Introduction

Students in high-poverty communities may be exposed to a risk factors that impact their ability to succeed academically - factors such as underperforming schools, family poverty and stress, violence, childhood trauma, and undiagnosed learning disabilities. Given these many potential risk factors, SEA programs should expect that some students will need more than just homework help and academic enrichment to succeed academically. SEA programs must provide a mixture of <u>both accountability **and** support</u> to our students; one without the other is ineffective. SEA programs should set and uphold clear expectations for students' academic performance in school, track and monitor students' school progress, and intervene when students struggle. When students need additional help, we must take ownership over the commitment we've made to support them; we must take the time to identify the cause(s) of the problem, provide additional resources and support, and communicate regularly with students, teachers, tutors, and families to monitor student progress toward improvement.

Overview

This guide shares recommendations for ways that programs can support the academic success of struggling students.

- ❏ **Academic Interventions**
    - ❏ Recognize that behavior tells a story
    - ❏ Have conversations with students
    - ❏ Have conversations with parents/guardians
    - ❏ Partner with teachers
    - ❏ Provide extra help at SEA programs
    - ❏ Teach and support effective time management
    - ❏ Monitor student performance
    - ❏ Create agreements/contracts
- ❏ **The Complexity of Motivation**
    - ❏ Can I do this activity?
        - ❏ Ability: Does the student have the skills/ability to do it?
        - ❏ Perceived competence: Does the student believe he/she can do it?
    - ❏ Do I want to do this activity?
        - ❏ Value: Is it useful to me (now or in the future)?
        - ❏ Intrinsic enjoyment: Do I enjoy doing it?
        - ❏ Peers: Do my peers value this activity?
        - ❏ Cost: What is the cost of doing it? What do I have to give up?
- ❏ **Learning Styles**

Academic Interventions

Recognize that behavior tells a story: As you approach students who are struggling academically, remember that behavior tells a story. Just as students do not suddenly get angry out of nowhere, students do not lose motivation for their academics out of nowhere. Here are some examples of questions to ask yourself, among others, as you think about what might be the cause for the drop in academic performance:

- ❏ Are they easily frustrated when working on homework/tests?
- ❏ Do they miss school a lot?
- ❏ How often do they come with no homework?
- ❏ How often do they participate?
- ❏ Are they constantly tired?
- ❏ Are their grades dropping across all subjects, or just in one subject?

With those questions in mind, below are some steps to consider taking when a student is struggling academically. For more information on this topic, see the section on the complexity of motivation.

Have conversations with students

- ❏ Have an individual conversation with the student who is struggling. Ask questions about why he/she is struggling and how you can be helpful. Be curious, not judgemental.
- ❏ Brainstorm action steps that you and the student can take to address the problem.
- ❏ Follow-up with students so they know you care and are paying attention to how they are doing.
- ❏ Let students know that you believe in them and that if you didn't you wouldn't be pushing them and working as hard to help them get on track/stay on track.

Have conversations with parents/guardians

- ❏ Build parent relationships so they know and trust you before any problems arise that you need to work on together with them.
- ❏ Invite parents to join meetings with you and the student to discuss challenges and plans for improving. Get their support in the intervention and their feedback. Ask for their observations on what challenges the student may be facing and what interventions they think would be helpful. Does the student have a quiet place at home where he/she can complete his/her work? Would it help for parents to take away the students' cell phone so he/she can focus? If the student is arriving late at school, how could the family help the student get there on time? Are the parents aware of any stressors the student might be experiencing?
- ❏ Keep communication consistent, not only when a student is not performing well.

Partner with teachers
- ❏ Build relationships with teachers in advance of issues and communicate regularly with them so that when problems arise, they know and trust you.
- ❏ Solicit teachers' input on what they think will most help the student succeed.
- ❏ Get copies of assignments, extra practice work, course syllabi, textbooks, and other materials that students may need to work effectively when at the program.
- ❏ Schedule time for students to meet with teachers during before-school and after-school times; some teachers are available to meet in the morning or afternoon for a few minutes to check-in with students, answer questions, and provide additional support.
- ❏ Find time to go sit in students' classroom and see what students are learning.
- ❏ Bring parents and teachers together for conversations about ways that everyone involved can support the student.

