

The Middle School FOCUS Period: A Best Practice Example

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Introduction

Culminating every school day, our intervention/enrichment period, called “FOCUS,” is a vital period of the day during which our middle school philosophy shines. During this period, our middle school students’ unique academic, social, and emotional needs are our whole-hearted focus.

In our 30-minute FOCUS session every day, we strive to personalize and maximize learning for every student. Of course, our teachers do this in their content area classes every single day, and our school has seen continued success because of their commitment to learning and their passion for students. As a complement to classroom instruction, this intervention/enrichment FOCUS period allows focused, uninterrupted time for:

- 1) Individualized intervention when students need support (*Intervention*)
- 2) Literacy enrichment to develop lifelong readers (*Enrichment*)
- 3) The opportunity for students to build relationships with other students and with an adult advocate, and to learn proactive behaviors to be their best selves (*Advisory*)

Planning for the FOCUS Period

After piloting programs and interventions with a few teachers and their classes, and then school-wide during study hall periods, we realized we needed a dedicated period of the day to implement Response to Intervention (RTI) to intervene with students who need support to build their skills. We needed to ensure that students and staff were available at the same time of day for this period as not all students had a study hall during their day, and not all teachers were available when students were available. As we brainstormed ideas, questions about logistics

immediately arose. In the next section, I will present the questions that we tackled first as we embarked upon the creation of our FOCUS program.

When Should We Schedule the FOCUS Program?

We considered two options. First, we considered scheduling it at the same time of day school-wide with all school personnel available. However, we knew not to schedule it first thing in the morning as doing so might tempt parents to schedule doctor's appointments and other appointments at that time. A second option that we considered was to include it at different times for different grade levels, with a traveling group of interventionists. We chose the former, and scheduled the time in the afternoon just before the last class period of the day. After piloting it the first year, with consulted staff and student input, we decided to rescheduled it to the end of the day. We observed that it was often difficult to re-engage students for an academic class following the FOCUS period. Fortunately, we haven't found an increase in the number of students leaving early for appointments, so we have determined that, for our building, the end of the day works best.

How Long Should the FOCUS Period Last?

We wanted the period to be long enough to accomplish learning objectives and short enough to hold the students' interest. Thus, we elected to schedule our period for 30 minutes. We needed time to take attendance and turn computers on, for example. Thus, the majority of the period could be spent on non-custodial duties.

From Where in the Daily Schedule Should That Time Come From?

A few minutes of time was carved from each period, including homeroom and lunch. This caused concern from some teachers, however, when viewed from a whole-year perspective. Those few minutes of class time we removed, multiplied by 180 school days, meant that a

significant amount of time was reduced from a course's annual instructional time. What we have found, though, is that in 50 minutes versus 55 minutes, the students who master the content are still going to master the content; it's the students who don't master the content who need that focused intervention time to enhance their skills. We have also found value in the enrichment portion of our FOCUS period because of its design, so those instructional time concerns have met with less resistance.

How Do We Staff It?

Because we didn't have additional staff members who could serve as an itinerant group of interventionists, we chose the whole-school intervention period so that all staff members would be available to assist in either an interventionist or enrichment capacity. With no other courses occurring at this time, every staff member is available to assist as needed.

How flexible is this period? How do we maintain students' integrity when assigning them to intervention or enrichment?

Rather than try to hide the fact that a student was leaving an enrichment class to be rescheduled into an intervention class, or vice versa, we chose to be transparent. We chose to instruct students about the flexible, dynamic needs of students and the flexible, dynamic nature of this FOCUS period. This was shared with students at our grade-level assemblies at the beginning of the year and then throughout the year in conversations. We stressed that all individuals need support in one area or another to be their very best, and sometime throughout the year, they or their friends may need intervention. That is nothing to be ashamed of, we maintained, and as a middle school community, we are all supportive of one another.

What is the Best Structure for the Intervention and Enrichment Components?

Many ideas were discussed and researched, and we implemented several before finding a plan that worked best for our students. In the sections that follow, specific details are shared about each separate component of our FOCUS period: Intervention, Enrichment, and Advisory.

