

The School Counselor and High-Stakes Testing

(Adopted 2002, Revised 2007, 2014, 2017)

American School Counselor Association (ASCA) Position

School counselors recognize that standardized test results are one of many measures that can be used to assess student learning and performance across standards. School counselors advocate for the use of multiple criteria when educational decisions such as course enrollment and admissions are made about student performance and oppose the use of a single test to make important educational decisions affecting students, teachers and schools.

The Rationale

High-stakes testing, which refers to the use of standardized test scores to make important decisions about students, schools and districts, was a prominent part of the No Child Left Behind Act passed in 2001 (NCLB, 2002). High-stakes test results have been used as a method to determine a student's: academic placement, promotion and retention, graduation and intervention services. Other decisions made using standardized test results for schools and districts include:

- increased or reduced funding at the state or local level
- revision of curriculum
- revision of teacher certification standards
- appropriate accommodations for students with exceptional learning needs and English-language learners
- decisions about school closings
- evaluation of instructional personnel

When high-stakes assessments are used in this manner, they have a direct and significant effect on the academic future of the student being assessed and, increasingly, on the teacher's career and reputation and the school's status in the community, as well as access to local, state and federal school funding (Duffy, Giordano, Farrell, Paneque, & Crump, 2008). When results from standardized tests are the only factors used to make educational decisions, these decisions may not be fully informed and could lead to biased decision-making. It is important to consider all factors that can provide additional information related to student achievement.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), enacted in 2015, represents a legislative move toward identifying multiple measures to assess student success. The act encourages an approach to testing that moves away from a sole focus on standardized tests to drive decisions around the quality of schools to multiple measures of student learning and progress, including other indicators of student success to make school accountability decisions (White House, 2015). School counselors continue to advocate for reasonable use of multiple measures to assess student achievement and determine need for school improvement at the local and state levels.

The School Counselor's Role

School counselors recognize that standardized test results provide valuable information related to student achievement. However, school counselors also understand that some students struggle with standardized test practices that prevent these tests from providing an accurate reflection of their capabilities. Additionally, school counselors recognize that standardized tests only provide a partial picture of student learning. When important educational decisions are made, school counselors advocate for the use of multiple criteria in the decision-making process. These criteria may include but are not limited to:

- Standardized tests results
- Teacher input
- Portfolios
- Projects
- Work samples
- Classroom performance
- Recommendation letters
- Personal statement
- Student access to curriculum and courses

School counselors support the school's educational initiatives by organizing and implementing a school counseling program aligned with the school's academic mission and providing support to students, teachers and administrators by:

- Monitoring student achievement data and achievement-related data (e.g., grades, attendance, school engagement, discipline referrals, retention rates, SAT/ACT)
- Disaggregating data to inform instruction and strengthen curriculum
- Providing support to teachers through collaboration and teaming
- Providing direct student services in the areas of study skills, test-taking skills, stress reduction and test anxiety among other topics
- Working with administrators on home-school communication to aid in maintaining a healthy school and classroom assessment environment (Cizek & Burg, 2006)
- Advocating to postsecondary institutions that students should be considered holistically throughout the admissions process

School counselors recognize some of the unintended consequences as a result of mandated, high-stakes assessments include: a redirection of time and resources away from innovative, creative learning programs and school counseling programs toward strict emphasis on basic skills (McReynolds, 2006); the belief that student achievement is best measured by a standardized assessment as compared with multiple and culturally contextual criteria; and student and family anxiety and stress, as well as educator stress and burnout (Duffy et al., 2008). In collaboration with other educators, school counselors also advocate for:

- appropriate testing conditions and administration of standardized tests with solid psychometric properties
- opportunities to retake a test when a student is unsuccessful in one administration
- opportunities to take comparable tests when a student is unsuccessful in one administration
- the use of standardized tests norm-referenced with representative student populations
- discontinuation of standardized tests that show socioeconomic or cultural bias

The school counselor's role should not include clerical or administrative activities that take the school counselor away from implementing a school counseling program (i.e., test coordination or monitoring make-up tests). Research has shown that serving in these capacities is not compatible with the school counselor's role and prevents the school counselor from having a positive impact on student achievement, school climate and the school's academic mission directly (Mullen & Lambie, 2016). When these roles are inappropriately assigned, school counselors should employ advocacy skills (e.g., outlining the distribution of time in the school counselor/administrator annual administrative conference) to respectfully help administrators understand that school counselors' time should be invested in working with students and staff on issues such as test-taking skills, time-management skills and stress management within the framework of a school counseling program.

Summary

School counselors work with staff and students in implementing strategies that support students in the test-taking process. School counselors recognize the use of standardized test results as one of many measures of student achievement and success. School counselors reject the use of high-stakes tests or the use of any other single measurement instrument as the only indicator of student success. The school counselor encourages multiple measures when life-influencing decisions are being made.

References

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