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### School Counseling Services and Student Academic Success

Sally A. Howe

*The College at Brockport*, showegirl@hotmail.com

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Running head: SCHOOL COUNSELING SERVICES

School Counseling Services and Student Academic Success

Sally A. Howe

The College at Brockport State University of New York

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Abstract

The importance of research in the school counseling field as well as a brief description of school counseling services was presented with attention paid to comprehensive developmental school counseling programs and how they can affect student outcomes. A review of the research literature in individual, small group and large group/classroom guidance counseling was discussed. Data from research done in a middle school on students who received on-going counseling services during the 2007-2008 school year was presented and analyzed as well as compared to the literature found on the subject of counseling and academic achievement. Implications for the counseling profession were discussed as were possible future directions for research.

### Research and School Counseling

This research project was undertaken with the goal of adding to the already existing body of work done around the relationship between school counseling services (Brigman & Campbell, 2003; Brown & Trusty, 2005; Cook & Kaffenberger, 2003; Harris & Franklin, 2003; Litrell, Malia & Vanderwood, 1995; Poynton, Carlson, Hopper, & Carey, 2006; Scheel & Gonzalez, 2007) and the ways in which these services may or may not contribute to student learning and academic achievement. The importance of this research and the connection between school counseling services and academic achievement lies in the fact that the role of the school counselor is often misunderstood as being clerical in nature and that many times school counselors are not allowed to spend a majority of their time to doing what they are trained to do (ASCA, 2003). Many times a school counselor is required to engage in activities that pull him or her away from the intended role of providing counseling services to all students in order to perform other tasks such as clerical record keeping, substituting for teachers who are absent, student scheduling, supervising students and other discipline related duties (ASCA, 2003). Relating counseling services to the academic achievement of students may help alleviate some of this role confusion for school counselors in the future and lead to a clearer role definition not only in schools but in the communities in which the school counselor works, allowing all students adequate access to school counseling services that may help them become successful learners.

The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) stresses the importance of students meeting the learning standards set forth for each grade level and (US Department of Education, 2001). The American School Counselor Association stated clearly that “school



counselors should be partners in student achievement,” and that school counseling programs should be pivotal in the daily education of all students (2003, p. 165). With this in mind, school counselors need to become part of the everyday curriculum of the school, not just an add-on service for those going to college or needing career advice.

Before the data taken in this research is presented and discussed, a review of the literature will be presented. This literature review on the subject will serve to explain the existing research on school counseling services and academic achievement by discussing the following: a brief overview of the school counseling profession, definition of terms used, school counseling services and their delivery models, and the findings of the research studies done on school counseling programs in general and in each of the service delivery models as well.

## Review of the Literature

### *Brief Overview*

The school counseling profession is one in which the academic achievement of all students is the central goal (ASCA, 2005) while focusing on the relations and interactions between students and their environment in order to reduce the effects of environmental and institutional factors that do not allow students to achieve academically (Education Trust, 2009). In order to contribute to the achievement of students and schools, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) (2005) has set forth a framework under which comprehensive school counseling programs should focus on academic achievement by working with students in three domains: academic, career, and personal/social with the goal to “promote the learning process”(p.22). A comprehensive guidance and counseling program is one that is structured and organized in a school

district serving students from kindergarten through high school graduation (Whiston & Aricak, 2008). The ASCA National Model was developed to assist school counselors in creating, implementing and evaluation a comprehensive developmental school counseling program (Whiston & Quinby, 2009). These programs have prevention as the primary focus and are geared toward teaching all students relevant developmental tasks and skills (Aluede, Imonikhe, & Afen-Apaida, 2007).

