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Helping Students Improve Academic Achievement and School Success Behavior

This article describes a study evaluating the impact of school-counselor-led interventions on student academic achievement and school success behavior. A group counseling and classroom guidance model called student success skills (SSS) was the primary intervention. The focus of the SSS model was on three sets of skills identified in several extensive reviews of educational research as being critical to school success: cognitive, social, and self-management skills. Students in grades five, six, eight, and nine participated. Positive effects on multiple measures were found.

A research project involving school counselors and students in fifth, sixth, eighth, and ninth grades was implemented to determine the impact of school-counselor-led groups and classroom guidance on student academic achievement and behavior. The need for more accountability research related to school counselor services has been well documented. Whiston & Sexton (1998) represents the most current review of outcome research related to school counseling. In the 50 studies reviewed (1988–1995), tentative support was found for career planning, group counseling, social skills training, and peer counseling. Forty-three percent of the studies used standardized instruments or instruments that had been used in previous research. Thirty percent of the studies used instruments developed by the author of that particular study. The review concluded that a broad range of activities school counselors perform often result in positive change for students. Due to methodological limitations and the small number of outcome studies, Whiston & Sexton also concluded that there was a very limited reliable and valid body of research related to school counseling services.

Four years later, Whiston (2002) responded to a special issue of the *Professional School Counselor* that focused on the past, present, and future of school counseling. Whiston made three major points that highlight the need for school counselors to measure the impact of their services. The first point was that although we can agree that counselors are helpful to

students and have a significant influence on their development, there is not sufficient documentation, in the counseling literature, of the positive effects of school counselor services. The second point was that the school counseling profession is at risk because we do not have substantial research showing that school counseling programs produce positive results for children. The third point that Whiston made was that, in the current era of accountability, there will be increased demands for evidence that shows school counselors have a positive influence on student performance. Other researchers have also called for more school counseling accountability research, especially related to student performance (Fairchild, 1993; Fairchild, 1994; Otwell & Mullis 1997).

One particular review of research reinforces the need for additional research related to school counselors' impact on student performance. Prout & Prout (1998) conducted a meta-analysis of 17 school-based studies, with 550 subjects, covering a 10-year period and found an effect size of .97 across all studies and outcome variables. A .97 effect size means that students receiving the interventions were significantly better off than approximately 97% of the comparison students. Almost all of the studies involved group counseling and all were conducted in schools. However, most interventions were not led by school counselors. While this review of research is important to school counselors because it highlights the positive aspects of counseling interventions in schools, it also highlights two weaknesses which need to be addressed. First, although most of the outcome research reviewed was conducted in schools, the research usually involved school psychologists or other mental health providers other than school counselors. Further, most of the outcome measures were self-reports, with little evidence of a strong link between counseling interventions and improvements in academic performance. The authors agree with Whiston (2002), that school counselors need to build a solid research base that supports the efficacy of school counselors providing counseling services. In addition, the authors believe

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that the emphasis of school counseling efficacy research needs to be on the link between school counselor interventions and student academic and social performance.

One of the most promising interventions, for school counselors interested in showing the impact of their services on student achievement and behavior, is group counseling. Shechtman (2002) reviewed the outcome research on group psychotherapy with children and found a consensus on its effectiveness (Dagley, Gazda, Eppinger, & Stewart, 1994; Holmes & Sprenkle, 1996; Kulic, Dagley, & Horne, 2001). Shechtman declared that a general conclusion that groups were effective was no longer enough. His position, similar to Whiston's (2002), was that demonstrating accountability is crucial to receiving support from administrators, teachers, and parents. Shechtman believes these groups are most interested in proven effectiveness for certain types of groups such as those impacting achievement and behavior. Shechtman's review also found that in order to improve achievement, the social and emotional dimensions along with the academic need to be addressed. This finding was echoed by Masten & Coatsworth (1998); Wang, Haertel, & Walberg (1994); and Hattie, Biggs, & Purdie (1996) and was incorporated into the Student Success Skills model.

