

High School Teacher Perceptions of the Student Assistance Team Process

**Dr. Jeff Stoehr
&
Dr. Jody Isernhagen**

Abstract

The Student Assistance Team Process provides a framework of accommodations, interventions, and instructional strategies tailored to the specific needs of a student with behavioral or academic problems. This research study, taking place at six public high schools in a Midwestern school district, details teachers' perceptions of the SAT Process and its effectiveness. While many teachers were mostly satisfied with the SAT Process, they also felt the process could be improved, particularly with regard to follow-up and teacher involvement. Of greatest concern is the finding that the majority of teachers feel that the SAT Process is only helpful some of the time. Given classroom teachers' important role in ensuring that at-risk students succeed, these results should be taken into consideration when planning programs to assist at-risk students. The SAT Process has the potential to be a valuable intervention program for at-risk students, but changes are needed to realize this potential.

High School Teacher Perceptions of the Student Assistance Team Process

Accountability and statistical data have become the hallmarks of today's educational environment. Students must meet an increasing number of standards, and schools must establish procedures and programs to help students meet these expectations. One such procedure is the Student Assistance Team (SAT) Process. As a part of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, schools are required to create a process targeted toward students whose academic performance and/or classroom behavior is hindering their academic progress. The Student Assistance Team Process provides a philosophy and framework for various members of the school staff who then use discussion, problem solving, reviews of available data, and/or development of intervention strategies to assist the student.

When a student appears to be having difficulty in the classroom, teachers should make their own day-to-day adjustments in the student's learning environment. If their efforts are not successful, the teacher can refer the student to the SAT Process. The number of students entering high school who need assistance and specific instructional strategies is increasing. In the Midwestern school district examined in this study, the number of students referred to the SAT Process tripled from 1999 to 2009.

The Student Assistance Team varies according to the school and the students' needs. The individuals on the team might include any or all of the following: the student, his/her teachers, parents, administrators, the school psychologist, the school nurse, a counselor, school therapists, and any other persons (ex., a private therapist or social worker/agency)

the parents wish to be involved in the development of a student plan. Through a collaborative process, this team recommends academic and/or behavioral accommodations, interventions, and strategies that can be implemented by classroom teachers in the hopes of helping the student succeed.

The SAT Process is grounded in the widely-held belief that accommodations, interventions, and instructional strategies tailored to a student's specific needs will help that student become more academically and behaviorally successful. This study was intended to provide information about teachers' perceptions of the SAT Process and its effectiveness. Collecting these perceptions will help Student Assistance Team members and school administrators modify the SAT Process to better assist at-risk students.

Review of Literature

There is a substantial amount of literature focusing on the factors influencing student failure, as well as techniques that can be used to address it. Ketterman-Brockett (1996) found the greatest predictor of future school performance was past school performance. It is clear that many students fail early in school and continue this pattern throughout their school career. Schools must be flexible institutions that change to facilitate the development of individual students rather than expecting the student to change to fit the traditional school system.

Research by Michie (2003) showed that principals felt positively about the impact of reforms and interventions. Three out of four principals stated that reforms resulted in improved student learning, academic atmosphere, student and teacher motivation, and school resources. On the other hand, principals were less enthusiastic about reforms and interventions meeting the needs of at-risk students. These students pose a particular challenge and need specific interventions. Therefore, some studies have focused specifically on the diverse needs of children who are at risk for failure. Stormont, Espinosa, Knipping, and McCathren (2003) found that establishing relationships, addressing challenging behaviors, and supporting language development increased the achievement of at-risk children, especially those in poverty. These three approaches were used with failing students and 82% of the students raised their grades to passing levels. Anderson (1997) found that ability, quality of schooling, student motivation, and academic coursework were important predictors of academic success for at-risk high school students. The most powerful factors influencing student achievement were individual ability and completion of academic coursework.

Studies have shown that over-generalized instruction does not help at-risk students with specific needs. In studying the development of early literacy skills and oral reading fluency, Kamps et al. (2003) found that schools that do not make specific adjustments for individual students' needs – such as a “one size fits all” school administrative policy, whole-class instruction, and overly large groups – had higher rates of failure than would otherwise be attained. Instead, research recommends isolating problematic behaviors and creating a customized, individualized plan to address each behavior. Fad and Patton (2005) used functional behavioral assessments and behavior intervention plans to address

negative student behaviors. Their method led to a dramatic decrease in negative behavior, with a subsequent increase in student achievement.

Additionally, a study by Lewis (2000) emphasized the importance of giving teachers plenty of information and training regarding the problems their at-risk students faced. The study found that general education teachers generally had a lack of knowledge of Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and were not trained in managing students with AD/HD in their classrooms. They were also less capable and therefore less willing to make appropriate accommodations for these students. Teachers with more knowledge of AD/HD were more willing to make accommodations for students with the disorder.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine regular education classroom teacher perceptions of the SAT Process.

