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Christopher Sink
Seattle Pacific University

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What are the Effects of Comprehensive Developmental Guidance Programs on Early Elementary Students' Academic Achievement?

Sink, C. A., & Stroh, H. R. (2003). Raising achievement test scores of early elementary school students through comprehensive school counseling programs. *Professional School Counseling, 6*, 352-364.

School reform is in full swing around the country and with it comes the clarion call for ongoing and systematic measurement of relevant student outcomes. Both state reform initiatives and *No Child Left Behind* have focused attention on the need for systematic measurement of student achievement via standardized test scores in core academic areas. Public school educators are becoming increasingly more accountable for producing demonstrable gains in student achievement. Accountability has been a major concern in the school counseling literature for over thirty years. Recently, Isaacs (2003) reemphasized the need for increased school counselor accountability and documentation of the efficacy of school counseling services.

In addition to evaluating specific school counseling interventions, it is important to know whether the nature of the school counseling program is related to student outcomes. Over the past 30 years, Comprehensive Developmental Guidance (CDG) (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000), has emerged as the most widespread organizational approach for school counseling programs and is the foundation for many district and state guidance models (MacDonald & Sink, 1999; Sink, 2005; Sink & MacDonald, 1998; Sink & Yillik-Downer, 2001). The American School Counselor Association's (2003) National Model for School Counseling Programs builds upon the CDG philosophy and delivery system—adding more standards-based approaches to program management and evaluation. Despite its popularity, there have been relatively few studies of the outcomes of CDG programs. It is important to know whether CDG-based school counseling programs are of demonstrable benefit to students in terms of enhanced academic achievement.

Previous CDG evaluation research reviewed in Lapan (2001, 2005) has produced largely positive findings. Initial research has suggested that CDG programs are useful in furthering secondary students' development in a variety of important school-related areas. Despite these encouraging findings, there is minimal empirical evidence that academic achievement is improving in elementary-age students due to the implementation of CDG. Sink and Stroh's study (2003a, 2003b) conducted in Washington State's elementary schools aimed at filling this hole in the research base.

Method

Sink and Stroh used a causal comparative design to answer this overarching research question: Does school counselors' interventions in elementary schools with CDG programs foster higher academic achievement test scores in students?

Participants. At the school level, 150 public elementary schools from Washington State were randomly drawn to participate in the study. The schools selected represented small (enrollment from 1 to 365 students, $n = 49$, or 33%), medium (enrollment from 366 to 499 students, $n = 57$, 38%), and large (enrollment of 500 or more students, $n = 44$, 29%) schools, and were spread out across the state in rural ($n = 59$, 39%), suburban ($n = 57$, 38%), and urban ($n = 34$, 23%) areas. Of the 150 schools, 119 school personnel (83% were certified school counselors; mean age = 45.5 years; female, 79%; and White, 93%) were given a telephone survey that addressed the usage of a CSCP in their particular school. Since the remaining 31 schools had no counselor in the building, personnel in these schools were not questioned. Of the original 150 schools selected for the study, 67 schools were classified as CSCP schools (research group) and 83 were labeled as non-CSCP schools (comparison group).

At the student level, data on students ($N = 20,131$) in Grades 3 ($n = 9,863$, 49%) and 4 ($n = 10,268$, 51%) within each of the 150 participating elementary schools were also collected. The students reflected the ethnic diversity of the state (European American/White, 72%; Hispanic, 12%; Asian American, 6%; African American, 5%; Native American, 3%; other, 2%) and the gender breakdown was approximately equal (51% males and 49% female). There were about 10,000 student participants in the research (CSCP, $n = 9,816$) and comparison (non-CSCP, $n = 10,315$) groups. Finally, the research group was further divided into a subgroup of "high" implementation CSCP schools (i.e., five or more years experience with a CSCP), representing 3,027 third- and fourth-graders.

Instruments. The following three measures were used:

(1) The *Comprehensive Guidance and Counseling Programs and Student Success in Washington State Elementary Schools Telephone Survey* developed by the researchers asked for the respondents' background information (e.g., current educational position, full time equivalent, age, gender, ethnicity, years as a school counselor) and school data (e.g., location, grade levels served, total caseload). Those respondents who stated that their schools or districts had instituted a "standard" CSCP or some facsimile (see e.g., Gysbers & Henderson, 2000) were queried further about the details of their comprehensive program.

