Tracking High School Athletes' Grades

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Abstract

One of the major problems athletes face when entering college is athletic eligibility. Many perspective college athletes do not have the necessary minimum 2.0 grade point average (GPA) that the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) requires of students in order to play varsity sports. There have been many attempts to help high school athletes improve their GPAs in order to meet the minimum requirements of the NCAA. Intervention methods used by high school administrators include "No Pass, No Play," the "PASS Program," and tracking grades. This Action Research attempted to determine if tracking athletes' grades would positively increase their GPAs. Over an eight week period, student athletes had progress sheets filled out weekly by their core curriculum teachers in order to become aware of their current grades. In turn, most students either kept their grades the same or improved their grades. As a result, the majority of the students were eligible to participate in spring athletics.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

There are numerous arguments about whether or not athletic participation is a right or a privilege. In their research, critics who say that athletic participation is a right have set minimum academic standards while their counterparts have implemented stricter requirements. This imbalance in academic requirements for athletes has made schools, districts, and states unsure of athletic accountability. Without standard academic requirements, high school athletes have fallen short of collegiate level eligibility. Current eligibility requirements vary from state to state and district to district. With such a range of opinions on academic eligibility requirements, some student athletes are falling behind and losing their eligibility. In particular, it is African American male athletes that are affected the most.

This is a prevalent problem because many athletes go to college strictly on athletic scholarships. If these athletes do not train themselves or practice excellent study habits to keep their GPA above the eligibility standard, they will lose their scholarship and sub sequentially have to leave college without an education. In today's society, a person needs a college education to get a decent job. The unemployment rate is rising and the available jobs are hard to come by. The local high schools and Coaches need to help prepare their young athletes to be successful to achieve that college education. The way to be successful is to teach the student athletes about priorities and balance. Balance for most of the athletes is between academics and athletics. Coaches need to instill upon the team that athletics is not their top priority. When you have a team that follows athletics only, grades start to drop and suffer, and the athlete never learns how to balance the academic side.

To help alleviate this situation, many suggestions have been made at the high school level, such as participation in more than one sport or extra-curricular activities, the PASS Program, parental support, and No Pass, No Play. But some of these programs require money that states do not have to run these programs. An inexpensive method for helping athletes is progress sheets. Progress sheets can be administered by the school or individual coach to help an athlete remain aware of their grades for the entire season to help maintain their eligibility and GPA. It also can help identify the subjects or areas that an athlete needs help in. The sooner a student athlete learns how to balance athletics and academics the more successful they will be in college and in life. This study will examine the tracking of high school athletes' grades, and the relationship between athletes' grades and athletes' GPAs.

Statement of Problem

The purpose of this study is to determine if tracking an athlete's grade will positively influence their GPA and keep them eligible during the current sports season. This study will investigate this topic over an eight-week period through weekly progress sheets.

Hypothesis

Athletes who are aware of their current grades will continue to remain eligible during the current sports season. As a result, there will be a positive increase in their GPA from their previous quarter.

Operational Definitions

The independent variable was grade level, which was operational zed by using 11th and 12th graders on the track team. The dependent variable was academic progress which was measured with second and third quarter GPA's.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a dream, whether it is what they most in the world or wishful thinking, that every high school athlete has is common, the desire to play in college. Some athletes see their dreams come true while others do not. There are several reasons why some high school athletes do not continue to play in college: lack of money to go to college, lost interest in the sport, or they are not eligible to play.

To be eligible to play at a Division-1 college, the NCAA has set an academic requirement scale for incoming freshman. It varies from a minimum GPA of 2.0, ACT score of 86 or a SAT score of 1010 to a GPA of 2.5 or higher, ACT score of 68 or SAT score of 820 (NCAA, 2003). It is flexible so that incoming freshmen have a wider range to reach eligibility. But this raises a problem: if the NCAA has set a minimum GPA of 2.0, why are some high schools not setting the same requirement? "Only a small percentage of high schools have attached a minimum GPA to their academic requirements" (Bukowski, 2001). In schools where the bar was raised for academic standards, the athletes have risen to the challenge and met those standards.

