Introduction

Many SEA programs use academic time to provide homework help to students and support their school progress. Research has shown that helping students improve their attendance, behavior, and grades in middle school significantly improves students' chance of graduating high school on time. The Diplomas Now program identified the following three signs that a student is falling off track[1].

❏ Attendance: less than 85% attendance, skipped classes, latenesses
❏ Behavior: an unsatisfactory behavior mark or suspension
❏ Course performance: a failing grade in core and non-core classes, all grades in the low 70s, any missing work or late work

Students who move from 6th to 9th grade with no concerning indicators are three times more likely to graduate than kids who have even one indicator. Knowing this, SEA programs must be vigilant in monitoring students' school attendance, behavior, and grades, and we must provide support and intervention to help students stay on track.

Overview

This guides breaks down effective academic sessions the following sections.

❏ Prepare for Homework Help Sessions
  ❏ Communicate with schools
  ❏ Check online grade books
  ❏ Share academic information with volunteers
  ❏ Have technology available
  ❏ Prepare supplemental work
❏ Manage Homework Help Sessions
  ❏ Consider goals and resources
  ❏ Have clear staff and volunteer roles
  ❏ Set the tone of the space
  ❏ Ensure productive use of time

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[1] https://www.healthypeople.gov/2020/healthy-people-in-action/story/increasing-graduation-rates-in-our-nations-public-high-schools

Prepare for Homework Help Sessions

Strong preparation is key to leading effective homework help sessions. Below are some ways to do this.

Communicate with schools

A key factor in helping students academically is to have a deep understanding of their course work by visiting and having relationships with their schools. Set up weekly or twice a month visits to check in with teachers. During these check-ins, here are questions to ask teachers:

- ❏ Coursework: What is being covered that week (any big papers, projects, quizzes or test) and in the upcoming months?
- ❏ Student Information: Are students turning in work on time and participating? How are their grades and behavior? Have they been late to or absent from classes?
- ❏ Teacher support: What do the teachers need from us? What should students focus on while completing work at our program?
- ❏ Resources: Are there materials we can use to support students in academics that you recommend?

When in sessions with students, let them know the information you've learned from their teachers (missing work, a big paper coming up they should work on, a test they should study for, why they are missing or late to class, etc).

You may need to get a **school records release form** signed by a guardian in order to have access to students' academic information (see [StreetSquash sample school records release](#)). If you do not have a partnership with the school, but have this form signed by parents, you should be able to schedule a visit with the school guidance counselor for general academic updates or individual teachers for specific subject updates. See SEA's [School Partnerships Guide](#) for more information on this topic.

Check online grade books

Most schools have online grade books that students and parents have access to. Staff should check these grade books at least bi-weekly to stay abreast of grades, missing assignments, and sometimes detailed notes from teachers. Collect login information, either from the schools or the students, and store it somewhere you can access as needed.

Share academic information with volunteers

Give your volunteers or academic support staff as much information as possible so they can best support students. Keep your grades, school visit notes, and other important

information about your students in one place. Using Google Drive to create an academic update tracker is useful for sharing updates remotely with part-time academic staff and volunteers (see StreetSquash sample academic tracker). This is also a good place to keep notes about individual student needs such as "needs 1-on-1 support," or "should do math first." (For more information on this topic, see the SEA Best Practice Guide on Volunteer Recruitment, Training, and Support.)

Have appropriate technology
Programs should have computers available to students during homework sessions. Chromebooks are inexpensive and durable for everyday use. Staff and volunteers should monitor computer use throughout the session to make sure students are not distracted by other websites. Blocking social media from WiFi access is very useful in limiting these distractions.
Cell phones are also often needed by young people in homework sessions: many students will take photos of assignments, text friends for homework clarity, or use music on their phones as a way to focus in sessions. Programs should determine their cell phone policies in advance and enforce those consistently in sessions.

Prepare supplemental work
When students come to programming with little to no homework, staff need to be prepared with supplemental academic materials. There is no need to recreate the wheel; teachers often have resources to give you, and there are many academic materials and websites that do not require you or your staff to create worksheets. Below are some suggestions for supplemental work.
- ❏ **Teacher-provided materials:** Ask students' teachers if they have supplemental work that would be helpful for students to complete once they complete their homework.
- ❏ **Grade level binders:** Compile leveled materials for students to use independently for practice or for an academic challenge. Completion of these materials can be linked to incentives. Below are some resources from StreetSquash.
  - ❏ Incentives for homework help sessions.
  - ❏ Resources for middle school binders, high school binders, and study skills
  - ❏ Books to try:
    - ❏ Wordly Wise 3000 (books align with students grade year)
    - ❏ Daily Reading Comprehension (6, 7 & 8) by Evan-Moor
    - ❏ 180 Days of Reading for Sixth Grade by Shell Education
- ❏ **Projects:** Projects are a great for both independent work or groups where students can build skills.

