

# A School Counseling Program Evaluation:

## Utilizing Staff Perceptions to Guide and Shape Future Program Planning

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### Abstract

This paper describes an action research project evaluating an elementary school counseling program in a large suburban Georgia city. Using staff surveys (which include homeroom teachers as well as support teachers and paraprofessionals), interviews, and researcher observations the program was evaluated to determine strengths and weaknesses. The results indicate that the staff members have a general understanding of the school counseling program's goals. Most participants indicated that the program met the needs of the school and its students. Implications from the research pointed to a need for more direct collaboration of the professional school counselor (PSC) with teachers on a regular basis. Further research into the parent and student perceptions of the school counseling program is recommended.

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With a major focus on accountability for educators, evaluation of all elements of student performance maximizes student success. School counseling programs must follow this trend and move toward greater demonstration of accountability through thoughtful program evaluations. In the state of Georgia, academic competencies are based on the Georgia Performance Standards (GPS); however, the state has not yet established these standards for school counseling programs. Individual counties have flexibility in the delivery and standards for school counseling programs.

The purpose of this action research study (ARS) was to determine the staff perceptions of the school counseling program for an elementary school (PK -5<sup>th</sup> grade) in a large suburban Georgia city and to utilize this information to make improvements to the program. The school's population is diverse in ethnicity and socioeconomic status: more than 50% of students are on free/reduced lunch status, and the student demographic breakdown is 68% African-American, 14% Hispanic, 13% Caucasian, 3% Asian, 2% multiracial. Class sizes are below the state average and numerous supports assist teachers in the educational process. With only one professional school counselor (PSC) for a school of almost 500 students, it is important that the school counseling program, which is modeled after the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model, is regularly evaluated and changed to meet the needs of students. This paper's purpose is to review the methods, outcomes, and limitations from the ARS to determine the program's strengths and weaknesses. The interventions utilized for improvement are also discussed. Having interaction regarding the staff perceptions of the school counseling program will guide the PSC and the school counseling advisory council in making changes to program elements and goals to provide students with a program that better meets their needs.

### Review of Related School Counseling Literature

The literature related to this ARS identifies two main themes: accountability for PSCs and their programs, and how staff perceptions of school counseling programs impact changes within the programs. Through a review of this literature, the foundation for this ARS was established.

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## Accountability and the Need for Program Evaluations

Like other professions, there is an increased demand for school counseling programs to demonstrate accountability and impact on student academic, personal/social, and career development (Beesley, 2004; Dimmitt, 2009; Whiston & Aricak, 2008). The American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2003) created a National Model for PSCs to utilize as a guide in the creation of programs. The model is comprised of four domains: foundation, delivery, management, and accountability. The accountability domain promotes the need for PSCs to utilize data to drive the program goals and demonstrate effectiveness (ASCA, 2003). Using data, the PSC should be able to demonstrate how the program's interventions have assisted in student performance and success.

## Methods for Program Evaluations

Thorough evaluation of school counseling programs can reveal the following: contributions that the program makes towards educational successes, increased awareness, and further definition of the responsibilities of the PSC. Having this information not only builds on the knowledge about the program but also leads to more effective interventions being utilized in the pursuit of assisting students (Dimmitt, 2009). School counseling program evaluation is necessary for the growth and improvement of the program. ASCA outlines performance standards and recommends a program audit for PSCs. The multifaceted design assists PSCs in simplifying and evaluating each element of the program. PSCs then utilize the information in setting program goals (2003). Methods for program evaluation can vary.

**Sample program evaluations.** Missouri, for example, evaluates school counseling programs using a multifaceted assessment of the components of the program, supervision of personnel, and program results. This school counseling model places emphasis on feedback from stakeholders regarding mastery of competencies, and satisfaction with program elements (Gysbers, Hughey, Starr & Lapan, 1992). By utilizing several sources of systemic data, PSCs had a more concrete picture of the impact of the program.

Conversely, other program evaluations center more on the individual PSC and his/her personal contributions to the program. Littrell and Peterson (2001) focused their description of program evaluation on one PSC's program

and through extensive observations were able to assess the impact of the school counseling program on the school and its students. Although helpful in reference, attempting to evaluate a program using this method, would present major difficulties for PSCs. Having outside observers enter a setting and conduct interviews related to the effectiveness of a program would be informative; however, most PSCs would find this approach unrealistic in that limited resources would be available to utilize this method of evaluation.

