



Flagged for

A red flag early warning system enables a teacher to catch students before they free-fall into failure.

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As an 11th grade English teacher, I used to get frustrated at interim time because I would go through my grade book, calculate the grades, and realize for the first time that a student was struggling. By then, five weeks into the nine-week marking period, it was almost too late for me to intervene. The students who struggled spectacularly were easy to spot, but it always distressed me to realize that other students were also slipping through the cracks.

One year, I decided to create a proactive intervention plan. As I planned my lessons, I anticipated where students might have difficulty given their past performance, my experience with them, and the mistakes students typically make. Then I planned how I would respond by preparing such interventions as graphic organizers, study guides, supplementary readings, and additional help sessions so that I would be ready the moment students struggled.

My system resulted in some improve-

ments, but I was still missing students who quietly struggled and who got caught up in a cycle of failure before I could intervene. I needed an early warning system, a set of red flags.

So I looked at how I tracked student progress to see how I could sift through all the information and turn it into early warning signals that would enable me to intervene in time. I wanted various objective flags that would enable me to consistently give all my students the support they needed. For example, I decided that any student who earned less than 75 percent or missed more than one-fourth of the questions on a quiz would need additional support. Once a student triggered a red flag, he or she would immediately go into the intervention cycle and receive progressively more intensive interventions until he or she moved above my mastery thresholds. Once a student was back on the path, that student could exit the intervention cycle.

Here's what this process looked like with three very different students.

Ben: A Quiet Downward Slide

I would never have noticed that Ben was struggling if it hadn't been for those red flags. About a month into the school year, as I was inputting a set of quiz grades into my electronic grade book, I checked for students whose grades were lower than 75 percent.

The fact that Ben had gotten a 74 percent on the quiz didn't set off any alarms. He was a good kid, and it was his first time raising a red flag. I made a note to check in with him during the next week and assigned him a review packet in anticipation of the next quiz. He was a diligent student, and I figured that the check-in and the review packet would get him back on track.

Check-ins are quick, informal conversations with students that enabled me to learn where they were struggling and see what supports I could provide. They are one of the least intensive interventions, and I used them for students who had just started to struggle. The review packet was really more of a one-sheeter that pointed students to the

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most important information in a lesson or unit. Students used it to review for the quiz.

After the next quiz, I scanned my grade book again and saw that Ben's grade had dipped to 70 percent. However, he was turning in all of his homework assignments, did fairly well on his classwork, and had completed the review packet correctly. Puzzled, I decided to use a more intensive intervention and required that he attend two acceleration and remediation sessions I conducted twice a week during lunch.

Over the next two weeks, Ben faithfully attended the sessions and seemed to enjoy getting the extra help. He claimed that he understood the work, and he participated more in class. By the time I gave the next quiz, I was confident that he would be just fine.

Except that he wasn't. In fact, he didn't even finish the quiz.

Now I was really concerned. We were at the interim point in the marking period, and as I prepared interim reports to send home to parents, I requested a conference with Ben's mother. When we met, I shared my concerns and the interventions I had used so far. She reported that Ben's father had recently left the family and that Ben was working 20 to 30 hours each week in an after-school job to help supplement the family income.

Ben was also angry with his father for leaving. His mother had contacted the school social worker to get Ben counseling, but he insisted that he was fine and refused to discuss it. After listening to her and reviewing his quizzes, I realized that Ben might be freezing up or daydreaming during the quizzes and that he might need a "break glass" strategy. Break glass strategies were little emergency strategies I taught students to use if they got stuck and couldn't figure out what to do. For example, I showed Ben how to identify the three

rhetorical forms (ethos, logos, and pathos) and suggested he default to analyzing how a quiz passage used these if he couldn't think of anything else to analyze in the passage.

The next day, I met with Ben briefly during class while the students were working quietly at their desks. I explained the break glass strategy and showed him how to use it on the next quiz. "Just try it," I urged him. "We'll see if it works, and if not, we'll try something else." He thanked me politely and went back to his seat. During the quiz the following day, I watched Ben carefully and was pleased to see him using the strategy. When I collected the quizzes, I saw that he had finished all the questions. I couldn't wait to grade it.

