

Selected Segments from a Research Brief

Excerpt from a research brief by Dr. Jay Carey and Karen Harrington, Center for School Counseling Outcome Research & Evaluation at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.
The impact of school counseling on student educational outcomes in high schools: What can we learn about effectiveness from statewide evaluations of school counseling practice in Nebraska and Utah?

Results

While the findings are intricate and complex, the Nebraska and Utah studies provide clear and consistent evidence of four important sets of results:

(1) School Counseling in high schools contributes to important educational student outcomes.

Across the two states, school counseling was shown to be related to a range of important student outcomes including increased Math proficiency levels, increased Reading proficiency levels, lower suspension rates, lower disciplinary rates, increased attendance rates, higher graduation rates, higher Perkins program completion rates, greater percentages of students taking the ACT and higher average ACT scores. These results show clearly that after schools are equated for differences in student outcomes due to demographic factors, school counseling adds value to the education of students and enhances their engagement and performance.

(2) Student-to-counselor ratios in high schools matter.

In both states, the ratio of students-to-counselors in a school was strongly related to its student outcomes. In Nebraska more favorable ratios were associated with improved attendance rates, enhanced technical proficiency in Perkins programs, and increased completion rates in Perkins programs. Similarly, in Utah more favorable ratios were associated with both increased attendance rates and decreased discipline incident rates. These associations are robust. In Utah, for example, the student-to-counselor ratio accounted for an additional 12% of the variability in the attendance rate after controlling for demographic differences among schools. In order for a school counseling program to be effective there must be a sufficient number of counselors to address student needs.

(3) How the School Counseling Program is Organized Matters.

The results from Utah, which has been implementing the Comprehensive Developmental Guidance model for over 25 years, indicate that the longer a school has been implementing this model, the better are its educational outcomes. Results from both Utah and Nebraska indicate that organizing the school counseling program according to ASCA National Model

principles has positive effects on student outcomes. In Utah, National Model management practices appear somewhat more important than other factors. For example, the Program subscale of the SCPIS accounted for 11% of the variability in average ACT scores after controlling for demographic differences among schools. In Nebraska, Delivery System practices were found to be more important than management practices. The Delivery System subscale of the SCPIS proved to account for an additional 6% of the variability in mathematics proficiency and an additional 3% of the variability in reading proficiency after controlling for demographic differences among schools. In sum, these results suggest that more strongly organized programs are better able to produce positive outcomes with students.

4) What Counselors Choose to Do Matters.

Finally, these studies produced some very intriguing results that need to be examined across other states. Both the Nebraska and Utah results indicate that career development focused interventions seem to be particularly important in producing positive academic outcomes with students. In both states, items that reflect a strong career development component of the school counseling program (e.g., career goals are used to construct student schedules) were positively related to a wide range of beneficial student outcomes including improved attendance, lower disciplinary rates, higher Perkins program completion rates, and increased scores on state achievement tests. Hopefully, in the near future CSCORE will be able to provide additional research-based guidance on which school counseling activities are most effective in terms of being most strongly associated with specific positive student outcomes.

Implications

In the next few months, CSCORE will complete the analyses with the remaining three states and will disseminate the results from all of the statewide studies. In addition, we will be rescaling the outcome measures from the three states with the most similar data matrices (i.e., Missouri, Nebraska and Utah) so that they can be analyzed together. We expect these results to help clearly establish the positive impact of school counseling and to provide guidance for how school counseling can be made even more effective.

We also hope that these studies will pave the way for a comprehensive national policy study of school counseling effectiveness that is needed to guide and support effective practice. Such a large-scale study to identify effective practices will be costly and will therefore need the support of either private foundations or the federal government.

Meanwhile, we can conclude that if a high school wants to improve its educational outcomes, school leaders should: hire enough counselors to satisfy the needs of students and parents; support the counselors as they establish a well organized program that serves all students, and; support the counselors as they focus on implementing more effective interventions and discontinuing ineffective interventions.