

# SCHOOL COUNSELING AND STUDENT OUTCOMES: SUMMARY OF SIX STATEWIDE STUDIES

The six statewide research studies presented in this special issue use a variety of designs, instrumentation, and measures. Nevertheless, they can be integrated at the level of results to shed light on some important questions related to effective practice in the field of school counseling. In fact, one can argue that, when separate studies that are conducted in a variety of contexts achieve similar findings, greater confidence can be placed in the conclusions. These six studies provide valuable evidence of the relationship between positive student educational outcomes and school counseling program organization, student-to-school-counselor ratios, counselor time use, and specific school counseling activities.

**School Counseling Program Organization.** Several of these research studies focused on whether student outcomes are influenced by how the school counseling program is organized. The Utah and Nebraska studies were designed to evaluate the extent to which components of *The ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs* (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2012) were associated with enhanced outcomes for students. The two studies share a common design and use virtually the same instruments. The Utah study found evidence that having a strong ASCA National Model programmatic orientation in the school

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counseling program was associated with increased ACT scores, increased percentages of students taking the ACT, and enhanced student achievement in math and reading as measured by the state achievement tests. The Nebraska study found that the extent to which a program had differentiated delivery systems as prescribed by the ASCA National Model and by traditional comprehensive developmental guidance (CDG; Gysbers & Henderson, 2012) was associated with decreased suspension rates, decreased discipline rates, increased attendance, and enhanced student achievement as measured by the state achievement tests in math and reading.

The finding that a programmatic orientation was more strongly related to outcomes in Utah while having a differentiated delivery system was more important in Nebraska most likely reflects historical differences between the states in terms of implementation of comprehensive developmental guidance. In comparison to Nebraska, Utah has a much longer history of statewide initiatives focused on CDG implementation. In earlier stages of implementation, perhaps having a differentiated delivery system is the most salient factor related to outcomes because counselors need to be able to deliver preventative curriculum, provide individual planning services, and engage in responsive services in order to have a program that actually reaches all students. After a differentiated delivery system is in place, developing the mechanisms that support planning, management, and professional decision making may become more salient factors because these mechanisms increase the effectiveness of the services actually delivered. If this interpretation is correct, it has implications for program development. In implementing an ASCA National Model program, the most effective approach may be to focus first on helping counselors develop a differentiated delivery system, then focus on developing the mechanisms (e.g. mission statement, advisory council, decision-making processes) that guide the management

of these activities. Further research is needed to study effective implementation practices.

School counselor data use is a hallmark of the ASCA National Model. The Utah study found that school counselor data use was associated with enhanced student achievement as measured by the state achievement tests in math and reading (and increased graduation rates in vocational programs). This finding was not replicated in Nebraska, perhaps because data use may become more salient after a differentiated delivery system is in place.

In contrast to Utah, school counselor data use in Rhode Island proved to be associated with decreased suspension rates and fewer student self-reports of being teased or bullied. Taken together, these findings suggest that, in general, school counselor data use influences positive outcomes for students, but the specific outcomes achieved will be related to the state, district, and school priorities and supports. Data use focused on enhancing student achievement will tend to

rates, retention rates, and truancy rates. More complete implementation was also associated with higher percentages of students passing the state math achievement test. According to the study's findings, Foundation implementation was correlated with graduation rates, while Management System implementation was correlated with attendance rates, suspension rates, graduation rates, retention rates, truancy rates, and passing rates on the state reading achievement test. The study did not find use of Evaluation practices to be significantly correlated with any outcome measure. The Wisconsin study has less rigorous statistical controls for demographic differences among schools. Nonetheless, this study supported the finding of the Utah and Nebraska studies that indicated that ASCA National Model implementation is associated with substantial benefits for students.

**Student-to-School-Counselor Ratios.** The Utah, Nebraska, Missouri, and Connecticut studies all studied the relationship between student-to-

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enhance achievement while data use focused on compartment or school climate will tend to reduce the suspension rate. Future evaluation should note that the impact of data use on student outcomes can only be appropriately assessed with respect to the actual identified goals of the data use.

Using different instruments and less rigorous analytic procedures than the Utah and Nebraska studies, the Wisconsin study found that more complete implementation of a comprehensive developmental model was associated with improvements in attendance rates, graduation rates, suspension

school-counselor ratios and positive student outcomes. All four studies used rigorous statistical controls for pre-existing demographic differences among schools.