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 has heightened the focus on accountability and outcomes for all school personnel (U.S. Department of Education, 2001) and it is because of this heightened focus on outcomes that the future of school counseling depends on its ability to contribute to student learning (Erford, House & Martin, 2003; Scheel & Gonzalez, 2007). Comprehensive developmental school counseling programs (CDSCP) have been the vision for all school counseling programs since the 1970s (Gysbers, 2001; Scarborough, 2008), have been shown to be beneficial to students and are currently considered best practice for school counselors (Lapan, Gysbers & Petroski, 2003; Scarborough, 2008). Research has shown that these benefits include a positive effect on student academic achievement, emotional development, career development and school climate (Fitch & Marshall, 2004; Lapan, Gysbers & Sun, 1997; Nelson, Gardner & Fox, 1998; Scarborough, 2008; Sink & Stroh, 2003). Further, studies have also found that school-based interventions can promote positive behavior change as well as lower the incidence of mental health problems in school aged children (Conoley & Conoley, 1991; Richardson, 2001; Tuma, 1989). These findings are important to note as the effectiveness of school counselors is judged in large part by the degree to which they contribute to student learning (Scheel & Gonzalez, 2007). Brown and Trusty (2005),

however, found that there is little support for the idea that comprehensive developmental school counseling programs improve achievement and that most of the studies done have been mainly focused on elementary students (2005). It appears that they concur with Whiston (2002), who stated in a review of the research literature, that there is not enough documentation of the positive effects of school counseling interventions and that in a data driven era, there will be more demands for evidence that demonstrates these positive effects.

In spite of this lack of evidence, there is a sense among many researchers (Brown & Trusty, 2005; Whiston, 2002; Whiston & Quinby, 2009) that school counseling interventions do serve to promote academic success. These interventions are strategic interventions in that they match the needs of the students with the intended outcome of the selected intervention and should be chosen based on empirical evidence (Brown & Trusty, 2005). Strategic interventions can be delivered in several ways, among them as large classroom guidance, small group work and individual counseling (2005).

### *Definitions*

Academic achievement, as a result of the No Child Left Behind Act is largely based on learning standards. These learning standards are benchmarks indicating the knowledge, understanding, and abilities that each student should be able to demonstrate according to their grade level in seven subjects in grades K-12 (New York State Education Department, 2008).

Individual student academic achievement is determined by state assessments in accordance with The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (2002). In the state where this study was done, state assessments are done in math, science and English language arts

each year during the elementary and middle school years. Raw scores are converted to scaled scores which in turn are divided into four different levels (New York State Education Department, 2006). The levels are the same for each of the tests. If, for example, a student earns a level 1, that student is not meeting the learning standard. A level 2 score means the student is partially meeting the learning standard, level 3 indicates that the student is meeting the learning standard and level 4 means that the student is meeting the learning standard with distinction (New York State Education Department, 2006). In these examples, academic achievement means scoring at least a level 3 on the state assessments, or obtaining a level that is considered to be meeting the learning standards.

#### *School Counseling Delivery Models*

The services offered by professional school counselors are varied and can be utilized in a variety of settings and their utilization by students has been shown to improve academic motivation (Scheel & Gonzalez, 2007). There are four components that are emphasized in comprehensive developmental guidance and counseling programs which are; guidance curriculum, individual planning, responsive counseling services, and program management (Aluede, Imonikhe, & Afen-Akpaída, 2007; ASCA, 2005).

The focus for this research study is on individual, small group and classroom counseling services, which are traditional interventions that school counselors use to directly impact students (Clark & Breman, 2009; Gysbers & Henderson, 2006).

Classroom services are delivered through a guidance curriculum that is designed to teach specific skills to students in a large group setting (Goodnough, Perusse, & Erford, 2007) while responsive counseling services are those that are geared toward providing help to

students who are dealing with issues or problems that may affect their academic, career or personal/social development and are generally offered in individual and small group settings (Newsome & Gladding, 2007).

*Individual Counseling.* Individual counseling includes school counselor led services to assist students who face problems that can interfere with their personal, social, academic or career development (ASCA, 2005) and can consist of only one session or several on-going sessions (Newsome & Gladding, 2007; Whiston & Quinby, 2009). These responsive services are delivered in individual counseling settings, generally in a counselor's office or other designated space (Clark & Breman, 2009) and primarily concentrate on students' immediate problems or needs (ASCA, 2005) where a confidential relationship with close emotional contact is developed (Newsome & Gladding, 2007). The focus in individual counseling sessions is on the student concern, and goals are developed to help the student make positive changes with regards coping mechanisms, how the student adapts to the situation of concern, or how the student behaves (Newsome & Gladding, 2007). Individual student planning, which involves assisting students with career exploration, academic and personal and social issues and development (Aluede, Imonikhe, & Afen-Apaida, 2007), can also be considered to be a component of individual counseling services and consists of professional school counselors systemically developing personal goals and future plan development with the student (ASCA, 2005).

