

Improving Academic Achievement: What School Counselors Can Do

Duane Brown

The school reform movement has been a major societal and political agenda item for nearly two decades. The impetus for the reform movement continues to be derived from a variety of sources. Chief among these are the unfavorable comparisons of the achievement records of students in the U. S. with students in other industrialized countries (Peak, 1997), "report cards" from the U. S. Department of Education documenting that many students are not proficient in core academic areas, and concerns that students who graduate from U. S. schools will be ill prepared to perform the tasks in the increasing numbers of technical occupations (Daggett, 1997). As a result of the pressure stemming from the movement to make schools more effective, many changes have occurred. The most obvious of the changes that have resulted from the school reform movement is an increased emphasis on assessment. End-of-grade tests, end-of-course tests, and standardized achievement tests are used to measure the performance of individual students, individual, schools, and entire school districts. The most dramatic changes involve takeovers of low functioning schools by state boards of education. Although takeovers may take many forms, one approach is to send an educational SWAT team to a low-performing school and essentially redirect that school from within.

Some of the approaches to educational reform involve the carrot instead of the stick. The establishment of the National Board for Certified Teachers (NBCT) is a more positive approach. The NBCT, when it has completed its work, will have established criteria aimed at improving the skills and knowledge of teachers, counselors, and others. States and local school boards then reward certified educators with significant pay increases. Another positive approach to promoting increased academic achievement involves rewarding the faculties of high performing schools, which in essence involves the introduction of merit pay based on the performance of the entire school. Vouchers that allow parents to remove their students from low-performing public schools and place them in private schools have been introduced in Florida and Ohio. Many educators in public schools oppose the voucher system, perhaps because it threatens their job security. However, parents who take advantage of the system view vouchers as a positive step toward providing a sound education for their children because they can send them to private schools and have part or all of the cost paid for by their school districts. Charter schools, which are an alternative form of public schools, have also sprung up across the country. Charter schools and the use of vouchers creates competition between charter schools and private schools on one hand and public schools on the other, something many people believe is essential for promoting change in traditional public schools.

School counselors, like teachers and administrators, are expected to play an important role in the school reform movement. One prominent role that counselors fill in many school districts is testing coordinator. Paradoxically, the amount of time required to coordinate the increased amount of testing resulting from school reform has decreased the amount of time that counselors can spend in their traditional roles. Although coordinating the testing program is labor intensive, school counselors are under pressure to make other types of contributions to the efforts to improve student achievement. Recently the Wake County, North Carolina Schools adopted a policy that requires each school counselor to identify 30 at-risk students and develop programs that will increase their academic achievement. Other school districts have not been as direct as the Wake County Schools in

challenging counselors, but the message is the same: help promote student achievement. This digest is designed to outline a number of strategies and techniques that school counselors can use to meet this challenge. A much fuller discussion of these strategies can be found in *Proven Strategies for Improving Learning & Achievement* (Brown, 1999).

Improving School Climate

High profile school violence incidents in Colorado, Arkansas, Kentucky, and Mississippi have focused the nation's attention on alienated students. However, alienated students rarely go on violent shooting sprees. More often students who feel they have no place in schools disengage psychologically, and often physically, from those schools. The result is lowered achievement levels (Nelson, Covin, & Smith, 1996) and higher dropout rates. Schools with positive school climates have teachers and others who are seen as warm and caring, have educational policies that foster educational and personal development, and recognize students' efforts and accomplishments (Purkey & Schmidt, 1996). In-school suspension programs are policies that promote educational development. Out-of-school suspension programs provide no benefits to students and discourage their achievement. Educators who know students names, recognize their efforts, and provide academic support encourage educational and student development. Those who do not care, fail to listen, and refuse to recognize individual differences in achievement potential contribute to the alienation of students. School counselors can improve the climate of their schools by advocating for policies that promote rather than detract from the personal and educational development of students. They can do this by conducting in-service training of teachers and administrators to teach them basic communication skills, and methods of affirming students' importance and providing encouragement to them.

One of the interesting bits of rhetoric that has emerged from the school reform movement is the need for smaller schools because large schools are viewed as too impersonal. It is argued that in small schools, teachers, administrators, and counselors will know every student personally and students will have increased opportunities to participate in school activities. Arguments for smaller schools are at least partially responsible for the development of charter schools, but these schools serve only a very small percentage of students. However, school counselors need not wait until schools become smaller to personalize the educational environment. They can become the students' anchor persons so that through the use of routine conferences, students feel that at least one person in the school knows and understands their unique concerns. Additionally, they can take the initiative to help students develop a sense of belonging by involving them in school clubs and activities. One middle school counselor identified all the students in his school that did not belong to a club or participate in an activity. He then created a new club for those students and helped them develop a service-oriented mission. One of their service activities was to direct traffic at all school functions, which gave students in the club high visibility in the school.