What are the Current Eligibility Requirements in High Schools?

High school athletic eligibility requirements are not mandated by any official state or national agency, but instead left up to the district or county's board of education to decide. This leads to multiple types of eligibility requirements in the nation, where most do not hold the same GPA standard the NCAA requires. Research has shown that throughout the nation there are many types of GPA requirements. It can range from none to 2.5, and in even some instances there is a minimum of 60-70 percent average required. This means that some athletes could participate with a 1.0 average or less. An athlete could have four D's and three F's and still is

allowed to compete in the sport without penalty (Bukowski, 2001). There is another discrepancy among the high schools, the number of failing grades an athlete can have to participate. Howard County Public Schools, in Maryland, allows no failures (HCPSS, 2004) where Wake County, North Carolina allows 5/7 classes passed (WCPSS, 2004). There needs to be higher expectations placed on these athletes if the high schools want to see these athletes continue to play in college. Right now only 1 out of every 100 high school athletes continues to play Division-1 athletics in college, mainly due to not meeting eligibility (Lapchick, 1995). It is the high schools responsibility to help these athletes maintain eligibility throughout their high school career so they can have the opportunity to play in college.

Why do Athletes Fall Behind or Lose Their Eligibility?

Athletes can fall behind or lose their eligibility for several reasons: pressure from coaches, too much to handle at one time, or intentional eligibility violations. Coaches sometimes put pressure on their team to do well by implementing long practices, easier classes, or extra games or camps. This leaves less time for the athlete to complete schoolwork and study. "The time and energy student athletes must devote to daily practice and competition often make it difficult for those who do not have a common-core academic background to maintain a high level of student achievement in their academic coursework" (Dickman & Lammel, 2000, p. 30). Common-core academic classes include English, Mathematics, Natural/Physical Science, Social Science, Foreign Language, Computer Science, or Non-doctrinal Religion/Philosophy. If one student athlete takes a full course load of core courses and another student athlete takes some core classes and some easier classes (like team sports or weight training), there is a definite difference in the amount of time that the athletes spend studying, which leaves more time for sports.

The second factor to why student athletes become ineligible is the intentional violations made by parents or coaches. Each county or district has issued certain eligibility requirements that all athletes, parents, and coaches are required to uphold. Oakland Mills High School, in Howard County, Maryland, had several violations for the Fall 2003 sports season. The particular violation that made the headlines was that a varsity football player had an "intentional, unauthorized grade change" (OMHS, 2003, p. 1) so he was eligible to play that season. The coach and the principal knew of this grade change but said and did nothing so the team could make it to the play-offs. With further investigation, it was found that the same school, in the same season had several other violations including: "1 other varsity football player, 4 JV football players, 1 JV volleyball player, 2 Boys cross country players, and 1 JV field hockey player" (OMHS, 2003, p. 1). There is a message that is being sent to the students: If you want to play, we will make it happen, no matter if you have the grades, correct address, or age.

What Type of Athlete is Losing Their Eligibility?

Looking at the types of students that currently play high school sports (African American, Asian, Caucasian, Latino, and Other), research has shown that it is the African Males that are losing their athletic eligibility (American Sports Institute, 1995). In a study centered to African American male and female athletes, 32.3% of 14-15 year old males have below average grades in two or more subjects, whereas 21.1 % of females are below average in two or more subjects (Hawkins, 1992). Many African American students have difficulty in school because of their culture's history and their own self-fulfilling prophecy that they cannot achieve in school because they are not good enough. "African American youth are used to symbolized teenage pregnancy, delinquency, and dropouts, and little attention has been given to the many ways in which African American students can be taught and encouraged to develop the habits of

persistence and resilience" (Hawkins, 1992, p. 4). Once on African American student does poorly on a test, they shut down without giving it another try.

