

## MIDDLE GRADES COUNSELING

### In support of *This We Believe* characteristic:

- Multifaceted guidance and support services

### Introduction

Multifaceted guidance and support services in middle level schools can be complex, due to the involvement of core faculty and specialists such as counselors, school psychologists, social workers, and speech therapists, to name only a few. While the National Middle School Association advocates for school counselors to be prominent leaders of support services (NMSA, 2003), including advisory programs that advocate that every young adolescent has at least one adult acting on his or her behalf (Anfara, 2006), the specific role of the middle grades counselor needs to be more clearly defined before multifaceted guidance and support services can be achieved. This research summary will illustrate how the school counselor role has evolved and highlight the implications of contemporary research and best practices for developmentally responsive middle grades counseling.

### Concept and Definition

Originating from an ancillary set of duties that were assigned to a high school teacher with a focus on vocational matching or “guidance,” middle grades counseling has evolved toward a broader approach. The more antiquated “guidance” term encompasses only one facet of the school-wide efforts, whereas contemporary best practices suggest middle grades counseling serve students, teachers, and families through a comprehensive, preventive, developmental, and systemic approach that is aligned to the school mission. The American School Counselor Association’s (ASCA) National Model includes foundation, delivery, management, and accountability components, with an underlying philosophy of leadership, advocacy, and systemic change in a program-centered approach that serves every student (ASCA, 2005). Each of these elements corresponds to or is synchronous with the middle school philosophy.

The foundation of a school counseling program establishes what every student should know or will be able to do (ASCA, 2005). Middle grades counselors seek to promote optimal academic, career, and personal/social development—a challenge, considering the heterogeneous developmental abilities of young adolescents. The foundation should be informed by the beliefs and philosophy of the school and staff members, and it should be aligned with the shared vision

of stakeholders that reflects the school’s mission including student achievement, student-teacher relationships, and community participation (Swaim, 2001). While the traditional mission around career development continues, contemporary middle grades counselors also seek to promote the interrelated areas of personal/social and academic development. In fact, middle grades counselors are pressed to attend more to relevant learning outcomes, such as academic motivation and self-regulated learning (Akos, 2005), as middle level schools become more scrutinized for academic performance (Yecke, 2003).

School counseling programs should also include a management system that addresses when, why, and who will implement the program. Management agreements are negotiated with school administrators and related student support services and help specify responsibilities and accountability for middle grades counselors (ASCA, 2005). Along with managing multifaceted guidance and support services, middle grades counselors must also plan appropriate delivery of services. They must aim to promote positive youth development through promotion, prevention, and responsive services; each of these can be delivered through individual, group, classroom, or school-wide programs that are based on data and the needs of the school and its students (Akos, 2005). Middle grades counselors have an opportunity to develop a guidance curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory for the students through advisory or within integrated team plans. It is also the delivery of guidance and support that initiate (e.g., transition programs) and sustain (e.g., peer mentoring and tutoring) the inviting, supportive, and safe environments advocated for by NMSA (2003). School counselors can use organizational structures in the middle grades to enhance supportive and meaningful relationships for the students by collaborating and communicating with both teachers and parents.

According to best practices, a comprehensive school counseling program requires counselors to spend the majority of their time in direct contact with students (ASCA, 2005). ASCA suggests that responsive services and guidance curriculum are primary to the middle grades counselor role (see Table 1).

While a general guide, the design and implementation of multifaceted guidance and support services will be unique



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**Table 1**  
*Sample Distribution of Total School Counselor Time*

Delivery System Component	Percent of Middle School Counselor's Time
Guidance Curriculum	25–35%
Individual Student Planning	15–25%
Responsive Services	30–40%
System Support	10–15%

(ASCA, 2005, p. 5)

according to developmental needs, school culture, and availability of related support service personnel. For example, middle grades counselors are in a unique position to help students explore new physical and cognitive abilities, peer interactions, and personal challenges that they face on a daily basis. The middle level, unlike other levels, incorporates attention to a broader mission around affective and personal development; thus, in being committed to young adolescents, school counseling programs at this level should also aim to promote student competencies in the personal/social realms as part of a developmentally responsive middle level school (Akos, 2005).

