

**Evidence-Informed Recommendations to Promote  
Black Student Engagement**

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### **Abstract**

In 2012, Black students dropped out of school at a rate of 7.5% (NCES, 2013a). While this is the second lowest dropout rate for this population in 55 years, Black students are still dropping out at nearly twice the rate (4.3%) of their White counterparts. This paper includes a review of literature related to this phenomenon and offers evidence-informed recommendations taken from the literature for professional school counselors to utilize to improve academic engagement of Black students. These recommendations include: facilitating difficult dialogues on race, using a Student Success Skills program, and entering into school-family-community partnerships.

*Keywords:* Black students, dropouts, professional school counseling, academic achievement

## **Evidence-Informed Recommendations to Promote Black Student Engagement**

When professional school counselors examine relevant interventions to promote Black student engagement, it is necessary to consider dropout rates and achievement of Black students, as this is linked to future quality of life for these students. Differences between Black and White individuals include disparities in retention of Black and White children, dropout rates between these two groups, lower test scores, slightly lower pay for Black individuals, and unemployment (U. S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2003). These concerns were also noted by Christle, Jolivette, and Nelson (2007) and Crenshaw, Ocen, and Nanda (2015), who reported that students who drop out are more likely to be unemployed, earn less, be on public assistance, or be in prison.

A review of data from the NCES (2013a) shows a dropout rate of 7.5% for Black students in 2012, which is the second to lowest dropout rate for this population in the past 55 years. Yet, Black students are still dropping out at a significantly higher rate than that of their White counterparts, who drop out at a rate of 4.3% (NCES, 2013a). Closely related to dropout rates are school suspension rates, which have been linked to an increased risk of dropping out. Fourteen years ago, Skiba, Michael, Nardo, and Peterson (2002) reported that Black students were suspended at a rate two to three times higher than other children and were regularly overrepresented in office referrals. This remains an issue today. In a more recent report published by the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, the Civil Rights Data Collection snapshot for the

2011-12 academic year (CRDC, 2014), Black students were suspended and expelled at a rate three times greater than White students.

While Black students have higher rates of school suspension, this population has the lower graduation rate at 66.1%, and they have the third lowest completion rate of college preparatory curriculum in California at 28.6% (Carter & Welner, 2013; CDE, 2013). In line with this information, Black individuals who have not completed high school have an unemployment rate of 18.8%, compared to those with at least a high school diploma at 16.4% (NCES, 2013b). More promising is the fact that the unemployment rate greatly decreases and is reported at 6.3% for Black individuals with a Bachelor's degree or higher (NCES, 2013b). From this statistical information, a linkage between educational attainment (e.g., earning at least a high school diploma) and employment later in life exists and indicates attention to these areas is warranted.

The purpose of this paper is to review current literature and offer evidence-informed recommendations for professional school counselors focused on engagement with Black students in preschool to grade 12 education (P-12) to improve academic outcomes. Included within this discussion will be focus on preventative measures that currently exist, which can be used by professional school counselors to decrease the number of Black students who drop out of P-12 education. In order to examine the areas outlined above, it is critical to explore literature related to Black student achievement, including exploration of the Black student achievement gap, the effects of school environment (positive and negative) on achievement, the effects of home environment and parental involvement on achievement, and the economic impact of dropping out.

## **Gaps in Black Student Achievement**

There is an abundance of literature that calls upon education stakeholders to address links between academic achievement and racial and cultural variables, and socioeconomic status (Davis Ganao, Suero Silvestre, & Glenn, 2013; Griffin & Steen, 2010; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Rumberger, 2001). Yet, these are not conversations easily had in schools (Singleton, 2015), and as such, a gap in educational achievement persists between Black students and their White counterparts when both groups are tested in mathematics and reading. In California, the mathematics achievement score gap between Black and White eighth-grade students was 35 points in 2007 (the most recent report available), compared to a 42-point gap in 1992 (Vanneman, Hamilton, Anderson, & Rahman, 2009). For fourth-grade students, the mathematics achievement gap had narrowed by 10 points since 1992; decreasing from a 39-point gap in 1992 to a 29-point gap in 2007 (Vanneman et al.). Looking at trend data from 1992 to 2007, the reading achievement score gap between Black and White fourth-grade students had narrowed by only 5 points from a 32-point gap to a 27-point gap in 2007 (Vanneman et al.). While the gap is narrowing in California, as shown above, Black students continue to lag behind their White peers (Education Trust, 2014). In reading and mathematics, Black students are approximately 2.5 times as likely as White students to lack basic skills (Education Trust, 2014).

