



# INFORMATION CAPSULE

## Research Services

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### MIDDLE SCHOOL COUNSELORS

#### At a Glance

This Information Capsule summarizes the research related to middle school counselors. Key findings include:

- Due to most school districts' limited resources, the U.S. has seen a decline in the number of middle school counselors over the last 10 years. Although the recommended student-to-counselor ratio is 250-to-1, most schools have one counselor for every 500 students and some schools assign one counselor to as many as 1,000 students. Research on whether the student-to-counselor ratio has an impact on student outcomes has produced mixed findings.
- Less affluent schools and districts have a student-to-counselor ratio double the size of more affluent schools and districts, and may not have any counselor at all.
- A number of studies have found that middle school counseling services are associated with increases in students' levels of academic achievement.
- Studies conducted on the impact of middle school counseling services on students' behavioral and personal/social outcomes have produced mixed findings.
- Most studies have found that career counseling increases middle school students' career awareness and their ability to make more informed decisions about high school course selections.

A summary of activities designed to increase the effectiveness of middle school counseling services is also provided.

Middle school counselors address students' academic, social/emotional, and career development needs through the implementation of comprehensive school counseling programs and services. Although the specific design and implementation of middle school counseling programs varies across school districts in the United States, based on each community's needs, school culture, and the availability of support service personnel, all counseling programs strive to provide students with multifaceted guidance and support services (American School Counselor Association, 2016; Anderson, 2016; Moore-Thomas, 2009; Akos & Kingsley, 2008; Wiist, 2007).

Middle school can be an especially difficult time for students. Early adolescence is a period of rapid maturation and physical growth, hormonal changes, social development issues, questions of self-identity, changes in relations with family and peers, and educational changes related to the transition from elementary to middle school. Experts therefore recommend the establishment of strong counseling programs at the middle school level (American School Counselor Association, 2016; Ray, 2016; Schmalzel, 2013; Wigfield et al., 2005; School-Counselor.org, n.d.).

Experts stress that counseling services should be provided to all middle school students, not just those at either end of the spectrum (i.e., high achievers and at-risk students) (Wigfield et al., 2005; American School Counselor Association, n.d.). Some of the activities performed by middle school counselors are listed below.

- Supporting the development of students' academic skills;
- Assisting with students' educational plans;
- Offering strategies to enhance students' organizational, study, and test-taking skills;
- Preparing students for the transition to high school;
- Assisting with career awareness, exploration, and planning;
- Providing students with guidance regarding personal and social problems;
- Teaching students conflict resolution, communication, problem-solving, and decision-making skills;
- Providing coping strategies for students who have undergone recent stress or tragedy;
- Providing students with safety nets, peer supports, and mentoring to help them maintain or improve their academic performance;
- Providing individual counseling, small group counseling, and classroom guidance on a variety of issues;
- Referring students to external community support services, if necessary;
- Working with teachers to identify students who are most at-risk of academic failure; and
- Consulting and collaborating with parents on students' academic, personal/social, and career development (Anderson, 2016; Nick G. Parras Middle School, 2016; College Board, 2012; Wigfield et al., 2005; Lapan et al., 2003; American School Counselor Association, n.d.; International Student, n.d.; School-Counselor.org, n.d.).

### **Impact of Student-to-Counselor Ratio**

The American School Counselor Association (2015) recommends a student-to-counselor ratio of 250-1. Due to most school districts' limited resources, however, the U.S. has seen a decline in the number of middle school counselors over the last 10 years. As budgets have become increasingly tighter, school counselors have often been the first positions to be eliminated. Most schools in the U.S. have one counselor for every 500 students and some schools assign one counselor to as many as 1,000 students. In addition, many middle schools require their counselors to complete an increasing number of non-counseling tasks that reduce their ability to provide students with adequate support and guidance (Williams, 2015; Schmalzel, 2013; Carrell & Carrell, 2006; Wigfield et al., 2005).

