



# Examining Indiana's State-Recognized Comprehensive School Counseling Programs, Caseload, and Academic Outcomes of Diverse Student Populations

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## Abstract

In the age of accountability, school counselors are responsible for ensuring that their services are effective for all students by providing evidence of the impact of comprehensive school counseling programs (CSCPs) on student academic outcomes. Numerous studies provide empirical evidence of the impact of RAMP on student outcomes; however, none have disaggregated outcome data by race/ethnicity. Reviewing disaggregated data will aid in how CSCPs and school counselor caseloads support specific student populations and assist in closing student opportunity gaps. Using an archival dataset from the Indiana Department of Education ( $n = 264$ ), we sought to understand the impact of a state-recognized CSCP and school counselor caseload on populations historically identified as underserved and underrepresented by examining critical demographic variables such as gender, race/ethnicity, and school socioeconomic status. Results indicated significant differences in English Language Arts scores for White students only, whereas lower school counseling caseload was related to higher academic outcomes for marginalized students.

**Keywords:** comprehensive school counseling programs, diverse students, academic outcomes, student-to-counselor ratios

Academic success is the “great equalizer of the conditions of men” (Mann, 1849, p. 59), and implies that obtaining a quality education is vital to a student’s successful future. If this philosophy is accurate, what does that mean for marginalized students and the gaps found in academic-related achievement? Educational researchers have long discussed the “achievement gap” between students of color and their White counterparts and discovered that gaps are more related to opportunities than achievement (McClellan et al., 2018; Pitre, 2014; Shukla et al., 2022). The gap is not a lack

of a student’s ability to achieve but a lack of access to resources resulting in educational barriers (Carrol, 2020; Flores, 2018; Holcomb-McCoy, 2022b; Mooney, 2018). Therefore, it remains essential to understand the needs of our marginalized students and how education works as either a catalyst or a barrier to future success.

A host of educational and systemic disparities continue to impact marginalized students’ academic success (Holcomb-McCoy, 2022b; Shell, 2021), such as a lack of access to quality preschool programs (Friedman-Krauss & Barnett, 2020) and affordable college education (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2022), low socioeconomic status (SES; American Psychological Association, 2017), poorly funded schools, unqualified teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2001; Holcomb-McCoy, 2022b) and lack of access to school counselors which includes higher school counselor to student ratios (Education Trust, 2019). Despite research confirming educational benefits resulting from comprehensive school counseling programs (Carey, Harrington, Martin, & Hoffman, 2012; Carey, Harrington, Martin, & Stevenson, 2012; Dimmit & Wilkerson, 2012; Wilkerson et al., 2013), often marginalized students are enrolled in districts with elevated student-to-counselor ratios or where counselors are restricted to non-counseling tasks such as testing and 504 case management despite the American School Counselor’s Association (ASCA) recommended ratio of 250 students to one counselor and 80% use of counselor’s time dedicated to direct and indirect services (Education Trust, 2019; Savitz-Romer & Nicola, 2022a, 2022b). These systemic disparities, as outlined above, widen the opportunity gap between students of color and their White peers.

One example used to illustrate disparities is the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which utilizes two assessments: main NAEP and long-term trend (LTT). The main NAEP offers standardized assessments to measure the academic progress of students across the nation (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2021).

Students are assessed in grades 4, 8, and 12 in a variety of subjects including math and reading. Although main NAEP scores (USDOE et al., 2022c) indicated explicitly lower math and reading scores in 4<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> grade for all students in 2022, gaps between most racial/ethnic minorities and White students still existed. For example, the average 4th-grade reading score for White students was 227 as compared to 197 for American Indian/Alaska Native students, 199 for Black students, and 205 for Hispanic students, with Asian students performing slightly higher than all groups at 241. The same trend was identified in 4<sup>th</sup>-grade math, with the average score for White students as 246, compared to 221 for American Indian/Alaska Native students, 217 for Black students, and 224 for Hispanic students, while Asian students again scored higher at 259 (USDOE et al., 2022a, 2022b, 2022c). The LTT assessment is designed to measure students' educational progress over a long period of time (USDOE et al., 2022c). LTT Assessment Results confirmed the historical trend in scores between White students and students of color, with White students performing significantly higher (USDOE et al., 2022c). These scores were used as an example of academic disparity because they are similar to the outcomes reported in this study. Although this gap has narrowed over the years, many educators may still view these results from a deficit mindset and determine that marginalized students cannot perform at the same proficiency as their White peers. However, it is important to remember that educational disparities result from limited access to resources and opportunities (Bushnell, 2021; Holcomb-McCoy, 2022b; Mooney, 2018). Therefore, to combat a deficit mindset, school counselors should operate from a strength-based approach where cultural strengths and methods of resiliency are identified and utilized in supporting marginalized students (Purgason & Craig, 2023).

As school counselors work to close opportunity gaps for marginalized students, their focus on equity to create systemic change is vital. School counselors should identify barriers based on trends in the data and implement necessary culturally responsive interventions for specific populations (ASCA, 2018, 2021a, 2021b; Atkins & Oglesby, 2018). Comprehensive school counseling programs should be viewed from a cultural lens (Schellenberg & Grothaus, 2009) and require counselors to adapt their lessons and interventions to reflect the population being served (Holcomb-McCoy, 2022b). According to Holcomb-McCoy (2022b), school counselors must be antiracist in order to be culturally competent. With the introduction of antiracist school counseling frameworks and competencies (Holcomb-McCoy, 2022a, 2022b; Mayes & Byrd, 2022; Stickl Haugen et al., 2021), there has been a focus on utilizing data to expose disparities and inequities at various levels resulting in the ability for school counselors to support marginalized students. These frameworks are systematic approaches to identifying and dismantling oppressive systemic policies, procedures, and practices. Each antiracist framework, in its own way, offers practicing school counselors ways to embed antiracist principles and practices into existing comprehensive school counseling programs beginning with reviewing, analyzing,

and using data (Holcomb-McCoy, 2022a, 2022b; Mayes & Byrd, 2022).