Equally troubling is the idea that affluent Black students are not achieving at levels on par with White students who have similar socioeconomic advantages (Gosa & Alexander, 2007; Howard & Reynolds, 2008), although they do perform better in school than Black students who lack such resources. In fact, the school performance of affluent

Black children is often closer to that of poor White children than it is to that of affluent White children (Gosa & Alexander, 2007); and Howard and Reynolds (2008) further expounded that Black students who attended middleclass schools were still outperformed by their White and Asian student counterparts. Further, Bono, Sy, and Kopp (2015) posited that achievement differences between Black and White students are not fully explained by socioeconomic factors. As such, socioeconomic status (SES) is not the only factor to be considered when examining Black student achievement trends.

To highlight this, examination of Ogbu's (2003) work is relevant. He reported on disparities in achievement between Black students and White students in a favorable school environment. Ogbu (2003) examined the performance of Black students in a middle-class suburban school district and found that while Black students performed well above national averages on standardized tests, they remained underrepresented in honors and advanced placement classes. Furthermore, according to Ogbu, Black students continued to trail behind White students in the district on most of the educational measurements used, including grade point average (GPA) and proficiency tests. Despite comparability in SES between White students and Black students, there still remains a disparity in performance or a gap in achievement.

When examining other factors that may affect Black student achievement (i.e., comparing achievement at schools in relation to Black student population density), there remains a gap in resources, which can contribute to the achievement gap. This is relevant considering that schools with larger Black student populations have previously been associated with lower quality of teaching and learning experiences for students

(Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010). Aud and colleagues posited that teachers lacking both a college major or certification in their teaching assignment and teaching experience, were likely not considered to be highly qualified teachers. Specifically, they found that for mathematics, the “percentage of high school teachers with neither a college major nor standard certification in the subject that was their main teaching assignment” (Aud et al., 2010, p. 48), was highest at schools where the Black student enrollment was 50% or greater. The percentage of teachers with neither a college major nor standard certification in English dropped to 13% (second highest) in schools with greater Black student enrollment (Aud et al., 2010). Connected with this is teacher experience, which as Aud et al. (2010) found, schools with at least 50% White enrollment had a smaller percentage of new teachers (i.e., less than three years of experience), compared to schools where Black students were more than 50% of the population.

In further examination of the effect of Black student density on achievement, Bohrnstedt, Kitmitto, Ogut, Sherman, and Chan (2015) examined Black student density in schools in order to attempt to better understand the achievement gap between Black and White students, and identified four density categories: 0-20%; 20-40%; 40-60%; 60-100%. Bohrnstedt et al. sought to examine associations between the percentage of Black students in a school and the Black-White achievement gap, and clearly outlined that they did not assess for a causal relationship between these variables. Bohrnstedt and colleagues found that overall, “achievement was lower for both Black and White students in schools with the highest Black student density than in schools with the lowest density” (p. 12). Yet, the achievement gap remained between Black and White

students in the highest and lowest density schools (Bohrnstedt et al., 2015).

Additionally, Bohrnstedt and colleagues found that when controlling for SES, the achievement gap between Black and White students was five to seven points less across three-out-of-four Black student density categories, yet in the highest density category (60-100%), the achievement gap was not significantly smaller when controlling for SES.

As previously established, differences in SES are not enough to account for the persisting achievement gap, and as such, another relevant factor to consider is the link between attendance and achievement. According to Aud et al. (2010), children who missed fewer school days were more likely to score at the *Basic* level or above on the mathematics assessment in 2009. This was evidenced by findings that showed that 87% of White students with no absences scored at or above the Basic level, compared to 73% of White students with three or more absences who scored at or above the Basic level (Aud et al., 2010). The same trend existed for Black students, as 56% of Black students with no absences scored at or above the Basic level, compared to 38% of Black students with three or more absences, who scored at or above the Basic level (Aud et al., 2010). While there is similarity in terms of an increase in achievement when there are fewer days missed, when examining the percentage of students scoring at or above the Basic level, a gap exists between Black and White students, no matter the number of days missed. Additionally, 23% of Black students were absent three or more days in one month when compared to other student ethnic minority groups (Aud et al., 2010). Therefore, if students are not attending school, how then can we expect to engage them? It is clear from this information, that there must be effort expended to



ensure Black students are coming to school. Engaging in the development of school-family-community partnerships is a method that can be used to establish connections and help families remain connected with schools to facilitate engagement for Black students. This will be explored in later sections.