Research and Methodology

The overarching question for the research study was: Do regular education high school classroom teachers perceive the SAT Process as beneficial in helping students?

The sub-questions for this study were:

1. What are the perceptions of regular education high school classroom teachers about the SAT Process (Steps 1-4), the pre-referral and identification of a student to the process?
2. What are the perceptions of regular education high school classroom teachers about the SAT Process (Step 5), the team meeting?
3. What are the perceptions of regular education high school classroom teachers about the SAT Process (Options 1-8), the strategies, accommodations, interventions, and results?

This research study took place at six public high schools in a Midwestern school district. Each high school was composed of grades 9 through 12 and ranged in student population from 1,450 students to 1,900 students. All of the high schools used the same SAT Process. For these schools, the process involved teachers, school psychologists, administrators, counselors, school nurses, school social workers, behavior therapists, education coordinators, attendance coordinators, students, and parents. The sample for this study was 579 regular education high school teachers.

A cross-sectional web-based survey with 34 questions was used to collect data. The survey examined teachers' current attitudes, beliefs, opinions, or practices (teachers' actual behaviors). Teachers received the survey through their district e-mail account. Teachers were asked to rate the frequency of 23 items' occurrence according to the following scale: "All of the time," "Most of the time," "Some of the time," "Little of the time," and "None of the time." One question asked teachers to choose between an "Academic concern" or "Behavior concern." Four survey questions asked teachers to choose between numerical options: number of students (from "No Students" to "10 or

more students,” in intervals of three), number of meetings (from “0-3 meetings” to “20 or more meetings,” in intervals of four), days (from “0-10 days” to “51-60 days,” in ten-day intervals), or minutes (from “0-30 minutes” to “More than 90 minutes,” in 30-minute intervals). Six questions were open-ended. Two-hundred and forty-seven teachers (43%) responded to the survey, and 157 (27%) completed the entire survey.

Results

Demographic data revealed that 65.79% of survey respondents were female and 34.21% were male. The respondents who participated were primarily Caucasian (93.88%), as are the teachers assigned to students in this Midwestern district. Respondents were also placed in four age groups: 20-30 years old (13.25%), 31-40 years old (28.48%), 41-50 years old (24.50%), and 51 and over (33.77%). Each grade (9-12) was represented in the data, as well as a variety of subjects, including English, Math, Science, Social Studies, World Language, Business, Fine Arts, and Physical Education.

Over the past year, 39.01% of the teachers had not made any referrals to the SAT Process. The highest number of survey respondents (47.80%) had referred 1-3 students, and only 13.19% of teachers had referred 4-10 students to the SAT Process. The majority of teachers (66.21%) attended less than three SAT meetings in a school year. A substantial minority (27.59%), however, typically attended four to seven SAT meetings.

Academic concerns were the most common reason students were referred to the SAT Process (60%), with behavioral concerns (40%) as the other reason for referral. Frequent academic concerns included failing grades, lack of work, and low achievement. Common behavioral concerns included acting out in class, decreased attendance, atypical behaviors, and lack of focus. When teachers were asked if they had made any adjustments to the curriculum based on the student’s needs prior to referring students to the SAT Process, 28.98% of teachers responded that they made adjustments “all of the time,” 40% made adjustments “most of the time,” while 23.30% made adjustments some of the time. On the other hand, 6.82% of the participants made little or no adjustments. Most of these modifications were related to academic concerns – no behavioral adjustments were reported prior to reporting a student to the SAT Process.

Some teachers had doubts that their prior efforts to help the student were valued by the Student Assistance Team. Although the majority (67.66%) thought their work was valued “all” or “most of the time,” 19.76% thought their work was valued only “some of the time,” and 12.58% thought their initial work was given little to no value. Ninth grade teachers perceived their work to be valued less than did eleventh grade teachers – a significant difference. Another significant difference was found between teachers who were under and over 41 years old. Younger teachers perceived their work to be less-valued than did older teachers. Similarly, teachers with fewer years of experience had a significantly lower perception of how their work was valued than did teachers with more than ten years of experience.

Some teachers were also critical of the SAT Process itself. Over 26% of teachers estimated that it took 21 to 40 days to get a SAT meeting scheduled after the initial referral, and 6.76% thought it took over 41 days – this group of participants indicated that the wait was too long and as a result the student was falling further behind. Furthermore, over 20% of teachers felt that the time taken between the initial referral and the first SAT meeting was inappropriate and causing the student more failure. On average, teachers with six to ten years of experience felt the amount of waiting time for the first SAT meeting to be less appropriate than did teachers with over ten years of experience – a significant difference. When teachers were asked what changes needed to be made to the pre-referral process, the highest number of responses related to cutting down the amount of time between the referral and the first meeting. Additionally, teachers also felt that more communication between the Student Assistance Team and the student’s teachers were necessary.