Individual counseling services have not been studied extensively, but research literature does exist to support the idea that school counselors who primarily use individual counseling are more effective than those who rely on classroom guidance

activities (Wiggins & Wiggins, 1992). This particular study found that students who received primarily individual counseling services had greater gains in self esteem and decreased need for school counseling help (Wiggins & Wiggins, 1992). While this study did not investigate academic achievement among students who accessed counseling services, it is relevant in that self-esteem is often linked with a student's level of success in school (Wiggins & Wiggins, 1992). Further research on individual counseling and academic achievement will be discussed in more detail in the research findings section to follow.

*Small Group Counseling.* Group counseling has been identified by ASCA as an important direct service which targets the three domains set forth in the framework for comprehensive developmental school counseling programs (ASCA, 2005; Webb & Brigman, 2007) which is effective in meeting the personal/social and academic needs of students (Cook & Kaffenberger, 2003; Steen & Kaffenberger, 2007). Small group counseling interventions may be used with students who are experiencing stressors in their personal lives or have academic concerns (Gladding, 2003; Steen & Bemak, 2008). These small groups allow school counselors to work with students with identified academic and social needs beyond what teachers or counselors can provide in a classroom setting (Webb & Brigman, 2007). Small group settings allow students to acquire new skills and resources to help them not only with their current issues, but may also prevent future problems (Clark & Breman, 2009). Further, when small groups are the backdrop for responsive services, school counselors have the opportunity to work with students in a confidential manner on to assist them in resolving or coping with problems or developmental concerns (Cobia & Henderson, 2007).

*Large Group/Classroom Guidance.* Large group or classroom guidance is delivered through developmentally appropriate lessons that are intended to assist students in developing skill sets and gaining knowledge that will help students achieve guidance competencies found in the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2005). Guidance lessons are included in a curriculum that is organized and takes into account the developmental stage of the students receiving the interventions in order to teach developmentally appropriate skills (Aluede, Imonikhe, & Afen-Apaida, 2007). These interventions are targeted to all students with the end of promoting academic, career and personal/social development (Whiston & Quinby, 2009).

#### *Research Findings*

*Individual Counseling Research.* Individual counseling is often difficult to schedule in the school setting as teachers are reluctant to let students out of class (Clark & Breman, 2009). However, there is some evidence that individual counseling has a positive effect on students facing problems that impact their development (Garza & Bratton, 2005; Littrell, Malia, & Vanderwood, 1995; Wiggins & Wiggins, 1992; Wilson, 1986). This section will discuss in more detail this research.

Wilson (1986), in a review of the literature, found that individual counseling sessions tended to take place at least once a week and would last from 10 minutes to one hour. Length of treatment varied, lasting from five weeks to two and one half years (1986). From the six studies reviewed by Wilson, only two were found to have positive results for students, one of those done by Schmieding (1966). This study, conducted on middle school students who were failing at least one academic course, found that after a mean of 3.7 counseling sessions, students experienced a significant difference in grade

point average (GPA) as well as better relationships with their teachers (Schmieding, 1966). Another study done which was done by McCowan (1968) using 18 low ability, low achieving high school males found that these students experienced an increase in GPA from the first semester to the last semester of the school year as a result of twice weekly 10 minute counseling sessions. This review also found that directive, behavioral approaches tended to yield better results than person-centered interventions (1986).