- ❏ Research essay - Use topics that are engaging to students (use of social media in education, Latinx representation in media, gender neutral bathrooms in public schools, etc). Students should research different perspectives and facts to include in their essays.
- ❏ Reading and analyzing text - Articles or novels can be used with writing prompts/reflection questions to encourage critical reading. This can be further developed into a discussion, essay, or powerpoint/slides presentation.
- ❏ Document Based Question Essays (DBQs) - Provide students with various sources (articles, images, etc) as evidence to help students respond to a question about historical or current events. Examples of DBQ essays can be found here http://www.nysedregents.org in the Social Studies section.
- ❏ **Websites:** Many websites provide independent practice of key skills, and many sites track progress which can help you see the skill level of your students.
  - ❏ Quizlet - Allows you to use existing or create quizzes for your students. This is also great for students to create there flash card style study materials.
  - ❏ Khan Academy - A math program that tracks student progress
  - ❏ NewsELA - Engages students in reading assignments and quizzes them on comprehension. Allows staff to print out hard copies of readings and quizzes
  - ❏ Math Games - Free math games and skills practice that students find engaging
  - ❏ Prodigy - Allows students to make an avatar and battle a creature while solving math problems at their grade level
- ❏ **Studying:** Have volunteers and resources like notecards available so that students can use extra homework time to prepare for upcoming tests.
- ❏ **Independent reading:** Have a library or collection of interesting articles available for students to read on their own. Including writing prompts in response to the readings helps encourage more critical reading.

Manage Homework Help Sessions

There are four main things to consider when coordinating your homework help space: the goal of the session, the use of staff, the tone of the space, and the use of student time.

Consider Goals and Resources

Determine the goals of you session based on your resources. How many support staff you have will determine how much content support you can offer, and access to technology will determine the type of supplemental academic material you can provide.

Staff-to-student ratio considerations
- *One-to-one or two-to-one ratios* - your homework help session goal should be *individually tailored support*.
  - Keep pairings consistent; this helps tutors learn the strengths and challenges of their student(s)
  - Encourage students to focus on the most difficult assignments first. Teach missing foundational skills as needed when completing assignments.
  - Supplemental work can be more project-based due to the extra support
- *Three or five to one* - your homework help session goal should be *small groups or pods*.
  - These groups or pods can be assigned based on school, subject area (students strong in math or struggling in history work together), academic needs (IEP students), etc.
  - Be strategic about where tutors and staff place themselves so that they can easily monitor the progress of all students' in their group/pod.
  - Supplemental work in these sessions can be team projects focused on the needs of the groups and led by the support staff, or individual work.
- If there are o*nly one to two academic staff with a larger group* of students, your homework help session goal should be *independent work*.
  - Staff should float between students, tutoring and giving benchmarks to help them stay on task (ie. "keep working and when you get to number 10 let me know and I'll come back and check in").
  - Sessions should be quieter as students work independently.
  - Supplemental work in these sessions should be independent work that is tailored to students' grade or subject areas where they need more practice.

Space considerations
- Having a quiet, well-lit classroom space where students complete their homework can make a big difference in the efficiency level of students. Advocate to get the best possible places for homework help.
- Ideally students should be seated at separate tables with their support staff/volunteers to reduce distractions. If your space is less than ideal (hallways, conference rooms, locker rooms, etc) maintain the same expectations and separate students and groups.
- If unable to separate students, keep conversations quiet and focused.
- Set the space up, or carry with you, basic academic supplies such as pencils, pens, blank paper, any supplemental materials, and computers.

Have clear staff and volunteer roles

Make sure roles and expectations are clear (see [StreetSquash academic staff expectations](#)).
Below are some important things to consider when thinking about how to use academic staff in sessions.

Role of lead staff vs support staff

- ❏ Lead academic staff are the keepers of student knowledge and relationships, and should use time in homework help sessions to make connections between what happens in school and what happens in program. This can look like:
    - ❏ Assigning supplemental work based on academic needs
    - ❏ Making suggestions on the order of homework completion
    - ❏ Conversations with individual students to share feedback from schools (low attendance, behavior, missing work, low test scores, etc.) and create a plan for change
    - ❏ Addressing behaviors that support staff are not equipped to address
- ❏ Lead staff can also act in the same capacity of support staff.
- ❏ Support staff (part-time staff and volunteers) are the tutors and redirectors. They should focus their time on checking for understanding in homework assignments, answering homework questions, checking if work is done correctly, redirecting focus, etc. They can also play a valuable role in helping manage behavior by keeping students engaged with their work.
- ❏ If support staff are supporting strictly in one subject area, they should float to help students when working on assignments in that subject area or be assigned to a student who is struggling in their area of expertise.
- ❏ Lead academic staff can also use support staff to create or organize supplemental materials.

