

A School Counselor's Guide to Promoting a Culture of Academic Success

Meitra L. Perry, Ed.S., School Counselor at Lithia Springs High School
326 Mill Run Drive
Bremen, Georgia 30110
404-403-3139
Meitra.Lak@gmail.com

Abstract

Graduation rates are affected by several factors in which school counselors are not always aware of. Current research highlights several demographics at a higher risk for dropping out of high school including low socioeconomic status, African-Americans, Hispanics, teen pregnancy and students whose parents dropped out of high school. This manuscript is intended to recognize community-based and school-based intervention programs to increase graduation rates as a whole and ways to advocate for these students. Further, the manuscript will provide important research in regards to additional risk factors to target students through a comprehensive school counseling program.

A School Counselor's Guide to Promoting a Culture of Academic Success

School counselor roles have changed drastically over the last decades, from major duties and responsibilities, to school administration preferences. Although school counselors have varying duties, dependent upon the school, school counselors aim to enhance academic success and performance through the implementation of a comprehensive school counseling program. Specifically, school counselors may focus on increasing

graduation rates within the school and community they serve.

In fact, graduation rates in the state of Georgia are a key element when determining a school's College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI). According to the Georgia Department of Education website, "CCRPI is a comprehensive school improvement, accountability, and communication platform for all educational stakeholders that will promote college and career readiness for all Georgia public school students" (2015). Graduation rates are a quick and quantitative way for a state's Department of Education to decide whether a school is improving, declining or staying stagnant. Many school systems turn to school counselors to track cohort graduation numbers of each class of students to assist in determining the likelihood of success in this area. It is also common for school administration to specifically look to the school counseling department to implement needed interventions and curriculum to target at-risk students who are not on track to graduate or school-wide programs when there is a concern for dwindling graduation rates. The National Center for Education Statistics states "... the 2014-2015 adjusted cohort graduation rate for public high school students rose to 83%" (2017). Although Georgia's

Department of Education has reported increased graduation rates every year since 2011, the 2015 four-year cohort graduation rate of 78.8% still has room for improvement (2015).

The intent of this manuscript is to provide school counselors with practical resources, selected interventions and unique opportunities to increase graduation rates for at-risk students as well as school-wide initiatives to promote a culture of academic success. The resources discussed throughout the manuscript will allow school counselors to choose which classroom guidance lessons, small group, and individual counseling lesson plans are the most appropriate for their target populations. Further, the following manuscript, will also introduce a variety of risk factors, including teen pregnancy, low-income, single parent households, English Language Learners and first-generation college-bound students that school counselors come into contact with regularly but do not have the time to address each group or each person individually due to the range of assigned duties. By introducing these risk factors, school counselors can decide which sub-group of students is producing the highest decrease in graduation rates in their specific school. The article will conclude with how school counselors can target these students and generate large increases in graduation rates by applying correct interventions and altering parts of their comprehensive school counseling program to meet the needs of the students.

Literature Review

According to Koenig, J. A., Hauser, R. M., the National Academies Press, the National Research Council, and the National Academy of Education (2010), "...high

school graduation rates have long been used as a central indicator of education system productivity and effectiveness..." (pp.9). Koenig et al. (2010) go on to say that "Earning a high school diploma is one of the most important factors associated with social and economic success in America. A high school diploma signifies that the bearer has both the cognitive and noncognitive attributes important for success in adulthood" (pp.13). Knowing how important employers believe a high school diploma to be in regard to the abilities of an employee shows the importance of tailoring a school counseling core curriculum, school-wide incentive plans, small group and individual counseling sessions to increase graduation numbers. Not only is a high school diploma important for job-seeking purposes, but studies indicate high school graduates live 6 to 9 years longer than high school dropouts, and although high school dropouts make up less than 20% of overall population, they make up 41% of the incarcerated population (Koenig, et al., 2010). A high school diploma does not just give vocational opportunities for students, but it can make a difference in a person's life expectancy and freedom.