Another study done on the effects of individual therapy was done by Garza and Bratton (2005). This study focused on a play therapy intervention with Hispanic children in which 30 children were selected to participate based on parent and teacher referral due to behavior problems (Garza & Bratton, 2005). Random assignment placed 15 children in the group to receive 30 minute play therapy sessions once per week for 15 weeks while the other 15 children participated in small group therapy sessions for the same amount of time (2005). Garza and Bratton found, as a result of this study, that there was a significant reduction in the problem behaviors exhibited by the children in the play therapy group as opposed to those students in the comparison group (2005). While these findings are not directly related to academic achievement, it can be inferred that lowering rates of problem behaviors will have a positive impact on academic success. These results are also not stating that there is no validity to the value of small group counseling, only that, in this instance, the play therapy group demonstrated greater gains. Small group counseling interventions and the effects on students are discussed in the following section.

*Small Group Work Research.* Small group counseling is a treatment modality often employed by school counselors (Gladding, 2003). The research literature on this



model is at times conflicting, with some finding that small group work does have an effect on academic achievement while others have not found evidence to support this notion. Steen and Bemak (2008) studied a group counseling intervention with high school students who were at risk of failing. The premise of this intervention was to provide these students with a stable environment with which to recognize the universality of their experiences. This study involved a group of nine ninth graders, five male and four female, of various ethnic and racial backgrounds. These students participated in 10 sessions of the supportive counseling group with one professional school counselor and one male University professor with the students choosing the topics. What Steen and Bemak (2008) found was that in this particular study, although the students themselves believed participation in this group had a positive effect on their grades, the reality was that there was no statistically significant difference in the GPAs of the treatment and the control groups. This study would be hard to apply broadly given the small sample size and the lack of controlling for variables between the two student groups and thus can not be considered to be definitive research into the effectiveness of school counseling groups on academic achievement.

Other studies done on small group counseling interventions have shown that those targeted to academic improvement may have the desired effect (Harris & Franklin, 2003; Steen & Kaffenberger, 2007). Steen and Kaffenberger's (2007) research involved a small group intervention for 24 elementary students in third, fourth and fifth grades targeting academic and personal/social concerns. The results of this study suggest that the students did benefit from the group counseling sessions, as evidenced in the improvement in letter

grades by 60% of the fourth and fifth graders (2007). Teacher feedback to the school counselor was positive regarding the program and benefits to students (2007).

Harris and Franklin (2003) found similar evidence to show that small group counseling interventions can have positive effects for student clients. Their study focused on parenting and pregnant Mexican American adolescents. Cognitive-behavioral groups were run with 73 participants using the “Taking Charge” curriculum, which is an eight week, task-centered intervention specifically targeted toward adolescent Mexican American mothers to assist in their improvement of social problem solving skills, effective coping skills and school success (Harris & Franklin, 2003). Found in this study was evidence that as a result of this intervention, the participants had statistical improvements over the control group particularly in the area of school attendance and grades. The researchers owe the success of this program to the fact that it was “clearly relevant to the developmental needs and current issues of young mothers in the study” (p.81).

Solution Shop is a counseling and study skills program that was studied by Cook and Kaffenberger (2003). This program targets the under-achievement of students of color and students who are economically disadvantaged (Cook & Kaffenberger, 2003). Students were chosen to receive this service if they had two or more failing grades. Ten students met with the school counselor for one period per day throughout a semester and developed academic and personal goals. Individualized tutoring is also a part of this program, which may have had an influence on the results which were positive for a majority of the students (2003). Out of the 35 students who participated in the program, 57% had a higher GPA than when the program began, and among teachers and

administrators, there was a perception that 75% of the students had benefitted from the program (2003).

*Large Group/Classroom Guidance Research.* Much of the research on classroom guidance has been done in elementary schools (40% of those evaluated by Whiston & Quinby, as opposed to 26% of middle school, 26% of high school and 7% a combination of students and parents) (2009). Even though this is the case, Whiston and Quinby found greater benefits from classroom guidance activities for middle and high school students than for elementary students (2009). There is support for school counselor led classroom guidance activities as found in a study done by Schlossberg, Morris and Lieberman (2001). This study concluded that ninth grade students demonstrated improvement in their behavior and school attitudes as a result of receiving six developmental guidance lessons whose topics were based on results from an earlier conducted needs assessment (Schlossberg, Morris & Lieberman, 2001).