The Intervention (RTI) Component of the FOCUS Period

During a visit to an Intervention/RTI session, an observer would see a Language Arts, Math, or Special Education teacher facilitating a group of 8-12 students from his/her team who are identified as needing support to build their skills. These students may be working in stations in the classroom, with a small group conferring with the teacher, a small group working on computers learning at an individualized level and pace, and a small group working at their seats on materials provided by the teacher. A different visit might show a progress monitoring session, with each student being assessed on his/her current level so that the teacher can determine if the interventions are working or not, and make decisions about next steps for that student to ensure progress.

Logistics of Intervention

Many resources exist about RTI. One individual we found extremely helpful in our research and planning was Pat Quinn (2009), also known as “The RTI Guy.” Quinn writes a weekly newsletter with practical answers to common questions that almost every school may have. He also presents nationally, and is a humorous, knowledgeable speaker who provides concrete ideas and solutions. His view of RTI is this:

RTI is a process of helping struggling students become successful. The process focuses on how a specific student responds to a specific intervention. In its simplest form, RTI includes the following steps: identify a struggling student; implement an intervention to

solve the problem; check to see if it worked. If the intervention works, you should naturally continue it. If the intervention does not work, you should try a different intervention.” (Quinn, 2009, p. 10)

Guided by many of Quinn’s insights, as well as other research including school visits, we began an RTI journey that evolved over the years, always incorporating benchmarking, interventions, and progress monitoring. Since the inception of RTI at our school, our benchmarking has been administered through a software program called AIMSweb, first piloted in a few classes, then school-wide for reading, then school-wide for both reading and math (during the first week of school, and then again in the middle of the school year). All school personnel assist with the benchmarking so that it is completed at the same time, for all 1100+ students, in a 75-minute timeframe for reading fluency and reading comprehension. The math benchmarking is administered in math classes, but is scored and entered into the AIMSweb database by all team members. We feel strongly that including all school personnel is one way to demonstrate that we are all in this together, and we are all responsible for helping our students grow academically. Once the benchmarking data is completed and accessible, the Language Arts, Math, and Special Education teachers review the scores, as well as statewide test scores, district test scores, and grades. This information helps teachers determine which students may benefit from participating in our intervention program.

After students are identified for the intervention program, they are scheduled with their Language Arts, Math, or Special Education teacher for intervention. A letter is mailed home to share this information with the families, and the teacher speaks with the student individually. During RTI, teachers utilize a variety of intervention programs and activities. Some examples

from the past few years include: ALEKS, MobyMath, Study Island, Readers Theater activities, and MySkillsTutor.

Weekly progress monitoring occurs, and we have also utilized AIMSweb in the past for this. The data is reviewed to determine if each child is making progress with the current intervention. This information helps inform the teacher about how best to support the student in his/her academic growth, whether to continue with the current intervention, try a different intervention, or increase the intensity of the intervention.

For the 2014 school year, we piloted a new program, iReady, for all three components: benchmarking, intervention, and progress monitoring. Other buildings in our district have used the program successfully for one or more components, and we are looking forward to its thorough reports of students' strengths and areas for support, and learning if one software program for all components might assist with efficiency and effectiveness in identifying and focusing on skills that need supported.

To support our teachers as the program has continually evolved, we sought out and continue to seek out professional development opportunities. This has helped us learn from others ideas that worked well for our building, and ideas that helped us avoid (some) difficulties. Initially, a team of individuals attended a number of professional development opportunities. Because this same core group attended multiple learning opportunities together, the team (including teachers, our school psychologist, and administrators) became our resident experts. They may humbly disagree with that term, but they truly did become our experts. Their leadership and understanding of RTI propelled our program into what it has become.

Another support for our teachers has been our Problem Solving Team (PST). Rather than an Intervention Assistance Team (IAT), we retitled the group and have refocused them as a

committee that assists teachers in making data-based decisions about student progress. They help determine if a student should be exited from RTI due to significant progress, if a student would benefit from a different intervention or more intense intervention, or if a learning disability is suspected. At the beginning, the PST was viewed as the sole decision making body; however, we have learned that the classroom teacher, of course, has direct knowledge and insight into the growth of the student and is an equal member in decision-making.

