

Micki M. Caskey, Ph.D., Editor
Portland State University
Portland, Oregon

2009 • Volume 33 • Number 1

ISSN 1940-4476

Supporting Academic Improvement among Eighth Graders at Risk for Retention: An Action Research Intervention

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Abstract

Recent changes in the field of school counseling have called for professional school counselors to provide evidence of the effect their work has on the academic success of their students. This article presents the findings of a multi faceted action research intervention designed to help students at risk for retention. Findings indicate that students participating in the intervention did improve their grades. Implications for school counselors wanting to lead such programs are discussed.

Background

Professional school counseling has undergone dramatic transformation in the early years of the 21st century in response to a general call for accountability in education (Baker & Gerler, 2007;

House & Hayes, 2002) and specific legislative action (e.g., No Child Left Behind Act of 2001). Through a variety of professional initiatives (American School Counselor Association, 2003; Campbell & Dahir, 1997; The Education Trust, 1996), leaders in the field of school counseling are attempting to answer the call for increased accountability for the work school counselors do. In spite of these efforts, scholars agree there needs to be more empirical research demonstrating the relationship between school counseling interventions and student achievement (Brigman & Campbell, 2003; Dahir, 2004; Otwell & Mullis, 1997; Paisley & Hayes, 2003; Rowell, 2005, 2006; Whiston, 2002). Large-scale experimental and quasi-experimental studies are necessary to add to the body of knowledge outlining effective strategies and best practices and to provide data to support

the professional and educational value of school counselors (Gerler, 1992). However it is perhaps more important than ever for practicing school counselors to contribute to this knowledge base by evaluating and publicizing their own interventions and programs using action research at a local level.

Although there have been several calls for school counselors to conduct their own research in recent years (e.g., Bauman, 2004; Brigman & Campbell, 2003; Sink, 2006), the lack of practical research being conducted by school counselors remains a concern (Myrick, 2003). Action research at the school level is important that practitioners can contribute to the best practices literature and demonstrate the effect *their* interventions have on *their* students, particularly in the academic domain.

This article will review an intervention program for middle school students at risk of being retained. The intervention, designed, implemented, and evaluated by a middle school counselor, was developed as a result of collaborative conversations between school administrators, eighth grade teachers, and the school counselor. Promotion and retention of students was at the forefront of staff concerns, and teachers expressed frustration with eighth grade students' exhibiting poor school success behaviors, such as missing assignments, turning in incomplete work, and poor study habits. The administrators, teachers, and counselor hypothesized that addressing students' academic success skills would improve those students' course grades and better prepare them for the state exam used to determine promotion, thus reducing the number of eighth grade students retained.

Method

Participants

This action research project took place in an urban middle school serving approximately 1,400 students. Fifty-two eighth grade students failing at least three academic courses at the end of the first grading period were invited to participate in the study. These students represented a sample of the eligible population and were identified by their teachers. Of those initially invited, 33 (63%) completed the entire intervention, 10 (19%) chose not to participate, and 9 (17%) withdrew from the school during the intervention. Of the 33 students who completed the intervention, 24 (73%) identified as African American; 5 (15%) as European American; 3 (9%) as multiracial; and 1 (3%) as Hispanic. The racial/ethnic

breakdown of the participants differs from the student population, 42% African American, 34% European American, 13% Hispanic, and 6% multiracial). The group included approximately equal number of female ($n = 17$) and male ($n = 16$) students. This study only included students who did not receive other special services.

Procedure

The design of this study was centered on action research principles. The school counseling practitioner served simultaneously as intervention facilitator and researcher. Because the researcher was the school counselor and worked directly with her students, she was actively invested in the study.

Prior to the start of the intervention, the 52 selected students attended an orientation meeting with the counselor/researcher to receive information about the intervention. At that time, the rationale, motivation for, and objectives of the intervention were explained. Students were given assent forms to complete and return as well as consent forms for their parents to complete and return.

