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# **Standards Blending: Aligning School Counseling Programs with School Academic Achievement Missions**

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## *Abstract*

*This paper proposes a standards blending approach that provides a means by which to explicitly demonstrate the direct impact of school counseling on student academic achievement. Standards blending is the process of combining school counseling standards with core academic content standards to provide students with a practical means by which to better comprehend and visualize the interrelationships of their learning and real life situations.*

Historically, school counselor education programs have been inconsistent in the preparation of school counselors, which has contributed to role confusion and variation in professional practices (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Dahir, 2004; Lambie & Williamson, 2004; Paisley & Hayes, 2002; Sears & Granello, 2002). Prior to standards-based educational reform movements, school counselor training programs primarily applied a clinical, mental health model as their pedagogical approach to the preparation of school counselors, while other programs applied an educational model (Education Trust, 1997; Martin, 2002; Paisley & Hayes, 2003).

Standards-driven educational reform movements such as No Child Left Behind [NCLB], (U.S. Department of Education, 2001) left school counselors behind, excluding them in educational reform agendas. Such disregard for the role that school counselors assume in the academic achievement of students prompted the forging of professional alliances that have been resolute and progressive forces in unifying preparation and practice and transforming the role of the school counselor.

## *Transforming School Counseling Initiative*

The Transforming School Counseling Initiative [TSCI] ( Education Trust, 1997) in collaboration with DeWitt Wallace-Readers Digest, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES), and the American Counseling Association (ACA), redefined the role of the school counselor with a new vision for school counseling programs. TSCI was established with the express purpose of restructuring school counselor education and training at the graduate level (Education Trust, 1997). This required changing the school counseling curriculum focus from an individualistic, mental health model to a systemic, educational model (Perusse, Goodnough, Donegan, & Jones, 2004). The TSCI envisions school counselors as social action agents who identify and remove inequities and other barriers to academic achievement through systemic leadership, advocacy, collaboration, counseling, coordination, assessment, data analysis, and the implementation of evidence-based programs that aid in closing the achievement gap (Education Trust; House & Hayes, 2002). New vision school counselors are challenged to create programs that are academic- and systemic-focused and align with schools' academic achievement missions.

## *Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs*

The revised Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP] *Standards* (2001), which reflect the changes in our educational climate and diverse, technologically advanced world, provide unified, minimal competencies for the optimal preparation of new vision school counselors. The *CACREP Standards* ensure that school counselors receive education and training in developing evidence-based practices for diverse and special needs students, emphasizing academic outcomes and identification and removal of personal and systemic barriers to academic achievement. The standards further require demonstrated knowledge in the use of needs assessments, data, program evaluation, and technology in counseling practices. In addition

to demonstrated knowledge in eight core areas (i.e., professional identity, social and cultural diversity, human growth and development, career development, helping relationships, group work, assessment; and research and program evaluation), school counselors are required to demonstrate knowledge specific to counseling in the schools, which reflect the contemporary educational reform agenda (Paisley & Hayes, 2003). CACREP provides counselor educators with standards for preparing pre-service school counselors for academic-focused practices. Practicing school counselors can assist counselor educators in bridging education and practice by developing approaches that can be used as models for classroom instruction and experiential activities that explicitly align school counseling programs with school academic missions and demonstrate a direct impact on student achievement and closing the achievement gap.

#### *ASCA National Standards and National Model*

In addition to the efforts of the TSCI and CACREP, the American School Counselor Association [ASCA] created *National Standards* (Campbell & Dahir, 1997) and a *National Model* (ASCA, 2003) to define and unify the professional practices of school counselors. The *National Model* provides counselor educators and school counseling practitioners with a unified language and framework (i.e., foundation, delivery, management, accountability) from which to establish comprehensive, developmental, accountable school counseling programs that emphasize school-wide service delivery over the delivery of services to a selected few (Paisley & Hayes, 2003). The *National Model* includes the *National Standards* with student competencies and indicators for facilitating development in three domains (i.e., academic, career, personal/social). ASCA has been instrumental in providing a standards-based, systemic framework that school counselors can use to develop approaches that will align school counseling with academic missions in this new millennium.

#### **The Problem: How to Align School Counseling with School Academic Missions?**

The TSCI, CACREP, and ASCA have been active in providing direction and unification in school counselor training and professional practice roles and functions that emphasize the need to align school counseling programs with schools' academic missions. However, the means to this end is still ambiguous with literature underscoring the same roles and functions that, to date, have failed to distinguish the school counseling profession as a vital link in the academic achievement process (House & Hayes, 2002; Lambie & Williamson, 2004; Lenhardt, 2001; Martin, 2002; Paisley & Hayes, 2002).

