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Measuring the Impact of School Counselor Ratios on Student Outcomes

A series of studies in three states (Indiana, Connecticut and New York) funded by an ASCA Research Grant reveal the impact of school counselor ratios on student outcomes. Results from the Indiana study indicated school counselor ratios of 1:250 have a significant correlation with lower student absenteeism and higher SAT math, verbal and writing scores. Preliminary findings in Connecticut school districts with lower school-counselor-to-student ratios produce higher graduation rates, higher college entrance and persistence rates, lower chronic absenteeism rates and fewer suspensions. Concurrently, socioeconomic status and community resources have an impact on school counselors' ability to effectively deliver comprehensive school counseling programs. Additional investigations are underway in New York.

Researchers

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Research Questions

- Is there a correlation between school-counselor-to-student ratios and graduation rates? College-going rates? Suspension/expulsion rates? Absenteeism? Academic achievement as measured by the SAT?
- Do patterns exist related to graduation rates, college-going rates, suspensions/expulsions, and/or absenteeism for districts having elementary counselors versus those who do not?

Methodology

In a series of studies across three states – Indiana, Connecticut and New York – researchers are investigating the impact of school counselor ratios on student outcomes. Two of these studies (Connecticut and New York) compare these ratios and outcomes across districts with and without elementary school counselors. Researchers completed correlation and regression analyses using publicly available data to determine the relationship between school-counselor-to-student ratios and student outcomes. The Indiana study examined student absenteeism and academic achievement as measured by SAT scores. The Connecticut study examined these outcomes, while also expanding to include student graduation, college-going and suspension/expulsion rates, as well as a qualitative component, to better understand the results.

Data collection for the New York study is currently underway. Location, grade level, gender, socioeconomic status and ethnicity are constant factors considered in all three studies. (A more complete discussion of methods and analyses used in this study is available from the first author upon request. All IRB guidelines for conducting research with human subjects were followed.)

Summary of Findings

Indiana: This study included 1,529 schools, 1,565 school counselors and 874,156 students. Student absenteeism and achievement, as measured by SAT scores, were considered across school-counselor-to-student ratios at 1:100, 1:200, 1:250 and 1:471 (the reported national average at the time of the study). Results indicated support for school-counselor-to-student ratios in the range of one school counselor for 200–250 students.

The school-counselor-to-student ratio of 1:250 had the largest significant effect on student attendance, SAT mathematics and SAT writing. Specifically, schools with at least one school counselor for every 250 students showed:

- 0.3% higher **attendance** (i.e. every day in a school of 1,000 students, three more students attend class than otherwise).
- 18 points higher on their **SAT mathematics** scores.
- 19 points higher on their **SAT verbal** scores.
- 16 points higher on their **SAT writing** scores.

Additionally, results involving verbal SAT scores indicated the impact of school-counselor-to-student ratio exceeding 1:250 is larger in schools located within lower socioeconomic-status communities.

Connecticut: Disparate ranges of ratios exist in Connecticut, dependent on grade level and location. This study included 1,493 schools, 1,217 school counselors and 535,025 students. Prior to investigating the impact of ratios on student outcomes, researchers analyzed the data to identify higher- and lower-performing schools at each grade level (elementary, middle, high), and location (urban, suburban, rural). High-performing schools were defined as those that had a combination of highest values of graduation rates plus college-going rates plus achievement scores and lowest values of suspension plus absenteeism rates. Low-performing schools were defined as those with the opposite combination – lowest values of graduation rates plus college-going rates plus achievement scores and highest values of suspension plus absenteeism rates.

Significantly higher school-counselor-to-student ratios exist in lower-performing schools (e.g., high school = 1:285, middle school = 1:891) versus caseloads in higher-performing schools (e.g., high school = 1:182, middle school = 1:211). Additionally, limited access to elementary level school counseling services exists in Connecticut. Approximately three-quarters (72 percent) of school districts provide no comprehensive school counseling services to K–5 students.

