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**REDUCING RECITIVISM: HOW TO COMBAT REPEAT SUSPENSIONS
AND IMPROVE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT**

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Educational Leadership

Master of Education Program

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of the requirements, of

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Abstract

This project is intended to take examine how Mount Olive High School can implement an alternative school program to reduce the number of students who are habitually absent from school, reduce the number of students receiving out of school suspension, and improve this demographic of student's overall student achievement. This project explains what alternative school is, its pro's and con's, and how it has been proven effective in other schools. This project examines the steps which were taken at Mount Olive to implement this program into its school. The project provides data on the effect the alternative school had on the students who were in attendance during the duration of this project, as well as recommendations for this program moving forward.

3-8-17**Derrick King****Capstone Project****TA096**

**REDUCING RECITIVISM: HOW TO COMBAT REPEAT SUSPENSIONS
AND IMPROVE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT**

Section One: Project Introduction

In their study on the effectiveness of out-of-school suspensions, American Public Media (2016) found that “a student who is suspended in the ninth grade even just once is twice as likely to drop out of school later. Students who are suspended are also more likely to wind up in the juvenile corrections system” (para. 14). Prevention of school suspensions and thus having students in school daily is vital to the educational success in contemporary society. In 2012, while sitting in an office lobby waiting to be called in for an interview at Mount Olive High School, I was introduced to the challenges that educators face when determining how to manage disciplinary which may result in suspensions in the school house. I recall vividly hearing tense voices coming over the radio airwaves as administrators discussed who was closest to respond to a fight taking place in a classroom.

Nearly thirty minutes later while sitting in an interview for a non-instructional teacher’s assistant position, I was asked if I would have a problem working with the leadership team handling certain disciplinary situations. My first day as an employee at Mount Olive High School, I was told that I would be taking on the role restructuring the school’s ‘Loss of Privilege’ (LOP) detention program. While I was intrigued, if not flattered by the offer to serve in a role previously managed by a certified teacher, I was curious as to who manned the LOP facilitator position before I arrived. The answer I

received was that essentially they couldn't keep anyone in the position. Not long into my role of LOP facilitator, I noticed a trend of the same students being assigned to loss of privilege detention repeatedly. It was not long before I began to see that there was a need for widespread changes to take place in how disciplinary problems were being handled.

Table 1

Discipline Data Mount Olive High School 2014/15-2016/17 School Year

School Year	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2016-17*
Referrals	1,250	1,060	1,010	1,470
Repeat Referrals	500	405	390	450
ISS	688	603	360	550
Repeat ISS	86	64	50	100
OSS	327	503	160	272
Repeat OSS	18	23	15	22

Note: * Projects full school year.

Disciplinary challenges which lead to suspensions in the public-school system have not only created negative perceptions among educators, but it has also placed burdens on schools being able to retain seasoned and effective teachers. Suspensions across our country have led to failures in student achievement, low student morale, and teacher fatigue. In an article on teacher retention, Eric Hanushek (2001) found that “teacher mobility is much more strongly related to characteristics of the students, particularly behavior, race and achievement, than to salary” (p.7). Behavior problems among students which lead to suspensions is a problem which exists at Mount Olive High

and this problem is threatening to undermine the goal of finding success in all students. Per the 2014-15 Mount Olive High School-School Improvement Plan (SIP) (Horizon School District, 2014), Mount Olive listed as one of the school's goals to reduce disciplinary referrals and suspensions, both in-school and out of school by five percentage points.

Not only was this a goal of Mount Olive High School, but it was also a goal listed by the Horizon School District where Mount Olive is located as presented in the district's school improvement plan (Horizon Public Schools, 2014). Reduction of suspensions is not only a task being undertaken at the local school and district level, but it has also become an initiative announced at the federal level. In looking at actions the federal government is taking to help curb the suspension epidemic, Meredith Kolodner (2015) writes that:

The U.S. Department of Education issued new guidelines last year to bring down the high rates of students losing time in school, which has been linked to higher drop-out rates. A study released in January showed that high suspension rates hurt academic achievement for everyone, even classmates who have not been suspended. Researchers believe suspensions creates a punitive environment causes anxiety and poor relationships. (para.10).

Mount Olive High School had a high number of suspensions in the past. However, during 2015-2016 school year Mount Olive displayed a reduction in suspensions following an implementation of a revamped In School Suspension program (ISS). ISS allows students to be suspended from the classroom but allowed to remain on campus during the school day. In school suspension also features a behavior intervention

protocol (BIP). BIP allows students to see the error of their ways and have an opportunity to learn from their mistakes before they return to the classroom. The cornerstone of the ISS program utilizes strategies born from the Positive Behavior System (PBS). While explaining facets of positive behavior movement, Duda and Fox (2012) suggest a need to implement a wide-range of programs which serves the purpose of:

resolving the problem behavior of children that is based on values and empirical research. It offers an approach for developing an understanding of why the child engages in problem behavior and strategies for preventing the occurrence of problem behavior while teaching the child new skills. Positive behavior support offers a holistic approach that considers all factors that impact on a child and the child's behavior. It can be used to address problem behaviors that range from aggression, tantrums, and property destruction to social withdrawal. (p. 3)

While Mount Olive High has focused on reducing level one offenses which ultimately places students into the ISS program, the school remains committed to embracing ideologies which will combat the number of students who fail to achieve success due to the number of out of school suspensions (OSS) they receive. OSS reached an epidemic proportion during the 2014-15 school year with 13% of the school population given at least one day of out of school suspension. While the school's implementation of an ISS program saw a reduction of 5% attendees from 2014-15 to 2015-16, OSS rose at a nearly 5% clip.

I was fortunate to have been given an opportunity to assess alongside the school leadership team a potential program which would not only reduce the number of out of school suspensions, but also improve student achievement among those students. We

agreed that research would be done and a potential solution would be brought back to the table for possible implementation. While performing research of programs which currently existed in our district, I suggested that our school implement an alternative placement program for students not qualifying for ISS. In the Horizon School District, there currently exists two alternative schools. Each of these alternative schools serves the needs of students who have either been expelled from their previous schools; or is more conducive for the student to be academically successful. After a series of meeting with district and school leaders, we agreed to build a model program from scratch that would be unique to the needs of our school.