According to the case study done by Todd McKee and Caldarella (2016): The United States has a high percentage of students dropping out of high school. Approximately 10% of students entering high school eventually leave before graduation without a diploma or equivalency. Research into high school completion has identified dropping out of school as a personal and social crisis.

Todd McKee and Caldarella (2016) go on to say high school dropouts

have limited life opportunities and, as a group, can become a drain on social services. Students who drop out are four times more likely to be unemployed and if employed earn one-third less income than high school graduates. They have fewer employment options and usually end up in low-skilled, low-paying positions with few opportunities for advancement.

Risk Factors

There are early risk factors, which can be identified as early as sixth grade to discourage students from dropping out of high school (Todd McKee & Caldarella, 2016). Social and academic risk factors are the most common risk factors to pinpointing students who are at risk for not graduating. High school counselors must begin making partnerships and relationships with their middle school counselor counterparts to provide easier high school transitions and bridge programs as well as communicating the names of students who need more support during high school. Todd McKee and Caldarella (2016) stated that "... identification of high school students at risk for dropout [must be done] by the first semester of ninth grade year" to effectively make change (pp.515). Students who are on track after their freshman year are "... four times more likely to graduate than students who were off track" (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016). "It comes as no surprise that ninth grade marks the year with the highest percentage of grade retention" (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016). Among other early risk factors to identify: family income, parents' education and family structure are all positively correlated with high school dropout as well as a larger number of minorities, African-American and

Hispanic males particularly (Todd McKee & Caldarella, 2016). Academic risks such as test scores, previous school performance, specifically in core classes, and problems with attendance are associated with high school dropout as well (Todd McKee & Caldarella, 2016).

Special Populations

As school counselors work to increase graduation rates, there are several key groups and populations who can be targeted through a comprehensive school counseling program. According to Beatty (2001), "...dropping out is significantly higher among Hispanic and African-American students, students in poverty, among students in urban schools, among English-language learners, and among students with disabilities" (pp. 14). The numbers for dropping out are much higher for Hispanic students who were born outside the United States compared to those who are born in the United States (Beatty, 2001). This data allows school counselors to concentrate on the populations who are at the highest risk of high school dropout by knowing which students to invite for group counseling initiatives and teaming up with ESOL/ELL teachers for classroom guidance lessons. Bradley and Renzulli (2011) stated one reason Hispanic and/or Latin@ students drop out is "Latinos, traditional cultural values may instill motivations for working that go above and beyond financial impetuses to work" (pp. 525). School counselors should be aware that "...in Mexico school is a luxury and adolescents are expected to work. For Latino boys, one of the most common explanations of dropout is that they are working many hours during and even prior to adolescence" (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011). By knowing which Hispanic country

a student and his or her family are from, school counselors will be able to explain the importance of cultural differences and expectations in the United States without devaluing the students' culture, family or heritage.

Some schools and school districts may be predominantly made up of Hispanic and/or African-American students, therefore, focusing on these two ethnic groups may not be possible, as this may be the majority and/or all of the student body. Another way a school counselor can identify students who need to be targeted with intervention programs is by focusing on the students' parents. "The judicial abrasion (divorce) or preclusion (out-of-wedlock births) of the father from his sons and daughters biases the children in the direction of not achieving a high school diploma" (Mackey & Mackey, 2012). Focusing on students who fall into the above ethnic categories but also may come from a family of divorce, or a family where the student was born out of wedlock, may also provide another way for school counselors to center on the group of students who are at the highest risk for dropout. Another way to incorporate parental characteristics is identifying those students who did and did not complete their own high school diploma or complete any college work. According to Lundetrae (2011), "...parents educational level was found to influence drop-out in both Norway and USA", and showed that "...highly educated parents increase the likelihood for youth to enter higher education and predict better results in mathematics, reading and science for 15-year-olds" (pp. 634). "The likelihood for dropout was more than three times as large for youth with low educated mothers compared to youth with high educated mothers (Lundetrae, 2011). Although

most school counselors are aware of the repetition which can occur across generations in regards to education, Lundetrae (2011) notes that it is important to look at the educational attainment of both parents, whether in the home or not in the home, as "...both parents' educational level had an impact on drop-out" (pp. 634).

