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How School Counselors Can Help Boost Student Test Scores

by Dr. Nick Abel and Dr. Brandie Oliver, Butler University School Counseling Program

It's that time of year again: flowers blooming, birds chirping...kids sitting neatly in rows taking standardized tests! Regardless of one's feelings about high stakes testing, it is a reality. Everyone in a school system, from superintendent to student to custodian, feels the effects of testing on their schedule, as well as their nerves. As key players in school improvement, school counselors are certainly not immune from the demands of testing -- nor should they be. When assigned appropriate work roles and given time to carry them out, school counselors are uniquely trained and positioned to assist in efforts to raise student achievement. Unfortunately, far too many counselors (up to 70%) are tasked with clerical duties -- including test coordination -- that rob them of the time needed to implement meaningful counseling programming (College Board, 2012). Indeed, I used to know a school counselor who called herself, "the highest paid secretary in the district." While she obviously said this in jest, it's not too far from the truth in some schools. So how can school counselors be used in appropriate and meaningful ways to make a real difference with regard to student test scores? Along with the College Board (2012), the American School Counselor Association (2014) has called for school counselors to be freed from test coordination, and instead given time to work with students and staff on test-taking strategies, stress and test anxiety management, and the disaggregation/interpretation of test data. As proponents of data-driven practice, we would also add to this list interventions such as small group counseling for students who are at risk of not passing a test. Interventions such as these can even be made part of a school counselor's program goals or Student Learning Outcomes. More detail on each of these possibilities follows:

Test-taking strategies: In addition to content knowledge, research on test-taking and test-wise strategies such as time-use and guessing strategies revealed this type of preparation can improve scores (ASCA, 2012). Simple strategies like underlining, eliminating answer choices, and pacing can be taught systematically by the counselor through classroom guidance lessons or via counselor-designed lessons delivered by teachers during common periods, such as homeroom.

Stress and test anxiety management: Stress and test anxiety are almost universal. In fact, it might be challenging to find a student that hasn't been impacted by stress and/or anxiety related to high stakes testing. These can cause a multitude of problems in students, such as upset stomach, headache, loss of focus, truancy, fear, irritability, anger and even depression. We are learning more and more information regarding the cognitive impact of test anxiety and chronic stress. These stressful emotions can also inhibit a student's ability to comprehend, retain, or recall information (ASCA, 2004). By providing students with tools and strategies that build both emotional skills and healthy physical habits in preparing for a test, school counselors can help students overcome test anxiety and stressors. Simple strategies that can be taught during classroom guidance include a healthy diet, ample sleep, deep breathing, muscle relaxation, and using positive self talk to stop irrational thinking.

Data disaggregation/interpretation: School counselors are skilled at data analysis, interpretation, and providing recommendations based on data. Working with your school counselor to help monitor student achievement and other achievement related data (SAT/ACT, ECA, AP, etc.) is an important component to school improvement. The school counselor can assist with disaggregation that can be used to inform future instruction, professional development needs, and to strengthen existing curriculum.

Interventions for at-risk students: In addition to large group guidance, counselors might also be tasked with running small groups targeting students at-risk of not passing a test. In these groups, counselors could target some of the skills mentioned above in a more in-depth manner, as well as provide direct content instruction and skill-building (perhaps with teacher support) depending on subject and grade level. In addition, research shows that longer test preparation programs, like ongoing test-taking groups, result in larger gains because students have more time to practice and develop more broad cognitive skills (Crocker, 2005)

While we support school counselors have a role in testing, using their time to focus on activities as listed above would be much more beneficial to the long term success of your students.



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