

Struggling Students at ASFMS Given More Routes to Success

Educators learn how the 'Response to Intervention' program has reduced failure rate at Feinstein Middle School.

By [Russell Waterman](#) September 27, 2011



Teachers and administrators face many challenges to motivate and guide adolescent students so they can perform well or better in school.

And that is especially true at a school as large as [Alan Shawn Feinstein Middle School](#) with 1250 students in grades 6, 7 and 8, along with 100 teachers, 40 support staff and three administrators.

But the Coventry school has made such significant strides in reducing course failures in their student population the past two years it was chosen to host a conference Friday entitled, *Supporting Struggling Students Through RtI* (Response to Intervention).

Over two dozen educators from five other school districts in the state intently listened and took notes as ASFMS teachers and administrators shared what they have been doing to help struggling students in a 75-minute long Powerpoint presentation

Dr. Arthur Lisi, Assistant Principal, pointed out two years ago the school had several students failing in the basic core curriculum classes: 41 in Grade 6; 143 in Grade 7 and 301 in Grade 8. There were just six RtI referrals and teams met only after school. Administrators and teachers at the school were alarmed and knew something had to be changed.

“RtI covers everything we do and everything we are all about,” said Dr. Michael Almeida, ASFMS principal. “We needed to restructure the school to create a RtI block in the schedule. It is important for the principal and the leadership to embrace this process. Teachers and their leadership collectively came together to make this a primary initiative in the school.”

ASFMS administrators explained how they approached the problem.

“We had to do lots of planning over the last two summers to solve a big puzzle,” said Dr. Almeida. “We had a summer retreat with teachers and got a lot of rave reviews and great email responses from them. They liked that we had a common vision.”

Data from a survey of staff showed a very favorable response to the changes that were made in the RtI program.

At the middle school, there are several teams of students and teachers in each grade. RtI leadership teams for each grade were formed that includes every guidance counselor, teacher facilitators, administrators and support services staff.

“It is easy to lose track with so many kids,” said Assistant Principal Danny Smith. “But we changed the master schedule and the faculty and students adjusted very well. We brought in new leadership teams. We also have some amazing teachers who can change from a role as middle school teacher to being facilitators of adults.”

“Every single week we meet with every single team,” said Lori Lebrun, Grade 6 guidance counselor, who is on one of the RtI leadership teams which meets in the CPT block, or Common Planning Team block, every Thursday or Friday.

Those identified as struggling students are grouped with teachers who help them complete or organize their work or get assistance with skills. Some may be matched to peers for tutoring. Others may need help with revision and clarification.

But officials emphasized this is not all about students who fail or struggle. Most students pass courses and many have excellent grades.

“Flexible grouping is important,” said Nicole Hitchener, Positive Behavior Intervention Support and RtI Coordinator at ASFMS. “We allow experimentation. One student should not be stuck in any group for a long time. And this is not just for struggling students but for those who want enrichment classes in writing, math, do community service or be in project-based activities.”

Parents are being kept in the RtI loop, too, through brochures, an Open House and notification of interventions. “We are doing another presentation during the year for parents,” noted Hitchener.

And since 2010, the results have been impressive. “There has been a tremendous decrease in failures,” said Dr. Lisi, pointing to a chart showing 41 course failures in Grade 6, 71 in Grade 7 and 49 in Grade 8, a total decrease from 301 to 184. “There was such a huge decrease in failures that we had the least number of summer school kids ever.”

Nicole Bucka, an educational consultant with the Rhode Island Department of Education, sponsor of Rt1, was there to oversee the conference and get feedback from participants.

“Next year the state is requiring RtI all for secondary students and Feinstein is a very big leader in starting that process,” said Bucka. “We want be as preventative and proactive as possible with students as possible and identify the kids in need before they fail. But we want to prevent inaccurate labeling, too.”

Officials at ASFMS admit the RtI process continues to evolve. “There are successes, challenges and cautions,” said Dr. Lisi. “Successes involve more RtI referrals, more students passing and more students revising their work. We want all students to do the work and we do not want zeroes.”

Challenges involve the time to administer the program, keeping students engaged, effective intervention and more, Dr. Lisi further explained.

“We are not all experts in this, but we want to show what we have learned and spread it to the faculty,” said Hitchener of the RtI success shown thus far at ASFMS.

The session ended with applause and praise by the educators.

“We are proud of what we have done so far and the community should be proud of what the students and teachers have done, too,” said Dr. Almeida. “We are hoping to see the work pay off even more after we get results on standardized tests the students start taking in February.”