The Utah study found that more favorable ratios were associated with improved attendance and discipline rates. The Nebraska study also found a relationship between ratios and attendance rates and found an additional correlation with completion rates and rates of attaining technical proficiency in career and vocational programs. The Missouri study found that better ratios were associated with

improved attendance in high-poverty schools and with improved graduation rates and discipline rates in all schools. Finally, the Connecticut study found that lower suspension rates were associated with more favorable student-to-school-counselor ratios. These four studies provide strong support for the contention that, in general, having more school counselors available to serve students is related to positive student school behavior, reflected most obviously in attendance and discipline.

## SCHOOL COUNSELOR DATA USE INFLUENCES POSITIVE OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS BUT THE SPECIFIC OUTCOMES ACHIEVED WILL BE RELATED TO THE STATE, DISTRICT, AND SCHOOL PRIORITIES AND SUPPORTS.

Subsequent research is needed to help quantify more exactly the relationship between ratios and outcomes to provide some way of empirically establishing the ratio needed for optimal implementation of an ASCA National Model program and to estimate the magnitude of benefits associated with hiring additional counselors.

**Counselor Time Use.** Three studies examined the relationships between how counselors use their time (across CDG time-use categories) and positive student outcomes. The Utah and Nebraska studies had counselors estimate time-use percentages across Guidance Curriculum, Individual Planning, Responsive Services, and System Support categories. Neither of these studies found robust relationships between counselor time use and positive student outcomes. The Wisconsin study used a different instrument to measure time use and found that increased amounts of time spent in Guidance Curriculum was associated with increased attendance rates, decreased truancy rates, decreased retention rates, and increased passing rates on the state reading achievement test. The Wisconsin study also found that time spent in Individual Planning was associated with decreased suspen-

sion and truancy rates and time spent in Responsive Services was associated with higher attendance and graduation rates and lower suspension and truancy rates. Time spent in System Support was not found to be associated with any student outcome in the Wisconsin study.

At this point, what these results about time use mean in aggregate and how they fit with previous research is not clear. For example, Lapan and Harrington (2009) used another in-

strument in a study of Chicago public high schools to measure counselor time use and found that students' level of college readiness was related to both the number of non-guidance tasks for which counselors were responsible and the range of individual planning services delivered by counselors. Each study in this special issue used a different self-report measure of time use and differing results may simply be due to instrumentation variation. Subsequent studies should address this issue by measuring time use in a more standardized fashion, using an instrument with known psychometric properties.

**Specific School Counseling Services.** The Rhode Island and Connecticut studies both focused on identifying the relationships between specific school counseling services and student outcomes. The Connecticut study found evidence for a positive relationship between the provision of college and career-readiness services and a lower suspension rate. Similarly, the Rhode Island study found a positive association between college and career readiness services and increased attendance, decreased suspensions, increased student sense of belonging to school, decreased student-reported

occurrence of "hassles with other students and teachers," and decreased student-reported incidents of being teased or bullied. The Rhode Island study also found that school counselor focus on activities related to promoting academic success was associated with these same outcomes. Focusing on parent involvement activities was associated with increases in attendance and students' sense of belonging to school, and with decreases in self-reported hassles with other students. Both of these studies found evidence that school counseling activities that focus on students' academic achievement, and college and career readiness, and on parent involvement are associated with positive outcomes in student engagement, comportment, and appropriate peer behavior.

These studies are consistent with and extend previous research on school counseling program outcomes (Lapan, Gysbers, & Petroski, 2001; Lapan, Gysbers, & Sun, 1997; Sink, Akos, Turnbull, & Mvududu, 2008; Sink & Stroh, 2003) by increasing the number of states (from two to seven) where guidance programs have been studied, by increasing the range of student outcome measures studied, and by increasing the range of objective measures of student outcomes. In aggregate, they provide evidence that important positive student outcomes are related to having an organized program in place that is consistent with the ASCA National Model and CDG principles, having a sufficient number of school counselors on staff to support the program, and delivering services focused on promoting college and career readiness, academic achievement, and parent engagement.