Another program that shows promise in having positive effects on student achievements according to Whiston and Quinby (2009) is the Student Success Skills program. This program has been systematically evaluated various times with similar results (Brigman & Campbell, 2003; Brigman, Webb, & Campbell, 2007; Campbell & Brigman, 2005; Miranda, et al., 2007; Webb & Brigman, 2007; Webb, et al., 2005). This particular curriculum was developed to work with students in grades 4 through 10 and consists of eight weekly sessions lasting 45 minutes each. After the weekly sessions have terminated, four monthly “booster” sessions are given (Webb & Brigman, 2007). The foci of these sessions include two of the three domains listed in the ASCA National Model: academic and personal/social (Campbell & Brigman, 2005). To measure the

effectiveness of this intervention in all of the studies the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (FCAT) for math and reading and a teacher rated behavioral scale. In the 2003 study, students in grades 5, 6, 8 & 9 were shown to have significant gains in the skills targeted by the Student Success Skills intervention (Brigman & Campbell, 2003). Both of the studies conducted in 2005 had similar results. Campbell and Brigman (2005) found that the students participating in the intervention had significantly higher scores in the math and reading assessments than those students who were in the comparison group. These same researchers found that 69% of the students also showed improvement in the areas of academic, social and self-management behaviors (2005). The other study conducted in 2005 found that 85% of students who received the intervention improved their math scores by an average of 27 points while 73% of the students in the treatment group improved by an average of 11 points (Webb, et al., 2005). Reading scores were also improved upon with 75% of students in the treatment group improving their reading scores by an average of 26 points, while the behavioral improvements were found in 72% of the students (Webb, et al., 2005).

In 2007, more studies were done on this same guidance intervention, again looking at math and reading scores as well as targeted behaviors (Brigman, Webb, & Campbell, 2007). Implementing the same curriculum as in 2005, the authors found that among the participants there were significant gains in math and reading scores although the reading gains were not as high as in the previous studies (2007). Improvements in behavior were similar to the previous results (2007). In order to make the research on this program more broadly applicable, data from these previous studies was analyzed to evaluate how effective the program is in improving academic performance among

African American and Latino students (Miranda, et al., 2007). What the researchers found was that the guidance curriculum for Student Success Skills appears to improve math and reading scores regardless of ethnicity (2007).

Career Targets is a career counseling program for middle school students to use to explore careers in conjunction with high school planning (Legum & Hoare, 2004). This program was studied with 62 middle school students who were at-risk of failing the academic year (2004). Of these students, 30 were randomly assigned to the control group, 32 were randomly assigned to the experimental group, five of which dropped out due to absenteeism. Students who were assigned to the experimental group participated in career exploration activities, as well as lessons in interview techniques, job application process and resume strategies (2004). Measurements were used to find out if the intervention had an effect on student self-esteem, career awareness and academic achievement (2004). While no statistically significant gains were found in the self-esteem area, twice as many students in the experimental group showed gains in career awareness and while the mean GPA among the group raised only 1/10 of a point, this is in contrast to a marginal decrease in GPA for the control group (2004).

While many structured classroom guidance programs focus on career awareness and study skills, conflict resolution is another area that school counselors focus on in classroom guidance lessons (Poynton, et al., 2006). A study done with 115 middle school students focused on problem solving (2006). These students received 18 classroom guidance lessons on conflict resolution and how to apply that to other areas (2006).

While this intervention was not found to effect significant changes on achievement test

scores, an impact was noted in student confidence in logical and problem solving skills (2004).