Furthermore, although "the success of all students has long been a goal of school counseling" (Borders, 2002, p. 182), success, in educational agendas, is measured in terms of academic achievement and school counselors have not been successful in establishing school counseling services as essential to successful academic performance (ASCA, 1987; Dahir, 2004; Stone & Clark, 2001).

An explicit approach is needed that more directly demonstrates student academic success as a result of school counseling services. If school counseling programs align with academic achievement missions, then school counselors must exercise the role of educational specialist by explicitly reinforcing core academic standards, while simultaneously addressing the personal, social, emotional, and career development needs of students.

#### **Aligning School Counseling and School Academic Missions with Standards Blending**

Standards blending is the process of combining school counseling standards and core academic content standards in programming. School counselors will not be teaching, but reinforcing core academic content standards, while teaching the school counseling standards-based curriculum. Creatively blending core academic content standards and school counseling standards provides students with a practical means by which to better comprehend and visualize the interrelationships of their learning and real life

situations. Students who have the opportunity to socially interact with the curriculum, fellow students, and other teachers, and who make the connection between academics and personal interests and goals are more motivated to learn (Pajares, 2001; Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006; Winstead, 2004).

Blending academic content standards and school counseling standards will require a working knowledge of national/state academic content standards and consultation with the classroom teacher to coordinate the pacing of lessons. Most schools offer pacing guides which outline when each academic content standard is to be presented in the classroom. In addition to the benefits to students, consulting and teaming with the teacher establishes school counselors as essential partners in accomplishing academic achievement goals, which serves to enhance the teacher-school counselor relationship. Administrators, too, focused on the bottom line—academic achievement—are more likely to support programs that explicitly reinforce core academic content standards. The incorporation and reinforcement of core academic content standards in the delivery of school counseling programs is demonstrative of best practices for new vision school counselors. The administration of standards-blended activities is accomplished using traditional methods of school counseling program delivery (i.e., classroom guidance, small groups counseling, and individual counseling).

School counselors select which academic content standards to blend in accordance with the core academic standards being taught in the classroom, student need as identified by an analysis of school-wide state and classroom assessment data. School counselors may wish to explore student needs in a specific grade level, classroom, or population, and provide standards-blended interventions in small groups and individual sessions.

### **Closing the Achievement Gap with Standards Blending**

Standards-blended programs allow school counselors to assume a distinct role in closing the achievement gap by addressing the academic

needs of low achieving students while also enhancing personal, social, and emotional well-being. School counselors are assisting in closing the achievement gap when students, who are considered part of the gap (e.g., low-achieving minority, economically disadvantaged, male, special education) participate in standards-blended programs that result in increased academic achievement.

### **Determining the Effectiveness of Standards Blending**

Increasing student academic achievement and closing the achievement gap are goals that improve the quality of life for students, now, and into the future. It is also vital to the improvement, advancement, and recognition of the school counseling profession as an essential component in the mission to increase academic achievement for all students. Therefore, it is imperative that school counselors measure the effectiveness of standards-blended programs in meeting some or all of the objectives of the lessons/activities.

There are several ways in which school counselors can measure the academic development outcomes of standards-blended programs, which is not much different from current program evaluation and accountability methods. Pre-program or baseline data needs to be collected prior to standards-blended program delivery. This may include data from state or classroom assessments and questionnaires developed directly from curriculum content. Program evaluation outcomes will be more reliable if the data collected is objective and standardized (e.g., assessment data vs. teacher report of classroom performance).

When using existing data, school counselors should highlight the scores pertaining to the academic content standards being reinforced in the blended-standards program for each participant. After program delivery the teacher or school counselor should assess the students using the same instrument from which the pre-program data was taken, if possible. If not, the students should be assessed using a measure that is ordinarily used in the classroom and that covers the academic standards presented. If using a pre- and post-lesson

questionnaire, it should be administered in a standardized fashion at the beginning and end of the program/lesson.

School counselors also need to evaluate the effectiveness of the school counseling curriculum of the standards-blended lesson using a questionnaire developed from the lesson's school counseling curriculum or another measure of the construct (e.g., self-esteem, anger, social skills). One questionnaire can be used to measure both the school counseling and academic curriculum content of the standards-blended lesson or program. A process component might also be included in order to determine strengths and weaknesses of the standards-blended program.

Once data has been analyzed and outcomes documented, findings should be used for program improvement, with positive outcomes being reported to building and division level administrators, presented at professional conferences, and published in peer-reviewed counseling and education journals. Sharing and publicizing positive outcomes will help to ensure future acknowledgement of school counseling contributions in increasing academic achievement and closing the achievement gap.

