Leslie Luck, M.Ed., is a professional school counselor in Duval County, FL. E-mail: luck@duvalschools.org

Linda Webb, Ph.D., is an associate professor in the department of counselor education at Florida Atlantic University.

School Counselor Action Research: A Case Example

Achievement outcomes for students participating in a school counselor-led Student Success Skills intervention were investigated. Students in Grades 4 and 5 in a single school participated in the action research. Achievement outcomes were measured using the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test. Students who participated in the intervention showed greater mean improvement in reading and math scores than students at the district or state levels. The authors describe how sharing improved student outcomes led to a decrease in duties assigned to the school counselor unrelated to facilitating the school counseling program and a greater appreciation and respect for contributions of the school counselor.

In today’s climate of accountability in education and emphasis on data-driven decision making, school counselors are being pressured to show how they contribute to improved academic achievement outcomes for students. This climate underscores the importance for school counseling practice to be grounded in research and is reflected in the ASCA National Model® (American School Counselor Association, 2005). In addition, there are resources that support practicing school counselors as they move to this type of data-driven model. These resources help school counselors better understand the importance of moving to evidence-based programs, how to choose interventions to support their school’s counseling programs, and how to collect and use data to show how they are making a difference related to student outcomes (Dimmitt, Carey, & Hatch, 2007; Stone & Dahir, 2007).

Leaders in one school district chose to respond to this need by providing training for school counselors to implement an evidence-based program, Student Success Skills (SSS), as part of the school counseling program. School counselors were trained to implement the classroom and group components of SSS. In addition, the training included a framework for collecting data at the school level to provide evidence that school counselors do contribute to improved academic achievement outcomes for students. After participating in the training sessions in 2005, the first author has been implementing SSS and collecting data over the past 3 years.

STUDENT SUCCESS SKILLS

The SSS intervention was chosen by district administrators because the program had research to support its development (Hattie, Biggs, & Purdie, 1996; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004) and four randomized comparison group studies to support program efficacy in improving student academic achievement (Brigman & Campbell, 2003; Brigman, Webb, & Campbell, 2007; Campbell & Brigman, 2005; Webb, Brigman, & Campbell, 2005). In each of these studies, the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), the statewide standardized test given to students each spring, was used as the primary outcome measure. FCAT as an outcome measure in these previous studies created particular interest in using SSS. Another reason this program was chosen by district administrators was that SSS aligned closely with academic and personal/social domains as outlined in the ASCA National Model (2005) as well as with the district’s vision for school counselors.

SSS has a classroom component followed by a group counseling component for students needing additional support. The classroom component (Brigman & Webb, 2007) consists of five classroom lessons to introduce key skills and strategies in five areas: (a) goal setting and progress monitoring; (b) building a caring, supportive climate; (c) cognitive and memory skills; (d) managing stress and text anxiety; and (e) building healthy optimism. The group counseling component (Brigman, Campbell, & Webb, 2004) was designed for students who received the classroom intervention but needed additional support. The group sessions focus on reinforcing the skills and strategies learned in the classroom. In addition, a social problem-solving peer coaching model is introduced as a new component.
Table 1. FCAT Developmental Scale Score Mean Change from 2005 to 2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>% Improved</th>
<th>DSS Mean Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SSS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = Number of students who participated in the SSS classroom lessons and at least five of the SSS small-group sessions.

Table 2. FCAT Developmental Scale Score Mean Change from 2006 to 2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>% Improved</th>
<th>DSS Mean Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SSS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = Number of students who participated in the SSS classroom lessons and at least five of the SSS small-group sessions.

The purpose of the action research was twofold: (a) to evaluate the effectiveness of the SSS intervention in improving academic outcomes for students in Grades 4 and 5, and (b) to collect data that could be shared with teachers and administrators to support the importance of the role of the school counselor. Even though school counselors know that addressing social and self-management skills contributes to improved academic outcomes, they rarely have school-based outcome data to support the effectiveness of this type of intervention.