## Literature Review

According to the American Civil Liberties Union, nearly 25% of schools nationwide did not employ a school counselor (Mann et al., 2019). Students of color and low-income students are more likely to attend schools without access to a school counselor (Mann et al., 2019). Specifically, students of color are anywhere from 20% to 40% more likely to attend a school with no school counselor than their White peers (Education Trust, 2014). Related to access, ASCA, the professional organization for school counselors, recommends a student-to-counselor ratio of 250:1; however, the national average in the 2021–22 academic year was 408:1 (ASCA, n.d.-a). Additionally, ASCA suggests the utilization of the ASCA National Model (2019a) as a framework for comprehensive school counseling which has generated positive outcomes related to student achievement, attendance, and discipline. A comprehensive school counseling program (CSCP) is data-informed, follows a systematic and developmental approach, includes a curriculum focused on mindsets and behaviors, works toward closing opportunity gaps, and improves academic-related outcomes (ASCA, 2019a). The ASCA national model's framework is operationalized through the lens of leadership, advocacy, collaboration, and systemic change. The premise is that these identified themes are woven throughout a comprehensive school counseling program and therefore become the school counselor's ethical responsibility (Reese, 2021). Researchers have highlighted the benefits of school counselors implementing CSCPs (ASCA, 2015) and lower counselor-to-student ratios (ASCA, n.d.-b; ASCA, 2015; Carey, Harrington, Martin, & Hoffman, 2012; & Savitz-Romer & Nicola, 2022a, 2022b) on student academic performance, attendance, and behavior.

Exemplary CSCPs that fully implement all components of the ASCA National Model are identified as RAMP schools. The Recognized ASCA Model Programs (RAMP) distinction recognizes schools committed to delivering comprehensive, data-informed school counseling programs aligned with the ASCA National Model (2019a). Programs that can clearly document evidence of how their direct and indirect school counseling services resulted in positive student outcomes can earn the RAMP distinction through ASCA. Numerous researchers provide empirical evidence of the impact of RAMP on student outcomes (e.g., Akos et al., 2019; ASCA, 2019a; Goodman-Scott et al., 2019; Wilkerson et al., 2013).

As per the research on CSCPs (e.g., Carey, Harrington, Martin, & Hoffman, 2012; Carey, Harrington, Martin, & Stevenson, 2012; Dimmit & Wilkerson, 2012), specific counseling domains (i.e., academic, college/career readiness, and personal/social) significantly increased student sense of belonging and attendance, while decreasing bullying incidents (Dimmit & Wilkerson, 2012). These domains were also related to decreased discipline and suspension

rates, and increased math and reading proficiency (Carey, Harrington, Martin, & Hoffman, 2012). While these studies provide promising evidence that elements of CSCPs produce desirable student outcomes, more recent literature introduces conflicting evidence.

Recent studies investigated group differences in school-level student outcomes (e.g., achievement, suspension, attendance, college and career readiness, and other school characteristics) in schools with RAMP compared to non-RAMP designations. Lapan et al. (2019) explored the difference in college and career readiness between RAMP and non-RAMP schools. Results indicated that students at lower ratio schools and fully implemented CSCPs increased college and career readiness knowledge. Similarly, Mullen et al. (2019) compared characteristics among RAMP and non-RAMP schools using free and reduced lunch data, Title I status, school demographics, race/ethnicity, and school full-time equivalent teachers. Free and reduced lunch (FRL) is a national lunch program designed to provide access to nutritional lunch regardless of a student's socio-economic status (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2017). Many schools are designated as Title I, a federal grant program that provides funding for schools with a high percentage of students from low-income homes (USDOE, n.d.). Mullen and colleagues (2019) examined whether RAMP schools differed in general school characteristics when compared to non-RAMP schools. They found RAMP programs had a larger student body and more full-time teachers. RAMP schools were also located in suburban areas, while non-RAMP schools were typically located in more rural areas. Researchers reported that schools without the RAMP designation were likely to be Title I schools and serve students from low SES backgrounds. While these studies contribute meaningfully to the RAMP literature, they did not disaggregate outcome data by race/ethnicity, and the authors noted the need for further research in this area.

Akos et al. (2019) examined achievement and attendance outcomes for elementary and middle school students in RAMP and non-RAMP schools. Akos et al. found that non-RAMP schools enrolled more racial/ethnic minorities and economically disadvantaged students. No significant differences were found in achievement from a school's pre-RAMP to post-RAMP status; however, they found that RAMP boosts student attendance in middle schools. Goodman-Scott et al. (2019) investigated group differences in school-level student outcomes (e.g., achievement, suspension, attendance) in schools with RAMP vs. non-RAMP designation. Similar to previous research (e.g., Akos, 2019), there were no statistically significant differences in RAMP status based on school-level student outcomes. In contrast, Wilkerson et al. (2013) found significant differences in academic outcomes for students enrolled in RAMP programs. Proficiency rates in English/Language Arts and Math were significantly higher in RAMP-designated elementary schools than in non-RAMP elementary schools. These results are inconsistent with research conducted by Goodman-Scott et al. (2019) and Akos et al. (2019), suggesting that more research is needed. Presently, there are still questions

about the impact of recognized CSCPs and whether they result in positive outcomes for all students. Not every state is affiliated with ASCA or seeks the RAMP distinction. Many educational leaders offer their own state-recognized distinction instead. The literature needs studies that compare state-recognized school counseling programs to non-recognized programs as most of the current research focuses on the RAMP designation.