While the overall evidence for the efficacy of counseling children and adolescents is strong, the link between services provided by school counselor and student academic and behavioral performance remains limited. The focus of this study was on increasing the outcome research related to this important link.

Shechtman's review on school-based group therapy research called for more rigorous methodology including pre-post comparison group designs, with a clear description and monitoring of the researched-based intervention. In addition, Shechtman recommended having at least several group leaders. This study incorporated these suggestions into the project.

For this investigation, a research-based model called Student Success Skills (SSS) was developed and tested. The SSS model focused on making a positive impact on student academic achievement and behavior. The model, was designed, to be used by school counselors.

The project under investigation came about when a school district's coordinator of school counseling invited counselor education faculty at one of the state universities to assist the district in obtaining a grant aimed at evaluating the impact of school counselors on student academic achievement and behavior. As is the case in many districts across the country, school counselors in this district were overloaded with nonguidance tasks. The school counsel-

ing coordinator wanted additional clerical personnel to assist counselors and free them to provide more direct counseling services. The superintendent and school board asked for accountability data that documented that school counseling services made a difference in student academic achievement and behavior before they agreed to increase funding.

The superintendent and school board's position reflects that of Whiston (2002) who points out not enough documentation exists regarding school counselors providing counseling services that make a significant positive change in outcomes that matter to most decision makers. If, as Whiston contends, that "in the current era of accountability in education, it is anticipated that there will be demands for evidence that shows school counselors have a positive influence on students" (p.153), then school counselors need to produce this evidence. This article is about one attempt to document the positive impact school counselors can have on student academic achievement and pro-social behavior.

At the beginning of the project, a survey of the participating school counselors revealed a lack of confidence, on the part of school counselors, that they could impact student achievement on standardized tests with their existing interventions. The aim of the project was to measure the effect of research-based interventions led by school counselors. Knowing the power of expectancy, the researchers wanted to limit the impact of negative expectations about the outcomes. Several strategies were used to address counselor confidence. First, counselors were encouraged to maintain a focus by limiting the scope of the intervention. This was attempted by providing information regarding the importance of a few key skills related to student success and to ask counselors to stress these skills in their group sessions. Secondly, the project provided an easy to use, research-based, structured format for each group session. The third strategy addressing counselor confidence was to provide and emphasize the use of a research-based group and classroom guidance curriculum, Student Success Skills. In addition, the project attempted to enhance counselor skills through training and peer coaching. Another method employed was to use action research methods to provide feedback to participating school counselors on the impact of their counseling interventions. Lastly, the counselors were provided a research summary that highlighted evidence for the efficacy of counseling children and adolescents. As a result of these efforts, the participating school counselors went from confidence scores averaging 2.5 on a 1-5 Likert scale (low confidence) when the project began to 4.5 (high confidence) by the time the project began full implementation.

RESEARCH BASE FOR THE SSS MODEL

The Student Success Skills model is based primarily upon three reviews of research: Masten and Coatsworth (1998), reviewed 25 years of research to determine the most critical factors associated with children and adolescents developing academic and social competence. Wang et al. (1994) reviewed 50 years of research looking at "What helps students learn" to determine the most important factors in promoting effective learning. Hartie et al. (1996) looked at 10 years of research on the effects of learning skills interventions on student learning to determine which were most effective.

All three reviews found a very similar cluster of skills considered to be critical to school success. These skills include: (1) Cognitive and meta cognitive skills such as goal setting, progress monitoring, and memory skills; (2) Social skills such as interpersonal skills, social problem solving, listening, and teamwork skills; and (3) Self-management skills such as managing attention, motivation, and anger. These three skill sets were the most powerful predictors of long-term school success and seemed to separate high achievers from low achievers.

The process for teaching skills has also been investigated. An instruction model for teaching learning skills to students was identified by Wang et al. (1994) as most effective. This model emphasizes an Ask, Tell, Show, Do, Feedback method, described later, and was incorporated into the group sessions of this study.