Alternate Programs

Oftentimes, school counselors will refer students who may be at-risk of aging out of the public school system or who may be several credits away from graduating to a GED program thinking this is in the student's or the school's best interest. Giambo (2010) brings light to the GED pass/fail rate when he states:

The composition of Florida's GED students has changed in recent years to include more 17 to 20 years olds, rather than previously more typical adults. The reason cited is that schools are referring students to GED programs, even though both the GED pass rate from community colleges for these are low.

Another issue with referring students to GED programs is students, oftentimes, do not follow through with beginning the GED program, as there is no accountability once the student has left the high school. Educational laws vary from state to state in regard to students being referred to GED programs. Certain states (i.e. Florida) determine leaving high school to enter into a GED program or adult education program will not count against a school's dropout rate, whereas some states (i.e. Georgia) do count these students against a school's dropout rate. School counselors need to research their state laws in accordance to this as well as be aware of the unusually low GED pass rates in their specific state, to be able to advise students to the most

appropriate option available.

Integration into School Counseling Program

School counselors work to assist students to remove barriers in a student's education so they are able to have success in the classroom and in life after high school. Awareness of the long-lasting effects of not possessing a high school diploma is critical to understanding the need for interventions and the continued focus on increasing graduation rates. Knowing how to target students who may benefit the most from needed interventions allows for the limited resources and finances available to school counseling programs to be utilized in the most effective ways (Bowers, Sprott & Taff, 2012).

Once school counselors know who and why to provide intervention programs to within their school, school counselors must then decide how to integrate these initiatives within their comprehensive school counseling program. Freeman, Simonsen, McCoach, Sugai, Lombardi & Horner (2015) suggest "...early and universal direct social skills instruction along with a mastery learning approach to academics has been shown [to] increase the odds of high school completion (pp.294). Freeman et al. (2015) research the findings from schools who implemented the Schoolwide Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (SWPBIS) framework and notes one of the most important impacts of SWPBIS is that it "...provides explicit instruction to students about pro-social behaviors that lead to increased positive reinforcement within the school environment" (pp.294). This is important for school counselors, as school-wide positive reinforcement can provide the results needed to improve a school culture while simultaneously increasing

high school graduation rates. "The critical features of SWPBIS include: clearly defining, teaching, and reinforcing school-wide expectations: using data-based decision-making to monitor implementation and results; providing differentiated levels of support for students in response to student need; and establishing systems to support ongoing implementation" (Freeman et al., 2015). Ecker-Lyster and Niileksela (2016) discuss other types of programs which research shows to have been successfully implemented in schools to decrease dropout rates such as "... weekly support group meetings that focused on enhancing students' academic and interpersonal skills, combined with daily one-on-one interactions with an adult mentor..." (pp. 27). Mentorship programs such as the Boys and Girls Club and local sorority/fraternity alumni groups or partnerships with community businesses would allow little to no financial burden on a school system while providing the needed mentors for students. Another way to improve school retention and engagement, is utilizing service-learning and community engagement projects for at-risk students so they, too, can give back within their community and feel a sense of belonging (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016). "Disruptive behavior and poor social skills are considered academic risk factors that have the potential to influence a student's decision to drop out of high school" (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016). To target this group, providing students with ways to develop social skills through classroom guidance and small group counseling as well as helping parents understand the need for improving social skills can positively effect graduation rates (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016).

There is not much conflict among research

in regard to the populations which are identified as having positive correlations with high school dropout. It is evident through the review of case studies, journals and articles that targeting these groups as early as middle school is key for effective intervention and change. The topic of high school dropout is relevant to each high school counselor in the United States, as school counselors work to make educational improvements within their school and school district daily. School counselors attempt to assist students to remove barriers within the educational environment to encourage all students to be successful during high school and with their post-secondary lives. Identifying students who are at risk for not being successful is fundamental to improving school culture, utilizing school resources appropriately and targeting vulnerable populations and subgroups to implement intervention.