Schools need to teach persistence so the student will continue to try again. "Academic resignation seems to set in after initial difficulties go unnoticed or unassisted, to the point that eventually students no longer hold enough attachment to academic goals to make educational plans or affect academic success strategies" (Hawkins, 1992, p. 4). This resignation leads these student athletes to become ineligible. Participating in sports is one of the few things that help African American males strive in school. If they are unable to play then these males tend to give up on school, and sometimes dropout.

What are Athletes and the Schools Currently Doing to Help Maintain Eligibility?

There are many things that states and local counties are doing to help prevent athletes from losing their eligibility. These things include participating in more than one extra-curricular activity, the PASS program, tutoring/mentoring, and raising standards. Students who are athletes tend to participate in another sport or activity to help maintain their study schedule to keep their grades up. "Previous studies found that of all extra-curricular activities, athletics persistently has the highest levels of status and prestige" (McNeal, 1995, p. 62). Participating in more than one sport or extra-curricular activity help student athletes maintain their grades in many different ways (McCarthy, 1994). The athletes' scores on achievement tests increase, which leads to a higher GPA. These athletes also have lower absenteeism compared to the rest of the school.

Many school districts and individual schools implement programs to help their students succeed. Tutoring and mentoring programs are available to the student population, especially the student-athletes. These programs set the student/athlete up with a tutor to help them with their academic classes. Most of these tutors are National Honors Society members who have

exceptional grades. Mentoring works in a slightly different way. The mentors are typically teachers in the building. They not only help the student/athlete with their classes, but with real life problems as well.

A select number of schools in various cities have started a new program developed by the American Sports Institute called the PASS program. PASS stands for Promoting Achievement in School through Sports. This program "helps athletes attain greater academic success and at the same time improve their performance on the field" (Griffin, 1991, p. 24). This is a yearlong course that the student athlete enrolls in and helps to develop the skills the student needs to achieve academic success while using sports as a teaching tool.

The type of intervention that is commonly used is the increase of academic standards to participate in athletics. Many states and districts have gone from none or very low requirements to a requirement of 1.0 to 2.0 GPA. Texas, in particular, has instituted the No Pass, No Play legislation in 1984. This policy requires "that a student have a six-week average of at least 70 in EVERY COURSE or sit out of all extra-curricular activities for the next six-weeks grading period" (Sabatino, 1993, p. 3). Initially this policy affected mainly the freshman and JV players (Burnett, 2001). Now, "more students have remained eligible to participate in extra-curricular activities" (Sabatino, 1993, p. 3).

Possible Intervention Methods

Academic standards for athletic eligibility vary from state to state. Various methods have been tried and have gotten mixed results. The interventions that would work would be the PASS program and uniform eligibility requirements. Since it would be years before uniform requirements are implemented, something needs to be done now to help the struggling athletes. No Pass, No Play would not work because African American athletes would still have

difficulties meeting eligibility. The data shows that the percentage of African American students who are under the No Pass, No Play policy have not had a significant increase in numbers over the past nine years, where the Hispanic and Caucasian population had a 10-20% increase (Sabatino, 1993).

The program that targets the students and the athletes is the PASS program. "This program supports the premise of PASS that in order to increase academic performance for those students involved in athletics, there needs to be an increased, not a decreased, emphasis on the appropriate study and practice of sports" (American Sports Institute, 1995, p. 9). It is not intended to be just an athletic support service, but to reach every student of all races and ethnicities. The PASS program focuses on three major elements: (Reeves, 1998) Students focus on the kind of people they are, on the way they hold the meaning of their lives. They do this orally and in writing, which allows them to reflect on their own perspective of themselves. (McCarthy, 1994) The focus of the Fundamentals of Athletic Mastery (FAMS) teaches concentration, balance, relaxation, power, rhythm, flexibility, attitude, and instinct. "These are the abilities that will under grid the students work to improve their levels of achievement in sports and in the classroom" (Griffin, 1991, p. 23). Each student is to design a personalized academic and athletic project, which will help to increase both performances. This program is widely liked by both coaches and students because the student does not have to choose between athletics and academics and their GPA increases, which coaches like.