As researchers have attempted to understand the achievement gap between Black and White students (Aud et al., 2010; Bohrnstedt et al., 2015; Vanneman et al., 2009), and the relation to SES (Bohrnstedt et al., 2015; Ogbu, 2003, Vanneman et al., 2009), it is necessary to consider other factors that may affect Black student achievement. To further examine this phenomenon, school environment as a factor affecting Black student achievement will be explored.

### **Effects of School Environment on Achievement**

School climate is a relevant factor to consider when examining Black student achievement and the dropout rate. School environments that are considered to be hostile or harsh are often viewed as having a poorer school climate where communication is often lacking. As Christle et al. (2007) found in their study of what they characterized as *high drop out schools* (HDOS) and *low drop out schools* (LDOS), the participant administrators in the study and other personnel at HDOS reported that their school climate was poor. Additionally, Christle and colleagues found HDOS were often in poorer physical condition when compared to LDOS, and observers in their study reported stark contrasts between cleanliness, orderliness, and condition of students' restrooms at LDOS and HDOS.

Another factor affecting school climate, disciplinary actions in schools such as suspensions and expulsions, can also affect student outcomes (Lee, Cornell, Gregory,

& Fan, 2011). Specifically, Lee et al. (2011) indicated that school suspensions are associated with negative academic outcomes for students and these students are at increased risk for dropping out. Aligned with this, Christle et al. (2007) showed that schools with higher dropout rates were often schools that had higher suspension rates, and had more students who were considered to be from a lower SES. Socioeconomic status has often been cited as an explanation for disproportionality of suspensions among Black and White students, yet data does not support this claim (Davis Ganao et al., 2013). According to Davis Ganao and colleagues, the disproportionate rate of suspensions for ethnic minorities remains after controlling for SES. Further, Black students are routinely overrepresented in terms of receipt of school suspensions (CRDC, 2014; Nottlemeyer, Ward, & Mcloughlin, 2015). While economically disadvantaged students and male students are at a similarly heightened risk according to Nottlemeyer et al., Black students still remain highly overrepresented in school suspensions.

Schools engaging in suspension and expulsion disciplinary practices typically favor zero-tolerance policies, which fail to promote school bonding, positive academic achievement, and may diminish school climate (Skiba & Rausch, 2006). Townsend (2000) concluded that there were consequences to the use of suspension and expulsion as discipline, which included a denial of access to learning opportunities, as students who are suspended from school or expelled do not often receive any opportunities or plans to continue their schoolwork. This is still an issue today. According to Hoffman (2014), zero-tolerance policies have evolved from the original intention of these policies, which was to ensure schools were gun and weapon free (see Gun-Free Schools Act of

1994); and now include the automatic suspension or expulsion of students for a host of offenses, which can include alcohol and drug violations, fighting, and criminal damage to property. Unfortunately, the students primarily disciplined are students of color. Specific to Black students, in 2007, 49% of Black students had been suspended at some point during 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade, while only 24.1% of White students were suspended at some point during high school (NCES, 2012). More recently, according to the Civil Rights Data Collection data snapshot for school discipline for the 2011-12 academic year (CRDC, 2014), on average, 16% of Black students were suspended, compared to only 5% of White students. Moreover, Black students made up only 16% of the student population at the time of the report, yet were 32-42% of students suspended or expelled from schools (CRDC, 2014).

Additionally, Hoffman (2014) found that “schools with both low and high percentages of Black students, on average, suspended Black students for approximately 7 times as many days as White students (p. 84).” Furthermore, as discussed by Hoffman and others (Christle et al., 2007; Skiba & Rausch, 2006; Townsend, 2000), lack of services to students as a result of being expelled or suspended creates a significant disruption to the lives of students, their families, and the community in which these students live. Based on the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection report released in June 2016 (CRDC, 2016), in the 2013-2014 academic year, “Black students were 1.9 times more likely to be expelled from school without educational services as White students (p. 4). Given that suspension and expulsion are more likely to be used as disciplinary measures for Black students than White students (CRDC, 2014; CRDC, 2016; Hoffman, 2014), and

that Black students are more likely to receive these disciplinary measures without educational services (CRDC, 2016), attention must be given to how to keep Black students engaged in school in order to diminish the potential of these students dropping out. This is an important consideration, as the use of suspension has been shown to potentially worsen student disengagement, possibly leading to decreased student achievement or students dropping out (Notlemeyer et al., 2015).