### Implications for School Counseling Practice

These findings clearly indicate that certain school counseling activities create specific and measurable results and that all school counseling activities are not equally impactful for students and for critical school-wide outcomes such as attendance and discipline. With this knowledge comes both a professional

TABLE 1

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AT DIFFERENT LEVELS: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Level of Practice	Practice Suggestions Based on Research Findings	Future Research Questions
School Counselor	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Use data (NE, RI, UT)</li> <li>2. Prioritize college and career-readiness counseling (CT, RI, WI)</li> <li>3. Prioritize career and technical education (NE)</li> <li>4. Prioritize promoting academic success (RI)</li> <li>5. Prioritize parent involvement (RI)</li> <li>6. Spend time on responsive services, guidance curriculum, and individual planning (WI, but not NE and UT) more than program evaluation (WI) and system support (NE, UT, WI)</li> </ol>	Which specific practices in each of these areas are most effective?
Program/School	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Implement a differentiated school counseling program delivery system if one is not in place (NE, UT)</li> <li>2. Implement the ASCA National Model if not already in place (UT, WI)</li> <li>3. When implementing ASCA National Model components, start with the Management System and add in Foundation and Evaluation components later (WI)</li> </ol>	If a school does not have a differentiated delivery system and is not using the ASCA National Model, which should be prioritized for implementation?
District	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Implement a comprehensive guidance program such as the ASCA National Model, if not already in place (RI, UT, WI)</li> <li>2. Decrease student-to-school-counselor ratios to improve student attendance (MO, NE, UT), improve student discipline rates (CT, MO, UT), and improve student graduation rates (MO) and technical proficiency (NE)</li> <li>3. Provide district-level professional development for school counselors in relevant areas</li> <li>4. Create school and district policies that ensure equitable school counseling program access for all students (CT, RI)</li> </ol>	<p>Are there optimal ratios for ASCA National Model implementation?</p> <p>Are there optimal time use profiles for maximal impact on students?</p> <p>How can schools and districts best ensure equitable access to comprehensive school counseling services?</p>
State	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Mandate ASCA National Model use (NE, UT, WI)</li> <li>2. Mandate student-to-school-counselor ratios to improve student outcomes (CT, MO, NE, UT)</li> <li>3. Provide state-level professional development for school counselors in the areas of college counseling, career counseling and education, academic support, guidance curriculum, data use, and parent involvement where needed (CT, MO, NE, RI, UT, WI)</li> <li>4. Create state policies that ensure equitable school counseling program access for all students (CT, RI)</li> </ol>	<p>What are the effective state policies and approaches to facilitate ASCA National Model implementation in states with centralized decision making? In states with local control?</p> <p>How much compliance is there with state mandates for school counseling practice and staffing?</p> <p>How can states best ensure equitable access to comprehensive school counseling programs?</p>
School Counselor Education	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Educate school counseling students about how to implement differentiated delivery systems and the ASCA National Model (NE, UT, WI)</li> <li>2. Educate school counseling students about college counseling (CT, RI, WI)</li> <li>3. Educate school counseling students about career and technical education and counseling (CT, NE)</li> <li>4. Educate school counseling students about how to use data (NE, RI, UT)</li> <li>5. Educate school counseling students about how to provide guidance curriculum, responsive services, and individual planning (WI)</li> </ol>	To what extent do school counselor education programs teach the competencies that have the greatest impact or that have little impact on student outcomes?

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**TABLE 1, CONT.**

Level of Practice	Practice Suggestions Based on Research Findings	Future Research Questions
National Policy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Continue to refine the ASCA National Model based on research findings (NE, UT, WI)</li> <li>2. Continue to push for decreases in ratios (CT, MO, NE, UT)</li> <li>3. Continue to mandate the use of data to make program decisions, measure outcomes, ensure equitable access, and determine accountability (NE, RI, UT)</li> <li>4. Ensure that all students receive state-of-the-art 21st century college and career counseling services from qualified professional school counselors (CT, RI, WI)</li> </ol>	<p>Which national policies implemented by the Federal Department of Education lead to the implementation of effective school counseling practices?</p> <p>Does advocacy by professional associations (ASCA, ACA) result in better Federal policy?</p>

imperative and an ethical obligation to increase those activities that best support student success. Table 1 summarizes the implications of these six statewide studies for practice at the counselor, school, district, state, and national policy levels. This table also includes implications for school counselor education.

For counselor practice on a day-to-day level, these studies have unambiguous findings about how to spend energy and time: making sure that a coordinated program is in place and providing important direct services to students and their families through career education, college and career counseling services, academic supports, parent communication, and the use of data to plan and improve services. For many counselors, data use is a new skill that has to be mastered. In the Rhode Island study, data activities included using data to examine student progress, determine the need for and effectiveness of interventions,

professional development or another form of education is needed (Dimmitt, Carey, & Hatch, 2007).