It has been a challenge for school counselors to show, as a profession, that interventions used with students influence academic performance (Scheel & Gonzalez, 2007). Currently school counseling research literature is lacking in well controlled studies of intervention outcomes (Whiston & Sexton, 1998) which Whiston and Arica found is a difficult task to accomplish because of a lack of reliable measurements for counseling interventions (2008). The research that does exist seems to show support for school counseling interventions (Borders & Drury, 1992; Whiston & Aricak, 2008), even though the number of these studies is limited (Whiston, 2007). In producing evidence that school counseling services do impact student academic achievement, school counselors will reap many benefits. Among these benefits are a better ability to explain the school counselor's role in the learning process, as well as a better ability to do provide counseling interventions as teachers will allow students time out of class to access services (Scheel & Gonzalez, 2007.) With ever increasing high school drop out rates it is important to identify what works, benefiting society as a whole and again helping school counselors as professionals strengthen their role in the learning process (Scheel & Gonzalez, 2007).

## Method

### *Setting and Demographic Information*

This study was done at a rural middle school located in the Northeastern United States. The total population of the district during the target school year for this study was 2,615. Of these students, 96% were white, 2% black or African American, 1% Hispanic

or Latino, and 1% Asian or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander. Limited English Proficient (LEP) students made up less than 1% of the population with 9 students falling into this category. Eligibility for free and reduced lunch totaled 21% of the population, with 13% qualifying for free lunch and 8% for reduced price lunch. The district is considered to be in good standing, meaning that it has not been identified as a District in Need of Improvement or a District Requiring Academic Progress (New York State Education Department, 2009).

### *Participants*

Participants for this study included only those students who received ongoing (meaning more than six sessions) of counseling services, whether group or individual, provided by their school counselor during the 2007-2008 school year. Three lists of students, one for each grade level, were provided to the researcher by the school counselors in the middle school where the research was conducted. The sixth grade list identified 9 students, the 7<sup>th</sup> grade list identified 34 and the 8<sup>th</sup> grade list included 42 students for a school-wide total of 85 students. These students and their parents were then sent informed consent letters, detailing the nature of the study as well as outlining how the information on the students would be kept confidential. Signed informed consent letters from both parents and students were then sent back to the researcher from 14 eligible subjects. Of those informed consent letters that were sent back with signatures, three were from 8<sup>th</sup> grade students and their parents, seven were from 7<sup>th</sup> grade students and their parents and four were from 6<sup>th</sup> grade students and their parents. Of the three 8<sup>th</sup> grade participants, one was male while two were female, of the seven 7<sup>th</sup> grade participants two were male and five were female, and of the 6<sup>th</sup> grade participants

two were male and two were female. Overall, males composed 36% of the group while females made up 64% of the group studied.

### *Procedure*

For these fourteen students, grades from ELA, math, science and social studies courses were averaged for the first and fourth quarters. Individual grades from each of these courses in the first and fourth quarters were also analyzed for gains or declines. Raw scores from the math and ELA state assessments were converted to the appropriate level from a chart on the New York State Department of Education website.

### *Instrument*

Student quarterly grades and state assessment test scores were compiled using the school district's database. Only core courses were looked at in this study, which include English Language Arts (ELA), math, science, and social studies, while other courses, such as band, art and technology education were not included for this study. These numerical grades were then averaged for the 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> quarters of the academic year to allow for comparison of each individual student's average at the beginning of the year with the average they earned at the end of the year.

The test scores that were compiled were the New York State Math and ELA assessments that are given every year in grades k-8. Only scores given for the 2007-2008 academic year were used. Test scores were given in scaled scores and using the conversion chart on the New York State Education Department's website, were converted to level scores. This was done with the end of determining whether the students achieved the minimum standards set by the state in each of the two subjects.



## Results

Each student is listed by a number assigned for this study in order to preserve confidentiality and prohibit identification of individual students. Further, grade and gender is indicated for each student in order to analyze the relationship or lack thereof between these two variables. In Table 1 each average for the beginning of the school year (1<sup>st</sup> quarter) and the end of the school year (4<sup>th</sup> quarter) is listed, followed by the point difference between the two averages indicated whether there was a rise, drop, or no change in average from the beginning to the end of the school year.

Table 2 demonstrates how each student performed on both the ELA and math assessments for the 2007-2008 school year with an asterisk next to the scores that indicate that the particular student did not meet the minimum standards for the assessment in that subject. Students are listed by number only, using the same number for the same student in both tables.