Many evaluation techniques require feedback from stakeholders regarding their insights into the program. This type of feedback can be difficult for stakeholders to provide, especially if the program is not fully implemented or well publicized. Providing information in the form of brochures, or presentations to parents and other stakeholders promotes the school counseling program and the role of the PSC is made clearer to the stakeholders. In turn, this improves stakeholder ability to access and evaluate program elements (Gillilan, 2006). Once stakeholders are knowledgeable about programs, they are able to communicate their needs through membership on advisory councils, and feedback in interviews and surveys. By advertising about programs, stakeholders will know more about the interventions and program elements that are offered to students (Lenhardt & Young, 2001). Teachers must be included in stakeholder groups who receive information on the school counseling program, as they consistently interact with students and are aware of student needs.

## Teacher Perceptions of School Counseling Programs

Surveying stakeholders is considered a useful tool in program evaluation, specifically with teachers and school staff as this helps to gain their perceptions of the program. From teacher surveys, PSCs can obtain information on beliefs related to their roles and responsibilities. Additionally, being aware of teacher perceptions is important, as this information can impact the success of the program (Jackson, et al., 2002). Teachers are more regularly in contact with parents and students, so they are more likely to suggest counseling assistance to a student in need of these services. Furthermore, providing stakeholders with opportunities for providing feedback on school counseling programs, demonstrates their importance to the program and concern for fulfilling their needs (Reiner, Colbert, & Perusse, 2009). Validating the opinions of

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stakeholders and integrating their needs into programs helps to guarantee that the program is comprehensive in nature and will increase buy-in for the program.

Teachers are important stakeholders of school counseling programs because of the influence they have on students and parents (Clark & Amatea, 2004). Collaborating with this stakeholder group about the program helps to ensure the counseling services are utilized. Clark & Amatea (2004) found in their studies of teacher perceptions that building positive relationships with teachers was critical to program success. Having a positive working relationship in which teaming and consulting between teachers and PSCs occurs will strengthen the school counseling program and allow for better utilization of services.

Although it is difficult to generalize teacher perceptions studies, the information they yield is extremely helpful in measuring counseling program effectiveness (Beesley, 2004). This ARS builds upon the research found pertaining to other school counseling programs that utilize school/staff perceptions to impact and evaluate the school counseling program.

## Methodology

The method for conducting this study is action research (AR). With this type of research, educators gather information to determine effectiveness of practices. However, use of AR research results is limited in generalizability but yields meaningful descriptive statistics for the researcher. Although AR results have limited generalizability, the data produced gives helpful insights (Mills, 2011) for possible replication individualized to the particular program.

Before beginning the data collection process, a plan for the ARS was given to the school and county administration for approval. With authorization from both parties, the researcher received approval from the Institutional Review Board at the University of West Georgia. The purpose of the study was to evaluate staff members' perceptions of the school counseling program to determine program strengths as well as areas for improvement. The researcher understood that the willingness of staff members to honestly critique the program and its elements could have influenced participant responses in both interviews and surveys. Additionally, the researcher is the current PSC and interview participants may not have felt comfortable discussing weaknesses of the program with her.

After reviewing related literature and self reflecting on the current school counseling program, the researcher formulated hypotheses before beginning the study. The researcher expected that the staff would be aware of the most of the elements of the school counseling program and generally have an accurate understanding of the PSC's role. Lastly, the researcher predicted that staff would express concerns over certain program elements that require teacher implementation, but would also have positive feedback on other program elements.

Research questions were formulated to test these hypotheses. The specific research questions include: 1) How does the school staff perceive the school counseling program? 2) Does the school staff have adequate and accurate information on the role of the school counselor? 3) How can the school counseling program be changed to better meet the needs of students? 4) What elements of the school counseling program currently in place do staff members perceive as beneficial to students?

## Participants

Prior to survey distribution, all staff members were informed of the ARS, its purpose and goal. In regards to participants, the term staff member includes full-time professionals and paraprofessionals that have direct academic interactions with students, which include classroom teachers, specials teachers, early intervention program (EIP) teachers, support teachers, and administrators. Generally, the school staff has an average of 11.8 years of experience in the school setting. There are only 2 male staff members and the rest are females. The majority, 68% of the staff members are Caucasian with the remaining 32% being African-American. During a school staff meeting, staff members in attendance were given a survey and their honest, thoughtful participation was encouraged. Staff members, with direct student contact, not in attendance were also given the opportunity to complete a survey that was placed in their employee mailbox. Of the 50 surveys distributed, 31 were returned with a return rate of 62%. Interview participants were selected based on their willingness to volunteer time to speak with the researcher about the school counseling program. Great care was given to ensure that interviews were conducted with a representative sampling of staff members to gain insight from various grade levels and content areas about the needs of all students. In all, nine interviews were conducted each lasting approximately 30 minutes. Staff members were asked strengths of the program, areas in

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which it could be improved and to make general comments regarding the overall effectiveness of the program.