The intervention was conducted during the last two grading periods of the school year. Students participating in the study met every other week in small groups ($n = 7$) with the counselor. Each group session lasted approximately 30 minutes and was held in the counselor's office. Group sessions began with and focused on a recognition period in which students shared any positive achievements they wanted to share such as project, test, or quiz grades they were proud of, or improvements in completing and/or submitting homework. Often the counselor took the opportunity to share positive comments from the participants' teachers about improvements in student attitude or effort. Students were encouraged to applaud and cheer for each other during this part of the group session. Following the recognition period, a particular school success skill was highlighted. Most skills were delivered in a didactic format by the counselor/researcher because of the short length of the sessions. Skill topics included (a) using the student planner for recording assignments and calendaring, (b) keeping track of and averaging grades, (c) calculating grade point averages, (d) managing time after school, (e) organizing notebooks and lockers, and (f) asking teachers for help.

Additionally, students met individually with the counselor/researcher on alternate weeks to review current grades and to reinforce what was discussed

in the group. The counselor/researcher reviewed the promotion criterion of passing five out of seven classes with each student during these sessions. The counselor also taught each student how to calculate his or her grade point average and instructed the students in tracking their grades using Microsoft Excel. By tracking grades through Excel, each student was shown in a visual and progressive way how his or her grades either were or were not on the path to promotion. Students were shown with bar graphs how their current grades measured up against their previous grades in each subject area. Using formulas in Excel, the counselor/researcher was able to show students specifically what grades they would need to make to achieve a passing status in each class. During these sessions, the counselor/researcher helped the student to set target grades for the next meeting and assisted in outlining specific steps the student would need to take to achieve the goals. These individual sessions also served as a time for students to share frustrations, stressors, and concerns, for which the counselor/researcher provided encouragement, empowerment, and motivation.

In addition to the direct interventions with the counselor/researcher, students were also offered optional tutoring services twice a week during the last period of the school day from high school students who were serving in a leadership training program. Some students opted for the tutoring service only once or twice during the intervention period. Approximately five students used the tutoring service on a weekly basis.

To address the motivation of the students, the counselor/researcher brought in guest speakers for the participants several times during the year to address issues of personal and academic motivation. Additionally, “Most Valuable Player” postcards, created by the counselor/researcher, were mailed home to students’ parents to acknowledge individual accomplishments. At the end of each grading period, participants met with the counselor/researcher as a large group and were presented with group statistics including group grade distributions and group averages. Using charts created from Microsoft Excel, group statistics were presented as well as achievements, goal-setting, and personal reflection.

Finally, parents were invited to attend two evening “pep rallies” coordinated by the counselor/researcher, to promote the intervention and to recognize the students. The pep rallies were held after the third

grading period and at the end of the school year. Students, parents, teachers, and administrators were invited, but attendance was sparse; 4 parents, 7 students, and 1 administrator attended the first pep rally, and fewer attended the second. During these recognition ceremonies held in the evenings in the school theater, students were honored with certificates. All participants were honored with a certificate for their participation in the program, and additional certificates were given to those students who improved their overall grade point average from the previous quarter. Significant achievement and improvement recognitions were based on criteria such as passing all subject areas, increasing the grade point average from the previous grading period, or bringing individual subjects up at least one letter grade.

Although the counselor/researcher facilitated most of the intervention steps described above, collaboration was an important part of the intervention as well. The counselor/researcher discussed the study with involved teachers, counselor educators, participants’ families, and community contributors on a regular basis. Collaborations, particularly those between the counselor/researcher and the teachers, took the form of informal conversations after each grading period. The counselor/researcher presented the teachers with charts and graphs that displayed the aggregated grade point averages of the group and academic performance in each subject area. As a result of these conversations, all stakeholders were kept up to date with the participants’ progress, the group’s progress, and the progress of the intervention as a whole. Consultation with the participants’ parents/guardians was done primarily over the phone and addressed students’ academic progress, school success skills, and parental concerns. Most of the parents/guardians and teachers expressed encouragement for the intervention and did not offer suggestions for changes.