In contrast, Lee et al. (2011) found that schools with lower suspension rates were likely to use preventative strategies to reduce inappropriate behaviors. Attempting to engage Black students early, before issues reach the level where school discipline is necessary, may be an effective way for professional school counselors to facilitate improved outcomes for this population.

### **Effects of Home Environment and Parental Involvement on Achievement**

Home life is also a necessary factor to consider when examining influences that affect academic achievement of Black students. In consideration of home environment, Verdugo (2011) posited that poor family economic status, such as living in poverty, is linked to adverse effects on children, and can easily translate into lack of resources and access to resources that may diminish academic achievement. It is known that in 2014, 26.2% of Black individuals were living in poverty (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2015), and living in poverty has been linked to poor student academic development and achievement (Bono et al., 2015; Hutchison, 2011) and school failure (Garrett-Peters, MoKrova, Vernon-Feagans, Willoughby, & Pan, 2016). Additionally, family climate and family climate stressors can also effect student academic achievement and

performance (Verdugo, 2011). These stressors as discussed by Verdugo included, divorce, substance use, and financial issues among others.

Wang, Haertel, and Walberg (1997) focused on determining educational resilience factors for Black children in inner-city schools. Of the 22 contextual influences identified by Wang and colleagues related to students' educational resilience, the researchers found home environment/parental support to be the second most influential category, behind classroom practices. Wang et al. (1997) posited that the home environment provides children with many resources, and suggested this is true even for children whose families may have limited economic resources. Specifically, parents and even older siblings serve as the initial teachers for children, and aid in facilitating children's physical growth, their competence development, and self-esteem (Wang et al., 1997). This is further supported by Bono et al. (2015), as they discussed Black kinship culture, and the extended family support that exists. Bono and colleagues suggested that extended family members may provide emotional support to parents and may also assist with raising children.

According to Ogbu (1981), families prepare children to learn what schools will later teach them, including social-emotional skills, language skills, cognitive skills, and motivational skills. Once students begin attending school, they learn basic practical skills such as reading, writing, and computation, which Ogbu (1981) termed subsistence tasks for every task in the United States' (U.S.) industrial economy. However, what happens when students are not prepared by their parents to learn what schools will later teach them? Those students then must acquire social-emotional skills, language skills,

cognitive skills, and motivational skills along with reading, writing, and computation during their first years in school; which may cause them to fall behind their classmates.

Parental involvement at an early age for Black children is a key factor shown to prevent students from entering school already behind their peers in language and communication skills, social-emotional skills, cognitive skills, and motivational skills. Davis Ganao et al. (2013) suggested that when parents have higher educational expectations for their children, children “are more likely to meet the standards and achieve academically” (p. 395). Therefore, if parents set higher expectations for children, they are likely to strive to reach, meet, and exceed those expectations. Setting expectations and developing goals for children both at home and at school may be beneficial in starting children down a path toward success at an early age. This can be accomplished through the facilitation of collaborative relationships between the school and home.

Given that there is much research to support that parental involvement and home environment have a significant impact on student achievement (Baker, Cameron, Rimm-Kaufman, & Grissmer, 2012; Bono et al., 2015; Garrett-Peters et al., 2016; Hutchison, 2011; Wang et al., 1997), it is important to consider the professional school counselor’s role in facilitating connections between the home and school through the creation and implementation of school, family, and community partnerships. This will be explored in later sections.

### **Economic Impact of Dropping Out**

The connection between dropout rates and educational attainment, employment, and earnings is well established. Decades ago, Ogbu (1981) suggested an economic

linkage between schools and the corporate economy when he posited that “the main preparation for participation in adult economic life has been delegated to the schools” (Ogbu, 1981, p. 15). Furthermore, there is a clear connection between the education of the individual and their earning potential (National Center on Education and the Economy [NCEE], 2006), and it is relevant to focus on the link between educational attainment and quality of life outcomes, whilst examining the connection to earning potential.

In 1971, students who dropped out of high school earned the equivalent of \$35,000 per year (in 2002 dollars), whereas an individual who dropped out of high school in the early 2000s would have earned less than \$24,000 per year (NCEE, 2006). More recently, DeNavas-Walt and Proctor (2015) indicated that 28.9% of people 25 years and over who did not hold a high school diploma were living in poverty, meaning these individuals earned less than \$12,331 per year, which is the poverty threshold. The percentage of individuals living in poverty decreases by approximately half, to 14.2%, when individuals earn a high school diploma (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2015). Additionally, DeNavas-Walt and Proctor pointed out that this percentage drops dramatically to 5% when individuals obtain at least a bachelor’s degree.