The model program we developed is the REACH Academy Alternative School. This school will house students who are placed here instead of being suspended, students who are not on track to graduate because they have less than a 2.0 grade point average (GPA), and finally students who need additional academic credits to regain their standing in their current grade level. REACH Academy operates Monday through Friday from 3:00 p.m. until 6:30 p.m. The primary goal of this program is to instantly reduce the number of students who are suspended, along with the number of repeat offenders who have level 2 and above offenses. As with any new initiative, the implementation of the alternative school program has drawn skepticism. Many faculty members expressed a displeasure with the program. Some viewed it as a concession being made for the bad students, instead of providing resources for students who were excelling. Others wondered what selection process would be used to choose which teachers would facilitate the program.

In the past, students were simply suspended for level 2 and above infractions. This mode of operation placed both the school and students in jeopardy. The students were placed in jeopardy because “getting suspended or expelled increases students’ risk for falling into unproductive behavior” (School Discipline that Improves Academics, 2016, para. 1). Students typically are no longer fazed by sitting at home and missing school. Schools also face the downside of potential consequence when too many students are sitting at home and not in the classroom receiving an education. Mount Olive has seen firsthand the damaging effect which the combination of students being suspended, along with the normal rate of students being absent can cause on a school. In the 2015-16 school year, Mount Olive received an incomplete grade from the State Department of Education. The sole reason why the school received an incomplete was because the school had a total of 8% of its students who did not attempt the required number of standardized testing because of absences. The implementation of an in lieu of suspension program should have an immediate effect on the percentages of students who are given an opportunity to test because they will be attending school, albeit in an alternative placement setting.

Purpose

My purpose for undertaking this inquiry is to examine data from the past year and determine the overall performance and effectiveness of the REACH Academy program as it relates to the reduction of suspensions at Mount Olive High School. I am also attempting to determine the exact effect REACH Academy has had on student achievement in the areas of attendance, GPA, grades, credits obtained for REACH attendees versus those who do not, and overall referrals in our school. One of the

challenges which exists is to determine the impact on an entire school when a small portion of the population of students are being targeted for this program. The leadership team of Mount Olive has tasked me with investigating not only the data relating to REACH Academy's implementation, but also the effect this program may have had on the overall school performance, including staff in the process. It is my hope that by demonstrating the effectiveness of REACH Academy, I will also be able to show how this strategy has helped our school can improve student achievement across the board, but possibly also retain quality teachers in the process. This research will allow me to determine the true impact that has been made through our school installing a system which reduces suspensions, and improves the overall behavior and performance of our students.

This project affects me personally because it gives me an opportunity to implement a program which will help improve the overall achievement of at-risk students. This project will allow me to assess whether the REACH program can have a positive effect on our school which transformed the way we handle serious academic and behavioral issues with students. This project affects me professionally because it will allow me to assess whether this program which I have played a significant role in will demonstrate that it has been effective enough to be duplicated at other schools across our school district.

Exploratory Questions

In my project, there are a few specific issues I will attempt to investigate and questions I am attempting to answer. This first question I desire to answer is: Did our school's implementation of the REACH program have a positive impact on reducing

suspensions over the course of this school year? I will be able to determine the level reduction which took place based on the data which is available concerning disciplinary suspension over the last few school years in comparison to this point in the present school year.

The second question is: What is the level of student achievement for REACH students? Are they better off credit wise, GPA wise, and attendance wise than those students who are not enrolled? The third question is: How will we know that this program has been successful? A few other questions I will assess include: What does data from OSS student grades verses non-suspended student's grades show? Is there a difference between REACH Academy student's grades verses those students who do not participate? What does attendance data suggest for REACH student's verses suspended students? Are standardized assessment results better for students in alternative placement verses those students who received out of school suspension? And then finally, what room for improvement may be left that the school leadership team can adjust and improve upon, and what more can be done to further improve the knowledge level and commitment from school staff in support of REACH Academy?

Conclusion

I hope that through this inquiry into the data concerning reduction of suspensions of students, and increased student achievement, I can show the leadership and faculty of Mount Olive High School that the REACH program has shown a positive impact on both the reduction of suspensions and overall student performance at our school. This revelation undoubtedly will have a positive impact on our entire school's success. I desire

to be able to share my research with school leaders and demonstrate how a commitment to a program such as REACH Academy can make a positive impact on their school.

Section Two: Literature Review

Introduction

Jeffrey Glanz (2006) writes that “principals have to manage a great deal in schools. But management of student behavior should not be avoided, because it supports excellence in instruction, which promotes student learning and achievement” (p. 90). Many schools have gone to great lengths to ensure that student behavior is not disrupting the classroom learning environment. Across the country more schools are increasingly suspending students out of school. Nathan Essex (2016) defines suspension as “a legal form of discipline for students who violate school or district policy that often involves relating to school safety” (p. 88). Many schools have begun to utilize the liberal parameters that a definition such as Mr. Essex’s provides them, and implemented a zero tolerance classification for egregious acts performed by students.

Under the school code of conduct method known as ‘zero tolerance’, students who break certain school rules are subject to facing mandatory penalties, including out of school suspension, and possibly arrest by law enforcement. Stephanie Ward (2014) writes that “the zero-tolerance mandate became increasingly popular around the times of the mid-1980. By the mid-1990s, most school districts across the United States had embraced at least some form of zero- tolerance punishment” (para. 14).

However, across the country many stakeholders in education are beginning to feel that suspending students from school should be a last resort. In fact, many school districts are beginning to revisit the zero tolerance approach they are taking towards suspending

students. Some, such as Chris McEvoy (2014) feel that out of school suspension is being utilized as a tool to disenfranchise the lowest performing students.

In some school's suspension may be used as a push-out tool to encourage low-achieving students and those viewed as troublemakers to leave school before graduation. Suspension must be viewed as posing a risk to educational opportunity given the research on the central importance of academic engagement to learning (p. 4).

Adding to the litany of scholars who view out of school suspension as a detriment to school and student success, Reece Patterson (2010) writes:

emerging data indicates that suspensions are not effective procedures to change student behavior. Data suggests long term negative side effects of suspension including school drop-out, increased crime, and negative academic consequences for students who are suspended. As a result of these factors, many schools have tried to reduce their use of suspension (p. 3).

With the prevailing thought of student's and schools suffering due to the large numbers of students being suspended, the idea of alternative placement is beginning to gain traction. Sarah Gonzalez (2012) writes that schools are establishing "a place on school campuses for students who break the rules, it's an alternative to out-of-school suspension" (para. 5).

What Is Alternative Placement?

