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The School Counselor's Role in Easing Students' Transition From Elementary to Middle School

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There seems to be an overall decline in student academic performance during the transition from elementary to middle school (Crockett, Peterson, Graber, Schulenberg, & Ebata, 1989). The underlying cause for this decline appears to be an inability of young middle school students to manage their time and set priorities. Furthermore, many middle school students are latchkey students, resulting in a lack of adult supervision to assist in time management. The goal of this study was to note the discrepancies between teacher and student perceptions of homework. Furthermore, the counselor's role in facilitating incoming students' development of time management skills and solid work habits, so that the students could successfully complete homework assignments and be overall successful academically, was investigated. The expected outcome was an increase in student academic achievement, higher self-esteem, and more positive perceptions of the school.

Background

Why is it so important that students adapt to their environment, including learning time management skills and positive work habits, early in their academic careers? There are many reasons. Peterson, Ebata, and Graber (1987) suggested that patterns of achievement throughout early adolescent years can predict school achievement in the 12th grade. Socially, if students fail to make the transition in middle school, especially in the areas of social adjustment and maturity, they may well be socially immature for the remainder of their lives (Hough, 1995). With these things in mind, counselors have a heavy weight of responsibility on their shoulders. Dundee (1998) stressed the importance of encouraging and supporting teachers in accomplishing their work in these efforts. More than ever before, middle schools cry out for counselors who employ a personal commitment to helping administrators, teachers, and other staff members help young adolescents at this very crucial yet also very difficult stage in the child's life.

Research has revealed excellent strategies to increase the effectiveness of study skills and time management for children and adolescents (Stanford Medical Youth Science Program, 2004). Unfortunately, often when there is a lack of congruity between teacher perceptions and student performance, the fault is placed with the student and not the school's practices. In many cases, to find fault with practice equates with ineptitude. It is important, though, that counselors and others take responsibility for what goes on within their schools because students take their cues from those who should be in charge. Griffith (1996) found that the quality of interpersonal relationships in the classroom and the organization of the school was related to students' sense of alienation, satisfaction, and level of conflict. These intangibles can only be created by counselors and other adults within the school.

Method

A small group of counselor education graduate students were invited to analyze an urban middle school's instructional and organizational programs to determine quality and effectiveness. The school's strengths and limitations were identified, and suggestions for improvement were made. Effective physical entry made the consultants less intrusive into the school organization. A needs assessment was conducted, with the data shared with administrators and teachers of the school.

Description of the Study Setting

The study site was a public urban middle school. It was located in a large geographic zone, with the student population representing a wide variety of socioeconomic strata as well as academic abilities. The total school enrollment was 634. The school was structured in teaching teams in each grade level, and was organized on the middle school concept. It had one of the lowest absentee rates in the school district.

Selection of Participants

This study examined the transition from elementary to middle school, from fifth to sixth grades. Therefore, the participants included all sixth-grade teachers (N = 8) and also 200 sixth-grade students. The student population was diversified, with a racial makeup of 58% African American, 38% Caucasian, 2.4% Hispanic, 1.6% Asian, and 0.001% multiracial. The gender composition was 55% male and 45% female. Sixty percent of students were on free or reduced lunch. More than 37% of students lived with a single parent and/or guardian. The racial makeup of the teaching population was 71% Caucasian and 29% African American.

Instrumentation

Two questionnaires were developed by the authors. The first set of survey questions were distributed to all sixth-grade teachers (N = 8) at the school to determine the value teachers had for homework. There were eight questions on this survey. There was a 100% response rate (n = 8). The second survey set of questions were given to sixth-grade students (N = 200) to determine how they managed their time to complete homework assignments. There were five questions on this survey. There was a 100% response rate (n = 200).

Limitations of the Study

This was a very short-duration study, lasting only 3 months from initial entry into the organization to final site visit. There may be unforeseen changes the following school year.

Results

Although teachers utilized homework to reinforce the instruction of the day, many students were not completing assignments. Fifty percent of teachers assigned homework four times a week, 37.5% assigned homework three times a week, and 12.5% assigned homework one time per week. The same percentage of teachers reported checking and reviewing homework. Meanwhile, only 60% of students reported completing their homework.

There appears to be a discrepancy in teachers' perception of how long it should take to complete homework assignment and students' report of how much time it actually takes them to complete it. All teachers reported that they feel as if the average time a student needs to complete homework assignments is between 15 and 30 minutes. However, 73% of students reported that it takes them between 1 and 3 hours to

complete homework assignments, while the remaining 27% reported that it takes them at least 1/2 hour to complete their homework.

Implications for Counseling

The counselor should be a leader within the school to help teachers and administrators increase student academic achievement. The counselor's role is not only facilitating appropriate skills but also being an effective advocate for students. While not all suggestions outlined here may be directly the responsibility of the counselor, he or she should be a vital part of the overall implementation process. The suggestions for improving desired learner results are as follows:

1. Effective time management should be discussed in an orientation for sixth-grade students.
2. All faculty and staff should be taught the time management process, with orientations and staff development meetings to keep them focused.
3. Students should be allowed a time during the day to prepare for assignments. By doing so, the school is implying that good study habits are important. It also reinforces the idea that the school wants its students to be successful academically.
4. Every week, each child should be given a chart to plan the week's activities. Saturday and Sunday should also be listed on the chart, to reinforce the goal of doing small amounts of school work each day, thus managing the workload instead of finishing a large project overnight or cramming for a test.
5. Students should be provided with information on how to take better notes.

Discussion

There are many things that can be done to help students transition from elementary to middle school. Students should be actively encouraged to think about how time is spent after school. Also, just as important as time management are the benefits related to developing good study habits. These work habits should be instilled early because student success improves with such positive, organized habits. Faculty and staff should focus on promoting student success, not only academically but also emotionally.

References

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