Practitioner-Based Recommendations Community-Based Interventions

Increasing community involvement within a school counseling program is a great way to produce increased graduation rates. Students with adult connections are more likely to feel encouraged by those around them, to have someone advocate for them and are provided with different perspectives when needing or seeking advice. Community mentorships are a key example of giving students adult connections. Most schools require anyone working with students to be given a background check, which can cost anywhere from \$30 to \$50. Partnering with organizations such as Boys and Girls Club or local sorority and fraternity organizations is a great way to find mentors as well as the organizations are usually responsible for the cost of the background check. Another way to find mentors within your

community, while avoiding the cost, is to partner with local or state mentor matching programs. Many community members do not know which schools to directly reach out to and often reach out to mentorship matching programs. Mentorship matching programs allow for schools to partner with this organization and have their need for mentors publicized in the geographical area. However, if/when a cost for a background check does fall onto your school, school counselors need to have already provided your administration with the reviewed literature, which shows the benefits of mentor/mentee relationships and how it will affect students and data.

Community-based incentive programs are another great way to increase community support while increasing graduation rates and providing students with a career after high school. School counselors need to research to find businesses and companies who provide incentive programs to high school-aged students, such as Southwire Company in Carrollton, Georgia. According to the Southwire Company 12 for Life website, 12 for Life provides students "...with classroom instruction, on-the-job training, key work/life skills, mentoring and employment opportunities" (Southwire Company, 2013). 12 for Life allows students to attend a public high school during a portion of the day and then spend four hours working a shift in a Southwire facility earning a paycheck, above minimum wage, but if students miss school, they are not allowed to work (Southwire Company, 2013). Programs such as 12 for Life focus primarily on students who are at risk of dropping out and need the skills and income to be successful and complete their high school degree. "Since the launch of 12 for Life, [Carroll County School System's] dropout

rate has plunged from 35% to 22%. A total of 851 kids have graduated from the program so far, 40% whom have gone on to college” (Helman, 2014).

School-Wide Interventions

Although focusing on students who fall into at-risk demographics, which have been discussed, is a good way to target students for interventions, there are students who always surprise school counselors when and if they choose to drop out of high school. School-wide interventions allow school counselors to focus on the entire student body with an inclusive mindset. Providing freshman transitional information sessions for students and families allows for time to teach freshman students which classes are needed to graduate, which classes are needed to attend four-year universities, how to read a transcript, the differences between middle and high school and understanding grade point averages. As Ecker-Lyster and Niileksela stated in 2016, “. . .ninth grade marks the year with the highest percentage of grade retention”, and through bulletin boards around your high school, freshman expo nights, open houses and visiting the middle schools who move into your high school are ways to provide this information to each entering ninth grade class (pp.28). Open houses and bulletin boards also allow school counselors to provide this information to the entire student body who may have transferred into your high school after ninth grade or who missed this information earlier in their high school career. For example, bulletin boards with the state and school’s graduation requirements or a timeline showing recommendations for each academic year for students going into a variety of post-secondary opportunities (i.e. technical school, junior college, university, work-

force).

Tracking cohort numbers is another way school counselors can directly track each graduation cohort. Keeping up with the student body number and the numbers within each graduating class allows school counselors to identify each student who is not accounted for and who may have dropped out or transferred schools. If a student transfers schools but the other school does not request transcripts or provide information the student has entered their school system, it will appear as if this student is a drop out from your high school when that is not the fact. Following up with graduation cohort numbers allows for unaccounted students to be addressed before it is too late. It is recommended that school counselors follow cohort numbers bi-weekly to have a better chance of reaching students to ask questions about their current educational situation. Tracking cohort numbers also allows for attendance to be seen to assist in identifying students for small group and individual interventions. Tracking cohort numbers is an easy way to add data into a school counseling program, but a team made up of the registrar, attendance clerk, school social worker and other guidance department staff will need to be utilized to use the data to implement change within the graduation rate.