Table 1

*Comparison of 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter Averages of Core Courses*

<u>Student</u>	<u>Grade</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>1<sup>st</sup> Q Average</u>	<u>4<sup>th</sup> Q Average</u>	<u>Difference</u>
1	6 <sup>th</sup>	Male	90	93	+3
2	6 <sup>th</sup>	Male	70	76	+6
3	6 <sup>th</sup>	Female	84	86	+2
4	6 <sup>th</sup>	Female	84	78	-6
5	7 <sup>th</sup>	Female	72	72	0
6	7 <sup>th</sup>	Female	70	67	-3

7	7 <sup>th</sup>	Male	70	65	-5
8	7 <sup>th</sup>	Female	96	93	-3
9	7 <sup>th</sup>	Male	84	79	-5
10	7 <sup>th</sup>	Female	77	76	-1
11	7 <sup>th</sup>	Female	80	82	+2
12	8 <sup>th</sup>	Male	73	67	-5
13	8 <sup>th</sup>	Female	81	79	-2
14	8 <sup>th</sup>	Female	90	92	+2

Table 2

*Levels Achieved on New York State Assessments*

<u>Student</u>	<u>ELA State Assessment Level</u>	<u>Math State Assessment Level</u>
1	3	4
2	3	3
3	3	2*
4	3	3
5	3	3
6	2*	3
7	3	4
8	3	4
9	4	4
10	3	3
11	3	3

12	3	3
13	3	3
14	3	3

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\*Indicates the student is only partially meeting the state minimum standards for that subject.

### Discussion

The results of this study were mixed, with some students raising their grades throughout the year and others experiencing lower grades from the first to the fourth quarter. The total percentage of those raising their grades was 36% while those whose grades decreased totaled 57%. Only one student (7%) in the study saw no change in grade average. While 75% of the 6<sup>th</sup> grade students raised his or her grades, all but one of the 7<sup>th</sup> graders (student 11) experienced a drop in grades overall from the first to the fourth quarter. One-third of the eighth grade students decreased in grade point average and only one 8<sup>th</sup> grade student (student 14) increased her average from the 1<sup>st</sup> quarter to the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter. None of the students had an average below 70% for the 1<sup>st</sup> quarter, but by the end of the school year three students (21%) had an average below 70%, indicating that these particular students were not successful in the classroom environment. Factors that may have contributed to this include the progressive nature of the course and the fact that these courses get more difficult throughout the school year.

Female students made up more than half of the group but only two of them were found to have raised their average by the end of the year. Average point increase for these two students was 2, while those females who decreased did so by an average of 2.83 points. Of the five males in the study, only two of them saw an increase in grades from

the beginning to the end of the school year. The average point increase for males was 4.5 while those who decreased did so by 5 points each.

The greatest drop in average was from a 6<sup>th</sup> grade girl who dropped six points from the first quarter to the fourth, and it was a 6<sup>th</sup> grade male who made the biggest gain in average, which also was six points. The average increase was approximately 3 points while the average decrease was also approximately 3 points. One student (student 5) showed neither an increase nor a decrease in average. All of the students ended with a final average that allowed them to be promoted to the next grade for the following academic year.

Only one student, a 6<sup>th</sup> grade female (student 3), did not meet the standards on the state math assessment. However, looking at her grades for the core courses would indicate that she is successful academically as her 1<sup>st</sup> quarter average for the four courses selected for the study was 84% and the fourth quarter average was 86%. Nine students scored a level 3, meaning that they were meeting the standards set by the state for math while four students scored a level 4, exceeding the minimum standards set forth by the state. Of these four students, one (student 7) ended the year with a 65% average in the four core courses, seemingly in contrast with scoring a level 3 on the ELA assessment and a level 4 on the math. A seventh grade female (student 6) did not meet the standards for the state ELA assessment but scored a level 3 on the math assessment thereby meeting the minimum standards for that subject. This same student's grade average (67% for the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter) would indicate that she is not successful in her course work. A total of 12 students met the standards and one 7<sup>th</sup> grade male (student 9) exceeded the standards

for ELA. There were no students in this study who scored below a level 3 on both assessments.

