

Celebrating Cultural Diversity: Empowering Students and Families through a Comprehensive Guidance Program

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Effective ways to increase academic achievement, reduce discipline referrals, and decrease absenteeism have long been sought by educators and school counselors in particular. With 21st Century Schools reflecting the most culturally, ethnically, and racially diverse student population ever experienced in the history of education in the United States, comprehensive guidance programs directed by multiculturally competent school counselors are essential. To develop and implement programming that successfully and sensitively addresses the diversity of the student population while increasing student achievement,

reducing discipline referrals, and decreasing absenteeism is the goal of the contemporary multiculturally competent school counselor. Toward this end, a pilot project was developed and implemented. Subsequently, a 1.1 million dollar grant from the U.S. Department of Education was obtained to expand the successful pilot program to 7 culturally diverse schools. Now its 3rd year, the multiculturally sensitive comprehensive guidance program reflects multicultural counseling at its best.

Based on the pilot project's data, this comprehensive guidance program provides a gamut of counseling services including individual and small group counseling, classroom guidance, tutoring, parent education, community linkages and outreach, and Family Fun Nights. Data regarding the impact that each counseling service has on student achievement, discipline referrals, and absenteeism are collected and analyzed. Two years of data have been reviewed, collectively and separately, the findings suggest which services have the greatest impact and therefore should be expanded. When counselors serve a student population of 500 to 1000 students, having the time to offer all aspects of a comprehensive guidance program is a struggle. Knowing where time is best spent and what programming produces the desired effect maximizes the school counselor's effectiveness and efficiency.

One counseling service offered is individual counseling. Students attend school for 7 hours a day so unless individual counseling has an enormous impact on academic achievement, discipline referrals, and absenteeism, then individual counseling is not an efficient use of time. Reviewing the data collected from the participation of 1069 students over the 2 year period, individual counseling was not associated with student gains academically. Absenteeism did not reach the critical point of >21 days for any student participating in individual counseling. In terms of reducing discipline referrals, individual counseling utilizing a brief, solution focused approach significantly reduced the number of discipline referrals. The significance level was $p < .01$. Analyses of these data further suggest that the practice of referring students to community agencies for counseling reduces the number of discipline referrals. Because of time constraints on school counselors, when students have the option through Medicaid or other health insurance to seek counseling outside the school, then the school counselor's time is better used to provide individual counseling to those that otherwise would not have access.

The second component of the comprehensive guidance program is group counseling. The advantage of providing small group counseling over individual counseling is that the counselor can work with more than one student at a time. When each counselor is serving a student population of at least 500, justifying

spending time with individual students is difficult unless evidence exists that individual counseling surpasses group counseling's effectiveness in producing the desired outcome. Absenteeism did not reach the set criteria of >21 days so further discussion of this variable is not possible. According to the regression analysis performed, small group counseling did not significantly impact the student's number of discipline referrals nor did small group counseling have a significant effect on academic performance. This is not to say that small group counseling has no place in the schools. In terms of the target areas for which the comprehensive guidance program was developed, after 2 years of the project, small group counseling has no statistically significant impact on absenteeism, discipline referrals, or academic achievement.

The comprehensive guidance program also provides parent education for parents of students. These meetings utilize the curriculum, *Active Parenting Now* (2002) followed by seminars of varied topics requested by the parents who are participating. This curriculum is available in both English and Spanish. Parents are surveyed to determine the days and times they are available. Parents are matched by times available with other parents who have students of similar ages. The students whose parents participate in parent education sessions do not have a statistically significant reduction in discipline referrals nor do they have a significant increase in academic achievement.

A comprehensive guidance program would not be complete without a classroom guidance component. To accomplish this task with uniformity, *The Second Step* curriculum (Committee for Children, 2002) is used in all 7 schools with students from K-5 participating. Students complete a pre and post test. The data indicate that the classroom guidance experience using *Second Step* does significantly reduce the number of discipline referrals yielding a $p < .05$. Although classroom guidance using *2nd Step* has not produced a significant impact on academic achievement, perhaps academic achievement is an indirect and long term by product which has not shown itself in the data at 2 years. With discipline referrals students lose class time, which over time, means not being present for instruction. If fewer discipline referrals result, then less class time is missed and the student is then present during instructional periods. Based on these findings, classroom guidance with the use of this curriculum is effective and efficient use of the school counselor's time.

