

Discussion Paper: Impact of Counseling on Student Outcomes

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The role of the school counselor

School counselors provide mental, emotional, social, developmental and behavioral services to students. The three domains of responsibility of the school counselor are categorized as: academic, career, and personal/social. Effective counseling programs are important to the school climate and a crucial element in improving student achievement.

School counselors are trained professionals, licensed or certified by law and/or regulation in all 50 states. School counselors are required to obtain graduate education in counseling as an entry-level prerequisite for state licensing. The California Commission on Teacher Credentialing notes that the complex needs of today's pupils emphasize the need for comprehensive counseling and guidance programs in schools. The foundation of the school counseling profession contains knowledge and professional attitudes that promote student development, learning and achievement. School counselors must have knowledge of the laws and ethics of counseling specific to children in California schools. Effective school counseling is further supported by knowledge of state and national standards for school counseling and by familiarity with models of effective comprehensive school counseling and guidance programs.

In many cases, there is a lack of understanding about how the work of school counselors impacts student outcomes. Historically, school counselors were trained under the mental health provider model with an emphasis on 1:1 counseling. This trend is changing as counselors are gaining the necessary training to expand their services to provide a broader impact on students' academic, career as well as personal and social domains.

Services provided by school counselors may include the following:

- Academic skill development
- Violence prevention initiatives (e.g. Second Step, Peace Builders)
- Group counseling
- Peer counseling
- Individual counseling
- Career development
- Academic course selection and scheduling
- College planning assistance

It has been suggested that the role of school counselors must continue to evolve and develop if it is to remain a critical component of a school's focus on student achievement. For example, one author suggests, "Many counseling programs are still operating under a student services model. The focus of counselors' work is related to career planning and placement, problem solving, and class scheduling. Under this model, counselors are spending the majority of their time providing services to a small number of students who have the greatest needs. They are providing individual counseling services to the most needy students and are reacting to crisis situations as they arise.

Functioning within this framework, school counselors are not able to provide proactive services or address the needs of the larger body of students” (McGannon, Carey & Dimmitt 2005).

The Comprehensive Developmental Guidance (CDG) Program model was developed in the 1970’s to position school counseling as a core educational program rather than a set of ancillary support services. Programs operating within this model are designed to promote student competence for all students and to prevent problems. Counselors are responsible for a guidance curriculum based on student learning objectives and outcomes and are designed to serve all students. The American School Counseling Association has developed National Standards to standardize these learning objectives and outcomes. These are shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1. ASCA National Standard listed by domain areas. (Campbell & Dahir, 1997)

Academic Development	Standard A	Students will acquire the attitudes, knowledge and skills contributing to effective learning in school and across the life span
	Standard B	Students will complete school with the academic preparation essential to choose from a wide range of substantial post-secondary options, including college.
	Standard C	Students will understand the relationship of academics to the world of work and to life at home and in the community.
Career Development	Standard A	Students will acquire the skills to investigate the world of work in relation to knowledge of self and to make informed career decision
	Standard B	Students will employ strategies to achieve future career success and satisfaction
	Standard C	Students will understand the relationship between personal qualities, education and training and the world of work.
Personal/Social Development	Standard A	Students will acquire the attitudes, knowledge and interpersonal skills to help them understand and respect self and others.
	Standard B	Students will make decisions, set goals and take necessary action to achieve goals
	Standard C	Students will understand safety and survival skills.

As outlined, the ASCA National Model states that exemplary school counseling programs:

- Are focused on improving academic achievement and eliminating the achievement gap
- Operate from a mission that is connected with the school district's mission and state and national educational reform agendas
- Operate from a formal set of student learning objectives that are connected to the ASCA National Standards, aligned with state curriculum frameworks, aligned with district standards, and based on measurable student learning outcomes
- Are data-driven and accountable for student outcomes.