In Wisconsin, counselor time spent on Guidance Curriculum, Individual Planning, and Responsive Services were all correlated with a range of improvements in critical student outcomes such as attendance and discipline rates. The authors did not find correlation for System Support. The Utah and Nebraska studies did not find any clear correlation between time spent in these activity areas and student outcomes, perhaps suggesting that what school counselors are doing within an activity category, more than how much time they spend on activities within a given activity category, is what is important.

At the school and district level, these studies found that it matters which services school counselors are providing for students, and also how many counselors are providing those services. All six studies showed clear and

selor ratios and student outcomes. Furthermore, this research provides a clear imperative for all students to receive state-of-the-art, 21st-century college and career counseling services from qualified, professional school counselors.

Ensuring equitable access to school counseling services requires thoughtful analysis of whether and why all students might not be receiving services. Depending on whether the limits are due to school resources, perceptions of bias, crisis-orientation instead of comprehensive services, lack of coordinated programming, or some other challenge, framing the lack of services as an equity issue provides motivation for change and legitimates resource use (Cox & Lee, 2007; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007).

At the state level, depending on the degree of local control exerted by school districts (as in Connecticut, Missouri, Rhode Island, and Wisconsin) compared to the extent of centralized educational policy decision making (as in Nebraska and Utah), these studies suggest that several possible policy actions would support student outcomes related to school counseling programming. Such policies or mandates could include using a comprehensive program model such as the ASCA National Model, standardizing resources to support equitable access, and identifying minimal student-to-school-counselor ratios. One particularly important question that remains unanswered is whether monitoring practices or ratios at the state level is more efficacious, since additional school counselors (better

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identify issues of equity and access, identify evidence-based interventions, identify the relationship between school counseling activities and student performance, and document impact of services. When counselors don't already have these data skills,

consistent evidence that a coordinated, comprehensive guidance program such as the ASCA National Model is correlated with several crucial positive student outcomes. These studies also consistently found significant correlations between student-to-school-coun-

ratios) who are not providing relevant student services (better practices) may not improve student outcomes. This is an issue that requires further investigation, however, because the Connecticut study found significant effects for ratios that were independent of counselor delivery of Individual Planning or Responsive Service activities. Providing professional development also is warranted in any area where school counselors have not been trained in the practice, which is often especially true for using data.

These studies also have several implications for counselor education programs, which are charged with providing graduate students with the skills necessary to create and implement effective programs. Counselor education programs need to teach students about putting differentiated delivery systems, such as comprehensive development guidance or the ASCA National Model, into place in buildings where no prior coordinated program delivery may have existed. This involves practical and applied skills in policy and program development and theoretical understanding of why the programming is necessary. As in all professions, being a school counselor requires constantly updating skills, which necessitates education about how to learn about and find appropriate materials such as curricula, evidence-based interventions, college and career counseling resources, credible Web-based resources, and more. School counselors also need technological competencies such as Web page development, use of e-mail to communicate with parents, on-line career and college resource use, and library resources.

At the national level, the ongoing analysis and refinement of the ASCA National Model in response to empirical evidence needs to persist. Likewise, continuing advocacy for the deliberate inclusion of school counseling in federally initiated educational reform initiatives needs to be continued. We hope that the results of these six state-wide studies will prove helpful in this advocacy.

Recently, Massachusetts became the first state to include school counseling reform in its (successful) application for Race to the Top (RTTT) initiative support. Presently, federal RTTT money is being used in Massachusetts to support the implementation of the Massachusetts School Counseling Model (a variant of the ASCA National Model). Other states will, we hope, follow Massachusetts' lead and federal policy makers will develop additional ways to support the development and implementation of high-quality school counseling programs that have the capacity to impact student learning, development, and achievement. Federal support for increased use of data, especially to insure equitable resource and program access, also continues

multiple regression techniques to control for demographic differences among schools by statistically removing variability among schools related to variables (e.g. per-pupil expenditures) that are known to be related to student outcomes before examining the relationships between school counseling program characteristics and student outcomes. Although these procedures strengthen the confidence that the associations found between program characteristics and student outcomes are credible, the possibility still exists that unmeasured variables could explain these associations. For example, an association between students' achievement scores and school counseling program implementation would result if schools differed from

## WITH THIS KNOWLEDGE COMES BOTH A PROFESSIONAL IMPERATIVE AND AN ETHICAL OBLIGATION TO INCREASE THOSE ACTIVITIES THAT BEST SUPPORT STUDENT SUCCESS.

to be necessary, given the findings of these studies. Although it may not directly impact practice at the local level, federal guidelines about effective school counseling programs, including ratios, would provide legitimacy to state, district, or school efforts to improve student access to counseling services.