METHOD

Participants
Students participating in the SSS classroom intervention were in fourth- and fifth-grade classrooms in a rural school in Duval County, FL, serving approximately 760 students in grades K-5. The ethnic makeup of the school was 79% White, 12% Black, 3% Hispanic, 3% multiracial, 2% Asian, and 1% Indian (www.duvalschools.org/whitehouse).

Procedures
The SSS skills and strategies were introduced at the beginning of the school year in five weekly classroom lessons followed by monthly classroom booster lessons that led up to FCAT testing in the spring. Once the five classroom lessons were complete, students, who scored at the lowest levels on the previous year’s achievement tests, were identified by teachers for potential participation in the SSS group counseling intervention. Students were screened by the school counselor who noted exceptionalities, behavior, and needs related to study habits to ensure the formation of well-balanced groups. The screening process also allowed the counselor to check students’ level of commitment to participating in the SSS group intervention. The group sessions were facilitated in November and December. At the end of the eight group sessions, monthly booster group sessions were held up until FCAT testing began in the spring. Tables 1, 2, and 3 include the number of students who participated in the group sessions each year beginning 2005-2006. Over the 3 years, group size generally ranged from 5 to 7 students per group.

An Excel spreadsheet was provided as part of the school counselor training for SSS. Categories included on the spreadsheet were student number, grade, race, male/female, number of classroom sessions.
Table 3. FCAT Developmental Scale Score Mean Change from 2007 to 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>% Improved</th>
<th>DSS Mean Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SSS</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>166</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. N = Number of students who participated in the SSS classroom lessons and at least five of the SSS small-group sessions.*

Over the past 3 years, achievement test data from students who participated in Student Success Skills have led to increased support for the school counseling program. Over the past 3 years, achievement test data from students who participated in SSS small-group sessions. The percentage of students who improved their achievement scores is included. The DSS mean change in reading and math for students who participated in the SSS classroom and group interventions is compared to the DSS mean change for students at the district and state levels. As previously noted, scale scores are converted to DSS to allow the tracking of student progress over time and across grade levels. Students who participated in SSS consistently made greater improvements when compared to district and state averages.

RESULTS

The focus of the action research was the impact of SSS on standardized test scores for students in Grades 4 and 5. The school counselor compared the average change from the previous year in reading and math FCAT DSS for fourth- and fifth-grade students who participated in the SSS classroom and group interventions to the average change for fourth- and fifth-grade students in the district statewide. Tables 1, 2, and 3 show the results of 3 years of data for students who participated in the SSS classroom lessons and at least five of the SSS small-group sessions. The percentage of students who improved their achievement scores is included. The DSS mean change in reading and math for students who participated in the SSS classroom and group interventions is compared to the DSS mean change for students at the district and state levels. As previously noted, scale scores are converted to DSS to allow the tracking of student progress over time and across grade levels. Students who participated in SSS consistently made greater improvements when compared to district and state averages.

DISCUSSION

After training was received to facilitate the SSS intervention, an overview of the SSS program was shared with administrators at the school level. An overview also was shared at a faculty meeting as was suggested in the training session. The first year, the faculty was willing but not overly enthusiastic to allow the school counselor to facilitate SSS in their classrooms. Teachers were asked to stay in the classroom as lessons were facilitated so they could reinforce the concepts. Posters that reflected key SSS concepts were left in the classrooms. At the beginning of the next school year, FCAT improvements were shared with the administration and faculty. After the year-one results were shared, teachers applauded the program and became increasingly enthusiastic about counselor time in their classrooms. Students also shared their enthusiasm for the counselor to come back to their classrooms.

Over the past 3 years, achievement test data from students who participated in SSS have led to increased support for the school counseling program. While the school has been considered an “A” school for the past 6 years, it has become more challenging to meet the standards for Adequate Yearly
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number and percentage of students who improved</th>
<th>Reading SSS Level</th>
<th>Reading DSS Scale Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Average amount of change (total number of DSS points / number of students)

Figure 1. A sample summary grid. (Note: A separate summary grid is completed for each grade level and subject. The mean change at each grade level is then compared to the mean change for students at the district and state levels, as seen in Tables 1, 2, and 3.)