Helping students succeed in school and develop the social and self-management skills needed for effective learning, working, and relating seems to be a direct fit with the American School Counseling Association's three national standards categories: academic, personal/social, and career (Campbell & Dahir, 1997). This focus is also very compatible with most schools' mission statements and yearly goals. If school counselors can show positive impact in students' academic, social, and self-management skills, then the accountability issue Whiston (2002) and Shechtman (2002) discuss would be effectively addressed.

The research question for this study was: Do certain school-counselor-led interventions impact student achievement and behavior? More specifically, do school counselor conducted group counseling and classroom guidance—which focused on cognitive, social, and self-management skills—have a positive impact on student achievement and school success behaviors?

METHOD

Participants

The 2-year project was funded through a grant from the Annenberg Foundation and the Henderson Foundation. Two faculty members from Florida Atlantic University's Department of Counselor Education worked with school counselors from three elementary, one middle, and two high schools.

One hundred eighty students (30 from each school) were selected randomly from those scoring between the 25th and 50th percentile on the Norm Reference Test (NRT) Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) in reading. School district leaders were particularly interested in these students because they were performing below average, and they represented the "gray area" students who frequently do not receive services. Students in four grade levels were involved: At the elementary school level, fifth grade students participated; at the middle school level, sixth and eighth grade students participated; and at the high school level, ninth grade students participated.

Comparison students were also selected randomly from the pool of students at the same grade levels who scored between the 25th and 50th percentile on the Norm Reference Test Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test in reading. The comparison students were in nontreatment schools that were matched with the treatment schools according to geographic proximity, race, and socio-economic data as reported on the district web site.

Ten school counselors participated in the treatment schools and led the group sessions as well as delivered the classroom guidance lessons. The comparison schools were not aware of the study.

Research Design

A pretest-posttest comparison group design with randomization was used for this study. The independent variable was school-counselor-led group counseling and classroom guidance using the Student Success Skills curriculum. The dependent variables were teacher rating of student classroom behavior and math and reading scores on a standardized test (FCAT). The .05 level of significance was selected.

Instruments

The two instruments used as pre-test and post-test were: (a) the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, Math and Reading (Florida Department of Education, 2002) and (b) the School Behavior Rating Scale (Merrell, 1993). The FCAT is the state-wide annual achievement test used in Florida. All students, grades 3–12, take this test each spring. Norming involved 5,171 students. The ethnic

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group makeup of the sample was 60.8% Caucasian, 20.6% African American, 15.1 % Hispanic, 1.80% Asian American, .18% Native American, and .83% multicultural.

The FCAT technical manual states that Cronbach's alpha reliability estimates range between .86 to .88 for reading and .91 to .92 for math. Several studies reported in the technical manual provided evidence that the items have adequate criterion-related and construct validity.

The School Social Behavior Scale (SSBS) was the second instrument used as a pre-test and post-test measure. Teachers rated treatment students in September and again in April on the SSBS. Comparison students were not rated. The SSBS was normed for grades K to 12, using 1,858 students from 22 different school districts, in 18 of the United States. The ratings were completed by 688 teachers. The sample represented a mix of urban, suburban, small town, and rural communities. The ethnic group make-up of the sample was 87.1% Caucasian, 8% African American, 2.7 % Hispanic, .9% Asian American, .6% Native American, and .8% described as "other." The non-Caucasian makeup of the sample was 13% compared to 30% of the general U.S. population. Socioeconomic status was controlled for in the sample. As a result, ethnicity was not a critical factor in influencing scores.

In terms of reliability, the internal consistency was .96 to .98, test-retest reliability was .76 to .82 and inter-rater reliability was .72 to .83. Several studies reported in the technical manual, provided evidence that the scale has adequate to good content, criterion-related, and construct validity, and that its factor structure is sound.

Treatment

The primary interventions provided by school counselors were group counseling and classroom guidance, using the SSS curriculum. Both the group and classroom sessions focused upon cognitive, social, and self-management skills. The training provided to participating school counselors focused upon three areas: topics (the SSS curriculum), format (the structured group and classroom guidance session format), and skills (counselor group discussion and leadership skills).