A positive outcome of our RTI process has been a significant decrease in the number of students who are recommended for special education testing but who, after testing, do not qualify (a decrease from 5 per year to 0-1 per year). When thinking about an individual student working through the in-depth testing process, the increased reliability of our referrals for testing is important. After participating in the intervention program, if a student is making progress, then we have helped him/her be successful in the general education setting through targeted interventions. That student is exited from RTI and enters the enrichment portion of the FOCUS period. After participating in the intervention program, if a student is NOT making progress, though, then we have very specific data and information to help us determine next steps, including if additional testing for special education should occur. Of course, at any point, if a disability is suspected, we move forward with testing for special education services. For this testing, and for any future Individualized Education Program (IEP) that may be written, we then have a wealth of information for the required components of the Evaluation Team Report (ETR) and the IEP: evidence of interventions tried (length, frequency, intensity, and duration) and evidence of progress monitoring (assessment method used, frequency of assessments, and analysis of data). Summarizing this, Quinn shares, “The belief behind RTI is that being ‘behind’ does not indicate that a student has a learning disability. A learning disability is present when a

student does not ‘respond’ to a scientifically validated intervention like other students” (2009, p. 10).

With RTI as an integral component to our work with students, we have been able to help build students’ skills so that they can be their most successful. Our statewide test scores are evidence of high performance in both achievement and progress. We believe that that is a direct result of our high quality instruction in every classroom as well as this targeted approach to reaching each individual student who needs support.

Reflections on the Intervention Component

When students were asked to share their thoughts on the Intervention component of the FOCUS period, the following were typical of their responses: “I enjoyed learning more and it brought my grade up; I did not want other kids to know, but then I started to like coming; I do think my skills improved - I could read and infer better; and I got smarter.”

One teacher voluntarily shared the following:

Just a quick note to say how valuable I think our RTI has been. This is making a tremendous impact on many of the students I see on a daily basis. The extra time, attention and effort they are putting forth is allowing them to make progress they otherwise would never have made. Without RTI, they would have dug themselves into a much deeper hole this year. I know you already know all this, but the results that I am seeing are simply amazing. Kudos to you and everyone who made this opportunity possible for the students who need it the most!

The Enrichment Component of the FOCUS Period

During a visit to an enrichment session, an observer would see a Science, Social Studies, Unified Arts, or Encore teacher leading a group of 20-25 students in a literacy enrichment

activity. This might entail everyone (including the teacher) reading silently a book of his/her choosing. Independent choice is a vital component of our program. It also might entail students giving book talks, students using iPads to create alternate covers for the books they are reading, or students creating a video summary of the book on Vine or with Puppet Pals, for example. Another activity might be students writing a “tweet” (in 140 characters or less) to summarize their book, or writing their favorite quote from the passage they just read.

Logistics of Enrichment

When developing the enrichment period, we knew that we must also create highly meaningful learning for students who did not need intervention at the moment. We all agreed that almost every teacher has taught units that they enjoyed teaching and that students enjoyed learning. Unfortunately, some of these units had to be removed as they were not aligned to the new standards. Therefore, to help teachers resurrect these favorite units, we provided teachers time over the summer to develop these units into three-week units that would be used during the Enrichment Component. Students rotated through these enrichment sessions, participating in extension activities from a variety of content areas. While this was ideal in many ways, it was challenging to manage logistically in such a large school. As one example, even noting the location/teacher on a student’s schedule was impossible given the number of rotations in which a student would be scheduled throughout the year.

As the scheduling committee continued to meet and to solicit feedback from students and teachers, we found that some of the most meaningful mini-units centered on literacy activities. At about the same time, one of our staff members shared a book with us that complemented our observations and helped frame our focus: *The Book Whisperer*, by Donalyn Miller (2009). Miller asserts, “No matter how long students spend engaged in direct reading instruction, without

time to apply what they learn in the context of real reading events, students will never build capacity as readers. Without spending increasingly longer periods of time reading, they won't build endurance as readers, either. Students need time to read and time to be readers" (2009, p. 51).

The summer reading that year for our Enrichment teachers was *The Book Whisperer*. At the same time, a planning committee spent time over the summer creating a web-based resource for our staff that provided practical ideas for literacy activities and research related to reading. Our students that next year, and currently, rotate through four teachers over the course of a year, each for nine weeks. In each rotation, the 30-minute period is spent not only in SSR, but also and equally as important, in activities designed to engage students in what they are reading and in what others are reading, to get them thinking about and talking about books. The final page in our student handbook lists all ten genres described in Miller's book, with an area for students to record what they've read. This serves as a discussion point for teachers and students, to help guide students to read genres they may not have tried yet, and to note what types of books students appear to be most interested in and make suggestions for future reading based on that.