Tutors

- ❏ Tutoring does not mean doing for. Staff should allow students to make mistakes and help them to make corrections rather than give them the answers.
- ❏ Be thoughtful about which tutors you assign to which age groups. Tutors with deep content knowledge about topics such as chemistry and physics might be more helpful with high school students, while tutors with more general content knowledge may be better with elementary and middle school students. Recognize that middle school students often need more frequent redirection, and assign volunteers who can help with this responsibility.
- ❏ In areas where staff/volunteers feel less competent, they can learn with the students by:
    - ❏ Reviewing textbook explanations and reading together

- ❏ Looking online for resources and reviewing together
- ❏ Asking the student to explain what they've learned
- ❏ Reviewing students notes from school together
- ❏ If students in homework help sessions are divided into groups by subject area, lead and support staff working with those groups should be very familiar with the subject they are tutoring.
- ❏ Benchmarks are important when floating; giving students a task to complete (finishing one paragraph in an essay, doing numbers 3-10 on a worksheet, etc.) gives staff time to move from student to student while keeping them focused.

Student-Staff Relationships

Often, the ability of a staff member or volunteer to help a student complete his/her work is impacted by the strength of his/her relationship with the student. As Theodore Roosevelt said, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." For more information on developing strong relationships with students, see SEA's Best Practice Guide for Building Strong Student-Staff Relationships.

Set the Tone of the Space

Here are some factors to consider when assessing the productivity level of your sessions.

Routines: The organization of homework help sessions is important. Create a routine for your students considering the steps below.
- ❏ Prep the space with needed materials in advance of student arrival (snack, academic supplies, computers, etc.).
- ❏ Create and post a visual agenda for the day.
- ❏ Have an established entry routine for your students. Here are some ideas to consider.
    - ❏ 5 Minute Focus to trantionsion into a focused productive space
    - ❏ Working independently on Do Nows to build skills and direct focus.
    - ❏ Working with other students at your table to solve a challenge or riddle written on the board
- ❏ Have students get, or hand out, snack to other students.
- ❏ Homework and tutoring begins. Start by checking planners.
- ❏ Supplemental work is available as needed.
- ❏ Clean up. Be specific and enforce expectations - throw out trash, push in chairs, return borrowed materials, etc.
- ❏ End of session shout outs.

Student planners: Requiring or encouraging planner use will help students stay organized and is a good way to help them set a goal for the homework session. If students have not filled out their planner in school, have them fill it out and plan their time for homework help during the first five minutes of homework time. To encourage planner usage, you can create an incentive plan. For example, put students in a "pod" with similar peers at their table for a month; every day that all students have their planners filled out, the group receives a star. At the end of the month, the group with the most stars gets a special prize. For individual students, you can award equipment bucks or behavior points.

What productivity looks like: In one-to-one sessions, productive looks like quiet academic conversations between assigned staff and students. In independent work sessions, productive looks like quiet focused work with intermittent conversations while staff is floating. In small group or pod sessions, productive may look either like conversations around projects and shared assignments, or like students completing their work quietly and independently. The Academic Director and their support staff should manage behavior, redirect students back to their academic work, and intervene as necessary to keep students engaged and on-task.

Ensure Productive Use of Student Time
Ensure that students are making the most of their time by helping them prioritize their work and track progress toward their goals. Based on the information you gather about your students, you can determine which assignments they should start on and prep your volunteers or support staff in advance.

Prioritizing: Most schools give more than one hour of homework a night, and most homework help sessions are about one hour long. Students should prioritize what assignments they work on at the program. Some factors to consider:
- ❏ Do difficult assignments first
- ❏ Get help studying for upcoming quizzes and tests
- ❏ Choose supplemental work that targets specific needs

Goal-setting: Consider using some time during homework help sessions to create action plans and do goal setting with your students. This takes away from the time they have to complete assignments, but is a great way to help students start to become independently motivated. Here are some resources for doing effective goal-setting.

Additional Resources

- ❏ [National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning](#) is a website with resources and tips, such as a [tutoring log](#) for volunteer tutors to complete.

SEA Shared Drive Resources

- ❏ [StreetSquash school records release form](#)
- ❏ [StreetSquash sample academic tracker](#)
- ❏ [StreetSquash incentives](#)
- ❏ StreetSquash resources for [middle school binders](#), [high school binders](#), and [study skills](#)
- ❏ [StreetSquash academic staff expectations](#)
- ❏ StreetSquash entry routines: [5 Minute Focus](#) and [Do Nows](#)
- ❏ [StreetSquash goal-setting resources](#)

This guide was written by Tai Garcia at StreetSquash Harlem, with support from the 2017-2018 Academic Leadership Committee.