Free tutoring has been another offering of the comprehensive guidance program. Unfortunately, to date, the tutoring efforts at the 7 schools have not shown any statistically significant impact on academic

performance or discipline referrals. Once again the use of the counselor's time must be considered and allocations to projects that do not yield progress toward the established goals of increased academic achievement, reduction in discipline referrals and decrease in absenteeism should be challenged. The talents and resources that the counselor brings to the school must be used wisely or the optimal benefit is never reached.

Increasing parent involvement at the school is a goal of the comprehensive guidance program. Epstein (1996) describes 6 types of parent involvement and sample practices. These include programs that train and support parents, facilitate home school communication, recruit parent volunteers, promote learning at home, encourage parent leadership and parent school advisory committees, and collaborate with the community. Family Fun Nights address these 6 aspects of parent involvement and have expanded the traditional experiences of students and their families beyond the classroom, offering learning activities, engaging the entire family outside regular school hours. Unlike evening programs at school where children perform to the delight of parents, Family Fun Nights require all members of the family to participate, parent(s), student(s), and other family attendees alike. Far too frequently, with the demands of present day life, families are fragmented, rarely coming together during the work week for family time. Family Fun Nights set aside time for families to interact and share in meaningful ways, without the distractions posed at home by ringing telephones, blaring televisions, or mesmerizing computers and video games. Designed to foster the relationship between home and school, these nights provide the opportunity for parents to have a positive experience with their student(s) at school. Family Fun Nights are designed to 1) increase parental involvement in the educational and developmental process of their student(s); 2) foster and strengthen positive relationships between and among parents, children, counselors, teachers, staff, and administrators; 3) provide a free meal to all school families, excluding no one for financial reasons; 4) encourage learning and playing together among students and families; 5) improve academic performance by helping parents learn effective ways to promote a more conducive learning environment at home; 6) reduce discipline referrals by helping parents learn effective ways to devise a more conducive learning environment at home; and 7) promote the school as an inviting, exciting, safe, and interesting center of learning, both during and outside the traditional school day. The long-term goal for students who attend Family Fun Nights is to build a lasting positive relationship with their parents through programming that enhances parenting skills.

To cultivate family interaction and play between Family Fun Nights and to maintain interest in attending Family Fun Nights, “door prizes” are awarded to attending families. Area businesses and attractions are donate tickets to activities that foster positive family bonding experiences. Based on a selected theme, each family fun night consists of an initial family activity, shared meal, an active learning module and a family project requiring cooperative effort for successful completion. Programming for Family Fun Nights brings a diverse group together identifying the similarities of values, practices, and beliefs among the cultures represented while embracing and championing the strengths offered in diversity. Programs raise consciousness through experiential activities and ideas uniting students and families. Some examples of these activities include the designing and making a school family quilt, reading with the stars, sharing culture through food, designing and making the family crest, experiencing culture through music and dance, and creating and singing the family song. These activities are first experienced through sharing within the family and the experience is deepened for all present as each family is given the opportunity to share their creation with the larger group. At the close of each family fun night, family projects bridging family fun between Family Fun Nights are assigned. This helps families to incorporate and practice what they learn during the family fun night in their daily lives.

Research evaluated and reviewed (Mattingly, Prislín, McKenzie, Rodriguez, & Kayzar, 2002) has consistently supported the positive impact that parent involvement has on the academic achievement of students. Of all the components of this comprehensive guidance program, the most statistically significant element that has positively impacted academic achievement ($p < .001$), and at the same time has been associated with reduction in discipline referrals($p < .001$) is participation in Family Fun Nights. What is impressive is that when each of the 7 programs is reviewed individually, the findings are uniformly the same. These findings suggest that the counselor’s time is spent most effectively when promoting family involvement through Family Fun Nights.

Essential to the success of any comprehensive guidance program is the need to be culturally sensitive to the needs of the student population served. The 7 schools in this project are culturally diverse with student populations that are predominantly non-white and most students come from families that are struggling economically and have a home language other than English. Much adversity has been faced district wide with 3 major hurricanes in fall semester 2004. Despite these challenges students and parents pulled together and supported each other in recovery. Family Fun Nights offered a forum for community

spirit. With many different languages and family histories, the richness and texture of such a varied community can not be blown away by storms. The school providing a haven in the time of the storms and offering The Family Fun Nights during recovery strengthened the community, the family, and the school. The resilience of the human spirit is reflected in the academic gains of students and a reduction in discipline referrals.

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