As referenced previously, Black students who earned less than a high school diploma had an unemployment rate of 18.8%, yet this rate drops significantly to 6.3% when the individual earns a bachelor’s degree (NCES, 2013b), which aligns to the statistical pattern referenced previously, and highlights the benefit of continued education. Consequently, students who dropout are much more likely than their peers who graduate to be unemployed, poor, incarcerated, unhealthy, and single parents with

children who will drop out of high school themselves (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006; Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin, & Palma, 2009).

Dropping out of school has been associated with a host of broader negative outcomes, which include incarceration, unemployment, living in poverty, and increased dependence on state and federal programs (Bono et al., 2015; Crenshaw et al., 2015; Hayes, Nelson, Tabin, Pearson, & Worthy, 2002). The previously discussed negative outcomes related to educational attainment and economics are very real possibilities for Black students in schools today who are teetering on the brink of dropping out of school. When the economic impact of dropping out is taken as a consideration along with parental involvement, home environment issues, and Black student achievement issues, it is clear that intervention is necessary for Black students. As mentioned previously, professional school counselors are in a unique position to engage Black students before they reach the point when they drop out of school. Evidence-informed interventions to support the engagement of Black students and the role of the professional school counselor will be explored in the next section.

### **The Role of the Professional School Counselor**

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) national model provides a framework to guide school counseling programs across the nation. As stated in the most recent edition of the ASCA national model, professional school counselors design and deliver comprehensive school counseling programs that promote student achievement (ASCA, 2012, p. xii). Further, as espoused by the ASCA, professional school counselors promote academic, career, and personal/social success for all students and collaborate with all stakeholders to create a school and community climate



that embraces cultural diversity, whilst seeking to remove barriers that impede student success (ASCA, 2015, para. 1). Given this, culture is an extremely relevant variable to consider, as culture as it relates to students, can be a very powerful influence on student attitudes about and behaviors in school (ASCA, 2015, para. 2), which may ultimately affect students' educational attainment and outcomes.

Grothaus in ASCA (2012) indicated that culture has a very strong influence on students and their attitudes about school, which is equally true of counselors' attitudes, perspectives, and behaviors. As directed by the professional and ethical standards issued by the ASCA, counselors are called on to value, respect and be responsive to these cultural influences by implementing culturally responsive programs (Grothaus in ASCA, 2012). As Grothaus further explicated, respecting and valuing others' cultures can send positive messages to students and stakeholders alike. By linking Grothaus in ASCA (2012) and Hatch in ASCA (2012), both indicated that school counselors are called on to advocate for students, be leaders on school campuses, and create equity-based school counseling programs to assist with closing not only the achievement gap, but also the opportunity and attainment gaps that currently exist.

In order to effect change for culturally diverse students as required by the professional and ethical standards issued by the ASCA, there must be connection to the surrounding environment of the student. This may include collaboration with critical stakeholders to address inequities existing within schools (Griffin & Steen, 2010). To facilitate connection to students' surrounding environments, in this section, evidence informed prevention and intervention strategies that can be utilized by professional school counselors to effectively engage Black students to decrease dropout rates and

improve academic outcomes, will be reviewed. Each of the strategies covered in subsequent pages were chosen because they have been shown to lead to improvement in the areas of achievement, school climate, and school-family-community partnerships. The identified strategies to be reviewed include facilitating difficult dialogues, implementing a student success skills approach, and methods for fostering school, family, and community partnerships.

### **Strategies to Foster Black Student Engagement**

#### **Facilitating Dialogues on Race**

Facilitating a dialogue focused on race or any other *ism*-related topic can be challenging. For the purposes of this paper, the focus will remain on race. Based on data taken from the NCES (2013c), 51% of students enrolled in elementary and secondary schools nationwide were White, whereas 49% were students of color, including students identified as Black, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, and those students who identified as being of two or more races. Specifically in California, during the 2013-14 academic year, just over 25% of students enrolled in schools identified as White, while 75% of students were students of color. Of this 75%, 6.16% of students were Black students (CDE, 2015a). In contrast, 65% of teachers in schools in California during the 2013-14 academic year were White (CDE, 2015b), and during that same academic year, 62% of staff classified under Pupil Services (which includes professional school counselors) were also White (CDE, 2015c). Recall from earlier discussion, culture has a strong influence on students' attitudes about school, and counselors' attitudes, perspectives, and behaviors (Grothaus in ASCA, 2012). Given that the predominant group of school-aged children in

schools today is non-White, while the majority of educators remain White, there are implications related to having honest conversations about race in schools, which has a direct connection to students' academic achievement.