Researchers have found that substantially fewer counseling services are provided to students attending schools with greater percentages of low-income students. It has been reported that

less affluent schools and districts have a student-to-counselor ratio double the size of more affluent schools and districts, and may not have any counselor at all. Not only do counselors working in low-income schools and districts have larger student caseloads, but there is also a tendency for them to be assigned more clerical and disciplinary tasks. They are often required to prioritize crisis intervention over other types of counseling services (Cronin, 2016; Williams, 2015; Lapan et al., 2014; Dimmitt & Wilkerson, 2012).

Some studies have found that lower student-to-counselor ratios (250 or fewer students assigned to each counselor) are associated with higher levels of academic success and reduced disciplinary incidents. Examples include:

- A study of 22 elementary schools in Alachua County, Florida found that the presence of an additional counselor was associated with significant score increases on grades 3 and 5 boys' (but not girls') scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and Stanford 9 exams. Both boys' and girls' disciplinary infractions also decreased when they attended a school with an extra counselor. The researchers concluded that hiring an additional counselor was approximately twice as effective as hiring an additional teacher (Carrell & Hoekstra, 2014).
- Another study of Alachua County, Florida's elementary schools compared the frequency of disciplinary incidents at schools with different student-to-counselor ratios, controlling for student and school characteristics. The researchers found that lower student-to-counselor ratios led to decreases both in the recurrence of student disciplinary problems and in the number of students involved in a disciplinary incident. Reducing the mean of 544 students per counselor to 250 students per counselor resulted in a 26% decrease in the probability of a disciplinary recurrence and a 59% decrease in the mean number of students with a disciplinary occurrence (Carrell & Carrell, 2006).
- A study of students attending Missouri schools found that lower student-to-counselor ratios (250 or fewer students assigned to each counselor) were significantly associated with higher high school graduation rates and fewer disciplinary incidents. Student-to-counselor ratios were not related to attendance rates or ACT Composite scores. Most schools included in the study were comprised of students in grades 7-12 or grades 9-12; a few of the schools included in the study housed students in grades 6-12 and grades 10-12. The researchers controlled for student and school characteristics (Lapan et al., 2012).

In contrast to the studies summarized above, one study found that the availability of school counselors at a school was more important than the student-to-counselor ratio. The study included over 58,000 eighth grade students in the state of Minnesota. Results indicated that student-to-counselor ratio did not meaningfully predict Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCA) scores in reading, mathematics, or science. However, the presence of a counselor made a difference in student achievement. Students with access to a school counselor had significantly higher MCA reading, mathematics, and science scores than students without access to a counselor. The research design controlled for student and school characteristics (Cronin, 2016).

## Impact of Middle School Counselors on Students' Academic Achievement

A number of researchers have found that middle school counseling programs have a positive impact on students' levels of academic achievement (Career & College Clubs, 2015; Lapan et al., 2014; Dimmitt & Wilkerson, 2012; Hanover Research, 2012; Akos & Kingsley, 2008). Examples of studies that have found that the availability of counseling services are related to positive academic outcomes include:

- A comparison of over 58,000 eighth grade students in Minnesota with and without access to a school counselor found that students with access to a school counselor had significantly higher standardized test scores in reading, mathematics, and science on the state's achievement test, compared to students without access to a counselor (Cronin, 2016).
- Brigman and Campbell (2003) compared Florida schools in which counselors implemented the *Student Success Skills* curriculum - focusing on the development of cognitive, social, and self-management skills – and control group schools. The study compared students in six elementary schools (grade 5 students), two middle schools (grades 6 and 8 students), and four high schools (grade 9 students). Students were randomly selected from schools with equivalent racial composition and income levels. Results of the study indicated that students who attended schools that implemented the *Student Success Skills* curriculum scored significantly higher on the FCAT Reading and Mathematics tests than control group students.
- Webb and colleagues (2005) conducted a study to replicate the results of Brigman and Campbell's (2003) study. Their study included students from 20 Florida schools. Approximately one-half of the students attended elementary schools (grade 5 students) and one-half attended middle schools (grade 6 students). Once again, students receiving the *Student Success Skills* curriculum scored significantly higher on the FCAT Mathematics than control group students. In Reading, the scores of students whose schools provided the *Student Success Skills* curriculum increased more than the scores of the control group, but not significantly more.
- Campbell and Brigman (2005) conducted a study to replicate the results obtained by both Brigman and Campbell (2003) and Webb and colleagues (2005). The sample consisted of Florida students in 20 schools. Approximately one-half of the students attended elementary schools (grade 5 students) and one-half attended middle schools (grade 6 students). Results indicated that students attending schools that provided the counseling curriculum scored significantly higher than the control group on both the FCAT Reading and FCAT Mathematics.
- A survey of over 22,000 seventh grade students in Missouri found that students who attended schools with fully implemented comprehensive counseling programs reported having higher grades and better relationships with their teachers. They were also more likely to report that their education was important to them and relevant to their future.