"Alternative Education is designed to meet the needs of highly at-risk students who are not succeeding in the traditional setting. In alternative programs, students are provided with a variety of options that can lead to graduation and are supported by

services for themselves and their immediate families that are essential to success” (Indiana Department of Education, 2012, para. 1). Alternative placement programs, or in lieu of suspension as they are also called, involves schools providing educational services to students whose “behaviors are such that regular classroom placement is no longer appropriate. Programs range from in-school to outside of the school and are operated with the intent of allowing students opportunities to continue their education without risking unwarranted behaviors taking place in the classroom” (Sarasota Public Schools, 2016).

In lieu of suspension programs are also defined by Wettach, Owen, and Hoffman (2015) as being:

designed to be tailored to student needs, and permit the continued and appropriate credit accrual for students which allows a progress toward graduation. Goals of alternative placement include: allowing students an opportunity to serve consequences for unbecoming behavior exhibited within the school setting, while also having an opportunity to correct student behavior so that a smooth transition to the classroom may take place (p. 36).

According to the American Institute for Research (2016) alternative placement is designed to “keep students in school while improving academic outcomes and behaviors through disciplinary policies that don't dampen student achievement” (p. 18). In other words, alternative placement is a platform put in place to manage actions exhibited by students while also serving to correct inappropriate behaviors during the continuance of the student's education.

An alternative school program as defined by the Massachusetts Department of Education (2012):

enables districts to maximize their use of teachers who are skilled in and dedicated to educating at-risk students. Furthermore, school districts can better meet the needs of their community, to the extent that Alternative Education programs and schools assist students who need smaller, more structured environments to address challenging behavior by utilizing, for example, positive behavioral supports (para. 2).

Alternative schools can be compared to factories which operate primarily for handling specialty product manufacturing, but are also capable of producing products which are considered mainstream. These schools exist also for students who have not yet demonstrated that a return to the general education classroom is now out of the picture.

What is Needed to Operate an Effective Alternative Placement Program?

Wettach et al. (2015) identify three crucial components which are necessary to operate an effective alternative placement program. They found that “for an alternative program to be successful, it must be a well-designed and well-implemented alternative schools and in-school suspension programs” (p. 36). The expectation is that by ensuring the program is both well designed and implemented correctly, it should be expected to be a superior alternative to out-of-school suspension. Wettach et al. (2015) also suggest using a “careful approach with an eye toward meaningful behavioral reform to deliver a result in a significant reduction in recidivism” (p. 38). This component is expected to provide students with the opportunity to reflect on past behavior, and understand why they should not repeat it.

While many schools may desire to operate alternative placement programs with streamlined budgets possibly servicing its students with non-instructional personnel,

Wettach et al. (2015) states that “assigning non-instructional personnel to oversee alternative placed students is unlikely to produce positive results, using certified teachers and trained behavior specialists to work with suspended students has been shown to be an effective tool” (p. 38). The expected result of using certified teachers is to ensure that academic instructional consistency will not suffer although students are no longer in the traditional classroom. For an alternative placement program to succeed, it must be diligent in “operating with a full day of school, small student bodies, small classes, a student-centered atmosphere, alignment of curriculum and assessment, availability of special education services, training and support for teachers, and connections with multiple external agencies” (p. 38). To operate an effective alternative program, students must be provided with the same level of consistent academic instruction which is found in the traditional school. This level of consistent academic instruction must be available, to include students with exceptionalities, and learning varying learning needs.

The goal for operating an effective alternative placement program is to ensure that there is fluidity in the program which mirrors that which is provided in the general education classroom. The chief goal is to provide comprehensive classroom instruction while also providing the unique experience which is desired, based on the reason each student is placed in the program. At the end of a student’s stay in the program, the desire is that they will be able to show successful attendance in school, improved behavior, improved grades, as well as an improved grade point average. Each of these improvements will be the result of them being placed in alternative placement program in lieu of suspension or expulsion.

What is Fidelity in Terms of Alternative Placement and Why is it Important?

Any school which is looking to operate an alternative placement program should expect to be monitored for fidelity. In fact, such as James Nelson (2009) suggest that “states should prescribe administrative compliance standards for alternative education programs” (p.34). Nelson goes on to say that “fidelity assessments should also be used in studies to asses these programs, and the impact on overall student achievement and outcomes should be examined to develop a tool which identifies students who will best benefit from this type of placement” (p. 34).

The success of alternative placement programs depends on placing students into these programs who will benefit from this type of setting. While it would be ideal to remove students from the traditional school system who pose threats to the structure of day to day operations of a school, students should be examined carefully to determine if alternative placement is truly warranted. Over the course of operating an alternative school, criteria for placement should be revised based on minimum acceptable student compliance to rules and success rate. Criteria should also include a mandatory adherence by staff and students to strategies and best practices which are deemed necessary to achieve student success.

Pros and Cons of Alternative Placement

Opponents of alternative schools such as David D’Agata suggest that alternative placement in American schools has resulted in a return to what is known as ‘Separate But Equal’. D’Agata (2005) writes that “while some perceive alternative education programs as the last hope for at risk students, others contend that such programs merely function as dumping grounds reserved for disruptive, underprivileged, minority students” (p. 635). While the term alternative may sound disingenuous and lead to assumptions concerning

who is placed in alternative schools, there is evidence which suggests that alternative schools are a necessity for more than just students with behavioral issues.

D'Agata claims that “alternative schools are nothing more than a convenient place to warehouse students the conventional system is unprepared to handle. Instead of helping these troubled students, the traditional schools simply abandon them by placing these students in exclusionary programs that offer virtually no academic content” (p. 640). While some choose to focus on the numbers of students being placed in alternative schools because of problematic behavior, there remains an audience of individuals who are able to see the big picture. The truth is that without an alternative platform which is able to meet the varying needs of today's students, public schools will be left educating pupils using a one-size-fits-all approach.

Russel Skiba and Jeffrey Sprague (2008) suggest that alternative education is a positive resource for schools, because it assures that the academic process is continued for students. They write that “it is hard to justify interventions that rely solely on excluding a student from school when we know that time spent in the classroom is the single best predictor of academic success” (p. 39). Another advocate for the use of alternative education is the national drop-out prevention organization ‘Rise Out’. Rise Out (2016) describes alternative schools as helping students by:

supporting their academic goals while also leaving time for other activities they want to pursue. They offer help with the legalities and logistics of exiting the school system, academic classes, discussion groups, and extracurricular activities.

They assist students with finding internships, create independent projects, help

with the college admissions process, offer educational consulting, and moral support (para. 1).

Clearly there are many benefits students receive when they are placed into alternative schools.