When I did, I was elated. Not only had he finished the quiz—he'd also earned an 85 percent. Relieved, I recorded his grade and made a note to check in with him the next day. When I handed back the papers, Ben grinned broadly as he looked at his grade. I patted him on the shoulder and whispered, "I think we found something that works!"

Carla: Uncooperative and Disengaged

Carla triggered a different red flag. She had several gaps in her background knowledge and struggled to keep up



with the pace of the class. I knew early on that the work would be challenging for her. I worried that she would get discouraged and give up.

I watched Carla closely those first few weeks, and when her overall class average dropped below my 80-percent threshold—another red flag I created—I checked in with her and assigned her a review packet before the next quiz. Two days before the quiz, when I asked her how she was coming with the packet, I discovered that she hadn't completed it. When I asked her why, she just shrugged and said she didn't have time.



I would never have noticed that Ben was struggling if it hadn't been for those red flags.

I stressed the importance of completing the packet and offered to go over it with her after school. She agreed to meet with me, but she never showed up.

The next day in class, I asked her why she hadn't come. She told me she forgot. I took a deep breath and asked her to meet me at lunch to go through the material, but when lunchtime came, Carla didn't appear. I went down to the lunchroom to look for her and found her eating with her friends.

"Hey, Carla, you stood me up!" I said as I slid into the seat next to her. Mortified, she hung her head and mumbled something about forgetting as her friends snickered loudly across from her. "No problem," I said cheerily as I pulled the review packet from my bag. "Shall we go through this now or would you like to come back to the classroom where it's a little quieter?" Reluctantly, she chose to leave with me, but once we were in the classroom, she sat in stony silence while I reviewed the key points

we'd covered in class the previous week. She complied, but she wasn't going to cooperate; I was frustrated plowing through the packet, knowing that my words went in one ear and right out the other.

I was encouraged to see that Carla's quiz performance that week was slightly better than I'd predicted. But because her overall average was still below my 80-percent cutoff at the next two-week check-in, Carla was automatically placed in the next intervention group and assigned to attend acceleration and remediation sessions at lunch.

On the day of the first session, I announced to Carla's class that I would be conducting an acceleration session at lunch that day and that any student who wanted to get a preview of what we would be doing in class the upcoming week was welcome to attend. At lunch that day, 26 students were there because I'd assigned them to be there; seven showed up because of my announcement.

When Carla walked in, she seemed surprised to see so many students. I previewed the content, gave students a note-taking sheet they could use during the lecture the following week, and showed them how to use it. I also previewed key vocabulary they would encounter and gave them a few hints on how they could participate in the upcoming class discussion on the novel we were finishing. Carla was reluctant to participate at first, but I soon saw her laughing with the other students and tucking the "cheat sheets" I'd given

them into her notebook. On her way out, I asked her how she liked the session. She said she was surprised that so many "smart" kids were in the group.

The next week, Carla actually raised her hand during class. I called on her, and she provided an answer that she'd learned during one of our acceleration sessions. I winked at her; she blushed and then grinned shyly. It was a start.

The following day was a quiz day, and I anxiously graded Carla's paper. She'd made a small improvement. At the end of two weeks, I checked her grade and saw another slight improvement. She still wasn't over the 80-percent threshold, but she was making progress with the acceleration and remediation cycles, so I kept her in that group.

Carla faithfully attended, and her grades improved. So did her participation in class. After another two-week cycle, she was earning a C; after six weeks, she had pulled her grade up to the 80-percent cutoff. When I told her that she didn't have to go to the lunchtime sessions anymore, her face fell. "You're kicking me out?" she asked, incredulous.

"Of course not," I replied. "You're welcome to come anytime. But as long as you keep your grade above 80 percent, you aren't *required* to be here."

"I think I'll keep coming, if it's OK with you," she said quietly. I assured her that it was.