Students reported greater academic success when they had access to counseling programs, regardless of the income level of their school (Lapan et al., 2003).

### **Impact of Middle School Counselors on Students' Behavioral and Personal/Social Outcomes**

Studies on the impact of counseling programs on students' behavioral and personal/social outcomes at the middle school level have produced mixed findings.

Legum and Hoare's (2004) study found that a counseling intervention did not have a significant impact on middle school students' levels of self-esteem. The researchers randomly selected at-risk sixth and seventh grade students from a suburban middle school to participate in the study as members of the treatment or control group. Treatment group students participated in *Career Targets*, a career exploration program that allows students to align their possible career choices with high school academic planning. The program also included training in interviewing strategies and resume writing. Study findings indicated that the counseling intervention did not have an impact on students' levels of self-esteem.

A few studies have found that the provision of counseling services has a positive effect on middle school students' behaviors and attitudes. For example:

- Dimmitt and Wilkerson (2012) found that counseling programs were associated with positive student behavioral and social outcomes. The researchers administered student and parent surveys and obtained school-level data on attendance and suspension rates in 19 Rhode Island middle schools and 32 Rhode Island high schools. They analyzed results based on the type of counseling services provided and found:
  - When counselors provided more services that focused on improving academic success, students had significantly better attendance and fewer suspensions. Students also reported that they had fewer problems with other students, were less likely to get teased or bullied, and had a greater sense of belonging to their school.
  - In schools where counseling programs spent more time addressing students' personal and social needs, students were significantly more likely to report a greater sense of belonging to their school, less likely to report difficulties with teachers, and less likely to say they were teased or bullied.
  - In schools where counselors provided more college and career counseling services, students had better attendance, lower suspension rates, and reported a stronger sense of belonging to their school, fewer difficulties with teachers, fewer problems with other students, and less likelihood of being teased or bullied.
- In two of the studies of Florida students summarized in the previous section (Campbell & Brigman, 2005; Webb et al., 2005), researchers administered the School Social Behavior Scales (SSBS) to treatment group teachers and obtained ratings of students' academic, social, and self-management skills prior to and following implementation of

the *Student Success Skills* counseling curriculum. Results indicated that teachers believed students' social behaviors and skills improved following participation in the counseling program.

### **Impact of Middle School Counselors on Students' Career Awareness and Development**

Career & College Clubs (2015) reported that few middle school students have realistic career plans and that most do not understand how their classroom instruction relates to future careers. In fact, many middle school students do not yet see the need for career planning. A survey administered to students in grades 6-8 attending a rural school in Western New York found that students reported that they did not require a lot of career counseling and were more interested in receiving counseling related to personal, social, and emotional issues. It was hypothesized that students at this age are more likely to seek career information and advice from their peers and may therefore not perceive the need for assistance from school counselors (Barrell, 2009).

In general, it appears that once middle school students receive career counseling, it has a positive impact on their career awareness and development. Researchers' reviews have concluded that middle school career guidance and support produce the following outcomes:

- More opportunities to connect classroom experiences with postsecondary and career goals;
- Ability to make more informed decisions related to high school course selections;
- Increased career awareness and motivation to attain a postsecondary education or training;
- Improved ability to make career decisions;
- Increased understanding of the world of work, leading to an openness to an increased number of potential careers;
- Enhanced teamwork skill development; and
- Increased understanding of why it is important to stay in school (Career & College Clubs, 2015; Hanover Research, 2012; ACT, 2005).