## Data Collection and Analysis

For this ARS, data were collected using a staff survey, staff interviews, and researcher observations. The survey was developed after reviewing literature and other related assessment tools. The survey consisted of 10 items using a 4-point Likert scale, comprised of strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree. Additionally, the survey also included 3 open-ended sentence completion items. These items gave participants the opportunity to express options for improvements to the current school counseling program. The quantitative data from the survey information were entered into an Excel spreadsheet. The information was totaled and converted into percentages (see Table 1).

Open-ended responses were compiled in a table format and were examined for reoccurring themes. Interviews were conducted by the PSC, who also was the participant researcher in this ARS, with 9 staff members that are part of different academic teams. These interviews were conversational, but structured and typically lasted 15-30 minutes. Interviewees were asked to evaluate the overall program, and to give insights into areas where the program could be strengthened. Following the structured questions, the researcher allowed staff members to give feedback on other program elements. Researcher journaling was also utilized for data collection. During the time frame of the ARS, the researcher kept detailed notes of informal conversations, and meeting discussions pertaining to the school counseling program. The notes were reviewed for common themes, areas for improvement, and program strengths.

## Results

Likert scale survey results indicate the staff perceptions of the school counseling program. Sixty-five percent of participants strongly agree that classroom guidance lessons are conducted regularly, 19% agree, 3% disagree (1 participant), and 13% did not respond. When asked whether classroom guidance lessons are meaningful 68% strongly agree, 16% agree, and 16% did not respond. Thirty-two percent strongly agree that small groups have been beneficial for students, 42% agree, 3% disagree, and 23% did not respond. When asked if small group topics met the needs of students 52% strongly agree, 35

% agree, and 13% did not respond. Sixty-five percent strongly agree that counseling referrals are followed up in a timely manner, 26% agree, and 10% did not respond. When asked whether or not teachers were given appropriate follow-up information 32% strongly agree, 42% agree, 10% disagree, and 16% did not respond. Ninety-four percent strongly agree or agree that the PSC meets with parents when needed or requested, 6% did not respond. When asked if the PSC is willing to meet with teachers to plan for student needs 61% strongly agree, and the remaining 39% agree. Sixty-five percent strongly agree that they would recommend school counseling services to students and parents, 32% agree, and 3% did not respond (see Table 1).

Three open-ended survey items were also included to allow staff opinions for improvements to the program, ideas for new program elements, and insights into how the school counselor can better serve students. Forty-eight percent of participants expressed their opinions. Several people wrote comments of positive feedback, but nothing that specifically answered the questions. Some suggestions were made for ways or areas for program improvement which include having another PSC, more time for small groups, and reminders of classroom guidance lessons (see Table 2). In regards to beginning new programs, some suggested the following: more one on one counseling for students with major needs, conducting classroom guidance sessions in the individual classrooms instead of the PSC's room, meeting monthly with grade levels to discuss student needs, and parenting workshops (see Table 3). The final open-ended question referred to how the PSC could better serve students. This question yielded some responses but only a few suggestions for improvements which included having the counselor spend less time on behavioral issues, and having time available for prevention (See Table 4).

Notes from researcher observations and interviews were reviewed for repeated suggestions for program improvement. Qualitative results indicated several common themes from teachers for improving the school counseling program. Common themes were established as ideas that more than one teacher recommended as a program change. Staff felt classroom guidance is helpful and completed regularly. Multiple teachers suggested having more classroom guidance sessions, instead of the current one per month. A few participants mentioned that having the second lesson of the month on the same topic as a review of the information taught in the first lesson to reinforce this material. Several staff members shared

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that referrals are followed up quickly and given needed attention. Two teachers expressed frustration about the PSC being called upon to handle administrative or discipline issues, which took away from counseling time. The main theme that emerged from the interviews is the desire for monthly collaborative planning sessions with the PSC. Teachers believed it would be beneficial to know monthly guidance topics so that they are able to reinforce the material with students. Additionally, several felt that this would be a good time to share student concerns with the PSC to see if there are possible interventions for helping the students with needs. Other comments indicated great satisfaction with the school-wide character education program, and positive feedback on guidance lessons and small group topics.