This program has recorded positive results in a four-year study conducted at several California High Schools between the 1991 through 1995 school years. In this period of time, 52% of the experimental group had increased their GPA. Of this percentage 12% increased their

GPA by a full letter grade. The PASS students "outperformed their counterparts by almost a quarter of a grade point" (American Sports Institute, 1993, p. 3).

CHAPTER 3

DESIGN

In this study, pre-post test design was used to examine the impact of maintaining a progress sheet on GPA from second and third quarters. The independent variable in this study was the grade level (11th and 12th graders) and the dependent variable was the Grade Point Average (GPA) in all courses. At the end of the eight weeks, their third quarter grades were collected to determine if their grade point average increased or decreased.

Participants

Participants consisted of 36 students from the spring track team. The team was diverse in gender, race, and socioeconomic status. There were seven seniors, twenty-six juniors, and three sophomores. Twenty athletes were male and sixteen were female. The school itself has a relatively high socioeconomic status. The students ranged from upper middle class to middle class. The majority of the participants were Caucasian / White athletes (56%), followed by African American / Black (25%), and other racial and ethnic groups (19%).

Instrument

The instrument that was used in this experiment was a progress sheet. The athletes' teachers filled each progress sheet out weekly. The progress sheet consisted of a grid. The grid had spaces for each teacher, for every period of the student's schedule to fill in a grade and comment. There was also a space for their signature. The school District GPA is computed by counting all courses equally on a four-point scale. The weighted rank/GPA is computed by weighting all Advanced Placement (AP), Gifted and Talented (GT) or Honors (H) courses in English, Science, Social Studies, Mathematics, and World Language in which a student earns an A, B, or C. In AP or GT courses, students with an A, B, or C will earn the weighted designation of 1.0 additional

quality point(s). In Honors courses, students with an A, B, or C will earn the weighted designation of .5 additional quality point(s).

Procedure

At the end of February, the beginning of third quarter, there was a meeting with the Boys and Girls track team to discuss the 8 week experiment, record names, class schedules, and to hand out parent permission forms. The meeting emphasized the importance of eligibility and GPA and how the two seemed to be connected. It was explained that each athlete would be handed a progress sheet once a week for eight weeks to be filled out by his or her teachers. The athletes will see their current grade before handing it in to me. The progress sheets would be handed out and picked up from the athletes' at practice or from their 1st period class. It was also discussed that their names would not be mentioned and that parental permission was needed. Each athlete was designated a letter or number so that their identity will be anonymous. March 1st was the start of the spring season. In the morning, parent permission forms were collected and the 1st progress sheet was handed out during the student's 1st period class. After school on March 1st, before track practice, the progress sheets were collected. The data was collected and recorded in an Excel Spreadsheet. The procedure was repeated for the next seven weeks (March 8, 15, 22, 29, April 5, 12, and 19th). After the eight-week period, copies of report cards were collected for each athlete from the registrar.