The ultimate goal has not changed, but has become more overt in demonstrating the school counselor's role in increasing academic achievement for all students, while continuing to solidify the school counselor's role in removing obstacles to learning by attending to the personal, social, emotional, and career development needs of students. In addition, reinforcing academic content standards in school counseling programming will likely improve the school counselor's effectiveness in increasing student academic achievement.

### **Standards-Blended Programming in Action**

The following standards-blended program, *Resolving Conflict Peacefully and Enhancing Academic Achievement in Mathematics and Language Arts*, illustrates the development, implementation, and evaluation of a standards-blended program. This program was delivered as a classroom guidance lesson; it may also be used for small groups and individual counseling sessions.

The lesson includes the *Virginia Standards of Learning* (Virginia Department of Education, 2001) and the *Standards for School Counseling Programs in Virginia Public Schools* (Virginia Department of Education, 2004), hereafter referred to as Virginia School Counseling Standards (VSCS). School counselors from other states may use the same process of standards blending using their state's academic standards or national academic standards. This lesson also includes the ASCA *National Standards for School Counseling Programs* (Campbell & Dahir, 1997), hereafter referred to as ASCA School Counseling Standards (ASCS).

### *Participants and Procedure*

The lesson was presented as a 40-minute classroom guidance lesson to 103 students (61 males and 42 females) in five second-grade classrooms in a public suburban elementary school located in Virginia. Classrooms consisted of general education, gifted, and special needs students. Participants were categorized into two subgroups: minority (43 African American, 7 Asians, and 3 Hispanics) and non-minority (50 Caucasians). Minority and non-minority groupings allow for the identification of academic achievement gaps. A questionnaire reflecting curriculum content was administered by the school counselor at the start and end of the lesson (contact author for copy of questionnaire).

Figure 1.1 lists the lesson goals, objectives, and standards of the lesson.

### *Lesson Curriculum and Delivery*

**Icebreaker:** The school counselor writes FNOLITCC on the board. Students are asked to unscramble the letters to reveal the topic of the lesson: "conflict".

**Discussion:** The definition and nature of conflict is discussed with student participation encouraged. Possible approaches to resolving conflict are discussed and the 4-step problem solving method is introduced.

**Activities:** Each of the four steps of the problem solving method are written on large strips of heavy stock paper and laminated for durability. Magnets are attached to the back of each strip for attaching

*Figure 1.1: Lesson Goals, Objectives, Standards, and Curriculum and Delivery*

**Lesson Goal:** To enhance students' personal/social, career, and academic development.

**Objective 1:** Students will define conflict, understand the nature of conflict, and be introduced to a positive approach to problem solving for improving interpersonal relations.

**Objective 2:** Students will learn a 4-step problem-solving method.

**Objective 3:** Students will gain a better understanding of sets and fractional representations.

#### **Core Academic Standards: Virginia SOLs**

**Math – Number & Number Sequence:**

- 2.4: Identify the part of a set and/or region that represents fractions for one-half, one-third, and one-fourth.

**English – Oral Language:**

- 2.1, b: Create and participate in oral dramatic activities.
- 2.2, c: Follow oral directions with three and four steps.
- 2.3, c: Use oral communication skills to participate and contribute in a group.

**Social Studies – Civics:**

- 2.10, c: Describe actions that can improve the school and community.

#### **School Counseling Standards: Virginia**

**Academic Development Domain:**

- EA8, Work cooperatively in small and large groups toward a common goal.

**Career Development Domain:**

- EC4, Understand the importance of teamwork in working toward a common goal.
- EC5, Demonstrate the decision making process.

**Personal/Social Development Domain:**

- EP2, Understand how to make friends and work cooperatively with others.
- EP4, Demonstrate good manners and respectful behavior towards others.

#### **School Counseling Standards: ASCA**

**Academic Development Domain:**

- A:A3.2, Demonstrate the ability to work independently and cooperatively w/others.
- A:B1.2, Learn and apply critical thinking skills.

#### **Career Development Domain:**

- C:A2.1, Acquire employability skills (i.e., problem solving).
- C:C2.2, Learn to use conflict management skills with peers-adults.

#### **Personal/Social Development Domain:**

- PS:A1.5, Identify and express feelings.
- PS:A1.8, Understand the need for self-control and how to practice it.
- PS:A2.6, Use effective communication skills.
- PS:A2.7, Know that communication involves speaking, listening, and nonverbal behavior.
- PS:A2.8, Learn how to make and keep friends.
- PS:B1.1, Use a decision-making and problem-solving model.
- PS:B1.6, Know how to apply conflict resolution skills.

and manipulating on classroom boards. The 4-step problem solving method for resolving conflict is demonstrated using multiple role play activities and scenarios determined by the school counselor and participating students. The 4-step problem solving method is then presented as a set of four components that are broken down into fractional representations of one-fourth, two-fourths/one-half, three-fourths, and four-fourths/whole. One step is

removed. The set is then presented as a set of three and the steps are represented as one-third, two-thirds, and three-thirds/whole. Students are encouraged to participate individually and cooperatively.