## Discussion

The ARS, designed to evaluate the school counseling program at a suburban elementary school, indicates that stakeholders perceive that the overall program is functioning to meet the needs of students based on their survey responses and interviews. Participants provided positive feedback and suggestions for strengthening further the PSC and the program elements. Almost all respondents report classroom guidance lessons and small group counseling as beneficial to students. Data from in-depth interviews suggest that the guidance curriculum could be strengthened by adding more lessons which would reinforce skills that have been previously taught. Further, having teacher buy-in through collaborative meetings would allow for greater transfer of learning as teachers will be able to use the same vocabulary and concepts covered in the guidance lessons. Small group sessions would also be strengthened through collaborative interactions with staff members.

Interview data also indicate that some students do not receive referrals to small group because teachers were not aware of group options or did not communicate the need to the PSC. By providing all grade level teams with a monthly time to connect with the PSC, the school counseling program should be better able to ensure that students' needs are not going unmet.

Throughout the survey, there were several items that a fairly large percentage of respondents chose not to answer. Because all staff members, including the support teachers, were surveyed, it is likely that staff members who were not homeroom teachers may not have been aware of students who participate in small group counseling or the

impact of classroom guidance on students. Support staff interviews affirmed that these teachers are aware of the elements of the school counseling program, but that they did not feel they had adequate knowledge to rate them.

Data related to counseling referrals explain that the staff members believe that both teacher referrals and student self referrals are handled in a timely manner. Upon review of the data, the researcher discovered that two of the survey questions were very similarly worded and were likely confusing to participants. However, the results indicate that staff members do not find referral follow up as a concern. Furthermore, during the interviewing, several participants expressed satisfaction at the handling of referrals and the quick response time. One interesting finding indicated that staff members (n=2) expressed concern that the PSC might be delayed in responding to counseling referrals because non-counseling duties have been assigned to her (e.g., the PSC being called to handle classroom disciplinary concerns more appropriately assigned to an administrator). The teachers felt this was a concern for the administration and not the fault of the PSC or teachers' misunderstanding of the PSC's role.

The findings of this ARS offer helpful considerations for evaluating the school counseling program. From the overall staff perspective, the program is beneficial and meets student needs. Although the program is valuable to student success, areas of improvement were discovered and appropriate interventions can be utilized to advance the program's development.

## Interventions

One of the recurring themes in the staff interviews was the potential benefit of having monthly grade level team meetings with the counselor. The PSC began meeting with each grade level team monthly to share student concerns and to debrief staff members on the classroom guidance topic for that month. This time for individual student planning has strengthened the program by allowing for easier access to referrals and early counselor intervention for problems.

Future interventions will include adjusting the classroom guidance schedule to allow for two classroom guidance lessons each month. The PSC will begin piloting this intervention at the beginning of the next school year to determine how this change to the schedule will impact the rest of the school counseling program.

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## Limitations

There are several limitations with regard to this ARS. First, the data from the study only include one mid-sized suburban elementary school. While this ARS could be replicated in other schools, the implications and results are only pertinent to the program evaluation for the school at hand. The interventions utilized, however, could likely be beneficial to other school counseling programs. Another limitation is the use of untested measurement tools. The survey, created by the researcher from a review of the literature, had some items which were not worded clearly. Two of the questions seemed to be evaluating the response time of the PSC. If further surveys of other stakeholder groups are to be done, it would be helpful to pilot the survey tool with a focus group before full distribution. Further, the interviews were conducted by the PSC which may have caused participants to answer differently than with an outside researcher. While a participant researcher is an entity within AR, it can be difficult when interviews are conducted. In the future, it would be wise to have another individual conduct the interviews.

## Implications and Conclusions

The school staff members at this elementary school are familiar with the school counseling program and its components. Although some adjustments can be made to the program to improve its ability to meet student needs, it generally seems, from a teacher perspective to be successful. The suggested interventions are likely beneficial and will have a positive impact on improvement of the overall program. However, with the demands placed on the PSC's time, it will be important to resolve some of the disciplinary duties that are often requested of the PSC thus allowing time for more classroom guidance lessons and collaborative planning with staff.

The results of this ARS proved to be helpful to the PSC in providing a careful program evaluation. From the information gathered, adjustments to the current plan will be implemented. The study also points to a need for future program evaluations to survey other stakeholders such as parents and/or students to determine their awareness of the program and its components to be sure that they are able to easily understand and access the school counseling program.