### **Comprehensive School Counseling Programs**

School counselors implement CSCPs to ensure equitable access to resources and promote all students' academic achievement, social/emotional growth, and career development. The role of school counselors relative to equity is to (a) develop plans to address over-or- under-representation of specific groups; (b) promote the development of school policies leading to equitable treatment of all students; and (c) use data to identify gaps in achievement, opportunity, and attainment (ASCA, 2018). Therefore, many school counselors use advocacy and data-informed school counseling practices within their CSCPs to close opportunity gaps and ensure direct and indirect counseling services for all students.

In the age of accountability, school counselors are held responsible for ensuring that their services are effective for all students. School counselors collect, track, and analyze data on their program's effectiveness. Data collection and analysis is a way of assessing whether and how students' needs were met, as well as understanding what types of needs are present so that improved services and interventions can be provided (Savitz-Romer & Nicola, 2022b). According to ASCA (2019a), school counselors use data to identify school counseling program goals, monitor progress to close gaps, assess and evaluate programs and demonstrate program effectiveness (Hatch, 2014; Savitz-Romer et al., 2018; Savitz-Romer & Nicola, 2022b). Outcome data, specifically, is used to determine students' learning, growth, and change due to the intervention and supports practical advocacy efforts (Dafoe, 2018; Flannery et al., 2019). ASCA recognizes outcome data as achievement, discipline, and attendance; however, overall school-level data may not accurately reflect effectiveness across all student subgroups. Analyzing disaggregated data is more appropriate in examining outcomes for student subgroups and should become an integral process for implementing and evaluating CSCPs.

### **Disaggregated Data**

As researchers evaluate the impact of CSCPs and school counseling ratios on student outcomes, another critical step in promoting equity and systemic change is critically analyzing disaggregated data to identify disparities. According to Hatch (2014), "disaggregating data by gender and ethnicity provides a more accurate perspective than is available in whole data sets" (p. 88). The disaggregation process allows for identifying and analyzing hidden trends and patterns that are not otherwise indicated. Relative to the educational

system and school counseling, disaggregation involves intentionally reviewing student data by subgroups such as gender, SES status, race/ethnicity, and disability status (National Forum on Education Statistics, 2016). No previous researchers disaggregated data to determine if the results were applicable to student subpopulations, indicating a gap in the literature.

### School Counselor Ratios

Another factor related to school counseling and implementing CSCPs is the school counselor-to-student ratio and whether that ratio allows adequate time for direct student services. ASCA recommends a 250:1 ratio, yet that ratio is not the reality for most school counselors (ASCA, 2021c). ASCA data revealed that average ratios across the United States range from as low as 186 to over 700 students per school counselor (ASCA, n.d.-a). Research regarding the impact of student-to-counselor ratios on academic outcomes and other related variables is mixed and varies by the variables and populations examined. Studies have found that lower student-to-counselor ratios positively correlated with GPA and graduation rates (Goodman-Scott et al., 2018; Kearney et al., 2021) and attendance and discipline (Kearney et al., 2021). Despite this evidence, higher ratios have impeded school counselors' ability to implement CSCPs effectively (Parzych et al., 2019). School counselors have been inundated with non-counseling related duties resulting in less time for counseling services. In addition, the shortage of school counselors has left many students without access to school counseling services. For marginalized students, the impact is even more severe (Mann et al., 2019; Savitz-Romer & Nicola, 2022b). Students of color and from low-SES families in thirty-eight states did not have access to adequate school counseling services due to high ratios (Education Trust, 2019). Although many systemic issues factor into student outcomes, ratios and access to school counselors are a concern for many marginalized students.

### State-Recognized Exemplary CSCPs

States such as Alabama, Delaware, Missouri, and North Carolina have adopted their own state recognition for exemplary school counseling programs (D. Hawkes, personal communication, July 27, 2022), aligned with the ASCA National Model RAMP award. Similarly, the state of Indiana has the Gold Star award for state-recognized exemplary school counseling programs. Additionally, Indiana has the highest number of RAMP schools across the country, creating a culture of school counseling excellence that influences their Gold Star program and provides ample data for the present study.

Since 2004, the Indiana Department of Education (IN-DOE) has offered the Indiana Gold Star School Counseling Award for exemplary school counseling programs (INDOE, 2021). This award was created to recognize school counseling programs demonstrating student achievement initiatives. In order to receive the Gold Star designation, schools must

meet criteria related to their mission and vision, data-driven program goals, and guidance curriculum, which includes (a) root cause data to inform the curriculum; (b) implementation of diverse activities to meet student needs; and (c) evaluation of implementation (American Student Achievement Institute [ASAI], n.d.). In evaluating exemplary CSCPs, INDOE recognized the similarities between Gold Star and RAMP.