Provide extra help at SEA programs
- ❏ Schedule an extra practice day for the student to come in for double academics or for one-on-one time with a tutor.
- ❏ Ensure that, if a student comes into the program on his/her off-day, he/she is actually getting work done. Have an adult available to supervise and support students so they don't get distracted fall off track, thus defeating the purpose of them coming to you in the first place.
- ❏ When setting students up with one-on-one tutors, try to keep the same tutor with the same student, and ensure the tutor has knowledge of the students' academic status and goals. Check in with the tutor each week to see how the work is going and address any concerns.
- ❏ As needed, provide the tutor or student with additional opportunities to practice the area of improvement. For example, if a student is struggling in Chemistry, find an old chemistry textbook or ask the students' teacher for additional practice problems that he/she can do at your program.

Teach and support effective time management
Sometimes students fall behind in their academics because they haven't been able to balance their schedule and workload. Help them learn to manage their time and get organized by creating schedules.
- ❏ Ensure that students are using a planner to record assignments.
- ❏ Create a schedule for the semester with major projects and tests.
- ❏ Create a weekly schedule and outline how they will use their time outside of school. Be realistic - students should allow time for themselves to sleep, eat, socialize with

friends and family, and have some down time while also setting aside specific times for academic work.
❏ Review the schedule with students weekly to ensure they are using it and to make adjustments and updates as needed.

Monitor student performance
❏ Create a document that can be shared with the student, parents, and teachers to track students' progress toward specific goals such as completing homework, focusing during class, and going to extra help. See SquashBusters sample [Academic Evaluation for Middle School](#). With high school students, consider having students themselves update this document, rather than teachers.

Create agreements/contracts
Academic contracts are intended to assist students who have not met or who are at risk of not achieving the academic standards of their schools and/or member programs. Create a written agreement that documents the expectations for action on the part of the student and the program. The agreement should explain the following:
❏ The reason for creating the agreement (problem and goals)
❏ The academic requirements of the program
❏ What the student must do to fulfill the agreement plan (clear goals and actions)
❏ What the program will do to fulfill the agreement plan (clear goals and actions)
❏ The dates the academic plan starts and when it is effective till
❏ A follow-up date and plan for staff to regularly check in with the students and others as needed (parent, teachers)
❏ If applicable, consequences if the expectations aren't met:
    ❏ May not be eligible for trips, matches, or tournaments
    ❏ If repeat offender, at risk of suspension or losing their spot in the program
See the "Additional Resources" section for sample Academic Plans from member programs.

The Complexity of "Motivation"

When a student is underperforming academically, the easy explanation is to say that he/she is not motivated to do the work. This explanation centers the problem on the student, and leads staff to simple solutions such as requiring that the student to spend additional time studying or threatening program suspensions unless the student changes his/her behavior. Motivation, however, is more complex than just deciding that you want

to do something and committing to doing it. Below are three key questions[1] that impact motivation, and ways that programs might respond.

1. Can I do this activity? (actual and perceived competence)
2. Do I want to do this activity? (relevance, value, peer influence)
3. What is the cost of choosing to do this activity?

1. Can I do this activity?

The desire to do an activity is related to one's <u>ability to succeed</u> and one's <u>perceived competence</u> in being able to do it successfully. For example, if a student struggles with basic math concepts like multiplication, he/she will likely not want to do algebra.