### Limitations

Although this research provides valuable evidence to guide educational decision making regarding school counseling programs and practices, awareness of its limitations can temper conclusions and help to identify directions and approaches for follow-up research. The primary methodological limitation shared by all six studies is their common correlational research design. All six studies correlated existing variability in school counseling program characteristics with school-level student outcomes in order to identify how program characteristics are related to student outcomes. Four of these studies used

each other on their general capacity to implement educational innovations effectively (e.g. math curricula, science curricula, the ASCA National Model). In this instance, school counseling program implementation would just be a proxy variable for the (unmeasured) general trait of capacity to implement educational innovations. Replicating these results with other research designs would be advisable. For example, studying how student outcomes change over time as school counseling programs move to higher levels of implementation or reduce student-to-school-counselor ratios would yield useful confirmatory evidence.

The second major limitation of these studies stems from instrumentation issues. Although the similar conclusions from studies using different instruments are comforting, more direct comparison and contrast of results would be better. More instrument development work needs to be done in order to produce a comprehensive array of instruments that reliably and validly measure the most salient

aspects of school counseling programs and practices. Such aspects would include the level of implementation of different facets of the program, school counselor workload, school counselor time use, and the delivery of specific categories of services for students, parents and teachers. The use of common instruments with strong psychometric characteristics would greatly enhance the quality and utility of the information generated in evaluation studies in this field.

The third major limitation of these studies stems from their inability to fully contextualize results within a state's education and policy contexts. State education policy and practices are powerful factors affecting school

### Suggestions for Future Research

The last decade has seen a tremendous increase in the amount of data that school counselors and researchers can access, requiring judicial decisions about what data to gather, mine from other resources, and analyze. The results of these six studies about the relationships among school counseling programs, school counseling practices, school counseling staffing, and student outcomes provide a wealth of information and raise many additional questions as well. Throughout this article, we have made suggestions for future research, including the development of reliable and valid measurements of school counseling programming and practices, an increased understand-

the state and national level, what are the most effective policies for supporting effective school counseling programs and practices? To what extent do schools and districts comply with state or federal mandates and policies?

Another set of important research questions involves the ways that school counseling practices are impacting student outcomes. Although these state studies gave evidence that school counseling practices were related to student academic outcomes, the most consistent findings were for school engagement factors such as discipline, attendance, and school climate. Studies of the neurological correlates of learning indicate that people have to feel safe in an environment in order for learning to occur (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; Sousa, 2011; Willis, 2006), so the contribution that school counselors make toward that end would seem to be a key part of the educational process. We don't yet have enough information about how school environment, discipline events, attendance, and school counseling practices are linked, nor do we know enough about how those factors interact with cognitive engagement and skill development in learning. These studies have demonstrated clear and consistent relationships between educational outcomes for students and school counseling programming, practices, and staffing, but we still have much to learn about the nature of those relationships and the best way to develop them. ■

## ENSURING EQUITABLE ACCESS TO SCHOOL COUNSELING SERVICES REQUIRES THOUGHTFUL ANALYSIS OF WHETHER AND WHY ALL STUDENTS MIGHT NOT BE RECEIVING SERVICES.

counseling program implementation (Martin & Carey, 2012). The inability to account for the influence of the state contexts limits both the understanding of a given state's results and comparisons across states. Although several studies reported important aspects of state contexts that influenced program implementation and practice, these reports were not based on a common understanding of the most salient contextual features related to school counseling program implementation. Both conceptual and psychometric work is needed to be able to identify and measure the most important aspects of state contexts that affect school counseling practice.

Despite these limitations, the six statewide studies presented in this special issue reflect an honest and ambitious attempt to evaluate the outcomes of school counseling programs and to generate valuable and useful information to guide educational policy and program improvement.

ing of the impact of state contexts on school counseling, information about how school counselor education programs are and are not preparing future counselors for the current educational reality, and studies about which specific school counseling practices within the domains identified are most effective. Table 1 provides research questions related to the research findings at each level of practice as well.

This is an exciting time to be conducting school counseling research, because, with the basic correlational relationships established, we can begin to consider optimal school counseling practices and program structures. At the school level, would schools without school counseling programming in place better serve students by starting to implement a differentiated delivery system before or simultaneously with the ASCA National Model? At the district level, are there optimally effective time-use profiles and ratios for implementing the ASCA National Model? At

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