

Left Behind But Not Forgotten: School Counselors' Ability to Help Improve Reading Achievement

Lawanda Edwards, Alabama State University
Parichart Thornton, Alabama State University
Necoal Holiday-Driver, Alabama State University

Abstract

Examined is an outlook of the achievement gap among African-American and White students in school settings. Statistics and other pertinent information are evaluated to demonstrate how this is a growing problem in schools. An exploration of how school counselors can meet the demands and recognize the effects the achievement gap has on African-American students and interventions that should be put into place to help with this rising problem are essential in helping to close the achievement gap crisis, as a result of this movement there have been numerous accomplishments; nevertheless major challenges continue to linger.

School improvement has been a main concern for presidents, governors, and other state policymakers for the past twenty years. As a result of this movement there have been numerous accomplishments, nevertheless major challenges continue to linger. One such challenge is the reading achievement gap between African American students and their European American counterparts (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). This article provides a definition of the achievement gap, instructional efforts classroom teachers can utilize to help close the achievement gap, and how school guidance counselors can help African American students increase reading performance, thus helping to close the achievement gap.

Accountability and improving student achievement has also been a main focus of the school counseling profession. There has been a shift in the way that school counselor accountability is being measured. In the past, school counselor accountability was measured by answering the question, "What do counselors do?" Now school counselor accountability is measured by answering the questions, "How are students different as a result of what school counselors do?" This shift is mainly due to the passing of the No Child Left Behind Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

What is This Achievement Gap?

The "achievement gap" speaks to the observed disproportion of scores on a number of educational measures among groups of students, particularly defined by race/ethnicity, gender academic performance, and socioeconomic status. The achievement gap can be measured in several ways, such as standardized test results, dropout rates, grade point average, etc. This article addresses the achievement gap African American students face based on national and State of Alabama reading assessment results.

Assessing the Achievement Gap

Multiple sources of reading achievement data clearly indicate the existence of a reading achievement gap based on socioeconomic status and ethnicity between African American students and their European American counterparts. The Nation's Report Card State Reading Snapshot Report 2005 - 2007 for students in Alabama indicates that eighth graders scored on an average of five points below the nation's average (Alabama State Department of Education, 2007). The gap has decreased by three points since the 2003 Snapshot when the gap in

scores was eight points. When 8th grade scores in Reading are disaggregated by race/ethnicity between the state and the nation, the gap in scores is 6 points for White students and 7 points for Black students when compared with students of the same race. Within the state White and Black students scored 263 and 235, respectively. The 2005 scores indicate an alarming 28-point gap in achievement within the state between Black and White students. This gap has increased by 3 points since the 2003 Snapshot report where the gap in scores was a significant 25 points. National scores in 8th grade Reading are 247 for students eligible to receive free/reduced lunch and 270 for those ineligible to receive free/reduced lunch; indicating a 23-point difference in scores. Within the state of Alabama, students eligible to receive free/reduced lunch scored 239, which is 8 points lower than the national average. Eighth grade students in Alabama ineligible to receive free/reduced lunch scored 265, only 5 points lower than the national average in Reading. The 2003 Snapshot indicated 8th grade students eligible to receive free/reduced lunch within the state scored 23 points lower than those ineligible to receive free/reduced lunch in reading. The 2005 Snapshot indicates a 26-point difference in scores within the state, indicating a three-point decrease; though not statistically significant, this decline in performance still needs to be addressed.

School Counselors Closing the Reading Achievement Gap

Numerous researchers have reported how the implementation of school counselor activities positively impacted students' reading performance. This research includes using peer counseling to improve reading performance of high school students (James, Charlton, Leo, & Indoe, 1991), registered therapy dogs to improve student reading performance of elementary students (Paradise, 2007), dance to improve reading skills of first-grade students (McMahon, Rose, & Parks, 2003), and relaxation as a reading remediation tool for elementary students (Culbertson & Wille, 1978). Although these programs successfully increased reading performances of the participating students, none of these studies focused on increasing the reading performances of middle school aged African-American students.