As a result, INDOE entered into an agreement with ASCA, allowing Gold Star recipients to be eligible for the RAMP award (D. Hawkes, personal communication, July 27, 2022). Accordingly, upon application, schools that successfully completed the Gold Star process would receive both the Gold Star Award and RAMP. Historically, the application process addressed RAMP components while also requiring a few additional elements including but not limited to a rationale statement that describes the program's benefits and activities that address Indiana student standards. Over time, the result of this program was that 165 Indiana schools earned RAMP, and 311 earned Gold Star (ASAI, 2019). To date, there are 94 Indiana schools designated as RAMP. As of 2020, the INDOE and ASCA partnership no longer exists (D. Hawkes, personal communication, July 27, 2022), as the award process is being updated to better align with the revised ASCA National Model.

### Purpose of the Study

There is a dearth of research on whether state-recognized CSCPs are efficacious on student outcomes in diverse student populations. This study was the first to examine disaggregated student outcomes based on caseload and the status of their state CSCP. The purpose of this study was to examine the Math and English Language Arts (ELA) scores of students in Indiana state-recognized Gold Star schools compared to a control group of students in non-Gold Star schools. The research questions guiding this study include (a) are there significant differences in school-wide pass rates on Math and ELA assessments between Gold Star schools and experimental control schools during the 2018-2019 academic year?; (b) how do student pass rates on Math and ELA assessments in Gold Star and control schools differ based on gender, race/ethnicity, and SES?; and (c) how are school counselor caseloads related to disaggregated student Math and ELA pass rates (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, and SES) based on Gold Star status?

### Methodology

We utilized an ex post facto research design to evaluate school-wide group differences (i.e., Gold Star status and student demographics) on academic outcomes (i.e., Math and ELA passing rates) using a publicly available archival dataset from the Indiana Department of Education (INDOE, 2020). Additionally, we analyzed correlations between the average school counselor's caseload and academic outcomes. Consistent with other school counseling studies (e.g., Goodman-Scott et al., 2019; Mullen et al., 2019; Wilkerson et al., 2013), ex post facto design, or data collected "after the

fact” is a widely used and accepted design when working with state or district-wide data to evaluate programming in conjunction with school-level variables.

### Sampling Procedures

We started with a statewide sample of schools ( $N = 1,911$ ), representing 1,055,706 students from the 2018–2019 academic year, which was the most recent year of robust data available due to incomplete testing data during the 2019–2020 academic year from the COVID-19 pandemic. During this year, the state of Indiana had an average school counselor-to-student ratio of 1:521 (ASCA, 2019c). We took several steps to exclude schools from our sample that may contribute to Type 1 error. We included only schools with both Gold Star and RAMP status designation as our experimental group and schools without Gold Star and RAMP as our control group, removing any schools with only one designation (e.g., Gold Star or RAMP) to avoid introducing any confounding variables in the school profile. We also excluded non-traditional schools such as vocational, primary, or schools that combine multiple levels, such as junior/senior high school. This removal allowed for consistent comparison between the Gold Star and control schools, as a true matched comparison between equivalent school settings.

Using a team of three graduate students, we gathered additional data from the INDOE website for all schools in the dataset, including school size, locale (e.g., rural, suburban, town, urban), and FRL rate. Additionally, we determined the number of school counselors at each school based on school websites and school directories from public websites. We used this data to calculate the average school counselor-to-student ratio (i.e., SC caseload). Each graduate student received a training video regarding data collection, and the second author randomly selected cases across each graduate student to assess the accuracy of the data gathered. We excluded from the dataset any schools with missing data involving these variables (i.e., SC caseload, locale, and FRL rate). Next, we identified which schools had the Gold Star designation in 2018–2019 ( $n = 66$ ) to include as our experimental group. We engaged in a matching protocol outlined by Wilkerson et al. (2013), in which each Gold Star school was matched to three random control schools on relevant demographic indicators (e.g., FRL rate, locale, and school counselor caseload). Scholars noted that a minimum sample ratio of 1:2 is recommended; however, the 1:3 sampling ratio is considered advantageous as a means to reduce variance by up to 67.7% (Rosenbaum, 2010; Wilkerson et al., 2013). As a result, our final sample included 66 Gold Star schools and 198 control schools ( $n = 264$ ; see Table 1).

### Instrumentation and Variables

The Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Process (ISTEP+) exam includes Math and ELA tests administered annually for students in grades 3–8 and 10 to assess student success per INDOE standards (INDOE, 2020). These exams are criterion-referenced and divide performance levels into

three categories: did not pass, pass (i.e., achieved proficiency), and pass+. For this study, school-level results were reported as a passing rate to indicate the percentage of students who reached (i.e., pass) or surpassed (i.e., pass+) the minimum proficiency standard. Internal consistency of Math and ELA ISTEP+ scores administered during the 2018–2019 academic year ranged from 0.91 to 0.94 (INDOE, 2020). Disaggregated passing rates were available based on gender (female and male), race/ethnicity (American Indian, Asian, Black, Hispanic, Multiracial, and White), and student FRL status (free, reduced, and paid lunch). The present study included all outcome variables; however, Math and ELA scores for American Indian, Asian, and reduced lunch students were not included in our analyses because these data were unavailable in the public-use dataset due to small sample sizes.

The independent variable, Gold Star status, was a categorical variable comprising two levels, Gold Star or control school. The dependent variables included continuous Math and ELA ISTEP+ passing rates represented as percentages. Overall passing rates for Math and ELA refer to the entire student body. To analyze data for student subgroups, we also utilized disaggregated passing rates for gender, race/ethnicity, and student FRL status. For subsequent correlational analyses, we created a continuous SC caseload variable by dividing the total student body by the number of school counselors to represent the estimated average caseload of each school counselor.