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## Appendix A

### Staff Perceptions of an Elementary School Counseling Program

\*This survey is voluntary and anonymous. Completed surveys will be used in improving the school counseling program

**Please indicate your role in the school**

Homeroom Teacher	Support Teacher	Administrator	Paraprofessional

**Please complete for your perceptions related to the school counseling program.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1) Classroom guidance lessons are conducted regularly.				
2) The topics of classroom guidance lessons are meaningful.				
3) Within the school counseling program, small groups have been beneficial for my students.				
4) Small group topic/focus covers several areas that meet the needs of students.				
5) Counseling referrals for students are followed up in a timely manner.				
6) Teachers are provided an appropriate amount of follow-up information about their students as it relates to the school counseling program.				
7) School counseling student referrals are follow-up in a timely manner.				
8) With regard to the school counseling program, the counselor meets with parents as needed or requested.				
9) With regard to the school counseling program, the school counselor is willing to meet with teachers to plan for student needs.				
10) I recommend school counseling services to students and parents.				

**The school counseling program could be improved**

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**I would like the school counseling program to begin**

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**The school counselor could better serve students**

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## Appendix B

**Table 1**  
*Elementary School Perception Survey Results: Likert Scale Statements*  
*Response Percentage/ n=31*

<b>Statement</b>	<b>SA</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>NR</b>
1) Classroom guidance lessons are conducted regularly.	65%	19%	3%	0%	13%
2) The topics of classroom guidance lessons are meaningful.	65%	16%	0%	0%	16%
3) Within the school counseling program, small groups have been beneficial for my students.	32%	42%	3%	0%	23%
4) Small group topic/focus covers several areas that meet the needs of students.	52%	35%	0%	0%	13%
5) Counseling referrals for students are followed up in a timely manner.	65%	26%	0%	0%	10%
6) Teachers are provided an appropriate amount of follow-up information about their students as it relates to the school counseling program.	32%	42%	10%	0%	16%
7) School counseling student referrals are follow-up in a timely manner.	61%	26%	0%	0%	13%
8) With regard to the school counseling program, the counselor meets with parents as needed or requested.	65%	29%	0%	0%	6%
9) With regard to the school counseling program, the school counselor is willing to meet with teachers to plan for student needs.	61%	39%	0%	0%	0%
10) I recommend school counseling services to students and parents.	65%	32%	0%	0%	3%

Note: SA= Strongly Agree, A= Agree, D= Disagree, SD= Strongly Disagree, NR=No Response

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## Appendix C

Table 2

*Open-ended Survey Responses 1; Program could be improved by:*

Response #	Response
1	I think our program offers a variety of options already
2	I think we do a great job
3	More time for more small groups
4	By keeping Mrs. Sherwood
5	Awesome and multifaceted! Thanks for all you do and all you offer!
6	Only if we could get another counselor. Heather does a wonderful job.
7	Not trying so many different programs. Staying with one or two that work
8	Please send a reminder re: guidance in the morning

## Appendix D

Table 3

*Open-ended Survey Responses 2; I would like the school counseling program to begin:*

Response #	Response
1	One on one counseling with a few students who have major issues!
2	Continue character building - I love the videos
3	Meeting with grade levels 1 time month to see needs
4	Parenting classes at the beginning of the year (mini ones/ off shoot of this year)
5	ASAP when school starts
6	Beginning of the year

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## Appendix E

Table 4

*Open-ended Survey Responses 3; The school counselor could better serve students:*

Response #	Response
1	Ours is doing a wonderful job. Always helpful, reliable, supportive. . excellent with the students . . . great example of what a school counselor should be/do
2	I can't think of anything you are doing a great job!
3	She does a great job
4	If she had more hours in the day. We seem to have many needs. I think that more students would benefit from small group sessions
5	If we had 2 counselors. 1 for K-2; 1 for 3-5
6	If she was not so busy with behavior issues each day
7	By visiting the classroom more than having class in the counselors office only
8	She's doing a great job
9	Mrs. Sherwood does an excellent job
10	Mrs. Sherwood does an excellent job! I don't see how she gets so much accomplished! Hard worker!
11	This program is fantastic!

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## Appendix F Guided Interview Questions about School Counseling Program

Teacher's Name

Grade/Subject Taught

What do you feel are the positive elements of the school counseling program?

How can the school counseling program be improved to better meet the needs of your students?

What changes do you feel would be beneficial to the program?

Please comment about the overall effectiveness of the program and what adjustments could be made to increase effectiveness.