Counseling the Whole Child
DROPOUT PREVENTION FRAMEWORK RESEARCH SYNTHESIS

Robust school counseling programs include multiple layers of support designed to strategically and effectively respond to student academic, social-emotional learning (SEL), and mental health needs. They work in combination with supportive school cultures and relationships that embrace the importance of shared responsibility for student success and safety.

A data-driven, systemic school counseling program includes:

- Programs that are integrated across elementary, middle, and high schools to support alignment for student supports and services and to guide postsecondary planning.
- Data use to identify and support students showing signs of being at risk for dropping out and support those students with necessary interventions.
- Schoolwide (Tier 1) student support efforts that include school counselors using comprehensive guidance or advisory curricula combined with SEL curricula.
- Systems to effectively triage students to appropriate services.
- Community partnerships to strengthen and broaden student supports.
- Mental health providers and/or effective partnerships with outside organizations to service students' mental health and SEL needs.
- Programs introducing counselors to students and families/caregivers as a supportive adult in the school environment.
- Parent/caregiver training and community education sessions regarding effective student engagement and dropout prevention practices.
- Professional learning activities for teachers and other staff on risk factors for dropping out, promising strategies for engaging and reengaging students, and effective ways of developing positive school climates.

The use of counseling programs for the whole child supports dropout prevention and student engagement efforts in a number of ways:

- School counselors play a critical role in leading a school's dropout prevention efforts as they are equipped with the tools to advocate for and intervene with students who show signs of risk of failing or dropping out (White & Kelly, 2010; Webber, 2018).
- School counseling programs can monitor student progress and use data to help meet student needs and address individual, school, or community factors that are linked with dropping out (Dahir & Cincotti, 2018; Tromski-Klingshirn & Miura, 2017).
- Interventions by school counselors before middle and high school can increase student engagement and prevent students from dropping out (Ecker-Lyster & Nileksela, 2016; What Works Clearinghouse, 2017).

Research Overview

Counseling the whole child is based on research that supports multiple interrelated practices at the school and student levels that influence academic, SEL, and behavioral outcomes. Tier 1 schoolwide policies can support students' academic, SEL, and mental health needs. Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) clearly define schoolwide expectations, use data-based decision making to monitor implementation and results, and include differentiated levels of support for students in response to their needs (Perry, 2017). Furthermore, having counselors involved in planning and implementing school events (e.g., open houses) to create a welcoming environment for students and families can be effective in keeping students engaged and reducing drop-out rates (Perry, 2017).

Researchers have found that programs addressing a wide range of needs for at-risk students are effective at supporting academic outcomes. *Check & Connect* continually monitors school performance and provides individualized attention through mentoring, case management, and other supports. A rigorous study found that *Check & Connect* has positive effects on staying in school (U.S. Department of Education et al., 2015). Building Assets, Reducing Risks (BARR), a research-based program that focuses on whole child (academic, SEL, and physical needs) includes professional development for educators, use of data, and partnership with families. An independent evaluation found that BARR led to an increase in students passing core courses from 74% to 80%; the program also reduced chronic absenteeism and course failure rates (Bos et al. 2022). In addition, the GEAR UP program, based at Western Michigan University, worked with at-risk high school students in a local high-need rural area. This personalized early intervention strategy began in nineth grade and involved coaches working with students, parents, and teachers to establish a plan to improve academic achievement. Researchers found that treatment students performed almost an entire letter grade better than anticipated based on comparative student results from baseline studies. Well over 50% of students predicted to fail succeeded well enough to progress to the next grade level (Zeller et al., 2013).

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) provides knowledge, skills, and competencies that a school counselor should have, and reviews and approves evidence-based counseling programs. Researchers found that well-implemented, research-based counseling programs improve student outcomes (Stevens, 2021). ASCA emphasizes the importance of collaboration among counselors, staff, and principal leadership to carry out effective programs, which may include positive behavior interventions, character education, drug and alcohol prevention/intervention, antibullying, self-esteem, and academic success (Stevens, 2021). In addition, these ASCA-approved programs—along with outside research studies—highlight the importance of relationships. One study found counseling and SEL programs influence students' connections to school and adults at the school (Stevens, 2021). Nava (2018) also found positive effects of an ASCA model program on student achievement and college readiness, particularly for African American students.

All Hands On Deck (Salina et al., 2013), a school counselor-led, schoolwide program, helped one school's graduation rate increase from 49% to 78.8% in 3 years (2009-2012). A case study showed that the program was a coordinated effort, aligned with ASCA's national model, and emphasized academics, social support, relationships, and trust. A study in Rhode Island showed strong and consistent correlations between increased amounts of school counseling services and positive student outcomes (Dimmitt and Wilkerson, 2012). Services included individual learning plans for students, regular consulting with teachers and parents, individual and group counseling, using data strategically, and conferences with students and families. The study showed it was particularly important to implement and expand counseling services in high minority, low-income Rhode Island schools where counseling services were lacking. Finally, a growing body of research suggests that trauma-informed school counseling is effective at supporting students' academic, SEL, and behavioral outcomes; particularly those most at risk of dropping out of school (Rumsey & Milsom, 2019).

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