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**“The Practitioner’s Best Friend”
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**How Can Secondary Schools Respond Effectively to Our Students that
“Get It” and those that “Don’t Get It” During Challenging Times?**

As educational leaders we want ALL students to leave our institutions having maximized their potential to be successful in the future. Particularly in these challenging times we must find ways to leverage our available resources to the fullest extent in order to bolster student learning. In the current era of increasing public expectations, political uncertainty, shrinking budgets and increasing workloads that impact all stakeholders, a growing number of secondary schools are taking the proactive step to implement a new student intervention model developed specifically to meet our current challenges with courage and hope for the future without impacting educational budgets.

This emerging, systematic, customized, data-driven remediation model has shown promise for improving learning results among a wide spectrum of the student population. The program has been launched in a number of public secondary schools under various “brand names”. The more common identifiers are CORE/FLEX, CORE/Choice and The Choice Program. The cornerstone of this style of intervention is the opportunity to earn access to unstructured time as a motivator for students to work toward proficient academic performance. In most schools this segment of time is known as the “Choice Session”. This is typically a 20 to 25 minute segment of time placed after second period, appearing on the bell schedule between three and five days per week depending on the school.

Schools implementing the Choice Program collect data on student performance at three-week intervals and use this information to support students in a variety of ways. Students with one or more “D” or “F” grades are assigned to mandatory remediation often called “CORE”. Students performing at or above standard (all “A”, “B” and “C” grades) have earned the privilege to decide how they will use each Choice Session. These students are said to have “FLEX” or “Choice” Status. At the end of each three-week period student achievement is evaluated again and students are reassigned to CORE or Choice based on their current individual academic standing.

Staff in Choice Program buildings must be assigned clearly defined roles and responsibilities in order to support the overall intervention structure and meet individual student needs. Certificated staff members are responsible for maintaining accurate information on student progress, posting grades in a timely manner at transitions between data cycles and assisting students attending the various support and enrichment sessions. Classified staff members manage the collection and organization of data while encouraging staff to meet various deadlines. Administrators use student performance

data to assign students to CORE classes with intentionality, monitor areas of campus open to Choice Students and balance equity of the program among certificated teachers.

Typically, students are assigned to a CORE teacher with whom the student has earned a below standard grade (or at least a teacher that instructs the same subject). Mandatory attendance is taken and monitored by one of several electronic information support systems used by most schools today. CORE teachers offer targeted assistance to move students toward meeting standards. Students have the opportunity to make up missing work, receive additional instruction, to preview upcoming lessons, to discuss recent discipline/attendance missteps, to participate in one on one counseling sessions and monitor academic progress. The specific strategies used on a daily basis are applied at the discretion of the supervising staff member in order to better meet the needs of the group. The directive nature of CORE helps avoid the difficulty of accessing struggling students outside the normal school day.

Students earning grades at or above 70% in all classes have earned Choice Status. Individuals in this category have the opportunity to decide how they will use Choice Sessions to benefit their learning. Choice Students have a variety of options available to them designed to support enrichment; such as computer labs, open library, AP seminars, content-specific learning labs, career exploration, post high school program investigation and guided study halls. Students may also utilize common areas of the campus to study, socialize and relax. Students must remain on campus and stay in the session they choose for the entire enrichment period. Attendance for Choice Sessions is taken via sign in sheets in all locations with the exception of the school commons. With significant numbers of students motivated to earn Choice Status, it allows CORE support groups to be small and manageable in size.

Many schools today struggle with assisting cohorts of students that have challenges beyond typical adolescent deficiencies in maturity, organizational skills or work ethic that result in one or two grades below standard. When a student is experiencing limited performance across a wide range of classes, more significant intervention is required. In the Choice Program the idea of Permanent CORE groups has evolved to facilitate improvement with these more troubled students. In Permanent CORE groups, students are assigned to a particular teacher voluntarily. Students served by this type of affiliation stay with their teacher regardless of changes in achievement status as the academic year unfolds. The perception being that students experiencing significant “outside of school” challenges contributing to multiple failing grades need the one on one relationship and interpersonal consistency offered in this alternative setting. In most cases, teachers working with a Permanent CORE group have also volunteered for the position and find meeting this type of challenge rewarding.

Most aspects of the Choice Program are tangible and measurable to all stakeholders. Choice-Style intervention programs can be described in words. Program goals can be articulated. Various types of interventions can be outlined. However, it is difficult to communicate in written form how dynamic and adaptable Choice Style response to intervention is when applied intentionally and professionally. In each new school where it is adopted the program takes on a certain “life” as the data-driven nature of the process allows for targeted modification to be implemented to impact students at regular intervals over the entire academic year. Institutions can review local capabilities and challenges to develop facets of Choice Intervention playing to their strengths and mitigating weaknesses. The

Choice Model is a relatively simple and elegant foundation upon which schools may find ways to weave new support structures designed to reach individual students, assist them in reaching their potential, and reduce the impact of past challenges on current learning.

In schools piloting the Choice Model significant gains have been made in reducing “D” and “F” grades. Discipline referrals have typically trended lower. Schools have seen improved results with regard to the number of students taking and passing AP National Board Exams and the vast majority of stakeholders seem pleased with the program conceptually, logistically and in terms of overall performance.

Choice-Style intervention is not an instant fix for the significant and varied challenges faced by public education today. However, institutions looking for a systematic, data-driven and adaptable response to intervention that meets the needs of both the highly capable and the progressing learner without additional program costs, may find the Choice Program to be of value. In challenging times we must not forget that our students need our support and enrichment more than ever. We must offer hope for today in order to meet the challenges of tomorrow.

Tod Witzel is a Social Studies instructor at Enumclaw High School with over 20 years of teaching experience. Tod has recently authored a teacher field guide directed at assisting staff in working through the process of developing, implementing and refining a Choice-Style intervention model in a secondary school for the first time. Parties interested in further information may contact the author directly via email at: studentsmaketherightchoice@comcast.net