Keith: So Far Behind

Keith didn't trigger just one red flag—he set them all off. Not only did he do poorly on his quizzes, he also flubbed his homework (on the rare occasions when he did it) and regularly failed his classwork. At the first two-week checkpoint, I started with the regular interventions, hoping that by checking in and giving him more support, I could help him start to turn things around.

But there was no change.

So I moved him to the lunchtime acceleration and remediation sessions. During these sessions, I typically pre-

viewed organizing strategies and background information that students would need for upcoming lessons. I might, for example, review with students how to complete the bibliography section of their research papers or find the implied thesis of an essay. After one session in which I went into differences between rhetorical devices, such as anaphora and ellipses, Keith stopped by my desk on the way out and said, “Dr. Jackson, I still don’t get it.”

I was flustered. I tried to reassure him that he would get it eventually, but I wasn’t so sure. He was missing a lot of background knowledge, he didn’t understand the vocabulary, and he took so long to understand what I thought were simple concepts that I worried he might have been placed in the wrong class. Maybe if he worked harder, I mused. But then I suddenly realized that Keith wasn’t going to put in that kind of effort, especially when he was convinced it wouldn’t make a difference.

The lunchtime acceleration and remediation sessions were important for Keith, but they weren’t enough. I started to give him scaffolded assignments. For instance, when I assigned an article or an essay to read for homework, instead of giving Keith the graphic organizer I gave the other students, I gave him one with additional clues, such as the page numbers where he could find the information he needed to fill in. I gave him tiered homework assignments. I also found a free tutorial online that Keith used to help with his background knowledge.

Yet Keith still struggled. I worked hard to keep him from getting frustrated and tried to give him as many quick wins as I could. I also tried to manage his workload so that he didn’t feel overwhelmed, and I didn’t feel overworked. These strategies helped, but because Keith had started so far behind, he was still triggering red flags. Although I responded to each with progressive supports, as we approached the sum-

mative assessment, I knew that Keith still wasn’t ready.

A week before the summative assessment, I went over all the supports I’d provided. I noticed that Keith had a pretty good understanding of the material, but that his writing skills were getting in the way of his being able to demonstrate that understanding. So, a few days before the assessment, I gave him some strategies to use to help with his writing. This included a heuristic he could use to structure his essay and

Four Cardinal Rules for Establishing Red Flags

Red flags should be unambiguous.

You don’t want to have to debate with yourself or with a student about whether he or she has triggered a red flag. You want a clear signal—like a cutoff classroom average or a cutoff grade on a quiz—that shows that a student is falling below mastery.

Red flags should be hard to ignore. You don’t want to have to go hunting for red flags. Establish red flags that are easy to recognize and hard to miss.

Red flags should trigger action. Once you see a red flag, you shouldn’t have to figure out what to do about it. The moment a student triggers a red flag, you must be ready to apply an intervention. If you wait, you will lose the opportunity to quickly get the student back on track.

Red flags should focus on academic concerns, not on student behaviors. Your intervention plan should be tightly focused on helping students get back on track academically. Separate the interventions from discipline or behavior management.

some sentence-combining strategies. We practiced using them until he felt comfortable.

On the day of the test, I’m not sure who was more nervous—Keith or me. When I collected the students’ papers, I flipped anxiously to Keith’s and graded it first. I noticed that he had used the strategies I’d given him and that they’d been relatively successful. I quickly tallied up his points and found he’d earned a solid C.

Keith never became an A student in my class, but he didn’t fail either. In fact, he finished the semester with a strong C. Not only that, but things got easier for Keith throughout the marking period. As he got more comfortable with the strategies I’d taught him, I began to gradually remove supports so that he could do the work on his own.

On the Mark

Red flags helped me more efficiently target the right kids and get them what they needed to meet the requirements of the task instead of applying random and general supports that may or may not address students’ individual needs. Red flags enabled me to catch students early on and get them on track to success. And because I’d planned my supports ahead of time to correspond to the red flags, I could intervene right away.

Triggers like these enable us to intervene while students are still resilient—before they’re mired in failure. Moreover, when we use them, we communicate an important message to students—that we see they’re struggling and we’re here to help them get on course; that we’re their allies for learning, and we want them to succeed. ☐

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