Classroom-Level Interventions

Due to the limitations of school counselors being able to interrupt educational teaching through classroom guidance lessons, it may be difficult to enter classrooms often. School counselors need to model their comprehensive program based on the ASCA school counseling model, so a partnership agreement with their administration is created at the beginning

of the school year which states the topics and number of classroom guidance lessons school counselors will deliver. This will allow school counselors to advocate for their school counseling program as well as have administration support when entering classrooms. School counselors can also advocate for their program by getting teachers and other educators in their school involved within their program. Communication is fundamental for the school to stay informed of what is going on in the counseling department. School counselors can get this information to other educators through a counseling department newsletter, bulletin boards, school announcements, e-mailing information to teachers and updating the counseling department website. To increase graduation rates as well as prepare students for the next chapter in their lives, school counselors must be providing a variety of information when developing classroom guidance lessons. For example, oftentimes, school counselors only educate students on four-year college exploration, simply because of time restrictions. Alternatives to a traditional college-bound future also need to be discussed and embraced, including two-year colleges, military branches and students who wish to enter directly into the workplace. To increase graduation rates with Hispanic and/or undocumented students, school counselors can partner with the school Spanish teacher and ELL teacher to identify students who would benefit from a guidance lesson as well as provide bilingual information when needed. Guidance lessons for this population can include Hispanic-centered information such as local colleges with Hispanic-friendly campuses, scholarships for Hispanic and/or undocumented students, resources specifically for this population—like

mentorships and leadership conferences—and any other practical information which will assist these students with success after high school. When giving ninth grade students guidance lessons, school counselors should incorporate a school tour to show students where the school counselors’ office is and the college and career center. School counselors can also incorporate other locations in the school which are beneficial to find resources when needed that students may not be aware of, such as the free/reduced lunch application, how to check out SAT/ACT study books, where to rent laptops, etc.

Small Group Interventions

Although small groups may feel like the most difficult intervention to provide in high schools because school counselors are being pulled in several different directions at times, having a plan and staying on track with each lesson does have the ability to provide change in students’ lives as well as in the data collected. A small group that can be utilized is one targeting minority students who want to attend a four-year university. This small group, made up of tenth, eleventh and twelfth grade students, meets once per week throughout the fall semester discussing different colleges, financial aid, scholarships, college application processes and deadlines and ending the small group with an off-campus college tour field trip for the small group. This small group will add students each year as members of the group graduate, and students who have been in the small group throughout their time in high school can also act as mentors for the younger students. Another small group, which can be implemented, is one for all pregnant students within a high school. This would be a small group which would continuously be occurring based on the need of the

high school to ensure each pregnant student is invited to attend the group during their pregnancy. This small group can include information on how to apply for government programs which provide financial resources for food, daycare, and medical care such as the Georgia services Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, and Medicaid.

School counselors can also allow time for students to use school phones and computers to apply and follow-up on these programs through the Georgia Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS). This small group can also be used for group/peer counseling where students share how pregnancy has changed their relationships with family members, the fathers of their children and friends as well as helping students understand alternative options to graduation which is available in your school district like night school, which does not require students to attend school for eight full hours but still provides the same high school diploma upon completion. This small group can also serve as an open question and answer time for students about things like Hospital Homebound services and how that will occur while they are home recovering from childbirth. Targeting African-American males with no father figures can create another small group. This group can discuss future goals and not letting the past alter their future, finding drive and determination from others, incorporating mentors for these students so they can develop adult connections and introducing post-secondary options which they may have not realized were options previously. Another small group, which can make an impact on graduation rates, is having a

small group for students who transfer to your high school for a “New Student” small group. This small group can be particularly helpful for students who transfer from out of state and who are not familiar with Georgia’s HOPE scholarship program, Georgia colleges, state requirements for graduation, discussing clubs and sports available at your high school to encourage students to get involved, and other resources which are specific to your high school which will assist students in feeling more included.