Peterson and colleagues (1999) found that the level of career intervention administered to students had a direct impact on their ability to understand the importance of their educational choices as they related to postsecondary education and future career choices. In that study, eighth grade students were divided into three groups and presented with different levels of career intervention:

- The Level 1 group was the control group.
- The Level 2 group was given printed information about course offerings, college preparatory and vocational curricula, and graduation requirements,
- The Level 3 group was provided with a four-day intervention that included small group and computer career counseling, as well as administration of career inventories by the school's counselor.

Findings indicated that students in the Level 3 group had the greatest ability to make informed decisions related to their course selections. Students in the Level 2 group also demonstrated significantly higher levels of understanding about the relationship between course selection and career aspirations than students in the Level 1 group. The researchers concluded that

implementation of a career intervention by the school counselor has the potential to help middle school students start thinking about the importance of the choices they will be making related to their course selections.

In contrast to these findings, Legum and Hoare (2004) found that career counseling services did not have an impact on students' career maturity, as measured by the Crites Career Maturity Inventory. The Crites Career Maturity Inventory assesses the process by which students approach career development tasks and measures their readiness to make appropriate career plans. The researchers randomly selected at-risk sixth and seventh grade students from a suburban middle school to participate in the study as members of the treatment or control group. Treatment group students participated in *Career Targets*, a career exploration program. Study findings indicated that the counseling intervention did not have an impact on students' career maturity. Although the treatment group's scores on the career inventory increased from pretest to posttest and the control group's scores decreased, the treatment group's score increase was not statistically significant.

### **Activities Designed to Increase the Effectiveness of Middle School Counseling Services**

Activities that have been shown to increase the effectiveness of middle school counseling services are summarized below.

- **Support students' academic achievement.** One of the main roles of middle school counselors is to foster students' academic development. Activities that contribute to students' academic success include:
  - Helping students set goals and developing a plan for academic success;
  - Teaching organizational, test-taking, and study skills;
  - Closely monitoring academic progress;
  - Teaching students how to use assessment results to identify knowledge and skill gaps;
  - Relating schoolwork to home and community experiences; and
  - Consulting with teachers, administrators, and parents regarding academic issues (American School Counselor Association, 2016; Nick G. Parras Middle School, 2016; Ray, 2016; McCotter & Cohen, 2013; College Board, 2012; Dimmitt & Wilkerson, 2012; Bottoms & Cooney, 2011; International Student, n.d.; John T. Magee Middle School, n.d.).
  
- **Address students' personal and social development.** Middle school counseling programs should promote students' personal and social competencies. Counselors should work individually and in small groups with students, as well as in whole classroom and school-wide settings. Activities that address students' personal and social needs include:
  - Helping students learn to understand themselves and others, including strengths and weaknesses;
  - Helping students cope with any pressure and stress in their lives;
  - Teaching communication, problem-solving, decision-making, and conflict resolution skills;
  - Teaching about positive peer relationships;

- Conducting training in anger management;
  - Conducting support groups that target specific issues, such as self-esteem, grief, illness, and parents' divorce;
  - Encouraging student involvement in school-sponsored enrichment and extracurricular activities that provide opportunities for students to develop positive peer relationships and a feeling of connectedness to their school;
  - Conducting tolerance and diversity training;
  - Implementing bullying prevention programs;
  - Educating students about substance abuse;
  - Holding school crisis interventions; and
  - Providing referrals to external community agencies when necessary (American School Counselor Association, 2016; Carrell & Hoekstra, 2014; DeWitt, 2013; McCotter & Cohen, 2013; College Board, 2012; Dimmitt & Wilkerson, 2012; Moore-Thomas, 2009; Akos & Kingsley, 2008; Trusty, 2004; School-Counselor.org, n.d.).
- **Provide career planning services.** Effective middle school career counseling services, while more general than the targeted programs found in high schools, help students identify their interests and aptitudes. Programs should focus on career exploration, career education, career planning, and career development. Counselors' activities should include:
    - Assisting with high school course selection and providing explanations of the types of rigorous courses recommended for various future career opportunities;
    - Connecting classroom learning to practical applications so that students can make clear connections between their academic coursework, college, and future careers;
    - Providing support services focused on linking students' interests to future college and career choices;
    - Developing individual career plans using student-counselor conferences, computer-assisted career guidance programs, career assessments, and interest inventories; and
    - Creating a school climate that encourages students to consider a postsecondary education (for example, organizing visits to colleges, hanging college campus posters on classroom walls, and holding award ceremonies to recognize students' academic accomplishments) (American School Counselor Association, 2016; Career & College Clubs, 2015; McCotter & Cohen, 2013; College Board, 2012; Dimmitt & Wilkerson, 2012; Hanover Research, 2012; Bottoms & Cooney, 2011; Moore-Thomas, 2009; Wiist, 2007; ACT, 2005).