Singleton (2015) espoused the need to build interracial knowledge to facilitate understanding between adults about the needs of students. This increased understanding is potentially a step forward in increasing engagement on the part of Black students. In his framework, Singleton (2015) identified four agreements of courageous conversations that must exist for the conversation to continue: 1) stay engaged; 2) speak your truth; 3) experience discomfort; 4) expect and accept non-closure. It is through the commitment to these four agreements that an initiator of a difficult dialogue might be able to keep the lines of communication open, thus continuing the conversation. While challenging, dialogues on race in a school can lead to growth, improved communication, and learning. At the very least, engaging in difficult dialogues with other school personnel on the issue of race can highlight differences in worldview, personalities, and perspectives (Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009) of racial and ethnic minorities, such as Black students.

As Sue et al. (2009) reported, difficult dialogues on race represent potentially threatening conversations between members of different racial and ethnic groups and can trigger intense emotional responses. It is this triggered emotional response that often leads to the breakdown of these dialogues. In addition to Singleton's (2015) four agreements, he identifies six conditions of courageous conversations that should remain in the foreground to guide participants through this difficult terrain. First and foremost, Singleton calls for establishment of a racial context that is personal, local and

immediate, which is used to begin a conversation about race that did not exist prior. Next, there should be an isolation of race while acknowledging the broader scope of diversity and factors contributing to a racialized problem, which allows the facilitator to explore his/her readiness to begin dialoguing with others about race. It is recommended that facilitators consider their "...own *personal* racial experiences, beliefs, and perspectives" (Singleton, 2015, p. 28) here. With the third condition, it is suggested that facilitators foster the development of understanding of race as a social/political construct. In the fourth condition, there is a call for monitoring of the conversation through the use of clear and deliberate measures. Here, Singleton (2015) also advises that time for speaking, listening, and reflecting be clearly outlined and he offers a tool (courageous conversation compass) to help traverse this condition. During condition five, there should be attention given to drafting a clear and workable definition of race that is separate from ethnicity and nationality (Singleton, 2015). Lastly, and directly connected with condition five, in condition six, the discussion should shift to examination of how Whiteness not only effects the conversation, but also how Whiteness can affect conversations about race. One can access the work of Singleton (2015) for the complete guide, including resource materials, to beginning a courageous conversation in a school environment.

To engage this framework when facilitating difficult dialogues centered on race and culture, the facilitator must be aware of his/her own biases and stereotypes held. Professional school counselors who are "...social justice change agents have an awareness of their own worldviews and biases..." and must "...be culturally competent and willing to learn a variety of components (e.g., values, history, beliefs) of other

cultural groups representing the students and the families with whom they work” (Griffin & Steen, 2010, p. 76). This type of awareness on the part of the dialogue initiator will assist with facilitation of communication that is open and honest, and presents to the other party that one is indeed approachable.

Additional considerations for the facilitator of a difficult dialogue taken from Singh, Urbano, Haston, and McMahan (2010) include knowing when it is appropriate to speak (e.g., is it appropriate to address a teacher in front of their students); knowing how to deliver information in such a way that will be heard (e.g., maintaining respect and providing context); knowing whom to speak to (e.g., instead of reaching out to one teacher, perhaps a request for time at the next professional development day to address a larger group with a brief presentation and activity). The goal is to achieve a true dialogue, and as Sue et al. (2009) recommended, creating a true dialogue where both parties listen and hear one another is an important skill to develop when facilitating difficult dialogues. Ultimately, the goal in using this strategy relates to helping educators at the school site better understand their Black students in order to foster a welcoming and understanding school and classroom climate.

### **Implementing a Program to Improve Black Student Achievement**

**Student Success Skills program overview.** The Student Success Skills (SSS) program was originally developed to improve academic outcomes for students (Brigman, Webb, & Campbell, 2007), and has been found to be an effective approach for working with Black students. In the original SSS program study, 220 students in fifth, sixth, eighth, and ninth grade in 12 Florida schools (only six schools received the treatment protocol) were randomly selected for the treatment group based on scoring

between the 25<sup>th</sup> and 50<sup>th</sup> percentile in reading on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test [FCAT] (Brigman et al., 2007). Students in the non-treatment comparison group were also randomly selected from the group scoring between the 25<sup>th</sup> and 50<sup>th</sup> percentile in reading on the FCAT (Brigman et al., 2007). To develop the SSS program, Brigman and colleagues took the three most identified skills related to academic achievement and social competence found in their review of the literature. These skills included cognitive and metacognitive skills (goal setting, progress monitoring, and memory skills), social skills (interpersonal skills, social problem solving, listening, and teamwork skills), and self-management skills (managing attention, motivation, and anger) (Brigman et al., 2007).