Out of School Suspension Impact on Student Achievement

According to the Florida Department of Education (FDOE), School Guide to Calculating School Grades, high school grades “are calculated by evaluating a total of twenty-four different areas in a school”. Of these twenty-four areas, students who are placed in in school suspension serve to create a deficit in every single area. One of the most pertinent areas which can serve to flat-line any school grade is the all-important area of ‘percentage of students tested’. While schools are expected to “make provisions for students to be able to come to school and test even during times of out of school suspension” (p. 24), suspended students often fail to arrive on campus and complete standardized testing.

Not only is the school grade affected by out of school suspension, but overall student achievement is affected when students are not allowed to participate in the learning experience. Evidence suggests, that student achievement is negatively impacted by students being away from campus due to suspension. Denise Marie Ordway (2016) writes that “students who had been suspended earned significantly lower scores in math and reading on end-of-year exams.” She also states that “students with a propensity to be suspended did worse on the exam during the years they were suspended than during years they were not” (para. 5).

There is mounting evidence to suggest that suspending students out of school is an overwhelming contributor to student's failure to find success in the classroom. Reece Peterson (2005) states that "emerging research that indicates that suspensions are not likely to change the inappropriate behavior of the students involved, nor do they serve to deter other students from engaging in the same behaviors. Instead, these consequences make the suspended student's academic progress more difficult, and they may increase the likelihood of the student dropping out of school or having other negative outcomes" (para. 2). One of the most compelling indictments on out of school suspension and the effect it has on student achievement can be found from Sue Books. Mrs. Books (2007) suggests that "students who make too much trouble for the school system are shipped out. After a few incidents, they are simply gone, no longer visible to teachers or school officials" (p. 27). Beth Hawkins (2014) writes that "a student kept out of the classroom three times by ninth grade is virtually guaranteed not to graduate" (para. 4).

Conclusion

Zero Tolerance is extreme, and is not the most-effective tool for all students with behavioral problems. Removing students from the academic arena should be a last resort policy. Although there are pros and cons to Alternative Placement, when these programs are designed with fidelity they will accomplish the goal they have been established to achieve. These programs provide a myriad of services for students in an age where diversity in the public-school arena is needed now more than ever.

Many students who are repeatedly suspended are dropping out and giving up on school at an alarming rate. Students who are not being suspended are negatively affected by not having their suspended peers in the classroom with them. Students who are

removed from school are demonstrating that the lack of academic instruction they receive, is a contributor to their lack of preparation, and ability to perform on standardized assessments. It is my belief that if schools will choose to implement alternative placement, and operate it with fidelity, then schools will be able to see much better results in all areas of student achievement across the board.

Section Three: Project Plan and Action

Project Details and Goals

This project is designed to assess whether the implementation of the REACH program is successfully improving the overall performance of students enrolled at Mount Olive High School and students enrolled in the REACH Academy. My goal to improve the overall quality of our school through reducing the number of students who are repeatedly receiving out of school suspension, improving student's grades, grade point average, percentage of students taking standardized assessments, and attendance. Improvement in each of these areas will not only improve our school's grade, but will also show the positive impact the REACH program has had on improving the overall performance of our students.

Action Plan

While meeting with my assistant principal, dean, and potential specialist we reviewed suspension data from Mount Olive High School from the last three school years, it became evident to me that if we were going to turn around the scores of our school, and improve overall student achievement more interventions in addition to PBS were needed to be made. In addition to PBS, the blueprints for the REACH Academy Alternative School began to come into focus. The initial goal of the REACH alternative program was to provide an alternative placement location for students who were in danger of being suspended from school and putting student and school performance in danger. Resources needed to bring this program included a location to house the program, teachers, and computers.

This past year, Mount Olive administrators created a tracking system which kept track of each area of demographics and academic data for each student who received in school suspension, as well as out of school suspension. The tracking system was intended to identify the students who were receiving disciplinary suspension, and also to identify how these students were performing in areas of academics, attendance, and assessments during the school year. As a member of the school advisory council (SAC), I saw an opportunity to utilize this data to create a plan of action for how we could better meet the needs of these students who often found themselves recidivating (repeating) the behaviors that placed in ISS or OSS.

With this goal in mind, the immediate question was what exact type of program would the REACH Academy be? Additional questions were: what hours of the day would this program operate? During the same hours as Mount Olive High School? The question of where would this alternative school be housed? Who would teach the students? What curriculum would be taught? What data would be used to assess the effectiveness of the program? Who would be responsible for overseeing the program?

Questions which I knew could be answered as a result of evaluating data and the effect of REACH include: are students who are enrolled in REACH Academy outperforming those students who are being suspended but not enrolled in the alternative school in each of the above areas mentioned? How much better overall are REACH students performing across the board since they have been enrolled into the program versus their experience as opposed to students who did not receive an opportunity to experience in lieu of suspension placement into the REACH Academy?

Methods

I chose the Lang Standards Assessment (LSA) as the assessment I would monitor to track student assessment data. I chose the Skyward student data tracking system to monitor student grades, GPA, and attendance. I chose the Decision Ed program to track student suspension data before, during, and after their participation in the alternative school program. LEAP's lessons, which is a behavior intervention curriculum program was also selected to be used to help eradicate student recidivism. Because students would also be required to complete their regular coursework while attending REACH, I established a system for how teachers would deliver their assignments to me for their students.

Not only will I assess Mount Olive student's suspension data, attendance data, LSA, grades/GPA, and overall student achievement for these students, but I will also build a data tracking model to mirror these results versus previous data in these areas to ascertain student performance while they are matriculating through the REACH program. As data come in to the Skyward and Decision Ed tracking systems, I will be able to assess the effectiveness of the REACH Academy.

The administrators began to assign students into the program after they interviewed students and their parents informing them of the goals of the program. Students and parents were made aware of the expectations as well as what grounds would be for program dismissal. Students and their parents were made to sign a behavior, attendance, and performance contract in lieu of their suspension. Students were also informed that should they violate the terms of this agreement that their original

suspension would return to out of school suspension and that they would be removed from the alternative placement program.

Ethical Considerations

The decision to give me permission to collect student data was approved once the decision was made by the leadership team to move forward with assessing when students would begin enrollment into the REACH program. It was agreed upon that access to student information would be limited to administration, guidance, and REACH instructors alone. During the selection, interview, and registration processes students, guidance, and instructors were the only ones who received tri-fold copies of student transcript data. A spreadsheet for tracking student attendance and performance was built into the school share folder and only REACH personnel, administration, and guidance have access to the page as it is specific log-in restricted.