### Data Analysis

We conducted a priori power analyses for all tests (e.g.,  $t$ -test and multivariate analysis of variance [MANOVA]) using G\*Power software. Across all analyses, the largest minimum sample required was 86 using the following parameters: test family =  $F$  tests, statistics test = MANOVA test of global effects, a priori power analysis, effect size = 0.15, power = 0.8, groups = 2, and response variables = 4. Our final sample ( $n = 264$ ) exceeded the minimum requirement. The sample included 100 elementary, 72 middle, and 92 high schools with a mean school size of 740 and an estimated representation of 188,948 students across the entire sample (see Table 1). SC caseloads ranged from 60 to 1027 for Gold Star ( $M = 378.63$ ,  $SD = 130.09$ ) and control schools ( $M = 391.83$ ,  $SD = 151.52$ ).

We ensured that all statistical assumptions were met to conduct  $t$ -tests, MANOVA, and correlational analyses (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2014). We analyzed Little’s missing completely at random (MCAR) test data and determined that missing data, which accounted for less than 5%, were missing at random; therefore, we used expectation maximization to replace missing data. We also examined the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, which indicated that the sample was normally distributed and Levene’s test to assess for homogeneity of variance. Additionally, we used the Mahalanobis distance test to check for outliers and Box’s  $M$  test to verify equal variance. Lastly, we evaluated correlations between depend-

**Table 1**  
**Gold Star and Control School Demographics**

		Gold Star Schools ( <i>n</i> = 66)		Control Schools ( <i>n</i> = 198)	
		%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
Level	Elementary	37.88	25	37.88	75
	Middle	25.76	17	25.76	51
	High	36.36	24	36.36	72
Locale	City	27.27	18	27.27	54
	Town	12.12	8	12.12	24
	Suburb	19.70	13	19.70	39
	Rural	40.91	27	40.91	
SES	Title-1	59.09	39	59.09	117
	Non-Title 1	40.91	27	40.91	81
Student Demographics					
	African American/Black	16.39	8,756	12.88	17,451
	Hispanic	13.90	7,422	13.19	17,872
	Multiracial	4.49	2,398	5.43	7,365
	White	65.22	34,830	68.51	92,854
Total Students					188,948

ent variables for multicollinearity. Our dataset met all necessary assumptions to continue with data analysis.

## Results

### Math and ELA pass rates between Gold Star and control schools

We conducted two *t*-tests to evaluate overall Math and ELA passing rates between Gold Star and control schools to address the first research question. There was no significant difference between Gold Star and control schools on Math scores [ $t(252) = 0.04$ ,  $p = 0.84$ ,  $\eta^2_p = 0.001$ ], despite Gold Star schools ( $M = 49.25$ ,  $SD = 20.53$ ) receiving higher scores than control schools ( $M = 48.66$ ,  $SD = 20.70$ ). Similarly, there was no significant difference between Gold Star and control schools on ELA scores [ $t(252) = 0.18$ ,  $p = 0.67$ ,  $\eta^2_p = 0.001$ ], despite Gold Star schools ( $M = 59.69$ ,  $SD = 14.12$ ) receiving higher scores than control schools ( $M = 58.81$ ,  $SD = 14.83$ ).

### Math and ELA pass rates based on gender, race/ethnicity, and SES

For research question two, we assessed disaggregated data to determine the impact of Gold Star school status on academic outcomes for student subgroups (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, and FRL status; see Table 2). We conducted a MANOVA to evaluate differences in Math and ELA passing rates by male and female students between Gold Star and control schools, which produced non-significant multivariate effects [ $F(1, 249) = 0.24$ ,  $p = 0.92$ ,  $\eta^2_p = 0.004$ ]. These results indicated there were no significant differences in Math or ELA scores between Gold Star and control schools as disaggregated by gender. Similarly, we conducted a MANOVA to evaluate Math and ELA passing rates by FRL

status (i.e., free or paid lunch) between Gold Star and control schools. This also produced non-significant results [ $F(1, 249) = 0.35$ ,  $p = 0.84$ ,  $\eta^2_p = 0.006$ ], suggesting no significant differences in Math or ELA scores based on Gold Star status as disaggregated by student SES.

Additionally, we conducted a MANOVA to assess differences in Math and ELA passing rates by student race/ethnicity (e.g., Black, Hispanic, Multiracial, and White) between Gold Star and control schools. While the model produced non-significant results [ $F(1, 249) = 0.24$ ,  $p = 0.19$ ,  $\eta^2_p = 0.024$ ], it is notable that White students had significantly higher ELA scores in Gold Star ( $M = 68.76$ ,  $SD = 11.24$ ) compared to control ( $M = 65.07$ ,  $SD = 12.49$ ) schools [ $F(1, 252) = 4.50$ ,  $p = .035$ ,  $\eta^2_p = 0.018$ ]; however, the effect size is small. This indicates there were no significant differences in Math or ELA scores due to Gold Star status for Black, Hispanic, and Multiracial students, as well as Math scores due to Gold Star status for White students.