Researchers emphasize that career counseling services should begin at the middle school level. They caution that it is too late to start career counseling in high school, when many students have already made their course selections and it is too difficult to overcome gaps in curricula and preparation for college and career. In addition, studies have found that students have career and occupational interests as early as sixth grade, gradually developing over the middle school and high school years (Rennie Center for

Education Research & Policy, 2015; Bassiri, 2014; Hanover Research, 2014; Ryerse et al., 2014; College Board, 2012; McAlister & Mevs, 2012; Tierney et al., 2009; ACT, 2008a; Wiist, 2007). McCotter and Cohen (2013) noted that the exploratory nature of middle school students also makes it an appropriate time to begin career planning.

- **Work directly with students.** Researchers stress that middle school counselors should spend as much time as possible working with students (College Board, 2012; Akos & Kingsley, 2008). The American School Counselor Association (n.d.) recommended that counselors spend 80% or more of their time providing direct and indirect services to students. Schmalzel (2013) noted that counselors are often required to spend too much time engaged in non-counseling tasks that limit their ability to provide students with the necessary academic, personal/social, and career support services.
- **Collaborate with teachers and school administrators.** Middle school counselors should not work in isolation. Instead, they should collaborate with teachers and school administrators to deliver programs and services that foster students' success. Collaborative activities include:
  - Assisting with students' academic and behavioral management plans;
  - Conducting learning style assessments that enhance students' ability to succeed academically;
  - Identifying at-risk students;
  - Organizing career development activities, such as classroom speakers;
  - Creating a positive and supportive school climate;
  - Administering school-wide needs assessments to determine which types of counseling services are needed most; and
  - Sharing student data and results with teachers and other school staff to better inform academic planning (American School Counselor Association, 2016; McCotter & Cohen, 2013; College Board, 2012).
- **Create a positive school climate.** Effective middle school counselors work to create a caring, safe, and supportive school climate. To achieve a positive school climate, school counselors should lead school-wide efforts that include:
  - Creating an atmosphere where every student believes in his or her own academic and social abilities;
  - Creating a college-going culture that conveys the belief that all students can succeed in postsecondary institutions; and
  - Establishing school-wide programs, as well as individual and small-group interventions, that are focused on eliminating bullying and other forms of violence and aggression (American School Counselor Association, 2016; College Board, 2012; Akos & Kingsley, 2008; Wigfield et al., 2005; International Student, n.d.; School-Counselor.org, n.d.).
- **Use data to inform practice.** Middle school counselors should use student data to inform practice. Examples of ways in which data can be used to guide counseling services include:

- Identifying trends in course-taking among student groups.
  - Identifying which groups of students are successfully preparing for high school and which are not;
  - Reviewing attendance, discipline, promotion/retention, and grade point average data;
  - Examining student progress on both an individual and group basis;
  - Determining the need for interventions that enhance students' academic, personal/social, and career development;
  - Determining the effectiveness of counseling interventions; and
  - Identifying issues of equity and access (Nick G. Parras Middle School, 2016; College Board, 2012; Dimmitt & Wilkerson, 2012; American School Counselor Association, n.d.).
- **Support students' transition from elementary to middle school.** The transition from elementary school to middle school can be very challenging for early adolescents. Middle school counselors can ease this transition by engaging in the following activities:
    - Working collaboratively with teachers and counselors in elementary schools to determine the range of skills students have when they enter middle school and identifying students who may require academic and/or behavioral interventions once they reach middle school; and
    - Educating parents about issues related to the middle school transition (College Board, 2012; Wigfield et al., 2005).
- **Support students' transition to high school.** Several researchers have noted that the transition to high school is just as important as the transition to college. They therefore recommend that middle school counselors provide comprehensive transition services to graduating eighth graders, such as:
    - Explaining high school academic opportunities and requirements to students;
    - Reviewing middle school students' educational and career goals, as well as their academic strengths and weaknesses, with high school counselors prior to students' entry into high school;
    - Arranging student visits and orientations to the high schools they will be attending prior to the start of the school year;
    - Notifying high school counselors of students who will need extra academic support and identifying their particular skill gaps (Bassiri, 2014; College Board, 2012; Bottoms & Cooney, 2011; ACT, 2008b).
- **Involve parents.** Effective middle school counselors collaborate with students' families. Activities should include:
    - Teaching parents and families how to support their children as they take rigorous courses;
    - Hosting parent information nights and one-on-one parent conferences;
    - Providing parents with interpretations of their children's assessment results;

- Teaching parents how to navigate the school system so they can be advocates for their children;
  - Helping parents communicate with their children’s teachers to obtain information about their academic progress;
  - Teaching parents how to use school and community resources to locate free and low-cost enrichment and extracurricular activities that support academic learning and career development; and
  - Providing parents with referrals to external agencies if their children need additional support services (American School Counselor Association, 2016; College Board, 2012; Dimmitt & Wilkerson, 2012).
- **Work with the community.** Middle school counselors should work with community organizations. Activities should include:
    - Locating members of the community who can serve as role models and promote academic excellence, goal setting, and career awareness;
    - Hosting representatives from local college and career and technical schools to meet with students to discuss early college planning;
    - Identifying community organizations that offer enrichment and extracurricular opportunities;
    - Increasing students’ exposure to careers that reflect their interests; and
    - Connecting students with needed external support services, such as legal services or substance abuse prevention services (American School Counselor Association, 2016; Ray, 2016; College Board, 2012).

### Summary

Effective middle school counselors provide comprehensive counseling services that address students’ academic, social/emotional, and career development needs.

A review of the research on the provision of middle school counseling services suggests the following:

- Due to most school districts’ limited resources, the U.S. has seen a decline in the number of middle school counselors over the last 10 years. As budgets have become increasingly tighter, school counselors have often been the first positions to be eliminated. Although the recommended student-to-counselor ratio is 250-to-1, most schools in the U.S. have one counselor for every 500 students and some schools assign one counselor to as many as 1,000 students. Studies have found that less affluent schools and districts have a student-to-counselor ratio double the size of more affluent schools and districts, and may not have any counselor at all.
- Research on whether the student-to-counselor ratio has an impact on student outcomes has produced mixed findings. Some studies have concluded that a lower ratio leads to increases in students’ academic achievement and decreases in disciplinary infractions; others suggest that access to a counselor is more important than the number of counselors employed at the school.

- A number of studies have found that middle school counseling services are associated with increases in students' levels of academic achievement.
- Studies conducted on the impact of middle school counseling services on students' behavioral and personal/social outcomes have produced mixed findings. Although one study concluded that participation in counseling programs did not result in higher levels of middle school students' levels of self-esteem, a few studies have found that the provision of counseling services is related to decreases in students' disciplinary incidents, a greater sense of belonging, and improved relations with teachers and peers.
- Most studies have found that career counseling is linked to increases in middle school students' career awareness and an ability to make more informed decisions about high school course selections. However, one study reported that career counseling services did not have an impact on students' career development or on their ability to make career plans.

Activities designed to increase the effectiveness of middle school counseling services were summarized, such as collaborating with teachers and school administrators; creating a positive school climate; using data to inform practice; supporting students' transition to high school; and involving parents and community members.

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