Inevitably, a challenge of limiting handling of information regarding students participating in the REACH program arose. The challenge boiled down to deciding how teachers would be notified of a need for them to send work to REACH instructors for students assigned to them who would be attending the program. Because Mount Olive teachers are already bound by a mandate from the Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), it was decided that teachers would be notified to send student work to REACH instructors with only student numbers being used by both sides identifying students. The same safeguards which were used to build the REACH program are the same protections that I will use as I collect data from LSA's, grades, GPA, attendance, and suspension data. I will replace all aspects of student identification with fictional names and student numbers as I operate under the guidelines of FERPA.

Conclusion

It is very humbling being given permission from administration to create a data driven, evidence based project which may lead to the success of students who traditionally underperform. Having successfully re-structured both, the Loss of Privilege (LOP) detention program, and the in-school suspension (ISS) programs; gave school administrators confidence that I would find success implementing the REACH program as well. Not only is it my aim to successfully remediate the problematic behavior of REACH student's, but to also show how this program has improved student achievement and the school at large.

Ensuring privacy of student information is a requirement which I do not take lightly. Tracking student data and limiting the sharing of this data is a priority of this project which I am undertaking. Because students with less than stellar academic, assessment, and behavioral history are often faced with unique circumstances and histories, it is paramount that their information is protected. In fact, the focal point of our organizational meeting was to reiterate the mandate of following FERPA guidelines for collecting and handling each student's personal information. Therefore, the results of all findings in this capstone project will reflect the unknown identities of each student who was utilized in the gathering and reporting of my findings.

When I presented school leaders with my plan to show evidence of how the REACH program could be used to bring about dramatic change across the entire school, they were enthralled. Upon hearing, how a reduction in the numbers of students who repeatedly were being suspended, students not reaching their potential academically, and the school failing to test the required number of students to satisfy DOE mandate;

administration expressed confidence in their original decision to include me in the alternative program.

Section Four: Results and Recommendations

As an instructional leader, developing the best possible programs for improving student behavior while ensuring academic success is a priority. However, oftentimes focusing on improving student behavior can become a priority over finding academic achievement when it involves students with disciplinary challenges. Many times programs are implemented to reduce trends of growing disciplinary problems, but research is not done to establish whether or not there has been an equivalent measure of academic success in this area.

At Mount Olive High School, our administration implemented the REACH Academy program. In this program, students would attend during non-school hours from 3:00-6:30 while receiving their traditional academic needs in lieu of out of school suspension. Attendance in this program would continue during the duration of days the student would have traditionally been home while serving out of school suspension. In reviewing the data accrued during the first five months of the REACH program, there is evidence that a positive trend is taking place in the areas of suspension reduction and student achievement.

Results

While assessing how to best perform the task of this portion of my project, I realized that I would need to focus on four specific areas of data. The first area is student attendance. I analyzed the absences of all students focusing on the number of students suspended and the absences of the students in the REACH program. The second area is out of school suspension data for students where I listed the number of students suspended during the same timeframe before and after the REACH Academy became an

option for student placement. The third area of focus will be grade point averages for students placed in REACH as opposed to suspended students. The fourth area I will assess is how students placed in REACH performed on the Lang Standards Assessment (LSA) English Language Arts (ELA) section versus students who were suspended instead. The table below shows student attendance data.

Table 2

Attendance Data Mount Olive High School 2014/15-2016-2017

School Year	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2016-17*
Students Enrolled	1,545	1,575	1,518	1,518
Non-Suspended Absent	45,259	45,429	32,400	50,680
Suspended Students	327	503	160	272
Suspended Absent	4799	8390	1953	3320
REACH Enrolled	X	X	50	70
REACH Suspended Absent	X	X	250	350

Note: * Projects full school year.

The first item which served as a glaring red flag was the total number absences which occur at our school on a daily basis. I immediately began to wonder if the data I received would not only show a need to place more suspended students into the REACH program, but also begin targeting consistently absent students for the program as well. During the 2015-16 school year attendance data shows that the average number of students who were absent from Mount Olive High School was 299 each day. This number represents 16.8% of Mount Olive's student body being absent each day during the 2015-16 school year. On average each of these students missed 28.8 days of school

during this year. Currently, 17% of Mount Olive High School's students have been absent 27.4 days during this school year.

Attendance of students who received out of school suspension further increases absence data for Mount Olive High School. This rings true in part because, historically, suspended students are far more likely to miss school than non-suspended ones. Mount Olive has been no exception to this rule, since the start of the 2014-15 school year Mount Olive High School has averaged 367 students per year being suspended. Data suggests that an average of 5,047 suspension days are given each school year. Over the course of three school years, suspended students have represented 21% of the entire population of Mount Olive. Suspended students, while representing 21% of the student population, represent 11% of the entire student body's absence rate over three years.

Attendance data accrued during this project reveals that not only are Mount Olive students habitually absent, but they are also suspended out of school at a very high rate. Since the start of 2014-15 school year, 990 Mount Olive students have received out of school suspension. With 4,648 students being enrolled at Mount Olive during this time frame, an estimated 1 out of every 5 students who have attended this school during the past three years has been suspended out of school. This number represents 65% of the average student population of Mount Olive over a three-year span. Statistical data taken over this time period further reveals that a typical absent student from Mount Olive can be expected to miss as much as thirty days during the school year.

Implemented during the beginning of the 2016-17 school year with a small number of students enrolling in the program, REACH Academy students represented less than 1% of the overall population of Mount Olive High School students. While

accounting for only a small sample size REACH Academy is having a stellar impact on student attendance. Initial data shows a tremendous disparity in attendance data between students who were enrolled in the REACH program and students. To date, of the 50 students who have taken part in the program there have only been 250 recorded absences which is an average of only 5 absences per student. Thus far during the 2016-17 school year REACH Academy students are six times more likely to attend school than their peers who recorded absences.

Table 3

Attendance Data for Suspended/REACH Students of Mount Olive High School

School Year 17*	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2016-
OSS Students	327	503	160	272
OSS Absences	4,799	8,391	1,953	3,320
REACH Students	X	X	50	70
REACH Suspended Absences	X	X	250	350

Note: * Projects full school year.

Prior to implementation of REACH from 2014- 2016 there were 840 students suspended from Mount Olive. In fact, the end of the 2015-16 school year saw an increase of 35% more students suspended at this school from the 2014-15 school year. Secondly, I noticed that it is evident that there is a small sample size of students to compare between REACH Academy students and suspended students of Mount Olive. Through January of this year, data shows that Out of School Suspension students have been absent 1953 suspension days as opposed to 250 for REACH Academy students. Based on a projection of seventy school days remaining after the conclusion of this project, by the end of the

2016-17 school year 70 students will have an opportunity to be alternatively placed in REACH Academy; thus saving them from the detrimental effect out of school suspension has on students. By the end of the current school year Mount Olive will have achieved a 17% reduction of out of school suspensions from the 2014-15 school year, and a 46% reduction from 2015-16.