### Math and ELA pass rates and SC ratios based on gender, race/ethnicity, and SES

To address research question three, we conducted a series of correlations between SC caseload and all disaggregated student academic outcomes for Gold Star and control schools. We found weak to moderate significant correlations at the .01 and .05 levels in both control and Gold Star schools, showing lower SC caseload was related to significantly higher Math scores for Black ( $r = -.33$ ), Hispanic ( $r = -.29$ ), and Multiracial ( $r = -.29$ ) students as well as higher ELA scores for Black ( $r = -.41$ ), Hispanic ( $r = -.42$ ), and Multiracial ( $r = -.31$ ) students in Gold Star schools (see Table 3). In control schools, SC caseload was related to significantly higher Math scores for Black ( $r = -.29$ ), Hispanic ( $r = -.15$ ),

**Table 2**  
**Disaggregated Gold Star and Control School Math and ELA Passing Rates**

	Math Passing Rates		ELA Passing Rates	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Gold Star Schools				
Female	49.22	20.69	65.89	13.69
Male	49.31	20.79	53.90	14.94
Black	71.65	34.21	75.65	28.11
Hispanic	64.14	29.57	70.64	24.46
Multiracial	76.07	27.77	82.30	20.57
White	58.37	17.77	68.76	11.24
Free Lunch	38.28	20.00	47.72	13.95
Paid Lunch	58.43	20.54	69.89	13.34
Total Student Body	49.25	20.53	59.69	14.12
Control Schools				
Female	48.87	20.59	65.15	14.48
Male	48.23	21.12	53.04	15.89
Black	67.38	36.81	73.74	29.57
Hispanic	62.37	31.10	69.99	24.80
Multiracial	71.54	29.79	77.51	23.45
White	54.66	18.09	65.07	12.49
Free Lunch	37.00	19.38	46.46	14.05
Paid Lunch	57.75	21.25	68.61	13.15
Total Student Body	48.66	20.70	58.81	14.83

and Multiracial ( $r = -.29$ ) students as well as higher ELA scores for Black ( $r = -.27$ ), Hispanic ( $r = -.21$ ), and Multiracial ( $r = -.31$ ) students. Although all correlations were found to be weak, with only two correlations having moderate strength (i.e., SC caseload and ELA scores for Black and Hispanic students), most notably, the correlations were stronger in Gold Star schools compared to the control schools (see Table 3).

### Discussion

In this study, we introduced a novel contribution to the literature by examining the impact of Indiana's state-recognized CSCPs on student academic outcomes through an equitable lens by disaggregating data based on student demographics (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, and SES). There is a need for school counselors to examine their own disaggregated school data to determine whether there is evidence that their CSCP is positively impacting all students. Although these results reflect CSCPs in the state of Indiana, this study serves as a starting point to understanding the impact of all CSCPs.

Relative to previous research, the results of this study align with Goodman-Scott et al. (2019) and Akos et al. (2019), where no significant differences in achievement were identified between RAMP and non-RAMP schools. Alternatively, our results contrast with Wilkerson et al. (2013), who found that RAMP positively impacted academic outcomes for elementary students in Indiana.

This study is the first to examine disaggregated data to evaluate how Indiana's state-recognized exemplary CSCPs impact academic outcomes for minoritized students. Specifically, we examined gender, race/ethnicity, and SES for Gold Star and non-Gold Star schools in the state of Indiana. Disaggregating data can identify inequities in the

educational system and allow school counselors access to additional information to drive intervention creation and implementation. Disaggregated data is a way to uncover hidden concerns that may be masked by positive results that have been generalized to the entire student population. Disaggregated data can answer the following questions: "Is there a gender or racial/ethnic outcome difference among students who participate in a particular evidence-based intervention? Are students in particular grades or with certain teachers performing better, on average, than other grades? Are high socio-economic status students overrepresented in accessing and receiving services?" (National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention, 2012, p. 2).

With non-significant results, it is imperative that research continues in this area, as this is only one study where evidence did not support positive outcomes on academic achievement when accounting for race/ethnicity, gender, and SES within one state. Non-significant results should not

**Table 3**  
**Significant Correlations for SC Caseload and Student Outcomes**

	Gold Star Schools	Control Schools
Math Passing Rates		
Black	-.33**	-.29**
Hispanic	-.29*	-.15*
Multiracial	-.29*	-.29*
ELA Passing Rates		
Black	-.41**	-.27**
Hispanic	-.42**	-.21**
Multiracial	-.31*	-.31*

\*Significant at the .05 level

\*\*Significant at the .01 level

be interpreted negatively regarding CSCPs. Instead, it should motivate researchers and practitioners to continue to investigate the implementation of CSCPs and the resulting outcomes for marginalized populations. Therefore, school counselors should not rely solely on the implementation of a CSCP, but be intentional about executing a culturally responsive and sustaining CSCP and identifying how the CSCP positively supports all students. When examining school counselor impact on outcome data (i.e., achievement, behavior, attendance), previous researchers have recommended interpreting the role of a school counselor through an ecological framework to account for the many systemic influences (e.g., classrooms, schools, families, communities) that introduce privilege and marginalization, ultimately influencing student outcomes (Goodman-Scott et al., 2018, 2019; McMahon et al., 2014). As such, the school counselor's role in academic outcomes may be more distal than other student outcomes, including variables that are not yet evaluated at the state level, such as cultivating skills to increase academic performance and social/emotional data points. Undoubtedly, other variables introduce complexity into the relationship between exemplary CSCP status and student outcomes, such as school counselor use of time, school resources, and school counselor caseload.

To further understand how school counselors with exemplary CSCPs may impact student academic outcomes, we evaluated correlations between school counselor caseloads and disaggregated student outcomes categorized by Gold Star status. In a unique contribution to the literature, this study is the first to demonstrate initial empirical support regarding the value of lower student-to-school counselor caseloads specifically among marginalized student populations. These analyses indicated significant correlational relationships between lower caseloads and higher math and ELA passing rates for historically underrepresented Black, Hispanic, and Multiracial students. In all cases, these significant correlations were weak to moderate in strength. These significant correlations existed for both the control and Gold Star schools; however, in all cases, the correlations were more robust and stronger in Gold Star schools. These findings affirm and extend previous literature indicating that lower school counselor ratios are related to favorable student academic outcomes (Goodman-Scott et al., 2018; Kearney et al., 2021; Parzych et al., 2019).