Progress (AYP) as required by the No Child Left Behind legislation (U.S. Department of Education, 2001) due to geographic boundary changes. The changes resulted in the school losing many middle-income families and gaining many lower-socioeconomic-status families. The faculty is confident that the SSS intervention has helped the school to maintain AYP by providing important skills to these students. Even though there are many interventions taking place at the school aimed at improving student achievement, the four previously published SSS comparison group studies (Brigman & Campbell, 2003; Brigman et al., 2007; Campbell & Brigman, 2005; Webb et al., 2005) provide support to suggest that the SSS school counselor-led intervention was a contributing factor in helping students succeed.

Scarborough and Culbreth (2008) have suggested that being able to have a positive impact on student outcomes through the facilitation of evidence-based programs is likely to improve school counselors’ belief that they can affect specific outcomes related to achievement. The study also suggests that this belief leads to an increase in the likelihood that school counselors will be engaged in activities considered central to a developmental school counseling program versus unrelated activities. One result can be increased support from administrators and teachers for the implementation of a balanced developmental school counseling program.

In the present study, sharing data at the school level also has led to a decrease in “assigned” duties unrelated to school counseling. After the first year of implementing SSS, administrators became very protective of the school counselor’s time. The school counselor no longer coordinates the schoolwide standardized testing program. The school counselor’s goal with standardized testing is to help students become more effective learners through SSS skills and strategies and to help them manage anxiety associated with tests. The school counselor also was acting as the Exceptional Student Education coordinator but that assignment has been given to another faculty member. The school counselor is no longer assigned lunchroom or bus duty. These administrative changes were supported by faculty as counselor time in classrooms, facilitating groups, and other school counseling-related activities is more respected. The administration and staff at school are totally supportive of SSS and believe the school counseling program is contributing to the success of students.

In the future, it would be beneficial to examine outcomes for students who participate in the SSS classroom intervention even if they do not receive the group counseling component. Classroom data would provide additional evidence of the positive impact that school counselors can have with large groups of students.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL COUNSELORS**

School counselors may consider the following strategies to support the implementation of their school counseling programs. These emerged as a result of using an evidence-based program and collecting data:

1. Seek leadership opportunities in your school and tie your work to the vision and mission of your school. Most school districts require some type of leadership team. These teams usually drive decisions regarding the best programs and interventions to support student learning. Membership on leadership teams creates an opportunity for school counselors to educate stakeholders about the school counseling program and evidence-based programs that they are trained to deliver.
2. Identify and become trained to implement programs that have evidence of effectiveness. Provide...
an overview of programs you are trained to deliver, including research that supports the program’s effectiveness, to administration and teachers.

3. Plan your time. Share your plan with the administration and make it visible to teachers. When school counselors can post a “Week at a Glance,” others can see how school counselors plan to contribute. This is likely to decrease daily requests for school counselors to pick up duties or tasks unrelated to their program.

4. Plan to measure outcomes for students you serve. It’s not enough to evaluate your program based on how many students you served. The question has become, what outcomes are improved as a result of your intervention?

5. Set yourself up for success. When you are planning to measure outcomes, track student attendance during the school counselor intervention. If a student does not receive the full intervention, outcomes may be affected.

6. Share outcomes with key stakeholders including teachers and parents. Teachers welcome school counselor involvement in their classroom when they have evidence that you can help them get the most from students. Parents are more likely to give permission for students to participate in group counseling sessions when they are aware of improvements that occur as a result of participation.

7. Be optimistic. Network, encourage, and share successful practices with other school counselors.

CONCLUSION

As school counselors, it is critical to be a leader, to be optimistic, and to take every opportunity to show how school counselors can make a difference in the performance of students in a school. When counselors are seen as contributing to the central mission of the school—improved academic achievement for students—they are valued and their time is respected. Action research is a critical tool for school counselors in the 21st century that leads to this end.

References


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