Table 4

GPA Data Suspended/REACH Students of Mount Olive High School

School Year	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2016-17*
Suspended Students GPA	1.6	1.7	1.8	1.8
REACH Student GPA Prior	1.8	1.9	1.8	1.8
REACH Student GPA Post	X	X	2.0	2.1

Note: * Projects full school year.

In looking at GPA data REACH Academy students display a higher grade point average than suspended students. The pertinent question I asked in this study was is there an effect on student GPA for students who are alternatively placed instead of being suspended, based on the data received during this project, the answer is yes.

Table 5

Lang Standards Assessment Data Mount Olive High School

School Year	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17
Suspended Student LSA ELA Baseline Scores	1.7	1.6	1.9
REACH Student LSA ELA Baseline Scores	X	X	2.4

The learning gains made by REACH Academy students on the LSA's are remarkable. Due to the fact that REACH Academy comprises such a small number of students does give reason for cautious optimism. As an original contributor to the

implementation of the REACH program I feel obligated to understand all underlying factors which contribute to both student success and student failures. While there appeared to be a slight improvement in the GPA of REACH students as opposed to their out of school peers, the results seemed modest. Likewise, with data showing only a half percentage point difference in analyzed students LSA results the question can still be asked: are REACH Academy students making substantial educational gains? In an effort to delve deeper and find the true impact of the REACH program, I developed a tool which would enable me to analyze the basic data we had access to and measure whether or not the fundamental data concerning REACH actually showed a significant impact. “Theories come and go, but fundamental data always remain the same” (Massel, 1999, para. 1). I theorized that REACH was having a serious impact on our students, however further analysis was needed definitively answer whether or not this was actually the case.

To determine if REACH Academy students’ scores were significantly impacted by the program, I utilized categorical variables. First, I tallied student GPA scores for each school year. Second, I determined the difference between REACH students LSA scores and suspended students over the duration of the timeframe being controlled. To attain a clear analysis of this relatively small amount of data we input this categorical information into a two-way table. I gauged the significance of REACH student’s GPA and tests scores by converting table counts into percentages. The conversion table percentages gave me results I could use as categorical data. The years from which data was gathered serves as continuous data which allows me to configure a ‘Marginal Distribution’ table. The results are summarized in the following table.

Table 6**Marginal Distribution of Student GPA & LBA Scores**

Students	Prior GPA	Post REACH GPA	Prior LBA's	Post REACH LBA's	Totals	Marginal Distribution
OSS 14-15	1.7	X	1.7	X	3.4	1.13
OSS 15-16	1.8	X	1.6	X	3.4	1.13
OSS 16-17	1.8	X	1.9	X	3.7	1.23
REACH 14/15	X	X	X	X	X	X
REACH 15/16	X	X	X	X	X	X
REACH 16/17	X	2.0	X	2.4	4.4	1.46
Total	5.3	2.0	5.2	2.4	10.9	4.95

The results of the marginal distribution table show that the initial group of REACH Academy students improved by 43% compared to the 2014-15 and 2015-16 school year OSS students. Initial REACH Academy students excelled above their 2016-17 counterparts by a margin of 39%.

What is the significance of this data? We must take into history that Mount Olive High School received a letter grade of 'D' on the 2015-16 school rating as assigned by the Florida Department of Education. Reback (2007) found that "students have gains that are .022 or .037 standard deviations greater than normal when their school needs to moderately raise their schools rating" (p. 17). Once the normal deviation is taken into account for students traditionally making gains in overall performance, the function of REACH students becomes 1.31. The function of 1.31 represents a 39% improvement for REACH students over 2014-2016 OSS students, and a 35% improvement over 2016-17

OSS students. Utilizing criteria such as student attendance and student LSA scores which are components of what FLDOE uses to compute Value Added Measurements scores (VAM) for teachers, the .3700 cut score for REACH Academy students would place its teachers in the 'Effective' category according to FLDOE.

In evaluating this evidence, the information gathered indicates promising signs that the REACH program has had a tremendous effect on reducing recidivism and improving achievement among Mount Olive High School's most at risk students. Limitations regarding data which has been presented is the small size of the sample size of students participating in the REACH Academy. There are benefits of having a program specifically designed to achieve the results which the REACH program has. I believe that REACH Academy will be an effective tool administration can continue to utilize in order to promote reduced recidivism and student achievement. Once the leadership team further broadens criteria used to assign students into the program, a greater number of students will be given an opportunity to become beneficiaries of what this program has to offer.

When I was tasked with orchestrating with this project by my assistant principal I clearly understood that this assignment was a priority. The REACH Academy venture was a vision which had now come to fruition. During the early stages of this project, I was initially uncertain whether I would be able to discover any substantial data that would be able to show the program as having an effect on student achievement. It is true that the sample size of students who have shown a reduction in recidivism and improvement on the LSA's is small, however, given the fact that this demographic of students are the same ones which would have otherwise been out of school the results

remain a glimmer of hope. During the conversation my AP and I had regarding my findings during this project, she was resolute in her belief that the decision to implement the REACH program was the best decision Mount Olive had made during her entire tenure of service at the school. Working with school leaders who are committed to finding success in all pupils has been extremely encouraging. Regardless of the modest findings of our data school leaders have displayed a universal resolve to use the information we have collected to promote growth and improvement amongst traditionally often suspended, absent, and underperforming students in our school. As a future school leader my desire is to take the information I have gathered and use every ounce of it to help position myself and my school to provide the highest quality of education to our students, especially those which are the most at risk of falling victim to the dangers associated with recidivism.

I would like to close this section by concentrating on the decreasing of suspensions and improvement in student achievement which has taken place during this school year. The goal of my project was to reduce recidivism, and increase student achievement amongst our most at risk students. Statistics reveal that the REACH program is effectively reducing the number of students who are absent, score below level two on their LSA's, and receive suspensions out of school. In the 2014-15 school year prior to REACH Academy, 327 students were suspended out of school, these students held a 1.6 GPA, and averaged scoring 1.7 on the Lake Standards Assessment. During the 2015-16 school year also prior to the implementation of REACH, 503 students were suspended out of school, these students held a 1.8 GPA, and averaged scoring a 1.6 on their LSA's. The 2016-17 school year not only saw the introduction of the REACH

Academy alternative placement program, but Mount Olive High School is on pace to see a reduction of 233 out of school suspensions by the school year end, and REACH students are on pace to hold a 2.0 GPA. During the release of Mount Olives mid-year LSA assessment scores REACH Academy students are averaging a 2.4 on the ELA section of the test, an improvement of .8 percentage points from the previous school year. Overall, 54% less students are being suspended out of school, GPA's have risen by 15%, and REACH Academy students have attained an 46% improvement on their LBA assessment scores. These results overwhelmingly suggest that the implementation of REACH has been a tremendous asset in reducing recidivism and improving student achievement at Mount Olive High School.