Initial findings from Connecticut indicated a less-clearly correlated relationship between student outcomes and ratios in the quantitative analysis. This limited finding suggests the need to address the whole-child approach, giving consideration to student outcomes not readily apparent through performance indicators (e.g., mental health needs, community resources). As a result,

investigators expanded the study to include a qualitative portion of the study, conducting focus groups with school counselors from the identified higher- and lower-performing schools. This qualitative research is currently underway.

Socioeconomic status and community resources have an impact on the ability of school counselors to effectively deliver comprehensive school counseling programs. Researchers identified highest- and lowest-performing schools (graduation rates, college entrance and persistence, attendance, suspensions/expulsions), by grade level (elementary, middle, high) and across different settings in Connecticut (urban, suburban, rural). Qualitative data gathered from middle school counselors in one of the lowest-performing school districts, in a lower socioeconomic-status school district, revealed a recent improvement in ratios. In response to years of low performance, the district’s newly hired superintendent “recognized the impact of school counseling programs [through results reports].” This ultimately resulted in the addition of two school counselors in this lower socioeconomic-status school district, lowering ratios from 1:400 to 1:215. Preliminary results suggest the school counselors are able to effectively deliver a comprehensive school counseling program to better meet students’ academic, career and social/emotional needs. Specific to rising mental health needs (e.g., anxiety, depression):

“[Our] students needing outside counseling experience a four- to six-week waiting list for a counselor. With our new caseloads at 215 [students], we can more readily identify need, respond and connect them with members of our school support service team.”

Conversely, qualitative data gathered from high school counselors among the highest-performing districts, in a higher socioeconomic-status community, revealed significant concern if school-counselor-to-student ratios were to increase from their current 1:150 to the ASCA recommended 1:250.

“We’re seeing a huge uptick in emergent mental health issues (e.g., anxiety, depression, self-harm). Kids are overscheduled and can’t attend to their mental health needs outside of school. We have a fully supported student support services [team] but worry if ratios rose to 1:250 across the board, it would negatively impact our ability to serve students.”

Students in districts with elementary school counselors have improved performance outcomes versus districts without. Fewer than 25 percent of districts in Connecticut have school counselors across all grade levels. Students in districts that have K–12 school counselors produce higher graduation rates, higher college entrance and persistence rates, lower chronic absenteeism rates and fewer out-of-school suspensions when compared to districts with school counselors beginning in grade 6. Improved performance outcomes are seen across urban, suburban and rural locations. For example, in districts with K–12 school counselors, 69.4 percent report graduation rates greater than 90 percent, compared to districts without elementary school counselors, where only 45.8 percent report graduation rates greater than 90 percent. Further research is needed to control for socioeconomic variables.

Implications of the Research

Access to a school counselor should not be an amenity reserved for students with privileged backgrounds. Research indicates regular access to a school counselor is a necessity, particularly for students most in need of intervention and support in high-poverty districts (Carrell & Carrell, 2006; Lapan, Gysbers, Stanley & Pierce, 2016; McIntosh, 2010; Utphall, 2006). Further, results from this study suggest that context matters. School-counselor-to-student ratios may be optimal at 1:250, but grade level and socioeconomic factors of a district require close consideration. The current research findings extend related studies on the impact of school-counselor-to-student ratios. The results will be of significant importance to the school counseling profession in that they will inform an evidence base for the ASCA-recommended ratios. Such evidence will allow state and local districts to make more informed decisions about program needs affecting student outcomes.

About the ASCA Research Grants

The American School Counselor Association awards research grants for projects examining the effectiveness of comprehensive school counseling programs, particularly the ASCA National Model, in improving student outcomes; projects investigating the optimal school-counselor-to-student ratio(s); and other projects that advance school counseling practice. ACT has provided funding support for the grants. Learn more about ASCA at www.schoolcounselor.org.