured, and when tutors and tutees were the same sex. More recent research on peer tutoring has found that tutoring can enhance student achievement (Ullah et al., 2018). Ullah et al. (2018) explored the effects of peer tutoring on academic achievement for secondary students in biology. They used a pre-test and post-test to collect information on student's knowledge, comprehension, and analysis (Ullah et al., 2018). Results from the study showed that peer tutoring was effective in improving students' outcomes in all three areas (Ullah et al., 2018).

Cross-age Tutoring

Cross-age tutoring typically entails older students tutoring younger students. Researchers have found that the optimal range for the tutors is no more than two to three years older than the tutees (Tenhovirta et al., 2022). Special education teachers have also found that older students with disabilities struggling academically can benefit from tutoring or reading to younger students (Mauer et al., 2024). Such tutoring can positively affect the motivation and skill level of the tutors, as well as providing them with increased self-concept and a role as instructional leader. Cross-age tutoring can occur in a classroom environment or during an after-school program (Burton, 2021). There are many advantages to implementing either a peer tutoring or a cross-age tutoring program because both types of programs have been shown to increase math achievement (Greene et al., 2018) and reading achievement (Nelson-Royes, 2013), when used in addition to the regular instruction, not in place of it. Academic achievement outcomes are not only increased for students being tutored, but also for those providing the tutoring (Leung, 2018).

Academic Mentoring

Academic mentoring is a way that at-risk adolescents can obtain assistance to improve their academic functioning (Somers & Piliawsky, 2004). In this strategy, students work one-on-one with a mentor who builds a relationship with the student and provides them with supplemental enrichment activities to build their academic self-esteem, motivation, and self-efficacy to enable them to achieve academically. Mentoring can be effective in increasing academic engagement (Herrera, 2004) and may also have positive impact on social and emotional development of the student.

Increasing Motivation

According to Crotty (2013), the biggest determiner of academic success is motivation. Motivation is "a theoretical construct used to explain the initiation, direction, intensity, and

persistence of behavior, especially goal-directed behavior" (Brophy, 1998, p. 3). Students who are unmotivated are less likely to benefit from better standards, curriculum, and instruction unless their lack of motivation is addressed (Usher & Kober, 2012).

Motivational Interviewing

One strategy to increase motivation is through "motivational interviewing." This could be done by any adult. Motivational interviewing is an empathetic, student-focused, collaborative and directive behavior change strategy that works to increase student's motivation. An adult meets with a student and works to promote self-awareness "and self-directed behavior change through the development of personal responsibility, self-efficacy, and an internal locus of control" (Cloth, 2013, p. 32). This type of interview can build intrinsic motivation. This strategy has been used in dropout prevention to increase student's desire to complete school. It has also been used for discipline issues, substance abuse issues, truancy issues, and as academic support for poor school performance (Cloth, 2013).

Computer-Based Instructional or Remedial Programs

Computer-based instructional programs are becoming more prevalent as technology use increases in education. These programs can be used in the classroom for traditional education purposes or as remedial programs. Computer-based programs allow students to participate in a personalized curriculum, which has been found to boost student attitudes when compared to traditional instruction (Ross et al.,1986). These programs provide immediate corrective and non-judgmental feedback, typically allow students to move at their own pace, and document student growth. Research by Ku and Sullivan (2000) indicates that student attitudes are more positive when instruction is tailored to their interests and preferences. A study completed by Ponce et al. (2012) found that the use of a computer program increased reading comprehension scores when compared to the scores of students who received only traditional classroom instruction.

Small Learning Communities

According to the Southern Regional Education Board (2010), small learning communities are designed to establish a foundation of trust among students and teachers. Small learning communities can be arranged in many different ways depending on the needs of the school. A common characteristic of these communities is that learning community sizes are smaller than typical classrooms, which increases opportunity for advisement sessions and praise towards academic achievement. Typically, small learning communities use a core group of teachers that work with a consistent group of students, allowing for better adult-student relationships. Thus, smaller communities are created within a larger one by creating smaller class sizes, forming teacher and student teams, and using other strategies that personalize instruction and relationships for students to improve the student's connection to teachers, the curriculum, and the school. Lessons may include instructional strategies that engage students and motivate them to participate in learning. These lessons are designed to foster teamwork, belonging and a sense of purpose (Felner et al., 2007). There is evidence in the research that the quality of instruction and outcomes are increased with properly implemented small learning communities (Dukes & Lamar-Dukes, 2006).

Conclusion

Many students, including those receiving special education services, require more academic support than their peers to be successful in school. Fortunately, a wide variety of strategies to provide this support have been developed and empirically evaluated in academic literature. It is important for educators to assess students' needs through the MTSS process to provide supports and services tailored to their unique needs. Educators are encouraged to implement strategies such as tutoring (i.e., adult tutoring, peer tutoring, cross-age tutoring), mentoring programs, and smaller learning communities.

Collectively, what these strategies have in common is increased exposure to academic material. Students who are behind academically are likely to stay behind unless they receive more opportunities to learn. Thus, educators should strive to provide as many opportunities for exposure to academic material as possible. By taking advantage of the evidence-based programs presented in this strategy brief and elsewhere, educators can also ensure that their efforts to support struggling students are as likely as possible to be effective.

Recommended Briefs

Based on the content discussed in this paper, the following briefs on the NeMTSS website are recommended for more information.

Jonson, A. & Witte, A. L. (2024). Reducing Classroom Disruptive Behaviors to Improve Academic Performance: An NeMTSS research brief. Nebraska Multi-tiered System of Support (NeMTSS).

Jonson, A., Rangel-Pacheco, A., & Witte, A. L., (2024). Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports: An NeMTSS research brief. Nebraska Multi-tiered System of Support (NeMTSS).

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