Table 7

Mount Olive High School Reduction of Recidivism

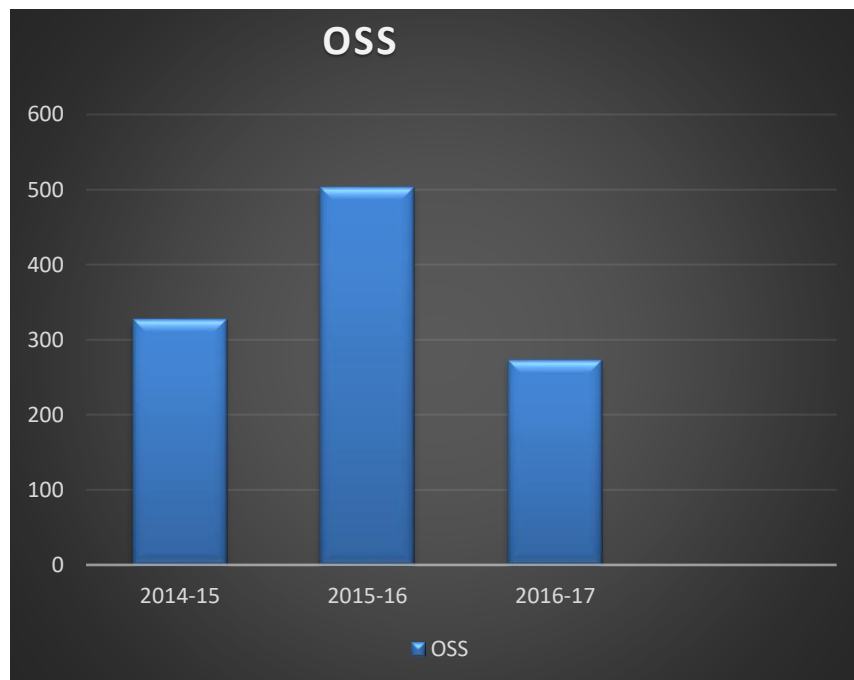
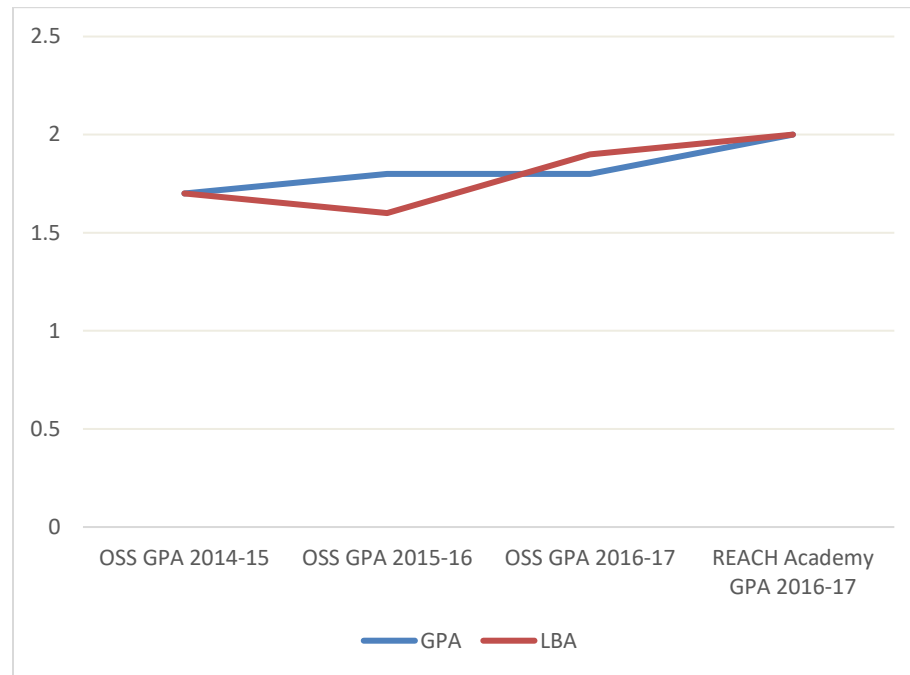


Table 8.**Mount Olive High School improvement of at risk student's GPA****Recommendations**

In wrapping up my project with my assistant principal, we discussed my discoveries and deliberated over suggestions for which direction we would move in based on findings of our data. The first recommendation is to take the information we gained from the reduction of absences to the school leadership team. The reduction of absences which was seen as a result of placing OSS students into the REACH Academy program was substantial. My assistant principal allowed me to address the school leadership team and inform them that the placement of some OSS students into REACH has contributed to a substantial reduction in the number of absences. I was allowed to express how we may be able to target habitually absent students for placement into the REACH program, thus further reducing the number of days that students are found to be absent at our school. I see placing habitually absent students into REACH as a benefit to both the

students and the school. An immediate result I see taking place is our school's attendance rating is improving due to the fact that regardless of whether or not students attend REACH, once they are enrolled in the program they do not count as an absence for our school. Another benefit which can be seen by assigning students to the program is that REACH runs in the afternoon, making it a more conducive timeframe for a large segment of students who struggle to attend school due to transportation challenges.

A recommendation is to plan hold an assembly in our school auditorium for habitually absent students, in school suspended students, OSS students who have chosen to not attend REACH Academy, and any 12th grade student who was not on track to graduate. This assembly would provide each of these demographic of students an opportunity to both hear pertinent information about the program, as well as ask any questions they may have regarding REACH. This would give the students who make up the largest percentage of our lowest performing quartile an opportunity to hear for themselves how this program is able to make a difference for them in areas where they are deficient. The desire is that after attending this assembly, and allowing students to have any lingering questions they have about the program, students who are offered the REACH program as an alternative to suspension will take it. And, students who need an additional option for flexible hours they are able to attend school will see REACH as the better solution to their not making it to school.