Due to the fact that this study does not indicate which students received group counseling or individual counseling, it is difficult to relate these findings with those from past research. If the students who did not raise their grades or achieve the standards on the state assessments received small group counseling, this study would concur with the results of Steen & Bemak (2008) in that the group intervention did have a positive effect on achievement. Perhaps those that did receive group counseling could have benefitted from an intervention targeting study skills as these types of interventions were found to have a positive effect on achievement by Harris & Franklin (2003) and Steen & Kaffenberger (2007).

For those students who received individual counseling services, these results seem to conflict with what was found by McCowan (1968), Schmieding (1966), and Wilson (1986) in that there is no positive link between grades and individual counseling. With that being said, the interventions used in these studies were more intense and were done during a time when there may not have been the problem of teacher reluctance to let students out of class to receive counseling services (Clark & Breman, 2009). Also, it cannot be known from this study what other benefits these students may have gained from individual or group counseling that may not be immediately reflected in their grades but that may show up in another way, such as behavior or self-esteem improvement, ultimately affecting their school performance at some future time (Garza & Bratton, 2005; Littrell, Malia, & Vanderwood, 1995; Wiggins & Wiggins, 1992; Wilson, 1986).

*Limitations*

This study has many limitations that prevent it from being seen as definitive on the subject of counseling and academic achievement. The most obvious of these limitations is the lack of controls for the many variables that affect student achievement. The fact that students have lives outside of the school building was not and most likely cannot be controlled. It is not known how many of these students had personal or social issues that may be beyond the scope of weekly counseling sessions, such as dysfunction in the home, lack of appropriate resources to complete school work or even pay attention in the learning environment. Also, there was not control for gender, ethnicity, or socio-economic status, which are known to contribute to an achievement gap among students of all ages.

Another limitation is that the type of counseling each student received is not known. Due to confidentiality, the researcher could not know the topic of the counseling sessions, therefore making it impossible to take into account the problems faced by the student or the intervention used by the school counselor. The fact that some of the students in the study received mandated counseling as per their individualized education plan (IEP) also means that some of the students are classified in special education, making achievement a more difficult task for them.

*Implications for Counseling Practice*

Counselors need to continue to call for studies done to show how they can contribute to student success, especially in a climate of school reform that calls for all school personnel to focus on achievement. Well controlled, scientific studies based on sound research methods are called for under the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) and as

such, that is what the school counseling profession needs to produce should it expect to be seen as a necessary, vital service for students.

### *Implications for Future Research*

As a result of this study, several implications for future research emerge. While a number of the students received mandated counseling as part of their IEP, the only data analyzed was the grades these students received. In future research, it might be useful to study whether or not counseling helps the student reach his or her IEP goals and why that may or may not be the case. Further study on how the school counselor's theoretical orientation impacts attainment of counseling goals or the student's personal goals may also be helpful for the school counselor in planning interventions with all students. Given that none of these students were failing a school year based on grade average, it may be necessary and appropriate to do a well controlled qualitative study on students who are currently failing or at risk of failure and how counseling may or may not impact the success of those students due to the fact that schools are coming under increasing pressure to prevent student failure and lower student drop-out rates. Because of the high stakes testing taking place in schools another issue that arises that may warrant research is how pulling students out for counseling services affects performance on these tests and also how teacher reluctance to allow students to leave class to receive counseling services impacts student development and learning. All of these issues revolve around the academic achievement of students and therefore merit study in an age of increased attention to school success for all students.

### Conclusion

Counselors are in a special position in that they can work with students on the various issues faced by students that may impede their education. School counselors have a repertoire of skills to help students with mental health issues, family and social problems as well as career exploration and course planning to make school relevant to each learner. Not all studies show that students achieve standards because of counseling, but there seems to be general agreement that counselors do make a difference for the better in the lives of the students that they work with. The challenge is to show this value to administrators and the community as a whole so that the work that school counselors do with and on behalf of students can continue.



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