### Limitations

As with all research, limitations must be considered when interpreting the results. While the present study utilized a large, statewide sample that met all *a priori* power analyses, these results only reflect a sample from one state. They, therefore, may not be generalizable to other states. While many of our analyses produced non-significant results, we recognize that as a non-experimental *ex-post facto* study, we rely on the validity of the statewide data as an accurate reflection of schools in our sample. The significant correlations produced by this study were classified as weak or moderate in strength and therefore should be interpreted

tentatively. We took additional steps throughout data collection to ensure consistency and fidelity; however, data collection errors remain a possibility. In data collection, we removed schools from our sample that were missing pertinent data variables (e.g., caseload, locale, FRL rate, Math or ELA passing rates), resulting in 12 schools being removed from our dataset. We do not believe that the removal of these schools impacted the significance of our analyses. Due to using an archival dataset and the nature of data available to us, we were unable to analyze interaction effects, particularly between race/ethnicity and SES. Finally, our study did not account for additional variables beyond the scope of this study, such as school funding/resources, school counselor training, and years of experience that may impact student outcomes.

### Implications for School Counselors and Counselor Educators

Examining the impact of state-recognized exemplary CSCPs provides implications for practitioners, counselor educators, and policymakers. Practicing school counselors should carefully consider how they implement CSCPs that meet their students' needs and use findings from this study as a resource to advocate for lower caseloads. There can be a false sense of security in implementing a CSCP endorsed by state and professional organizations. It should not be assumed that because a CSCP is labeled exemplary that it will result in significant positive outcomes for students. There needs to be additional research regarding state and professional exemplary CSCPs, the award process, and resulting student outcomes to determine how students' needs are being met. An additional area of research could include identifying best practices for evaluating the effectiveness of exemplary CSCPs. The results of this study amplify the need for data collection and analysis, particularly disaggregating data, to determine which programming elements influence which students. Despite the best intentions, school counselors may make faulty assumptions about student outcomes based on overall student body data trends without disaggregating data. Ultimately, disaggregating data can help school counselors answer the question, how are students better due to CSCPs?

Identifying and examining disparities allows school counselors to provide interventions related explicitly to student needs. Atkins and Oglesby (2018) suggested that adequate support of students' needs should result in programming adjustments rather than mistakenly viewing disparities as deficits in students. School counselors can use results from this study to support the implementation of culturally responsive services and continue improving student-related outcomes for all students. Culturally responsive services mean "identifying, recognizing, and utilizing the cultural strengths of students to increase positive outcomes" (Rutledge, 2019, para 2). General recommendations include being culturally sensitive in the delivery of instruction, creating a welcoming climate that focuses on students' cultural strengths, as well as incorporating diverse perspectives and



representation in the overall program (ASCA, 2021; Holcomb-McCoy, 2022b). More specifically, school counselors can teach lessons related to cultural identities and equity, create classes specifically for students who may benefit from additional instruction beyond classroom lessons focused on specialized topics, and have students directly participate in interventions by co-leading groups and co-teaching lessons (Purgason & Craig, 2023).

Administration and community support are vital to making CSCPs accessible to all students, specifically underrepresented student groups. As school counselors understand the impact of their CSCPs and caseloads on student outcomes, that information must be shared with administrators and other educational partners. Sharing this information indicates that school counselors are being held accountable for their work and are transparent with the results. In addition to accountability, ASCA suggests that school counselors execute leadership and advocacy roles (ASCA, 2019b). One area in need of advocacy is the use of additional ways school counselors can show the positive impact of their CSCPs that extend beyond the traditional outcome data (i.e., attendance, discipline, and achievement). For example, advocating for the use of data related to school climate, student engagement, completion of advanced courses, and college and career readiness. These data points are directly aligned with the current accountability system as outlined by the Every Student Succeeds Act (National Education Association, 2020). By showing the value of their CSCP and how all students are impacted, school counselors may gain more buy-in, allowing them a certain level of support and autonomy to implement services effectively. Administration and community support are vital to making CSCPs accessible to all students, specifically underrepresented student groups.

Counselor educators should be well-versed in initiatives and current research on the foundational frameworks used to guide the work of school counselors. Similar to the ASCA National Model, pre-service counselors should also be introduced to other possible school counseling frameworks such as the International School Counselor Association (ISCA) International Model for School Counseling Programs. The ISCA model is an integration of standards from the American Counseling Association (ACA) and ASCA. Both ISCA and ASCA support the attitudes, knowledge, and skills needed for success in academic, career, and personal/social domains (ISCA, n.d.). As language, interventions, and approaches reflect ASCA's and ISCA's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion so should school counseling training programs. In addition, pre-service school counselors should be grounded in equitable practices. Therefore, this research provides an opportunity for counselor educators to teach model frameworks from a cultural lens. According to Dixon et al. (2010), "It is counselor educators' responsibility to build knowledge and awareness of social justice principles, as well as a framework for practice, into preservice school counselors' training" (p. 104). Therefore, this study is directly aligned with counselor education and supervision through the effective training of pre-service school counselors, focusing on implementing national models and state-

recognized exemplary CSCPs from a social justice and advocacy lens.