Of all of our staff members to thank for their help in designing this FOCUS period, our media center specialist was the most instrumental in making the literacy enrichment period a success. She created a closed-circuit television channel called "Book TV" where student work from these enrichment sessions was televised, including, for example, student-created tweets, quotes, book talks, videos, and artwork. Throughout the year, she showcased new materials in the media center, similar to bookstore displays. Students and staff were able to peruse the books and resources, by genre, and check out books of interest. She also researched our media center statistics and found that, as expected, our circulation number increased significantly. What was

most exciting, however, was the statistic showing that our holds (students placing a hold on books they would like to read next) doubled! We knew then that students were hearing others (students and staff) talk about books they were reading and were motivated by those book talks.

When discussing the significant amount of time her students spend reading in the classroom, Donalyn Miller (2009) indicates that not only have her students performed extremely well on the state assessments, proving to be “strong, capable readers,” but they also simply “love books and reading” (p. 4). “Building lifelong readers has to start here. Anyone who calls herself or himself a reader can tell you that it starts with encountering great books, heartfelt recommendations, and a community of readers who share this passion” (p. 4, 2009). We are excited by the literacy enrichment period in that it complements what our Language Arts teachers, and all of our teachers, focus on in their classroom: helping students become capable and lifelong readers.

Feedback on the Enrichment Period

Students shared a general sentiment in regard to the enrichment period. Some typical responses are as follows: “I love FOCUS. I used to hate to read, and now that I read every day, I love it!” Another student observed, “Our Media Center has a ton of awesome books!” Student choice is always an important consideration when motivating students to read, as this student maintained, “I love that you get to read a book of your own choice, rather than a whole class book. Reading what you want makes it more motivating.” Finally, one advocated for the Enrichment Component in this way, “It’s a relaxing way to end the day, getting to read and hearing what others are reading.”

One teacher expressed gratitude for including Sustained Silent Reading as part of the enrichment components. This teacher explained how it has impacted students’ reading stamina:

In the past, I would always start the year with making SSR [sustained, silent reading] time a priority, but as the weeks raced by, SSR would get muscled out for more academics. This year, I committed to starting each class period with SSR...Then you add in the 30 minutes of FOCUS time—heaven. I gave a practice [statewide] test 2 weeks ago, and I saw ‘reading stamina’ in action. My team reported how diligently almost all the kids worked on the reading section [of the statewide test] yesterday. Even the students in my room with attentional concerns were able to attend and focus for long stretches of time. So, to make a long story short, thanks for making the READING/FOCUS time a priority. It hasn’t always been pretty or smooth, but, like making pancakes, it does get better after the first one. THANKS!!!!

The Advisory Component of the FOCUS Period

During a visit to an advisory session, an observer would see a staff member advising a group of 15-18 students from multiple grades. The activities observed might range from a team-building activity where students must work together to accomplish a task, to partner or small group discussions of a high or low moment from the previous week, to a whole-group creation of a family tree to display on the classroom wall, to reading an excerpt from and then role-playing concepts learned in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens*, by Sean Covey.

Logistics of Advisory

One of the 16 characteristics of successful schools for young adolescents, from the Association for Middle Level Education (formerly known as the National Middle School Association [NMSA]) is that “Every student’s academic and personal development is guided by an adult advocate” (2010, p. 35). After we designed a schedule that incorporated a dedicated

intervention/enrichment period for students, we recognized that we now had a period in our day where every single student and every single staff member was available. In addition to our classrooms being staffed by outstanding, caring, student-centered teachers, we now had an additional opportunity to address, with a school-wide framework, students' social and emotional needs as well as their academic needs.

We started small. We began brainstorming ideas for meaningful activities for students for the beginning of the school year, before school-wide benchmarking assessments are administered, before data is reviewed to determine which students would benefit from intervention, and before scheduling students into either intervention or enrichment sessions. In our first year, we began those first few weeks with a school-wide anti-bullying focus, to ensure that all students heard the same message. A planning committee created, over the summer, a series of lessons to support this focus. Students were scheduled in small groups with one of their team teachers and attended these sessions until intervention/enrichment groups were determined and assigned.