- ❏ **Ability**: Knowing that many students attend underperforming schools, it is not uncommon for students to need additional academic support. If ability level is one of the factors contributing to students' lack of motivation, programs can identify and help fill in the gaps in students' knowledge.
  - ❏ **Provide tutoring:** Programs can provide additional tutoring for students. One-on-one tutoring, especially with a consistent tutor who has knowledge of the content area and a good rapport with the student, is an effective way to address skill gaps. Staff may need to find appropriate supplemental activities for the student and tutor to use during their sessions in order for their time to be spent most productively. Look into sources of support outside of programming if your program doesn't have the resources.
  - ❏ **Determine academic level:** Programs might consider testing all students' math and ELA skills at the start and end of each year so they know students' academic strengths and weaknesses in advance. See the [SEA Best Practice Guide on Academic Data and Assessments](#) for ways to determine students' academic levels.
  - ❏ **Address learning disabilities**: Learning disabilities sometimes go undiagnosed until a caring and aware adult intervenes to request testing and support for the student. Programs, in partnership with parents and schools, can help request testing for students. For general information about how to request testing, visit the following link: [Right to an Evaluation of a Child for Special Education Services](#) Information about how to request testing in specific states is typically available on the state Department of Education websites.
  - ❏ **Address basic needs and mental health**: Sometimes students are not physically or mentally able to focus on their work. Recognize that students living in poverty have less access to healthy food, may have to manage high

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[1] From Jacquelynne Eccles: http://learningandtheadolescentmind.org/people_02.html

levels of stress at home, and may have had adverse childhood experiences. Programs should provide healthy snacks to students so that hunger is not the immediate cause of a lack of focus. Additionally, programs should be prepared to refer families to organizations that can provide additional support services, and to refer students to mental health clinicians that can help them manage depression, heal from trauma, and/or address other mental health needs.

❏ **Perceived competence**: If a student believes that he/she is bad at something, regardless of his/her skills in that area, he/she will be less motivated to engage in it. If perceived competence is impacting students' motivation, programs can address it both by helping students gain skills and by helping shift students' mindset.
   ❏ **Encourage a growth mindset**: Help students understand that competence is not a fixed trait. We get stronger and better at things when we practice them. See the [Transforming Education website](#) for more resources on this topic.

Note that just forcing chronically underperforming students to study more on their own is not a proposed solution. Simply forcing them to spend more time doing something they have been unsuccessful doing on their own will not solve the problem, and may contribute to increased resistance or frustration from the student. If you decide to assign additional study time to the student, it should be accompanied by resources to help them, such as a tutor.

2. **Do I want to do this activity?**
In choosing to engage in an activity, students also evaluate the value to them of engaging in the activity. Here are some of the ways students determine the value of engaging in an activity.
   ❏ **Value**: Is this activity useful to me, now or in the future?
   Students will consider whether the task feels relevant and useful to their interests and goals in life. If a student does not believe he/she will ever use algebra outside of math class, he/she will be less likely to want to do his/her algebra homework. Likewise, if a student does not see the value of writing assignments in his/her planner, he/she is less likely to do it.
   ❏ **Intrinsic enjoyment:** Do I enjoy doing this activity?
   Students are more likely to participate in activities that they enjoy. For some students, it may be especially fun to figure out puzzles. For others, they may enjoy learning about anything related to cars.
   ❏ **Peer involvement:** Do my peers value this activity? Can I do it with them?

Adolescents highly value their peers and will consider the value of an activity in relation to their peers. Do my peers value this activity? Are they doing it? Can I do it with them? Social connectedness is important for adolescents.

There are various ways programs can respond to the challenges above. Here are a few ideas.