Current status of counseling

The California Department of Education website notes, "California has made important strides in class size reduction, higher academic standards, greater accountability and improved teacher preparation. The important missing link in these initiatives to improve student learning is the need for more school counselors and other student support services, such as school psychologists, school social workers, and school nurses. Traditionally, California students' access to counselors varies by grade level and 29% of California's school districts have no counseling programs at all. When counseling programs exist, counselors are often asked to add administrative duties such as testing, supervising, and class scheduling."

With a statewide average ratio of 954 students to each counselor, compared to a national average of 477:1, California ranks last in the nation. The American School Counseling Association recommended ratio of students per counselor is 250:1. Obviously, California has a long way to go to reach this optimal level.

In the Pleasanton Unified School District, the counseling ratios vary by level at approximately: 685:1 for high school; 600:1 for middle school and 1400:1 for elementary school (as each counselor is responsible for two schools). Again, these ratios significantly exceed both the national average and the recommended ratio.

School counseling outcomes

Legislative initiatives, including "No Child Left Behind" are leading school systems across the country to focus on accountability and specifically, student achievement. School counseling has great potential to help students achieve to high standards in the academic, career and personal/social aspects of their lives. The push to greater accountability puts pressure on administrators, teachers and counselors to be involved in the process of increasing student achievement, reducing the achievement gap, improving school attendance and graduation rates, and ensuring adequate levels of safety within school systems. There is a need to consider the evidence that addresses the question of whether school counselors have a significant impact on students in order to guide policy decisions on the provision of quality, comprehensive school guidance programs.

Numerous studies have been undertaken to identify the outcomes of school counseling practices and their impacts on student achievement, behavior and other factors:

- A broad and comprehensive qualitative review of the K-12 school counseling outcome literature, including 50 school counseling outcome studies published between 1988 and 1995 suggested that one can cautiously conclude that a broad range of activities school counselors perform often result in positive changes for students.
- A review of 19 studies over 25 years considered whether counselor interventions with low achieving students and their parents are effective in boosting academic achievement, as measured by GPA. Summary information suggested that counseling interventions can have positive effects on academic achievement.
- A review of the school counseling outcome literature that focused specifically on classroom guidance produced a number of studies that demonstrated that comprehensive curriculums about career, academic and personal/social development can positively impact student knowledge in each of these domains.
- A large-scale research study considered whether school-counseling interventions in elementary schools with comprehensive guidance programs foster higher academic achievement test scores in students. Study results indicated that early elementary-age students who attend the same school for three or more years do better academically when there is a comprehensive program than students who attend schools without such programs.
- In a study, considered by many to be extremely well-designed, researchers examined whether the combination of curriculum-based and group-based interventions with a focus on cognitive and metacognitive skills, social skills, and self-management skills known to be related to school success would have a measurable impact on students' test scores on a standardized state achievement test. Study results showed that these small group and classroom-based school counseling interventions resulted in significant score improvements on state achievement tests.
- School counseling programs have been found to have significant influence on discipline problems. Baker and Gerler found that students who participated in a school-counseling program had significantly less inappropriate behaviors and more positive attitudes toward school than those students who did not participate in the program. Another study found that group counseling provided by school counselors significantly decreased participants aggressive and hostile behaviors.
- A study found that the efficacy of school counselors is influenced by the school climate. In schools with effective counseling programs, principals generally provided enthusiastic support for the programs and encouragement to the counselors. Another common element was a clear understanding between counselors and administrators as to the goals of the school counseling programs. These conditions were generally not present in failing programs.
- Research shows that school counseling interventions have a substantial impact on students' educational and personal development. Individual and small-group counseling, classroom guidance and consultation activities seem to contribute directly to students' success in the

classroom and beyond, and school counselors should spend the majority of their time performing these interventions.