Individual Interventions

Meeting with students individually can provide a time for students to feel more calm and confident to ask their school counselor questions. It is beneficial for all senior students to meet with their school counselor one-on-one in the fall of their senior year so school counselors can provide these students with reassurance they are on the right track to graduate, explain free/reduced lunch benefits, selective service registration, voter registration, to give them a checklist and timeline for their senior year as well as allow for each student time to ask any questions they may have. School counselors should meet one-on-one with all junior students during the spring of the student’s junior year. This allows two individual meetings, at the least, for every student to meet with their school counselor during their time in high school. During the junior meeting, school counselors and students will discuss how the student is doing in current courses, how the student can improve their GPA, which college entrance exam tests should be taken and when, required courses for next year and any other questions the student may have. It is beneficial for middle school counselors to provide the high school

counselors with names of students who would benefit from individual transition meetings during their first semester of high school. This individual counseling session will allow students to feel like they “know” someone at their new, larger school while providing information on the differences of middle school and high school and how the student will react to those differences. Lastly, individual interventions should be made when teachers refer students to the school counselor. Although not every school counselor referral is useful, teacher referrals are important to investigate, as they may warrant peer mediation, a student being moved into a small group which is taking place, reaching out to a parent/guardian or a further referral being made to an outside agency.

School Counseling Considerations

Through the review of literature and understanding the importance of increasing graduation rates, school counselors can begin making several changes to their comprehensive school counseling program to implement programs and strategies for the advancement of their school and students. School counselors must be at the forefront of collecting data in a variety of ways and utilizing that data to target students for intervention. Using advanced statistical methods, such as correlations, to identify students who may benefit from involvement and participation within classroom guidance lessons, small groups or individual counseling allows for school counselors to provide information to the important stakeholders. School counselors will provide unique small group opportunities, which are school-specific, and empower students to remove their own educational barriers. School-specific small groups should be driven by needs found within data collection, such as

schools who have 5 to 15 students who are pregnant can create a pregnancy small group or a school who has a large number of new students throughout the year and would benefit from a new student small group. School counselors must begin communication with their middle school counselor counterparts to ensure early intervention when students begin high school since the reviewed literature went into detail about ninth grade being a pivotal time in a student’s academic career. School counselors must actively network within their community to find partners and resources who want to be involved with the school counseling program. School counselors must begin providing lesson plans based on the ASCA standards, mindsets and behaviors, and obtain signed administrative agreements with their administrative staff. By doing this, school counselors will be able to engage the administration to better understand the school counselor’s vision and data-driven initiatives, as their support can impact the success or failure of every program. School counselors will continue to ensure information is given to the entire student population through school-wide interventions, bulletin boards, newsletters, website upkeep and social media outlets so each student has the ability to receive information if/when they have not been targeted for further interventions.

Administrators need to use the provided literature and research as a tool to be better equipped to recognize the uses and needs of data within their school. Administrators must begin taking more of an initiative to be involved and understand the comprehensive school counseling program within their schools. Administrators may be missing out on opportunities to provide change within their

school, student population and data by not partnering with school counselors and taking time to understand and advocate for the school counselor duties and responsibilities stated in the ASCA school counseling model. Administrators should take time to observe school counselors daily routines to better understand the required time and effort in which they need and utilize to create and deliver a comprehensive school counseling program.

Conclusion

School counselors play a crucial role in increasing high school graduation rates and are continuously discovering new and helpful strategies to make a well-rounded school counseling program. In this manuscript, a review of the literature provided a better understanding of how and when to target specific student populations through the use of data. Further, identifying students who fall into certain demographics and characteristics who may benefit from implementing classroom guidance lessons, small group interventions and individual interventions which are data-driven and school-specific. The positive ways in which networking within the community and opening the lines of communication among school counselors within a school district can positively impact the work school counselors are doing were also discussed. Administrators must support their school counselor and take time to fully understand school counselor duties and responsibilities per the ASCA model. School counselors and administrators must understand the need and evidence-based research for the continued data-centered school counseling program to implement change and advocacy in regards to high school graduation rates.

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