The ASCA National Model mirrors current educational reform in the final component of the model with an emphasis on accountability. A relatively new area for school counseling, few studies have reviewed outcomes of school counseling programs (Whiston & Sexton, 1998), and research on the effects of middle grades counseling, in particular, is a small portion of all counseling research (St. Clar, 1989).

### Summary of Current Research

While the number of studies examining school counseling outcomes is limited, a few seminal articles inform practice. Lapan, Gysbers, and Petroski (2001) found that the implementation of comprehensive school counseling programs in middle schools were consistently related to important indicators of student safety and success. They reported that more fully engaged school counselors were able to exert a positive influence on students when they could provide students with a unique network of emotional and instrumental support services, such as spending more time in classrooms; assisting students with personal problems as well as educational and career plans; consulting with parents and school personnel; providing individual and group counseling services; referring students to outside resources as needed; and communicating to others both within the school and in the local community about the goals and aims of the guidance program (Lapan, Gysbers, & Petroski). For both seventh grade boys and girls, the availability of these guidance activities led to "better relationships with teachers, higher grades, a belief that their education was important to them and relevant to their future, and more enhanced subjective and objective

perceptions of the quality of life available to them in their schools" (p. 8).

While Lapan, Gysbers, and Petroski's (2001) research provided evidence that the implementation of comprehensive school counseling programs was associated with important indicators of student safety and success, the study was limited by the student and teacher self-report data, which lacked objectivity in measuring student achievement and behaviors as well as assessment of counseling activities. Sink, Akos, Turnbull, and Mvududu (2008) examined the differences between Washington State middle schools that had implemented a comprehensive school counseling program and those that had not. While they found minimal differences between students in schools that had implemented comprehensive school counseling programs and those that had not, they did find significant differences in academic achievement scores for students who attended schools with at least five years of comprehensive school counseling program implementation. Thus, the study by Sink and associates provides further evidence that the longer comprehensive school counseling programs are implemented in schools, the more the teachers are likely to grasp the academic value of the program's guidance curricula and the more students will benefit academically.

While comprehensive middle grades counseling programs need further evaluation, some studies have examined particular interventions within school counseling programs. In 2003, Brigman and Campbell investigated the impact of Student Success Skills (SSS)—counselor-led classroom guidance and group counseling intervention on student academic achievement and school success behaviors for fifth, sixth, eighth and ninth graders. Results revealed that SSS was associated with an improvement in behavior related to cognitive, social, and self-management skills, which can be linked to the school-wide efforts and policies that promote the health, wellness, and safety of students. These skills, in turn, were related to an increase in math and reading achievement scores. The Brigman and Campbell study supported the importance of studies that validate research-based interventions that demonstrate the positive impact multifaceted guidance and support services provided by school counselors have on student academic achievement and behaviors.



Poynton, Carlson, Hopper, and Carey (2006) found that conducting classroom guidance lessons on addressing conflict resolution in middle grades classrooms greatly increased students' confidence in problem-solving and logical reasoning abilities. The program, Conflict Resolution Unlimited middle level peer mediation curriculum, was, in turn, linked to improved self-efficacy beliefs surrounding these skills, which could lead to a greater likelihood of student engagement in these activities and greater persistence in the face of adversity (Poynton et al.). This again supports the utility and positive influence of counselor-led interventions for middle grades students.

Finally, in a meta-analysis of 50 school counseling outcome studies published between 1988 and 1995 (Whiston & Sexton, 1998), only 10% of the studies focused on the services provided by middle grades counselors. Of the programs they examined that were conducted in middle schools, they found that a program aimed at transitioning from elementary to middle school helped strengthen peer relationships (Walsh-Bowers, 1992), and a dropout prevention program influenced student attitudes toward school (Gerler, Drew, & Mohr, 1990). In another study (Hagborg, 1993), students who participated

in small-group counseling sessions reported satisfaction from participation with greater attendance and group cohesion. While Whiston and Sexton indicated a need for more research activity, they concluded that promising evidence exists that school counselors have a positive influence on students.