- ❏ **Make tasks personally meaningful**
    - ❏ **Explain the why:** Be explicit about why you're asking students to do the activities you are. What's the value to them?
    - ❏ **Exposure to post-secondary education and career options**: If students only see low-wage, hourly jobs that don't require education as a future for themselves, they will not see the relevance of education. Programs should expose students to different types of post-secondary and college options.
    - ❏ **Exposure to role models:** Exposure to post-secondary education and career options alone is not enough. Students also need exposure to people who look like them and have succeeded in those opportunities. Find mentors and role models who can speak to the challenges and benefits of doing well in school.
    - ❏ **Apply to real-life scenarios:** Staff might try to bring to life and make more meaningful the content that students are studying. For example, they might demonstrate how science (biology, physics) applies to the sport of squash and students' bodies, or staff might draw comparisons between what students are learning about in history class and current day social issues.
- ❏ **Help students enjoy learning**
    - ❏ **Staff/volunteer enthusiasm and engagement:** Staff members and volunteers who know and embrace what students are learning can increase student interest and enthusiasm by role-modeling enthusiasm themselves. For example, staff might read the same book students are reading in ELA and have conversations with them about it. Volunteers who are enthusiastic about a topic might be paired with a student who is struggling in that topic.
    - ❏ **Program enrichment:** Engage students in fun and meaningful academic activities like book clubs, open mic nights, and science fairs. School may be boring, but programs can show students that learning itself is fun.
    - ❏ **Academic programs**: Connect students to high-quality local programs where they can develop their interests. Look for programs that teach robotics, writing, science, and more. Over the summer, send students to academic enrichment programs through SEA or your own program partnerships.
- ❏ **Use of peers:** Find ways to use peer groups to help students interact with and motivate one another. Here are a few ideas from member programs.
    - ❏ **Tutoring**: Older students can help tutor younger students on their off-days.

- ❏ **Group work**: Get together a group of students who share the same class and challenge them to support and hold one another accountable for increasing their performance. For example, they may decide that the goal is for everyone to get at least a B+ in that class, and they work together to make that happen - getting tutoring together at the program, helping one another understand the material, and holding one another accountable for completing assignments.
- ❏ **Group agreements:** A group of students who do not share the same class but who share another common goal, such as getting high enough grades to be nominated for a tournament, might create an agreement that they will not get any grades below a "C". Help the students check in with one another and support each other in reaching their shared goal.
- ❏ **Selective use of rewards and incentives**: Programs should be cautious in their use of rewards and incentives to motivate student performance. Extrinsic rewards given for behaviors that are ideally intrinsically-motivated can undermine intrinsic motivation. In these cases, extrinsic rewards turn students' motivation from "I want to" (...because I enjoy it, I benefit from it, my friends do it, etc.) into "I have to" (...because if I don't, I don't get the reward). Below are some tips on how to best use rewards.
  - ❏ Unexpected and verbal praise are the best rewards (praise, encouragement)
  - ❏ Praise effort, not only results
  - ❏ Use rewards for tasks with little intrinsic appeal
  - ❏ Relate rewards to competence, rather than control (give in recognition of positive actions, rather than in an effort to control student behaviors)

3. What is the cost of choosing to do this activity?

Students weigh the benefits and costs of engaging in various activities, and often place different levels of value than adults do on their activities. For example, students might consider playing other sports, hanging out with friends, or playing video games as very important ways to spend their time. Trivializing the importance of these activities to students can create a barrier between staff and students, where students don't feel understood and may retreat further. Recognizing and learning about why the activities are important to the student will build trust with the student, and when staff members build trust with students, they can have more open and honest conversations with them related to their academic success.

Learning Styles

Learning styles are different methods of understanding new information. When students know their learning styles, they can learn the most effective ways for them to study and complete their homework. Below are resources to help identify student learning styles.

- ❏ Understanding your learning style - a presentation about different learning styles
- ❏ Learning style questionnaire - 20-question online survey to help students identify their learning styles.
- ❏ Learning style questionnaire - a 30-question printable survey to help students identify their learning styles.

Additional Resources

- ❏ Academic Plan of Study for Student Growth - An article with tips and resources for developing student academic plans
- ❏ Leveraging Mindset Science to Design Educational Environments that Nurture People's Natural Desire to Learn - An article by the Mindset Scholars Network on how to foster students' desire to learn
- ❏ Sleep and Teens - An article on the importance of sleep and how it affects students
- ❏ Sleep Duration Recommendations

SEA Shared Drive Resources

- ❏ Racquet Up Detroit Academic Plan - a sample plan created with the student
- ❏ SquashBusters Academic Evaluation - an evaluation form to be filled out by teachers
- ❏ SquashBusters Academic Agreement - an agreement between the program and student
- ❏ Squash Haven Study Hall Requirement - an agreement between the program and student

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