Another recommendation is to look for other groupings of students to place into the REACH program. This would include: students who need to raise their GPA in order to graduate, students who are in need of credit recovery, and students who are in need of additional credits they cannot take during the traditional day time hours. The benefits of

allowing these students to partake in the REACH program include: having a higher number of students being able to graduate on time, a reduction of students who are not able to take each of the classes they need on any given school day, and an increase in funding that the school receives due to the higher number of courses which are now being offered at the school each day.

I also recommend conducting a survey of first year REACH program teachers and students. On the teacher survey I would have educators offer their thoughts on the first year of the program. I would have them evaluate the program and ask for suggestions and improvements which will make the program more academically focused. On the student survey I recommend asking students for their thoughts on the initial year of the program, as well as suggestions they would recommend which would make the program more effective at meeting their needs. I will also ask them for suggestions students feel would help reduce repeat offenders.

I believe that the first six months of the REACH program has been a success. REACH Academy students are absent less, have higher GPS's, and score better on their LSA's than students who serve out of school suspension. Even if only one area of gains was being made by REACH students the program would still warrant continuing. I believe that the reductions in absences and suspensions serve as evidence that this program can be used to assist in improving students in other areas as well. It will take a number of years before we can grasp the overall effectiveness of the program but it is safe to say it has gotten off on to a good start. I plan to continue to evaluate REACH during the course of, and after each school year. I plan to recommend to administration

that more students are enrolled into the program, not just students who are suspended out of school.

Section Five: Standards Alignment and Personal Reflection

Standards Alignment

A major focus of completing a project such as the one I have undertaken is to ensure that I am not just performing research for research's sake, but it is imperative that I have a clear understanding of what I intend to accomplish now that I am armed with this information in hand. As an aspiring school leader my goal is to ensure that I share this information with my leadership team and together we will decide on how this information can best be utilized to bring about student achievement.

The project that I have completed demonstrates many different facets involved with serving as an educational leader. According to the Florida Principal Leadership Standards school leaders should be adept with providing for the needs of all students in every capacity which is possible to meet in an educational setting. The purpose of the Florida Principal Leadership Standards is as follows: "The Standards are set forth in rule as Florida's core expectations for effective school administrators. The Standards are based on contemporary research on multi-dimensional school leadership, and represent skill sets and knowledge bases needed in effective schools. The Standards form the foundation for school leader personnel evaluations and professional development systems, school leadership preparation programs, and educator certification requirements" (FDOE, pg. 1).

The initial category of the Florida Principal Leadership Standards which my project embraces is Domain 1 'Student Achievement', which is encompassed by two subcategories, Student Learning and Student Learning as a priority. While looking at how

my project deals with these two areas it is apparent that *Student Learning* results are being improved by the reduction of students missing time in the classroom as well as students having an opportunity to continue the academic process when they would traditionally be absent from school. *Student Learning as a Priority* is being demonstrated when students are given an opportunity to enroll in the REACH program showing that our school will do as much as we possibly can to ensure that student learning is a priority among our school leaders.

The second category of the Florida Principal Leadership Standards that my project has shown to demonstrate is found in Domain 2, 'Instructional Leadership'. The subcategory which is focused on here in this category is Learning Environment. I decided to embark upon this project fully aware that there was a need for an alternative learning environment where the needs of students who were habitually suspended, and needed to improve their chances for educational success could be served. Our school was also in need of a program which would allow us to reduce our number of students who were suspended out of school and were missing out on standardized testing.

The third area which my project succinctly focuses upon is the area of Domain 8 'Organizational Leadership' and the subcategory of Standard 8 'School Management'. I helped to structure the program and provided instructional delivery to each student who attended the program. I designed classroom rules and expectations that each student is governed by during their attendance. I communicate with students and ensure that they are provided with resources they need to complete the program. Each day that I facilitate the program I monitor students to ensure that they are completing assignments. I monitor the HOPE facility to ensure that only assigned students are participating in the program. I

make sure that students are provided refreshments daily during their assigned break time. I also make sure that students are congregating in the appropriate locations of campus when they are not in the classroom.

The last category in the Florida Principal Leadership Standards is Domain 4: 'Professional and Ethical Behavior'. This category is one which must be followed by school leaders to the letter. Whenever student demographic information is being handled their personal information must be altered to protect their identity. When I began this project one of the decisions which I made was to ensure that all data involving our school and its students would be alerted in order to protect the identities of both our students, faculty, and school. Our school had a major dilemma it was faced with when trying to combat discipline issues including the high number of students being suspended out of school. To combat poor student attendance and reduce the number of out of school suspension the REACH program was implemented. The program successfully reduced suspensions by over 40% and also contributed to lowering the absence rate by 12% school wide. While conducting this program I was able to demonstrate professional and ethical behavior by doing the following: I diagnosed our school's dilemma, researched pertinent data, analyzed the findings of data, implemented a program designed to meet the needs of our school, and protect sensitive student and school information while completing this project.

Personal Reflection

Without question this project has given me an opportunity take everything that I have learned during my time as an Ed. Leadership candidate and apply it to one singular mission. Every individual component of the Florida Principal Leadership Standards has

been addressed during this project. This task has given me an opportunity as a student to experience what it is going to take for a school leader to address a serious need at their respective school. This assignment allowed me to dig deep into research and examine an area of need at my school, as well as to see what it takes as a school leader to meet a serious need head on. As a future educational leader I now know how to research and examine data in order to come to an understanding of what is wrong and what needs to be done to fix it. I now have a firm grasp on how to ensure that as a leader I am using the team based approach as opposed to attempting to combat an issue by myself.

This project has allowed me to see how as a school leader my mindset has to be focused on ensuring that the greater good is being sought after to benefit the entire organization and not just one facet of the school. I have learned that initiatives must have a concise agenda that must be understood by all involved parties so that no opportunity for schism exists which could possibly derail a program before it ever enters its infancy stages. As a school leader I must fully understand the program its rules and regulations in order for me to be able to correctly articulate the program to students, staff, as well as parents and concerned citizens.

As an instructional leader I understand that it is my responsibility to ensure that data is continuously being gathered so that we can analyze the effectiveness of our program and know whether or not the program is being a substantial benefit to our students. My responsibility as a school leader is also to be an advocate for any faculty and staff who need support in order that they may best serve the needs of their students who are participating in the program.

Operating an alternative program such as the one we have researched during this project is a task that must consistently be monitored. Any time that students are being taken away from one type of environment and moved into another, there is opportunity for some students to fall between the cracks as well as for some students to lose focus. Quality control must be done on this program on a consistent basis. Teachers must be monitored to ensure that they are educating this demographic of students with fidelity. Students must also be monitored to ensure that data trends which may reveal that the program is consistently having a positive impact on students is accurate.

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