To implement the program, professional school counselors received three full days of training that included demonstrations of how to effectively lead a small group session and classroom lesson aimed at improving student academic, social, and self-management skills (Brigman et al., 2007). Counselors were also provided structured standardized manuals for implementing the SSS program at their sites. The format of the group sessions included students being oriented to the program in August/September, with group sessions beginning in October (Brigman et al.). Group sessions were 45 minutes in length and groups met for eight weeks. Students were then engaged in four follow-up booster sessions after the conclusion of the group in advance of their scheduled achievement testing. Brigman and colleagues indicated that the participant counselors implemented the SSS program using a three-phased structured format to ensure consistency across all groups. Given the sample size, potential implications for schools wishing to replicate this intervention are challenging, so it is

warranted for potential implementers to include some form of structured format in their process. While the authors initially developed this program with a focus on achievement testing, Webb and Brigman (2006) indicated, “the SSS program is directed at students’ day-to-day development and the implementation and monitoring of skills and strategies aimed at improving their academic and social competence” (Webb & Brigman, 2006, p. 113). One can access the work of Webb and Brigman (2006) for information pertaining to the key skill areas and supporting strategies.

Miranda, Webb, Brigman, and Peluso (2007) examined the four previous studies of the SSS program to explore differential effects in achievement scores for White, Latino, and Black students. Miranda and colleagues examined data from 1,123 fifth, sixth, eighth, and ninth grade students who participated in the original SSS program. Students were enrolled in 36 schools across two Florida school districts and 22.3% of the study participants were identified as Black, with 143 being assigned to the treatment group and 136 being assigned to the comparison group (Miranda et al., 2007). Following participation in the SSS program, Black students in the treatment group showed gains in mathematics and reading. Overall, Miranda et al. (2007) found that achievement gains in mathematics and reading for all groups increased, which supports that this program would be beneficial to use with Black students to improve academic engagement and achievement.

### **Fostering School-Family-Community Partnerships**

School-family-community partnerships can be defined as collaborative relationships involving school counselors, school personnel, students, families, community members, and other school and community stakeholders who work jointly to

implement school and community based programs and activities that improve student academic achievement directly within schools (Bryan, 2005; Bryan & Henry, 2012; Griffin & Steen 2010; Taylor & Adelman, 2000). According to the ASCA (2010), professional school counselors have an essential and unique role in promoting, facilitating, and advocating for successful collaboration with parents/guardians and community stakeholders. Further, researchers have shown that developing partnerships between schools, families, and communities is an effective means to combat achievement discrepancies experienced by many ethnic minority students (Bryan, 2005; Griffin & Steen, 2010; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007), including Black students. Such partnerships have also been shown to foster educational resilience in students (Bryan, 2005), and are associated with facilitating growth in leadership, while helping students to build problem solving skills, and establish connections with adults in both the school and surrounding community (Bryan & Henry, 2012).

In order to create a culture of academic success for children in schools, Holcomb-McCoy (2007) suggested that schools, parents, and communities share the responsibility of educating children. Holcomb-McCoy outlined five principles for effective school-family-community partnerships (suggested by the Education Alliance at Brown University): policies, leadership, communication, the community, and evaluation. Holcomb-McCoy maintained that focus on these principles can lead to an effective collaborative effort between stakeholders.

**Policies.** Professional school counselors can examine areas of existing policies to determine if expectations of the school for parental engagement are clearly delineated (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Further, as discussed by Holcomb-McCoy, any



new policies created related to school-family-community partnerships should involve collaboration with parents and community members directly in order to promote ownership.

**Leadership.** Next, to address leadership as a principle, the professional school counselor should assess their role as a leader on the campus and encourage shared leadership in the relationships with families and community members/organizations. As explicated by Holcomb-McCoy (2007), professional school counselors should seek out non-traditional leaders in the community (e.g., small business owners, police officers, grandparents, etc.) and invite them to play a meaningful and appropriate role in the school as decided by the group.