One program has proven effective in improving the academic performance of African-American students in middle school. The Student Skills Success Program (SSS; Brigman, Campbell, & Webb, 2004; Brigman & Webb, 2004) is an intervention used to close the academic achievement gap for low achieving students. The SSS program is an intervention delivered in a structured format, by trained school counselors. School counselors deliver the program during classroom guidance and group sessions. The program focuses on three skill sets which consist of a) cognitive and meta-cognitive skills, b) social skills, and c) self-management skills. Cognitive and meta-cognitive skills include goal-setting, progress monitoring, and memory skills. Social skills include interpersonal, social problem solving, listening, and teamwork skills. Self-management skills include managing attention, motivation, and anger. Researchers suggest that this program increases reading scores of African-American students, as well as other ethnicities (Miranda, Webb, Brigman, & Peluso, 2007). A statewide, standardized assessment, the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) was used to measure academic achievement gains. The FCAT scores from two consecutive years were used as pretests and posttests in this study. The mean score for African-American students in the treatment group increased from 642.5 on the pretest to 651.9 on the posttest, while the mean score for African-American students in the comparison group only increased from 650.9 on the pretest to 655.5 on the posttest. The results show that when school counselors implement programs like the SSS, it helps increase academic achievement and close the reading achievement gap.

School counselors should also implement a comprehensive school counseling program to help close the reading achievement gap. The American School Counselor Association National Model (ASCA, 2005) was developed to provide the framework for developing, implementing, and evaluating comprehensive school guidance and counseling programs that included the national standards. School counseling programs are comprehensive, preventive, developmental, integral in the total educational program, and driven by data. The ASCA National Model is now being used by most professional school counselors (Sink, Akos, Turnbull, & Mvududu, 2008), but some school counselors are not highly implementing comprehensive school counseling programs. Research has shown how students' academics, behavior, attitude and self-esteem have positively impacted by highly implemented comprehensive school counseling programs (Lapan, Gysbers, & Petroski, 2001 & 2003;

Lapan, Gysbers, & Sun, 1997; Sink & Stroh, 2003). One study compared the reading achievement of students who attended schools with highly implemented comprehensive school counseling programs to the reading achievement of middle school aged students who attended schools where a comprehensive school guidance program was not highly implemented.

Sink, Akos, Turnbull, and Mvududu (2008) conducted a study in Washington State middle schools with 6th and 7th grade students. The researchers used scores from the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) for 6th graders and the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) for the 7th graders. The results indicated that students in schools with highly implemented comprehensive school counseling programs significantly outperformed students in schools without comprehensive school counseling programs implemented. The 6th grade students in schools with highly implemented comprehensive school counseling programs did better on the ITBS language scores and the 7th grade students did better on the WASL reading scores. Although this is just one study with middle school students, this provides evidence that a fully implemented comprehensive school counseling program does have a positive impact on reading achievement.

Implications for School Counselors

School counselors are urged to fully implement comprehensive school counseling programs at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. To fully implement a comprehensive school counseling program, school counselors are encouraged to give up some of their non-guidance duties to focus on actual guidance duties. This also means increasing communication with administrators to allow school counselors to stop “pushing papers” and devote more time to guidance and counseling duties (Dollarhide, Smith, & Lemberger, 2007).

School counselors are encouraged to show how their programs and activities contribute to an increase in student achievement (Trusty, Mellin, & Herbert, 2008). Counselors can collaborate with teachers and administrators to help disaggregate data and close the reading achievement gap (Sink, 2008). School counselors can offer their skills of collaboration, consultation, leadership and advocacy to help in the process of increasing student achievement.

School teachers are constantly in contact with students and are the first to notice concerns with academics. School counselors are encouraged work with teachers and administrators on school improvement plans to make sure that counseling programs are included as interventions. School counselors can also take on a leadership role as a part of the school’s leadership team. This gives school counselors an opportunity to advocate for student needs and assist with identifying programs that are scientifically based, such as the SSS.

The National Reading Panel (2000) suggests that teachers’ use of high-interest, easy reading text with controlled vocabulary, can assist students reading below grade level especially in the middle grades. Such an academic intervention might address multiple student needs through combination with bibliotherapy. For example, school counselors could collaborate with teachers to incorporate bibliotherapy into the curriculum. Bibliotherapy can promote social development and a love for literature and reading (Gladding & Gladding, 1991).

School counselors and counselor educators are compelled to focus on conducting more research to identify techniques, strategies, and programs that school counselors are using to help close the reading achievement gap. More research should also be conducted on the effectiveness of fully implemented comprehensive school counseling programs in the elementary, middle, and high schools.

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