(2) The *Iowa Tests of Basic Skills-Form M* (ITBS), a widely used standardized achievement battery of tests (Vocabulary, Comprehension, Reading, and Mathematics), was administered to the Grade 3 students.

(3) The *Washington Assessment of Student Learning* (WASL), a criterion-referenced test, was group-administered to the fourth grade participants. The possible scale score range for the Mathematics, Reading, Listening, and Writing tests was 150 to 600. At the time of the study, the criterion for passing each test was 400.

Data analyses and variables. Multivariate analyses of covariances (MANCOVAs) were run to examine the research hypotheses (see Sink & Stroh, 2003). The key independent variables were Group (participants in CSCP vs. non-CSCP schools), Length of Enrollment (length of time students were continuously enrolled in their particular schools), and Gender. The dependent measures included ITBS or WASL achievement test scores. The covariate was each school's percentage of students receiving a free or reduced cost lunch. Partial eta squares, as estimates of the effect size, were calculated as well.

Results

What were Sink and Stroh's (2003) principal findings?

- **CSCP students in their first few years of school enrollment generally received significantly lower achievement test scores than those students in non-CSCP schools. This group achievement difference was largely erased as students remained for at least three years in their CSCP schools.**
- **A significant interaction was found for both third- and fourth-graders between Group and Length of Enrollment in high implementation CSCP versus non-CSCP schools. That is to say, the longer the participants stayed enrolled in high implementation CSCP schools, the more likely they would have significantly higher test scores (as measured by the Grade 3 ITBS Vocabulary, Comprehension, Reading, and Mathematics, and Grade 4 WASL Listening, Reading, Writing, and Mathematics tests) than those students in the non-CSCP comparison schools.**
- Significant gender differences were also reported, but these are less important to the focus of this research brief.

Implications for Professional School Counseling and Closing Remarks

What are the key things school counselors can take away from this research?

First, we now know that early elementary-age children who attend the same schools for three or more years, with a CDG program in place, will benefit academically, even if the CDG program is not fully implemented. Second, children from all socioeconomic levels who remain in the same school for multiple years with a *well implemented* CDG program will generate higher achievement test scores than students who attend schools without such whole-school counseling programs. Third, these results are consistent the general school counseling efficacy research conducted in elementary schools which indicates that elementary-age pupils are assisted both academically and interpersonally by going to schools with trained counselors in the buildings (e.g., Whiston, 2003; Whiston & Sexton, 1998). Finally, Sink and Stroh's investigation extends earlier CDG evaluation studies (see e.g., Gysbers, 2001; Lapan, 2001, 2005, for reviews) carried out with middle or junior and senior high school students and suggest that CDG programs are really making a difference in students' educational lives at all levels.

Given these findings it would be prudent for school districts to support the implementation of CDG school counseling programs. A comprehensive, developmental approach to school counseling is associated with gains in academic achievement. In CDG programs school counselors should be involved in implementing classroom guidance and small groups targeting student mastery of academic/educational competencies. Elementary students will profit from a "how to get ahead in school" guidance curriculum, including such topics as listening, study, and test-taking skills, building positive school attitudes and behaviors, effective writing and reading skills, and homework completion skills. School counselors can facilitate cross- and same-age peer tutoring for students needing a bit more academic support. Naturally, conducting workshops and in-services for parents, teachers, and staff on ways to foster student learning are useful activities as well.

Closing Remarks

Elementary school counselors can take comfort that all the years of hard work in planning, implementing, and evaluating their CDG program has not been in vain. These school counselors need to celebrate and publicize their good work with youngsters. This does not mean school counselors can become complacent and rest on their laurels. Instead, they must continue to refine their CDG programs so that *all* students in every grade academically achieve to the best of their abilities. Coupled with the previous research with secondary students, Sink and Stroh's recent study suggests that the CDG programs (a) can be very effective organizational frameworks to enhance student learning, and (b) should be fully funded and widely implemented. For those school counselors who are developing or refining their CDG program, ASCA's (2003) National Model is excellent resource to consult.

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Christopher A. Sink
Professor and Chair, School Counseling and Psychology
Seattle Pacific University
csink@spu.edu

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