Counselor training. Counselors attended 3 days of training in August plus 3 half-day training sessions in October, January, and March. In September, November, and February counselors met in small groups (3 to 5) for half-day peer-coaching sessions to review video tapes of group and classroom guidance sessions, share ideas about implementing the project, and discuss results they were noticing related to student improvement in achievement and behavior. The verbal and written feedback to coun-

selors who shared group and classroom guidance tapes was structured. The feedback revolved around rating scales, which focused on the topics, format, and skills taught by the university faculty during the summer the training sessions.

Topics: The SSS curriculum. The SSS curriculum for group counseling and classroom guidance was focused on the topics identified in the three research reviews cited above as being essential to school success: cognitive, social, and self-management skills. These three skill areas were selected because positive changes in these areas were considered to be the most effective route to improved student academic achievement and social performance.

The group counseling intervention consisted of 8 weekly sessions of approximately 45 minutes each, followed by four booster sessions. The booster sessions were each spaced a month apart. The group sessions began the first week of October. The weekly sessions ended the first week of December. The four monthly booster sessions occurred in January, February, March, and April.

The group curriculum used was *Academic and Social Support: Student Success Skills* (Brigman & Goodman, 2001). The group plans followed a structured format and stressed goal setting, progress monitoring, and active learning through a variety of activities.

Format for group sessions. The group format is divided into three sections: The beginning of the group session, the middle phase of the session, and the ending of the session. The beginning phase of each group session had four tasks. The first is a temperature check on feelings/energy. For example, the counselor might use a "go-around" with a 1 to 10 rating scale to check on energy and mood. A life skills progress monitoring form was used to keep track of patterns associated with fun, rest, exercise, and diet, which can have a significant impact on mood and energy. The second task of the beginning phase involved a review of the past session. The third task focused on goals and progress associated with academic achievement and school success behavior. This goal and progress review by students included their report to the group on progress made on applying lessons learned in group to their life. A goal-setting, progress-monitoring chart was developed which incorporated specific cognitive, social, and self-management skills. The cognitive skills incorporated in the chart included: picking out the most important ideas to study for tests, organizing the most important ideas into outlines or concept maps, chunking these key ideas into small groups, placing them on note cards, reviewing the note cards six or more times, and using anxiety-management techniques during test taking. The social skills incorporated into the chart included working coopera-

tively in teams or pairs during class and maintaining several "study buddies." The self-management skills incorporated into the chart included anger management and the life skills noted above. The last task of the beginning phase of each group session involved previewing today's meeting and providing a WIIFM (what's in it for me) rationale or benefits statement tied to engaging in the activity.

During the middle portion of each group session, the main activity was introduced and explored. Some general guidelines for the middle portion were emphasized. One is for leaders to use the "Ask, Tell, Show, Do" method of skill/knowledge building. Before the counselors presents a new topic they "Ask" students to define and share what they already know and how they currently use the skill/idea being focused upon. Next, they "Tell" or provide new information related to the skill/information, and then they demonstrate or "Show" its use. Last is guided practice or the "Do" part which provides students the opportunity to apply new ideas/skills. This "Do" component usually involves role-play and feedback but could also include art, music, games, or story telling/reading with student generated multiple endings.

The ending of each group session includes four tasks. The first task is to review what was covered in the session. The second task is to process/discuss thoughts and feelings participants had during their participation in the session's activities. The third task is to set a goal(s). Students are asked to reflect on what was most meaningful and decide how they would use it next week to help reach their goal. This goal-setting process is considered very important and has four specific subparts: (a) thinking/reflecting and picking out one specific thing they learned or found useful, (b) writing down what they commit to do this next week to put this learning into practice, (c) sharing their goal with a partner and listening to their partner's goal, and (d) volunteers sharing their goal with the entire group. The last task of the ending phase involves the leader previewing what is coming up in the next session.