There appeared to be a lack of follow-up within the SAT Program. The highest number of teachers (33.08%) felt that the Student Assistance Team only reconvened to determine if the student plan was working effectively “little of the time.” When asked about follow-up by an administrator, the highest number of teachers (36.30%) indicated that an administrator followed up with them only “little of the time,” followed by more than a third of teachers (34.07%) who stated there was no follow-up at all. Younger teachers felt there was significantly less follow-up by administrators than did teachers over 40 years old. Similarly, teachers with six to ten years of experience felt there was significantly less follow-up by administrators than did teachers with over 21 years of experience. The majority of teachers (54.35%) also indicated that their involvement and participation in the SAT Process was never discussed in their teacher evaluation. Another 26.81% felt their involvement was discussed during evaluations only “little of the time.” On the other hand, teachers in their first year agreed that the Student Assistance Team reconvened to a significantly greater extent than did teachers with six to ten years of experience. It is very likely, however, that these first-year teachers have had fewer SAT meetings.

Even so, many teachers felt that their administrators were supportive of the Student Assistance Team. The highest number of teachers (47.79%) indicated that their building administrators supported the SAT Process “most of the time.” However, a large number (31.62%) thought their administrators supported the process “all of the time.” Teachers with 6 to 10 years of experience felt that their administrators were significantly less supportive of the SAT Process compared to teachers with 11 to 20 years of experience.

One of the most important findings was the lack of confidence teachers had in the SAT Process’s ability to help students become more academically successful. The majority of teachers (57.46%) felt students were more academically successful after the SAT Process only “some of the time.” Less than a third (30.60%) thought they were more successful “most of the time,” and a scant 1.49% thought the SAT Process always helped students become more academically successful. In addition, 10.45% felt the process helped students “little of the time.” A significant difference was found between teachers with 6 to ten years of experience and teachers with more than 21 years of experience in regards

to this issue. Teachers with less experience did not feel that the SAT Process generally helped students with academic problems.

The same trend was found in teachers' perceptions of student behavior following the SAT process, but these numbers were even starker. Most of the teachers (61.94%) thought the process helped improve students' behavior "some of the time." Only 19.40% thought the process helped student behavior "most of the time," and nearly the same number (17.91%) thought the process helped only "little of the time." Less than 1% of teachers thought the SAT Process helped student behavior "all of the time." Some teachers suggested that the Student Assistance Team cooperate more with the School Community Intervention Program (SCIP).

Overall, the majority of teachers (56.25%) said they were satisfied with the SAT Process "most of the time." The second highest number of teachers (23.19%) claimed to be satisfied with the process "some of the time." Additionally, over 80% of teachers felt the needs of the student had been identified at the end of a SAT meeting "most" or "some of the time" – less than 8% of teachers felt that student's needs were always identified by the end of a SAT meeting.

An open-ended survey question asked teachers what they thought should be changed about SAT meetings. The highest number of teachers (29%) felt that teachers needed to be invited to these meetings, and that the meetings should be scheduled such that teachers could attend them. They stated that after they referred the student to the SAT Process, they did not receive any follow-up. Four teachers (6%) thought there was too much "chit-chat" in meetings, with not enough focus on the "real" problem. Similarly, three teachers (4%) felt meetings needed to "just function to meet student needs." Twelve participants (18%) did not think anything needed to be changed.

Although many teachers identified similar concerns with the SAT Process, there was little consensus regarding the specific improvements that needed to be made. Thirteen teachers (18%) suggested increased communication and consistency, while ten teachers (14%) stated that all parties involved with the SAT Process needed to be included in SAT meetings and the development of a student plan. Three teachers (4%) pointed out that classroom issues can be indicative of a deeper problem external to school, and interventions should be developed to help students tackle these external problems as well. Other teachers recommended implementing more follow-up, spending less time between the initial referral and the implementation of the plan, creating different SAT teams for each grade level, making sure the SAT Process functioned as designed, developing alternative high schools, increasing consequences for behavioral problems, creating an easier referral process, or making parental involvement mandatory.

However, teachers also need to strengthen their commitment to the SAT Process. While 41.38% of teachers reported being asked to provide information "all of the time," only 23.40% actually provided this information "all of the time," and 7.09% indicated they did not provide information even if they were asked. Correspondingly, 36.30% of participants indicated that most teachers of the student in question were in attendance at

SAT meetings only “some of the time,” and almost 26% reported that most of the teachers were in attendance “little of the time.”