#### *Method of Analysis*

A 6-item multiple-choice questionnaire reflecting the standards-based curriculum content

was developed and administered by the school counselor. Items 1-3 measured school counseling curriculum competencies addressed in the lesson. Items 4-6 measured core academic competencies addressed in the lesson. The questionnaire was designed to assess lesson effectiveness in meeting objectives 1 and 3. Data from the questionnaire was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics.

## Results

Results indicated that the standards-blended lesson was effective in meeting both the school counseling curriculum objective 1 and the core academic curriculum objective 3. Knowledge development occurred on both the school counseling and academic curriculum contents for participants in all classrooms and for both subgroups, which was statistically significant as determined by paired sample t-tests (see Table 1). Independent t-tests indicated no significant differences between minority and non-minority proficiency levels on the core academic curriculum content at pre-lesson,  $t(101) = .201$ ,  $p < .05$ , and post-lesson,  $t(101) = .970$ ,  $p < .05$ , measures. This would indicate no achievement gaps between the two subgroups on the mathematical competency portion of the lesson before and after administration.

## Discussion

This case study illustrates the significant impact of standards blending for teaching school counseling curriculum and reinforcing academic curriculum as evidenced by the significantly lower pre-lesson scores on the school counseling curriculum versus the academic curriculum. Although students had already been taught the mathematics presented in the lesson, there was a significant increase in academic proficiency as a result of the classroom guidance lesson.

This case study could not support the standards-blended lesson as a strategy for closing the achievement gap because pre-lesson data analysis did not detect an achievement gap among the second grade participants in the core academic curriculum presented. However, because the lesson was effective in developing minority student academic proficiency in mathematics in classrooms that consisted of both low and high achieving students, theoretically the lesson would be effective in closing an achievement gap between minority and non-minority 2nd grade elementary school students.

## Direction for Further Study

Future studies to determine the effectiveness of standards-blended programs should include the evaluation of small group and individual

Table 1:

Participant Performance on Each Curriculum Component by Grade Level & Subpopulation

Curriculum	Mean		Standard Deviation		N	% difference	t
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post			
Non-Minority							
School Counseling	1.2	2.6	.89	.61	50	117%	-9.268*
Academic	1.8	2.4	1.1	.88	50	33%	-4.818*
Blended	3.0	4.7	1.5	1.2	50	57%	9.610*
Minority							
School Counseling	.85	2.5	.86	.72	53	193%	1.327*
Academic	1.8	2.2	1.2	.93	53	27%	3.683*
Blended	2.6	4.7	1.6	1.4	53	81%	-10.915*
All 2nd Grade Students							
School Counseling	1.0	2.5	.89	.67	103	150%	-15.662*
Academic	1.7	2.3	1.1	.91	103	35%	5.985*
Blended	2.8	4.7	1.6	1.3	103	68%	-14.566*

\*  $p < .001$

interventions for special needs, economically disadvantaged, and minority students who are not achieving at proficient levels. This would provide support for the effectiveness of standards-blended programs in contributing to academic achievement and closing the achievement gap.

Standards-blended program evaluations should be conducted at every grade level and linked to end-of-year standardized assessments and graduation rates. Other studies might consider developing and evaluating standards-blended programs that seek to enhance attendance, promotion, school safety, and parent involvement.

Future research should include both proximal and distal evaluation data; proximal data is essential to establishing a distal link. Program evaluations that collect and analyze multiple sources over data over time will provide the cross validation needed to establish and strengthen causal relationships between school counseling standards-blended programming and academic achievement.

### *Implications for School Counseling*

Standards-blended programming strengthens the very nature of the specialty of counseling in the schools, defining the school counselor as both educational and mental health specialist, not solely a mental health specialist within the school setting. Effectively carrying out this dual role is vital to the future of the profession, which has been excluded from educational reform agendas and viewed as superfluous to the academic missions of schools. Documentation of the positive outcomes of standards-blended programs will help to ensure that school counselors are not left behind in future educational reform agendas. Standards blending provides school counselors and counselor educators with a direct, explicit approach for aligning school counseling programs with academic missions, fulfilling the role expectations of new vision school counselors and increasing academic achievement for all students.

### **Conclusion**

Standards-blended programs have the potential to increase academic achievement, close achievement gaps, enhance psychosocial and career

development, and foster teacher-school counselor relationships, while solidifying school counseling programs as indispensable components of the schools' educational plan. Standards blending is an academic-focused approach for school counseling programming demonstrative of accountable practices that promote optimal learning.

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