### Conclusion

With school-to-school variance about the expected roles that a school counselor should perform—and what can actually be performed—it is difficult to summarize the impact school counselors have on student development and performance more globally. The national model proposed by ASCA is comprehensive and developmentally appropriate like the middle school model itself, but it, too, is difficult to implement because of the various pressures in the educational system. Based on these limited findings, middle level leaders can be cautiously optimistic that more fully comprehensive and developmental guidance programs can lead to positive student outcomes. As more fully implemented school counseling programs emerge, the multifaceted guidance and support services advocated by NMSA will become a reality.

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## ANNOTATED REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

American School Counselor Association. (2005). *The ASCA national model: A framework for school counseling programs*, Second Edition. Alexandria, VA: Author.

*The ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs* is written to reflect a comprehensive approach to program foundation, delivery, management, and accountability. Middle grades counseling programs that follow this model are able to serve every student in a developmentally responsive manner that aligns itself with the middle school philosophy.

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American School Counselor Association. (2005). Special issue: Focus on middle school counseling. *Professional School Counseling*, 9, 2, 95–176.

Because young adolescents go through a variety of changes as they transition into adolescence, it is important that middle grades counseling programs be developmentally responsive. This issue of *Professional School Counseling* is dedicated to addressing the issues and concepts that make middle level counseling unique compared to different levels. In its first article, Patrick Akos addresses the uniqueness of middle grades counseling. This article is followed by six articles intended to address relevant issues and concepts in middle grades counseling, such as the 40 developmental assets (Peter Scales), young adolescent development (Allan Wigfield, Susan Lutz and A. Laurel Wagner), ethnic identity development (Cheryl Holcomb-McCoy) academic development and learning (Christopher Sink), education-career planning (Jerry Trusty, Spencer Niles, and JoLynn Carney), and family involvement (Keith Davis and Glenn Lambie). Five articles provide perspectives from the field with a focus on application for middle grades counseling, including topics such as cross-gender interactions (Andrea Dixon Rayle), service learning (Kathryn Stott and Aaron Jackson), an after-school program (Theresa Kruczek, Charlene Alexander, and Kevin Harris), classroom guidance management strategies (Jill Geltner and Mary Ann Clark), and counseling Latino immigrants (Antoinette Thorn and Susana Contreras). The final three articles present perspectives of three ASCA Middle School Counselors of the Year (Mary Higgins, 2002; Harriett Worsham, 2003; and Gina Vines, 2004).

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Lapan, R., Gysbers, N., & Petroski, G. (2001). Helping seventh graders be safe and successful: A statewide study of the impact of comprehensive guidance and counseling programs. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 79, 320–330.

Results from this article suggest that school counselors' implementation of a comprehensive guidance and counseling program are a piece to the overall goal of helping students achieve to their potential. Because this article focused specifically on seventh grade students, it is beneficial for all who aim to implement a comprehensive school counseling program that serves middle grades students.

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Sink, C., Akos, P., Turnbull, R., & Mvududu, N. (2008). An investigation of comprehensive school counseling programs and academic achievement in Washington state middle schools. *Professional School Counseling*. Manuscript submitted for publication.

This article compared student achievement in middle school students who attended a school with a comprehensive school counseling program and those who attended a school that did not. While the study revealed minimal differences between students in schools with comprehensive school counseling programs and those in schools without these programs, there were differences in measures of achievement for students who attended schools that had implemented the comprehensive school counseling program for at least five years. Data from this study provides further evidence that the longevity, integrity, and quality of comprehensive school counseling program implementation are critical to creating an environment that is conducive to student learning and achievement.



## ANNOTATED REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED RESOURCES (continued)

Whiston, S., & Sexton, T. (1998). A review of school counseling outcome research: Implications for practice. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 76*, 412–426.

This review provides a summary of school counseling outcome research published between 1988 and 1995. Empirical literature regarding comprehensive developmental guidance programs is examined in this article, revealing a trend of research that focuses on remediation activities compared to preventive interactions. This review found tentative support of career planning, group counseling, social skills training activities, and peer counseling; however, there are not many studies that focus on the middle grades, indicating the need for more empirical research to be performed at this level.

## AUTHORS

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