Format for classroom guidance lessons. The classroom curriculum includes three main topics: (a) cognitive skills, which include memory strategies, goal setting, and progress monitoring; (b) social skills, which include conflict resolution, social problem solving, and team work skills; and c) self-management skills, which include anger management, motivation, and career awareness.

The four-part format for classroom guidance lessons is similar to the format for the small group sessions described above. The first activity involves an introduction and attention getter along with a WIIFM (what's in it for me benefit statement or rationale from the students' point of view to stimu-

late students to care about the topic). This introduction section also includes having the students share what they already know, define topic, and perhaps brainstorm ways to handle a presented problem. Quotes, puppets, visual aides, or other props are often used. Activity two involves presenting and discussing information on the topic to the whole class. Pair sharing is used to increase student involvement. The counselor uses high facilitative responses and other group discussion skills to respond to student comments and to identify common themes and connect student ideas. The third activity includes students applying information in small group discussions. The small group provides time for students to explore the topic further and discuss how they might apply ideas presented. With young children, sharing in pairs may be preferred. As students discuss and apply concepts/skills the counselor moves among the small groups, listening and providing any needed clarification. At the end of this activity, small groups report to the whole class. The fourth and last activity involves individual student summary of the content and personal goal setting.

The classroom guidance goal setting is similar to the group goal setting. Students are asked to reflect upon what they did, what they learned, and how they can use what they learned. Students are asked to identify and share with a partner one way they could use something learned from lesson in their life this week. Volunteers share how they plan to apply lesson with the whole class.

Skills: Group leadership skills. To narrow the variance of group leadership skills used by the participating school counselors, a review of group leadership skills was provided. The review included lecture, discussion, demonstration, and practice with feedback. Peer-coaching was part of the ongoing training and was important in reinforcing effective group leadership skills. Peer-coaching involved small groups of participating counselors (3 to 5), who met for a half day, every other month, and shared video tapes of their group counseling sessions. Usually one group tape and one classroom guidance tape would be shared per meeting. One of the counselors not sharing a tape would facilitate a structured feedback process where the group offered both supportive and corrective feedback to the counselor sharing the tape. Each counselor had a copy of the SSS group format and a list of the targeted group counseling leadership skills to refer to in order to help make feedback concrete and consistent. Verbal and written feedback from each group member was given to each counselor presenting a tape.

Monitoring level of implementation. In order to ensure that the program designed was the program tested, a monitoring system was developed. The system included five components: (a) counselor

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Table 1. ANCOVA Tests of Between-Subjects Effects for FCAT NRT Read 02

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	210152.935	2	105076.468	188.399	.000
Intercept	15539.189	1	15539.189	27.861	.000
FCAT NRT R 01	206224.862	1	206224.862	369.754	.000
Group (Read)	5112.238	1	5112.238	9.166	.003

Note: Computed using alpha = .05, R Squared = .632 (Adjusted R Squared = .629)

Table 2. ANCOVA Tests of Between-Subjects Effects for FCAT NRT Math 02

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	198431.691	2	99215.845	221.364	.000
Intercept	6259.616	1	6259.616	13.966	.000
FCAT NRT M 01	196599.488	1	196599.488	438.641	.000
Group (Math)	7759.687	1	7759.687	17.313	.000

Note: Computed using alpha = .05, R Squared = .669 (Adjusted R Squared = .666)

attendance at training sessions, (b) counselor attendance at peer-coaching sessions, (c) counselor use of prescribed group materials, (d) student attendance at the eight weekly group sessions and the four booster sessions, and (e) counselor conducting at least three classroom guidance lessons on student success skills in each targeted grade level. In order for the data collected to be used, the counselor had to meet standards set for all five of the above criteria. Five out of the six schools did meet the criteria.