The following year, in addition to the anti-bullying unit to begin the school year, we added monthly, then bi-monthly advisory sessions in those same small groups. The focus of those lessons was on pertinent topics for young adolescents; for example, we focused on skills such as building character and making positive life-long choices. During that year, an advisory committee was formed to more fully develop our advisory program. We discussed what an advisory program should be and reflected on the ideals in *This We Believe*, specifically:

When students and their advisors meet regularly during the school day, an advisory program helps students develop respect for self and others; compassion; a workable set of values; and the skills of cooperation, decision making, and goal setting.” (2010, p. 35)

As we talked, several committee members reflected on how closely this corresponded with the tenets of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens*, by Sean Covey. In his book, Covey states that, “Life for teens is no playground. It’s a jungle out there. And if I’ve done my job right, this book can be like a compass to help you navigate through it” (2014, p. 4). The seven habits described in the book are universal, yet they are written specifically for teenagers with scenarios and ideas to which they can often relate. Through continued planning with the Advisory Committee, we developed lessons based on Covey’s work, focusing on one habit per month, with weekly lessons to support that particular habit.

With feedback, our advisory program has evolved to include more team-building and relationship-building activities for those first few weeks of the school year as opposed to the stand-alone anti-bullying unit we initially incorporated. We did this because we believe that students will easily become more comfortable throughout the year reflecting and sharing with each other and with their advisor. We now meet in multi-grade groupings, with an advisor the students will have for all three of their middle school years, and we have moved toward more of a family atmosphere in our advisory sessions, with the group starting each session in a circle to discuss an opening question and ending in a circle to set goals for the upcoming week. In addition, we also felt strongly that students would benefit from direct readings from Covey’s book, so we wrote grants to purchase a classroom set for each advisory group, and we incorporated reading activities into our lessons.

This past year, we began the three-to-five year process of developing a Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) model in our school, which corresponds with our Advisory program. The planning committee has been retitled the Advisory/PBIS Committee and continues to design and enhance our Advisory/PBIS framework to meet our overall goals of

connecting students with adults and with each other and teaching students positive behaviors to help them become successful students and adults. As an entire school, we are committed to fostering students' social and emotional growth, as well as their academic growth, and, by incorporating the themes from *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens*, we are helping students discover proactive behaviors to reach their full academic and social-emotional potential.

Positive Reactions on the Advisory Component

Judging by the students' comments, they seemed to embrace the community-building aspect of the Advisory and the chance to be with students of different grades: "I liked being with people from every grade, being able to mix." Another shared, "I learned that 8th graders are not mean." Other positive outcomes shared were, "I've learned how to chase my goals in life" and "I learned you can make friends with anyone." The main goal of any middle school should be to create a sense of community, which is exactly what this student observed, "I learned that you don't have to be related to be a family." Finally, one student viewed the Advisory Period as a time to escape: "I loved how it was a comfortable atmosphere that we could go to at the end of the day, without the normal stress and expectations of normal school. I loved the people and the environment."

One teacher's sentiment seems to echo the positive reactions of the students:

Advisory group is a place for me to connect with students and for them to connect with each other. I love that students from upper grade levels look out for the younger students, helping them to navigate the ins and outs of middle school. Advisory creates the feeling that 'we're all in this together,' and we might as well have some fun, learn, and grow while we're here.

Conclusion

Our middle school has had the honor and privilege of presenting the components of our FOCUS period at a number of state and national conferences, and we continue to learn from other middle school educators who care so deeply about middle school students. In addition, our middle school master schedule and our intervention program have won awards at the state level.

We are extremely proud of our students and our staff, and we strongly believe that this multi-faceted FOCUS period has provided us with that added boost toward meeting our students' individual needs: intervention when students need support, literacy enrichment to develop lifelong readers, and an advisory program for all students. It has not always been a smooth process; however, which is why we believe in starting small and growing each aspect of our program. It is critical to provide time to develop and implement ideas, gather feedback, make revisions and enhancements, and, in each and every step along the way, determine how we might best meet the unique needs of our young adolescent students. For validation of our perceived success, I look to the feedback provided by our students. I couldn't say it better than one of our students, who shared what it is that makes our middle school so special by observing that "not only do we talk about academics, but also about a life outside of that and making sure we're prepared for that life."

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