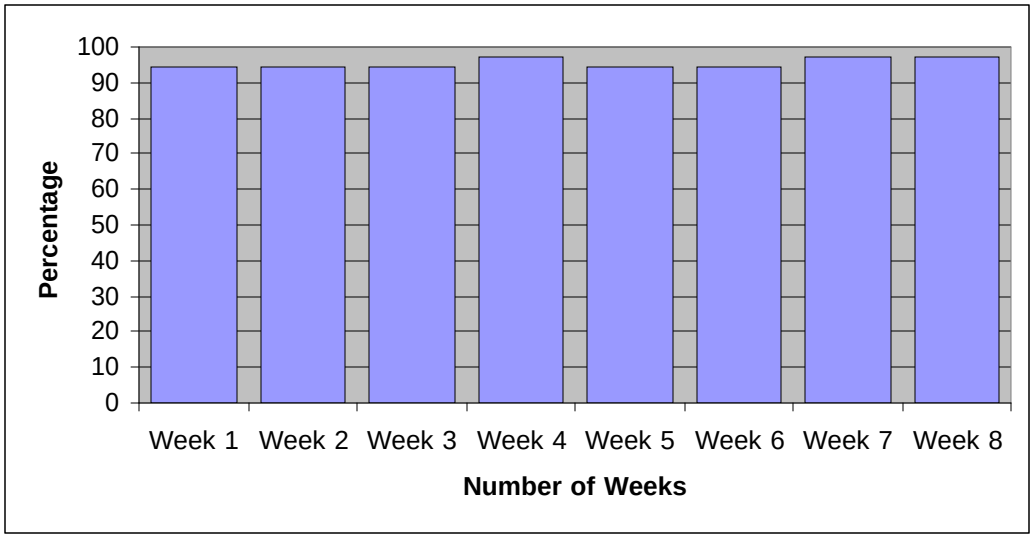
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The analysis indicated that the GPA scores did not significantly change from the second to the third quarter: $t(35) = 0.86$, $p = 0.39$. The mean GPA in the second quarter was 3.14 and decreased to 3.1 in the 3rd quarter.

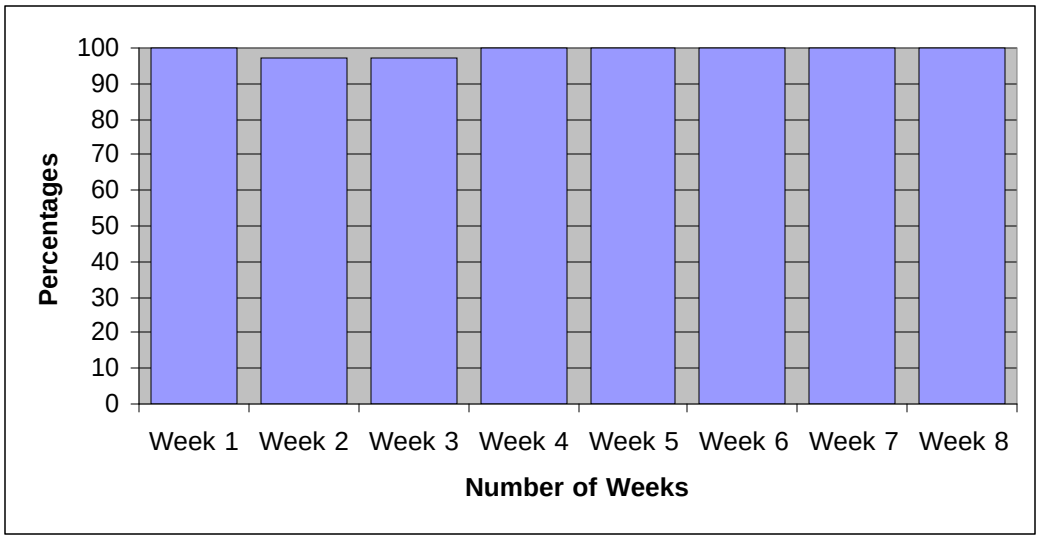
The beginning of the third quarter showed a passing rate of 94% (34 students) in mathematics (Figure 1). At the end of the third quarter the passing rate had increased to 97%(35 students). Therefore the number of students passing math increased from the first week of the third quarter of the eight-week period.