RESULTS

One assumption of this study was that, if the school-counselor-led intervention was effective in helping students improve their behavior related to cognitive, social, and self-management skills, then there would be an improvement in student academic achievement. The School Social Behavior Scale (SSBS) was selected because it measured student behavior in the three skill areas identified as critical to school success. A math or reading teacher for each treatment student was asked to complete the SSBS in September and again in April. The combined results for all three levels elementary, middle, and high school showed approximately seven out of every ten treatment students improved behavior between pre-

test in September and post-test in April. The average amount of improvement was 22 percentile points. No comparison data were available on the behavior scale. The assumed connection between improved behavior in these three critical skill areas and improved achievement scores was supported. In math, 82% of these students showed improvement. In reading, 61% showed improvement.

In order to compare the performance between treatment and comparison students on the math and reading FCAT achievement test, a one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted. The ANCOVA indicated a significant difference ($p = .003$) between treatment and comparison students in reading scores (see Table 1) and a significant difference ($p = .000$) in math scores (see Table 2). We calculated means and standard deviations for the FCAT reading (see Table 3) and math scores (see Table 4).

DISCUSSION

The goal of the project was to examine the impact of school-counselor-led interventions on student academic achievement and school success behavior. The results reveal that the combined school counselor interventions of group counseling and classroom

Table 3. Treatment & comparison means & standard deviations for FCAT READ 2002

Group	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
Treatment	97	664.75	44.568
Control	125	656.27	33.322

Table 4. Treatment & comparison means & standard deviations for FCAT MATH 2002

Group	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
Treatment	97	662.46	44.797
Control	125	656.67	28.696

guidance were associated with a positive impact on student achievement and behavior. The facts that the interventions were targeted on specific skills associated with school success and that school counselors used research-based techniques to teach these critical skills were seen as central to the positive outcome of the study.

The original request from a district school counseling coordinator was to help evaluate the impact school counselors made on student academic achievement and behavior. The hope was that such information would encourage the increase in direct counseling services and provide clerical support for counselors to help deal with the growing paper work that frequently keeps them from working with students. This goal has been partially realized. The district has created a new guidance data specialist position to assist with clerical aspects of the job. They have also presented their findings to all school counselors in the district and are beginning to see an increase in other schools in group counseling and classroom guidance related to student success skills. The county has implemented a new guidance plan policy which requires each school to create a yearly plan based upon the new national standards of the American School Counselor Association. Other school districts in the state are asking for information related to the project so they can implement similar student success skills programs and show impact on student academic achievement and behavior.

The implications of this study include the call for more research supporting the impact of school counselor services on student academic achievement and behavior. A series of studies documenting the impact of school-counselor-led interventions is important to supporting the conclusion that school counselors can have a substantial positive effect on student performance. To increase the likelihood of showing positive impact, future studies should ensure that they begin with research-based interventions and ensure school counselors have the necessary training to fully implement the interventions.

The connection between behavior change and achievement is important to document. Studies that include pre-post behavior ratings for both treatment

and comparison students would be helpful. The lack of comparison data on the SSBS in this study was a limitation. Comparing counselor-led treatments with other interventions such as tutoring, mentoring, and intensive reading and math classes would also be helpful. A cost-benefit analysis comparing the impact of school counselor interventions with other interventions is needed and would provide policy makers with data that could be useful in making budget decisions.

It has been the authors experience in working with various school districts that one of the best ways school counselors can win support for their counseling programs is by focusing, at least some of their group and classroom guidance interventions, on student academic and social success and the cognitive, social, and self-management skills that have been associated with student success. A large body of research supports the connection between these skills and student success. In addition, these skills are strongly supported by the national standards for school counselors. A final reason for school counselors to focus on helping students develop these critical skills is that they appeal to decision makers because they are clearly tied to the mission of the schools, which is to improve student academic and social performance.

It is crucial that school counselors measure and report the impact of their services. There is a growing call for data-driven decision making by school district leaders. State and federal funding sources are increasingly requiring that programs that receive resources have a strong research base. As Whiston (2002) cautioned, school counselors who do not provide evidence that the work they do helps students to succeed are at risk of losing support for their programs. School counselors who implement research-based programs, measure their impact on student achievement and behavior, and report their findings have a great opportunity to increase needed prevention and intervention services for all students. ■

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