**Communication.** In consideration of communication as a principle, it is important for the professional school counselor to ensure that critical information pertaining to students is shared with families, and formal procedures exist related to how information will be shared and the frequency of contact (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Again, this decision should be decided and agreed upon by all stakeholders involved in the school-family-community partnership. This method is likely to reinforce the relational narrative (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007) that educators work with parents in helping children to improve academic outcomes.

**Community.** To promote community involvement, schools should determine appropriate methods to keep the community abreast of what is occurring at the school in order to promote a sense of openness and honesty within the collaborative relationship. Engaging the community in this manner can foster support for the school and cultivate future leaders (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007).

**Evaluation.** Lastly, in the school-family-community partnership, evaluation is key to addressing how successful and effective the partnership is to the school, to families, and to community members. The recommendation is for professional school counselors to collect data, both quantitative and qualitative, to assess the effectiveness of this type of intervention. Specifically, Holcomb-McCoy (2007) called for professional school counselors to assess how parent leaders have emerged (or not emerged), and document any strategies that have fostered more diverse parent participation. It is also important to identify how the original vision of the partnership evolved as a result of participation in the school-family-community partnership (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007).

Holcomb-McCoy offered additional resources that initiators of school-family-community partnerships can access and use to assist with implementation. One can access the work of Holcomb-McCoy (2007) related to this framework, with added resources and guides.

Researchers (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines 2010) contend that fostering school-family-community partnerships can serve as a protective factor and reduce negative effects related to sociocultural inequalities experienced by Black families. At the heart of the school-family-community partnership is a relationship that encourages community membership, and community membership is central to African-centered pedagogy (Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010). In developing school-family-community partnerships where Black families and students are the main focus, Moore-Thomas and Day-Vines recommended that counselors consider the Black psychology framework in development of African-centered pedagogy. Moore-Thomas and Day-Vines (2010) proposed that learning within the African American community is

best understood as an interactive combination of effort, capacity, and social support. Likewise, there should be ample energy expended to ensure that the Black family is respected in the process.

Moore-Thomas and Day-Vines (2010) suggested that those fostering community partnerships consider Black family cultural values and norms that exist within Black families, which are uniquely calibrated and informed by individual families and communities. Another consideration for professional school counselors includes a focus on the idea of cultural reciprocity (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999; Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010). Cultural reciprocity refers to the understanding of cultural variables that may affect the relationship between two individuals; and as it relates to counseling, includes understanding how the framework of counseling as a western process may cause disconnection between the counselor and the counselee if the counselee is from a non-western or non-westernized culture (Warger, 2001). Moreover, Warger espoused that cultural reciprocity allows for the facilitation of conversations with families in an attempt to identify differing values and beliefs that drive the family's priorities, goals, and visions for their children, and as counselors seek to understand these differences, they can begin to adapt and align their professional methods with the family's practices. This process also allows the family to gain knowledge and understanding of an unfamiliar system (Warger, 2001).

A consideration for professional school counselors involves counselors understanding that this reciprocity "...develops over time within the framework of a trusting relationship" (Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, p. 60). Specifically, Moore-Thomas and Day-Vines focused on cultural reciprocity as a consideration for counselor

educators and school counseling trainees who are engaged in practica and internship experiences, because the current educational structure of school counselor fieldwork may not allow enough time for the creation of lasting trusting relationships. Yet, this should also be a consideration of professional school counselors given the extremely high counselor-to-student ratios currently experienced in many states, including California, which may impact the ability of the counselor to commit the necessary time to foster these relationships. Nevertheless, in order for the professional school counselor to engage in the development of school-family-community partnerships using the five effective principles outlined previously, there must be a commitment on the part of the counselor to respect the unique family structures and values of all families, and specific to this paper, the structures and values of Black families.

### **Conclusion**

There remains a need for continued attention and focus on Black students in P-12 education, as this population continues to be on the receiving end of harsh disciplinary actions and is more likely to drop out of school. There has been an abundance of research reviewed that has linked dropping out to poorer life outcomes for Black students, therefore it is necessary for added attention and effort to be expended on school campuses in order to promote engagement of this population and decrease the likelihood of these students dropping out. The three evidence-informed strategies offered in this paper should be approached after carefully reviewing the framework for engagement provided by the authors of these programs. Further, more research related to ways to engage Black students in P-12 schools to improve academic outcomes is

warranted, as engagement in research related to this topic is relevant for Black students and society at large.

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### **Biographical Statement**

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