Figure 1: Percentage of students passing Math for Eight Consecutive Weeks



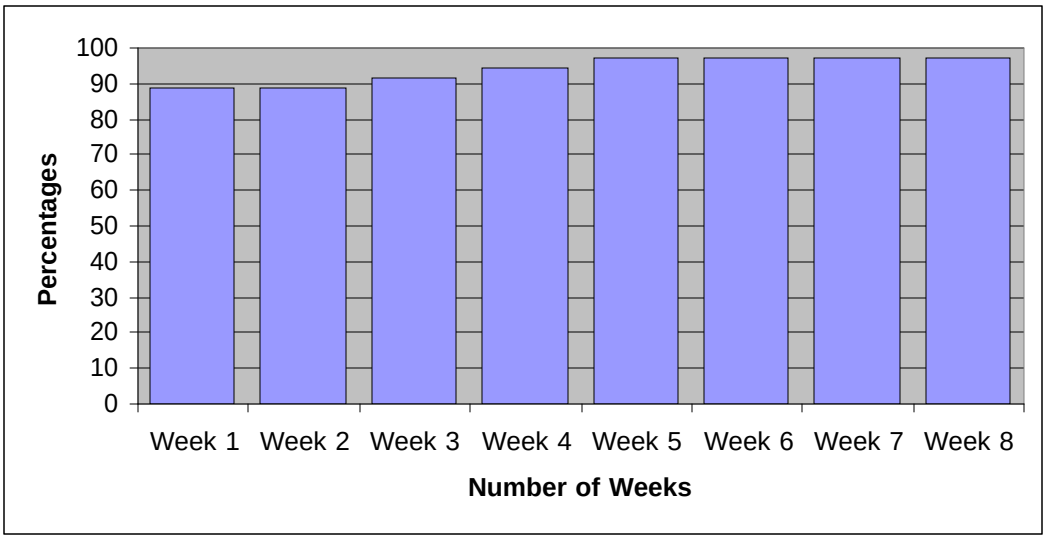
The beginning of the third quarter showed a passing rate of 100% (36 students) in English (Figure2). By weeks 2 and 3 the number passing had decreased to 97% but ultimately returned to 100% passing by the eighth week.

Figure 2: Percentage of Students Passing English for Eight Consecutive Weeks



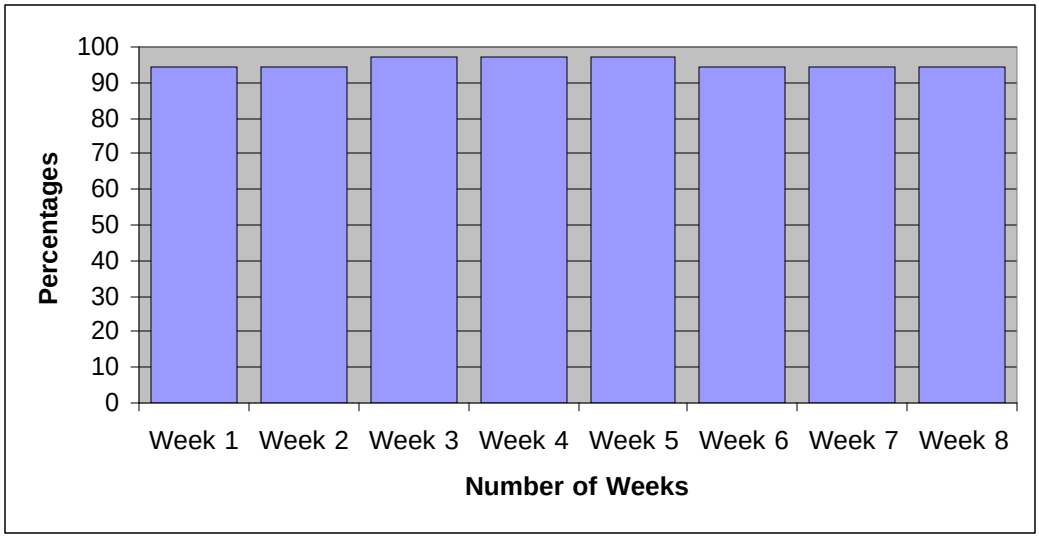
The beginning of the third quarter showed a passing rate of 89% (32 students) in Science (Figure 3). At the end of the third quarter the passing rate was 97% (35 students). Therefore the number of students passing science increased from the first week of the third quarter to the eight-week period.