In addition, pre-service school counselors must learn how to use disaggregated data to identify student needs and inequities, thus aligning their CSCPs to meet needs and address opportunity gaps. Counselor educators should be informed of the strengths and limitations of CSCPs and be able to teach pre-service school counselors how to apply components to meet the needs of all students appropriately.

## Policy Implications

Continued research is needed to examine the overall effectiveness of CSCPs and those designated as exemplary. One concern with any award criteria is the ability of school counselors to effectively show how they impact outcome data (e.g., achievement, behavior, attendance). Designating bodies, such as state departments of education, and professional organizations, such as ASCA, should consider what data would be most beneficial for school counselors to collect and analyze to show improvement due to CSCPs. As previously suggested, data related to school climate, graduation rates, college and career readiness, and other factors related to student success should be considered. Therefore, consideration should also be given to revising how data is utilized and modifying the type of data collected for the award process. One particular area of the award process that needs critical examination is the focus on opportunity gaps. Historically, both the Gold Star and RAMP processes included submitting evidence related to the closing the gap action plan and data results; however, they are very general and broad. With RAMP, evidence for closing the gap does not require the examination of disaggregated data or an intentional focus on bettering outcomes for minoritized populations. Although INDOE Gold Star involves the use of disaggregated data for closing the gap lessons, documents do not require the submission of results data or implications (ASAI, n.d.). Awarding bodies should consider the inclusion, as a part of the document submission, narratives that directly indicate how school counseling interventions positively impacted populations such as racial/ethnic minorities, lower SES, students with disabilities, English language learners, and other underrepresented groups.

While ASCA recommends a 250:1 ratio, the results of this study provide initial support regarding how lower caseloads may positively impact marginalized student populations. These results offer implications concerning how the school counseling profession approaches student-to-school counselor ratios from an equity lens. Rather than recommending a 250:1 ratio for all schools, recommended ratios may need to be tailored to student needs based on SES, race/ethnicity, etc.

Lastly, the school counseling field should encourage and support continued research on state-recognized exemplary CSCPs, whether designated by ASCA or individual states. ASCA recently issued a call for grant proposals addressing the effectiveness of RAMP and ASCA National Model aligned programs to improve equity and school counselors'

use of time, which should produce much-needed research on these topics. The school counseling field needs additional funding opportunities to support research efforts. As a profession, researchers should continue to track and analyze the number, location, and demographics of exemplary CSCP schools, while analyzing student outcomes from a culturally-responsive lens. Collecting this data allows researchers to provide evidence of the effectiveness of exemplary CSCP, especially for minoritized and marginalized students.

### Recommendations for Future Research

This research study raises several questions regarding the efficacy of CSCPs on overall academic outcomes, exemplary CSCPs on marginalized students, and the relationships between CSCPs and caseload to maximize school counselor impact on student outcomes. Researchers should focus on replicating previous studies to provide more robust and concrete data supporting CSCPs, caseloads, school and student demographic information, and the effectiveness of exemplary CSCPs. Since this study was the first to examine disaggregated data, researchers should explore the impact of exemplary CSCPs on diverse student populations, especially minoritized groups, seeking to better understand potential interactions between race/ethnicity, gender, and SES. Due to the complex nature of school counselors influencing student outcomes, this study reiterates previous scholars (e.g., Goodman-Scott et al., 2018, 2019; McMahon et al., 2014) by encouraging researchers to approach this work from an ecological framework to account for the myriad of forces that influence student outcomes.

Another relevant line of research involves identifying barriers related to school counseling programs being able to achieve state designations and RAMP status while examining the award process from a culturally responsive lens. Researchers should analyze other school counseling-related data that might be more relevant than test scores. Research is needed to determine how school counselors can collect better data to highlight the value of CSCPs. School counselor ratios, CSCPs, school resources, and other variables may have more of a systemic impact than solely utilizing a CSCP, such as data related to social and emotional skills, behavior management, and college and career readiness. Future researchers should explore school counseling caseloads from an equity lens, focusing on how caseloads impact marginalized students. An additional area of research that may prove beneficial to understanding student outcomes as a result of CSCPs is examining school counselors' personal cultural identity and experiences and their resulting influence on the counseling process. With the continued focus on equity, cultural responsiveness, and antiracism, information related to school counselor's cultural identity is valuable as it connects to competencies such as the Multicultural Social Justice Competencies (Ratts et al., 2015) and anti-racist school counseling competencies (Stickl Haugen et al., 2021).

### Conclusion

Educators, including administrators, school counselors, and teachers, ensure that all students have the necessary knowledge and skills upon graduating high school. The word "all" is crucial, as it indicates a level of inclusivity needed to meet student needs and is meant to encompass race/ethnicity, gender identity, disability status, socio-economic status, and cultural background. In order to accomplish this task, educators must critically examine their student population to determine specific needs. This examination requires analyzing disaggregated data to assess specific areas of concern. Without reviewing more selective data, educators are missing key areas of focused support.

This study reflects the core issues of evidence-based school counseling by highlighting the importance of critically examining data related to CSCPs to support positive outcomes for marginalized students. Additionally, implications and suggestions for future research on the intersection of caseload and CSCP implementation, how school resources may influence student outcomes, a culturally responsive award application process, and advocating for more comprehensive data points in statewide data collection are shared. Additionally, this research supports the need for further research that evaluates exemplary programs, whether professional or state. For school counselors particularly, this study indicates that using disaggregated data allows them to create and implement CSCPs that appropriately meet the needs of all students, but especially those from marginalized populations.

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