Implications

These results indicate that improvements to the SAT Process need to be made. Schools should make sure that students referred to the SAT Process actually begin the SAT Process promptly. According to Ketterman-Brockett (1996), the greatest predictor of future school performance was past school performance. Therefore students who fall behind are in danger of falling further behind. Almost a third of the teachers in this study reported that it took over 20 days to hold a meeting after the initial referral to the SAT Process was made, and the most common recommendation suggested to improve the pre-referral process was cutting down on this time. Guidelines should be put in place to establish a time frame for each step of the SAT Process as well as the student plan. A week is recommended for setting up the initial meeting. If necessary, a school psychologist should evaluate the student within 30 days instead of 60.

Communication between the Student Assistance Team, the administration, and classroom teachers needs to be enhanced to ensure that the SAT Process is successful for all students. Many teachers felt that their previous efforts with the student that had been referred were not appreciated by the rest of the Student Assistance Team. Teachers expressed a strong desire to attend all meetings and wanted them to be scheduled at a convenient time for them, but some teachers were not kept informed of SAT meetings, and as a result could not attend and give their input. It is vital that all members of the SAT are active participants in the process. Classroom teachers in particular are crucial to the success of these students, as they are responsible for implementing most or all of the student plan.

Follow-up is an important part of any improvement plan, and the SAT Process needs to put greater emphasis on monitoring the success of the plan’s implementation. Less than 9% of the teachers in this study reported that their Student Assistance Team reconvened all the time to discuss the progress of the plan to heighten the possibility of success. Schools need to prepare for the possibility that some students’ problems may need multiple meetings. Administrators need to follow-up with teachers to ensure that the plan is being implemented successfully. They should also make teachers’ participation in and commitment to the SAT Process part of their teaching evaluation, underlining the importance of the SAT Process.

Additionally, retaining and encouraging the “new generation” of teachers must be a priority. Younger teachers and teachers with fewer years of experience (usually two to ten years) often provided responses that were significantly lower than those given by older teachers and teachers with over 20 years of experience. They felt less appreciated by the Student Assistance Team, thought the process lacked administrative support and follow-up, and did not think the process helped the students with their academic problems. Continuous staff development must be provided, particularly with regard to the SAT Process, including the pre-referral process, meetings, and interventions.

This study should be replicated by this school district in the future, possibly targeting the younger teachers who expressed the most doubts about the implementation of the SAT Process. Additional research could compare students' actual academic or behavioral gains to teachers' perceptions of their academic or behavioral gains.

Conclusion

The challenge of school improvement has emphasized the importance of ensuring that at-risk children receive the help they need to succeed academically. One program used by schools is the Student Assistance Team Process. An examination of the SAT Process in a Midwestern school district revealed that while many teachers were mostly satisfied with the SAT Process and happy with the level of administrative support they received, teachers also felt the process could be improved upon. Common recommendations were cutting down on the time between the initial referral of the student and the first meeting of the Student Assistance Team, maintaining more open communication with teachers – particularly with regard to SAT meeting notifications – and making sure that meetings stay focused on the development of the student plan. The survey results also showed that schools are lacking in their follow-up of the SAT Process and that younger and less experienced teachers are more skeptical of their school's SAT Process than their older and more experienced peers. Of greatest concern is the finding that the majority of teachers feel that the SAT Process is only helpful to students with academic and behavioral problems some of the time. The SAT Process has the potential to be a valuable intervention program for at-risk students, but changes need to be made in order to realize this potential.

References

- Anderson, E. S. (1997, May-June). A longitudinal test of a model of academic success for at-risk high school students. *Journal of Educational Research*, 90(5), 259-288.
- Fad, K. M., & Patton, J. R. (2005). A practical perspective on functional behavioral assessments and behavior intervention plans. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 40(3), 161-190.
- Kamps, D. M., Willis, H. P., Greenwood, C. R., Thorne, S., Lazo, J. F., Crockett, J. L., Akers, J. M., & Swaggart, B. L. (2003, Winter). Curriculum influences on growth in early reading fluency for students with academic and behavioral risks: A descriptive study. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 11(4), 211-224.
- Ketterman-Brockett, D. P. (1996). The classification of students experiencing school difficulty and the correlates of school success for at risk students. (Doctoral dissertation, University of California-Riverside, 1989). *Dissertation Abstract International*, 50, no. 05A.
- Lewis, R. W. (2000). General education teacher's knowledge of and attitudes toward identified students with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder in the general

- education classroom. (Doctoral dissertation, The University of Alabama, 2000).
Dissertation Abstract International, 61, no. 09A.
- Michie, J. S. (2003). Instructional interventions. *Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk*, 8(1), 61-85.
- Stormont, M., Espinosa, L., Knipping, N., & McCathren, R. (2003, Fall). Supporting vulnerable learners in the primary grades: Strategies to prevent early school failure. *Early Childhood Research & Practice*, 5(3), 191-234.