School counselors can also help develop a positive school climate by sponsoring and conducting awards programs. Many schools have award programs in place, but unfortunately they are set up to honor only those students who are number one in a given area. If award

programs are to positively influence the environment of the school, they must impact a wide variety of students. Students who are working to improve their achievement, extend support and assistance to others who are striving to improve, exert energy to achieve even if the results are not exemplary, all need recognition. For example, awards can be given to the scholars of the week, the most improved students in math, science, language arts, etc., students who contribute the most to the achievement of others, the peer tutors of the week award, and so forth. Counselors can work with teachers and administrators to establish these awards and maintain a series of bulletin boards that have the Polaroid pictures of the various award winners posted. They can also name award winners in "Achiever Newsletters", post their names on their schools' websites, issue bumper stickers to students that tout their achievements, and send notices to parents about their children's achievements. Regular school assemblies can also be held to honor award winners. Perhaps the spirit of what is being advocated here can be found in the work of a high school counselor. At the end of each grading period, she sent "almost made it letters" to students who narrowly missed the A-B honor roll, congratulating them and encouraging them to keep aspiring.

Direct Interventions

School counselors can improve the nature of the achievement climate in their schools. They can also draw from a vast array of interventions that will help students increase their academic achievement (Brown, 1999). One intervention that has been used for more than a quarter of a century is behavioral contracts. Unfortunately, this intervention has not been properly applied and has not had the results that many teachers and counselors expected. If behavioral contracts are to be effective they must have specific objectives, set attainable short-term goals, be monitored regularly, allow for immediate reinforcement, and be adjusted when they are not promoting the desired change. Although they are somewhat more difficult to develop and monitor, behavioral contracts that involve groups instead of individuals have great potential to influence student behavior.

Other direct interventions that are frequently employed by school counselors include study skills groups, time management training, classroom guidance units aimed at improving test taking skills, and achievement motivation groups. Achievement motivation groups are led by the counselor, but involve input from the teachers and support for increased achievement from the students in the group. School counselors also establish SAT preparation courses, peer and volunteer tutoring programs, homework support networks, and refusal skills groups. Refusal skills groups are aimed at helping students resist the pressure often applied by low achieving students on achievers to minimize their academic achievement.

When students have educational and career goals they do better in schools. Counselors can facilitate the development of educational and personal goals by engaging students in individual and group activities that focus on goal setting. Career counseling is often neglected by high school counselors because they believe that students, particularly those going to college, have a number of years to choose a career. The fact is

that students who attend other than liberal arts institutions are often asked to declare majors that are tied directly to occupations upon entering college. Some school counselors routinely ask students about interests, educational plans, and occupational goals and record these in their portfolios as one way of emphasizing the importance of goal setting. Other counselors include juniors and seniors in a variety of experiences ranging from career and post-secondary opportunity days to occupational internships to assist them in their goal-setting.

Involving Parents

Research supports what educators have long understood: parent involvement is an important factor in student achievement (Brown, 1999). Parents who have a high level of commitment to their children, set high standards, maintain a stable home environment, support achievement and become upset when grades are low, suggest that academic achievement brings honor to the family, and monitor their students' progress continuously have children who do better in school. On the other hand, parents who accept the absolute authority of the teacher, maintain homes in dangerous neighborhoods, are poor, and are not proficient with the English language, have children who achieve at a lower level than other students. Counselors can involve parents through parent consultation, parent education classes that teach parents how to support their children in schools as well as parenting skills, and by advocating for parents and students when students are not treated fairly by the educational establishment. They can also help to keep the parents of children who are having difficulty in school apprised of their children's progress by encouraging teachers to communicate more frequently with parents than once per grading period.

Summary and Conclusion

School counselors are under pressure to assist in the effort to increase student achievement. They can respond to this challenge by working to improve the school climate, using direct interventions such as teaching study skills and involving students in achievement motivation groups, and by increasing the involvement of parents in the educational process.

References

- Brown, D. (1999). *Proven strategies for improving learning and academic achievement*. Greensboro, NC: CAPS Publications.
- Daggett, W. R. (1997). Getting schools ready for the technology of the future. *Model Schools News*, 1, 1-2.
- Nelson, J. R., Covin, G., & Smith, D. (1996). The effects of setting clear limits on the social behavior of students in the commons areas of schools. *Journal for At-Risk Issues*, 3, 10-19.
- Peak, L. (1997). *Pursuing excellence: A study of fourth grade mathematics and science achievement in an international context*. Washington, DC: NCES.
- Purkey, W. W., & Schmidt, J. J. (1996). *Invitational counseling*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.

ERIC Digests are in the public domain and may be freely reproduced and disseminated. This publication was funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, Contract No. ED-99-CO-0014. Opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions of the U.S. Department of Education, OERI, or ERIC/CASS.

For information on other ERIC/CASS products and services, please call toll-free (800) 414-9769 or (336) 334-4114 or fax (336) 334-4116 or write ERIC/CASS, School of Education, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Greensboro, NC 27402.