- A study of Missouri high schools found that schools with more fully implemented model guidance programs had students who were more likely to report that (a) they had earned higher grades, (b) their education was better preparing them for the future, (c) their school made more career and college information available to them, and (d) their school had a more positive climate (greater feelings of belonging and safety at school, classes are less likely to be interrupted, peers behave better). Positive program effects were found after removing differences due to school enrollment size, socioeconomic status, and percentage of minority students in attendance. Results highlight the important roles school counselors play in promoting the central educational goals of their schools.
- Studies of the effects of a small group counseling approach for failing elementary school students found that 83 percent of students showed improvement in grades.
- A study on the effects of counseling on classroom performance found that the underachieving students who received counseling improved significantly on the Self-Rating Scale of Classroom behavior and in mathematics and language arts grades.
- The School Dropout Assistance Program (1991-1996) funded a number of projects to test and evaluate the effect of promising strategies for dropout prevention and reentry. The results found that counseling services were one of the key elements of any particular dropout prevention initiative.
- Studies on high school attrition have indicated that preventative counseling, occurring before students are in crisis, reduced the risk of these students dropping out later.
- School counseling interventions can positively affect school behaviors; specifically, students' on-task and productive use of time and students' in-class discipline. Furthermore, results of one study suggest that counselors can assist fellow educators to help students improve academic performance. In this study, students were selected based on their need and ability to improve their academic abilities in math, language arts, or both. Intervention methods of the counselors were varied, but included individual and group counseling sessions, classroom guidance lessons, parent consultations and teacher consultations. Results showed statistically significant decreases in disruptive behaviors for both 3rd grade and 5th grade students tested.
- Counselor-led, developmental guidance units presented in ninth grade classrooms have the potential to improve students' expressed behavior and general school attitudes, while addressing their developmental needs. A developmental, preventative guidance approach may help to assist students in coping with the overwhelming nature of the transition to high school.

- One study found that high school counselors influence their students' future plans by providing them with high expectations. A high proportion of 10th and 12th grade students surveyed perceived that their counselor expected them to attend college regardless of their racial background. High school students' own educational expectations for themselves have also increased over time.
- Counselor-led career interventions have been found to impact the educational choices of eighth grade students as they prepare for high school. One study simulated three levels of career intervention, representing three levels of involvement in preparing eighth-grade students for making high school educational choices. The results of the study suggest that the higher level 2 & 3 interventions were helpful in assisting individuals in preparing trial high school programs of study, particularly in the mathematics and science areas of the curriculum.
- The implementation of comprehensive school counseling programs is consistently associated with important indicators of student safety and success. A study found that school counselors who were more fully engaged in providing students with a unique network of emotional and instrumental support services were more likely to exert a positive impact than counselors who did not implement such activities. After researchers controlled for differences between schools due to socioeconomic status and enrollment size, students attending middle schools with more fully implemented comprehensive programs reported (a) feeling safer attending their schools, (b) having better relationships with their teachers, (c) believing that their education was more relevant and important to their futures, (d) being more satisfied with the quality of education available to them in their schools, (e) having fewer problems related to the physical and interpersonal milieu in their schools, and (f) earning higher grades.

Summary and conclusions

The research conducted to date on the outcomes of school counseling suggests that an effective and comprehensive school guidance program that is fully integrated with the mission of the school and supported by the school administration, has the potential to positively impact:

- Academic achievement at the elementary, middle and high school levels
- Student personal development
- Transitions into high school from middle school
- Academic course selection, college and career planning by middle & high school students
- School climate including improvements in classroom behavior; a reduction in discipline problems; fostering a greater sense of belonging among students; and improved school safety due to a reduction in violence
- Drop-out rates through efforts to keep students in school

The evidence linking school counseling with positive student outcomes in academic, career and personal/social domains appears to be clearly supported through both quantitative and qualitative research. This suggests that the ratios of students per school counselor in PUSD of 685:1 for high school; 600:1 for middle school and 1400:1 for elementary, when compared to the national average of 477:1 and the recommended ratio of 250:1 come up as clearly in need of attention.

RESOURCES: COUNSELING

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