Measures

The counselor/researcher gathered three key sets of data for each student to serve as indicators of intervention effectiveness. First, grades from the five academic core courses were collected at the end of each grading period. Second, cumulative grade point averages, using a 4-point scale, were calculated for each student at each marking period using report card grades. Finally, each student’s scores on the state competency exam for the school year preceding the study were collected and compared to scores on the exam taken at the end of the school year in which the intervention occurred.

Results

Participants earned a total of 10 As, 45 Bs, 34 Cs, 25 Ds and 51 Fs during the fourth quarter (after the intervention), compared to 5 As, 35 Bs, 27 Cs, 24 Ds and 74 Fs in the first quarter, resulting in 23 fewer failing grades and 15 more As and Bs in the fourth quarter. Furthermore, 21 students (64%) improved their overall academic average between the first and fourth quarters. Improvements in academic averages ranged from 1 to 23 points (using a standard 100-point scale), with an average gain of 8 points. Two students (6%) showed no change, and 10 students (30%) showed a decrease in grades. Regarding the competency exam, 24 (72%) participants reached the “proficient” level, compared with 22 (66%) the previous year. At the end of the year, 31 of 33 participants met promotion standards, and, thus, only 2 participants were retained.

Discussion

The purpose of this intervention was to help students previously identified as being at risk for retention meet the criteria for promotion by improving their course grades and state competency exam scores. Academic grade point averages and competency scores for participants did increase overall, and perhaps most important, only 2 of the 33 participants were retained. From a practitioner perspective, this study certainly holds practical significance with regard to academic improvement. Although the authors make no claim that outcome data were due solely to the intervention, it is fair to assume that the intervention played at least *some* role in the complex process of the students’ academic improvement. Furthermore, the potential risk to participating in such a program appears to be minimal, but the potential reward is great, both for students (promotion) and for the school (meeting academic goals). In addition, evaluating the intervention and publicizing the results to administrators and other stakeholders can be beneficial for the school counseling program. Specifically, if administrators are sufficiently impressed with and encouraged by the outcome data, the practical significance of this intervention for the school counselor could include greater appreciation for school counselors’ role in academic achievement and greater freedom for the school counseling program to develop and implement additional programs.

Although outcome data from this project are not generalizable to other populations, action research is

less concerned with how interventions might work in other settings, focusing instead on how it might work more effectively again in the same setting with a similar population. Toward this end, the counselor/researcher identified several strategies for improving the program. For instance, this project included several components, making it overwhelming at times for the counselor to coordinate and difficult to evaluate the effect of specific components of the intervention. In future programs, it may be helpful to collect other perception data from students to evaluate specific knowledge gained or skills developed from each component of the intervention. This information could be used to determine which strategies had the greatest effect on student achievement and to determine whether any components might be discontinued to streamline the intervention. In addition, more shared involvement from educators in the school could help make the intervention more manageable and, perhaps, more effective through the integration of different educators’ perspectives.

One noteworthy aspect of the participant group was the overrepresentation of African American students. The source of this overrepresentation is unclear, but it would be worth looking into selection bias, stereotyping among those selecting students for the study, or systemic bias within the school.

Conclusion

As national efforts to demonstrate the effect school counseling interventions have on student achievement continue, school counselors must contribute to the reservoir of data if the new vision of professional school counseling is to be achieved. This project served as an example of how school counselors can develop, lead, and evaluate their own data-driven programs in response to identified school needs. Although the intervention was complex, the data collection and analysis were uncomplicated. Outcome data (quarter grades, competency exam scores) were already collected systematically by the school and easily accessed by the counselor. For data analysis, the counselor/researcher used simple descriptive and percentage-based statistics that were easily calculated and understood by teachers, administrators, and parents. With many school counselors citing their discomfort with statistics as a factor keeping them from more action research, this project demonstrates how a practicing school counselor can collect data to advocate for school counseling program without the use of complex statistical analyses. Although results were not statistically significant, the data

were practically significant, in that most student participants did increase grades and meet promotion criteria. Additionally, school counselors could use results data to advocate for further school counseling programming.

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