Figure 3: Percentage of Students Passing Science for Eight Consecutive Weeks



The beginning of the third quarter showed a passing rate of 94% (34 students) in History (Figure 4) and remained at this rate by week eight of that quarter. Although there was an increase in the passing rate during weeks 2 through 5 (97%), the overall passing rate returned to the same rate (94%) by the end of the eight weeks. This was primarily due to the missing data for one student.

Figure 4: Percentage of Students Passing History for Eight Consecutive Weeks



CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

The research that was completed during the eight-week experiment did not support the researcher's hypothesis. The hypothesis stated that there would be a positive increase in the student's GPA from the second quarter to the end of the third quarter. In most instances the GPAs stayed the same or slightly decreased. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that this may not be the best approach to help athletes remain eligible to play their sports.

Validity

The major validity issue that occurred in this study was the John Henry Effect. John Henry was a railroad worker who outperformed a machine in a contest because he was aware that his performance was compared with that of a machine. The story produced the John Henry effect. The John Henry effect states that when people are aware of the importance of reaching a particular goal, they tend to do better. This could be the case in this research. As the experiment progressed from week to week, the students became aware of their grades and in turn, most students worked to improve their grades. It is unknown if the actual progress sheets helped the students improve their GPA or if it was the effect. This does not mean that the research data is invalid. It means that there is cause to continue researching this method of intervention to decide if it is a valid way to improve GPA scores.

Similarities and Differences

This study's result is a little different from other possible research methods. The No Pass, No Play method does not target student athletes in particular, just the overall school population. No Pass, No Play is mainly found in the state of Texas, where sports, especially football, are a way of life. In the No Pass, No Play policy, if students want to be involved in

sport programs they have to remain eligible the entire season. If they fall below the standard (70%) they are suspended from the team until their grades increase. Unfortunately, this program has around a 10 – 12% increase rate in GPA. According to the data, this intervention method may help to keep athletes eligible, but it does not do anything specific. This is a strictly student-centered intervention; it is up to students to remain eligible. Tracking athletes' GPA may help athletes monitor their own grades to maintain eligibility. This is a more hands-on approach in which athletes take active roles in staying eligible.

The other method examined in this action research was the PASS Program. In the PAAS program, students have mentors for the school year, who instructed them in the main fundamentals of PAAS. This program was piloted in California and has shown a 52% increase in GPA scores as it targets specific students and athletes. These are typically student athletes who are close to failing school or falling below eligibility requirements. In this yearlong course, students are paired with mentors who teach achievement through sports by utilizing FAMS (fundamentals of athletic mastery). This program teaches instruction through concentration, power, attitude, and balance. These techniques help athletes achieve success because they can relate to school achievement through an athletic approach. It is hard to compare this program with the data collected because PASS is yearlong and this research project was only for eight weeks.

Implications

If this action research program were to be repeated, several activities could be modified. First, the timeline could be extended into a yearlong study instead of eight weeks. Expanding the time may be beneficial as students' grades could be tracked every week for the entire year. Ideally, with extended time, students would learn skills to improve and maintain their grades.

This step is critical, as most students in this action research group are college bound. They must find a way to be successful academically as they live independently. This method may just teach them how to monitor their grades each week and fix any problem early before it is too late. By doing this, the data would be more accurate to determine if tracking grades truly increased GPA scores and if the students actually learned how to stay eligible on their own.

Second, the research group would be expanded. The ideal target group would be athletes as well as lower achieving students. The Howard County Public School System is one of the top school systems in the nation. Most of the athletes were already well above the eligibility standards before the experiment began. It would be interesting to study the lower achieving students to determine if this method is a productive method to increase GPAs. It is the lower achieving students that need the most help. Research has found that these students usually wait until the week before the quarter closes to worry about their grades. For some of these students, athletics is their only happiness or talent they excel in. Without the proper eligibility requirements, these students may never be academically or athletically qualified for college. By having these students focus on their grades weekly, it may help them become more serious academically and help them focus on their grades. Maybe if these students – the ones who are often forgotten in the research – received the opportunity to participate in this action research, there would be positive results.

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