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The Role of School Counselors in Ensuring Grade-Level Promotion: Impacts on Student Sense of Belonging and Academic Self-Efficacy

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Abstract

One of the responsibilities of high school counselors is to assist students in achieving grade-level promotion leading to graduation. Through building relationships with students experiencing barriers to remaining academically on-track and strengthening communication with these students, their families, and their teachers, school counselors can significantly impact students' sense of belonging in school and likelihood of graduating. This article will suggest a model school counselors can use to support grade-level promotion and help increase students' sense of school belonging and academic self-efficacy. Recommendations for further research on the role of school counselors in ensuring grade-level promotion and its impact on students' sense of belonging are provided.

Keywords: high school, student relationships, belonging, academic self-efficacy, dropout prevention

The inability to obtain a high school diploma or equivalent dramatically impacts an individual's earning potential, likelihood of needing public assistance, chances of incarceration, and health outcomes (Breslow, 2012; Vaughn et al., 2014). While rates of high school dropout have decreased over the last ten years, most recent data indicates that one in twenty students still do not achieve this goal (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Factors impacting students' decisions to drop out of high school are multifaceted, but often one commonality among these students is previously being retained to a grade level, especially in secondary school (Allensworth & Easton, 2005; Giano et al., 2022; Gubbels et al., 2019; Strategic Data Project, 2012; Valbuena et al., 2020). Multiple studies from urban school districts indicate students who end their ninth-grade year on-track are four to six times more likely to graduate than students who do not (Allensworth & Easton, 2005; Bornsheuer et al., 2011; Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012; Strategic Data Project, 2012). On-track is defined here as ending the ninth grade with at least a quarter of the credits needed to graduate and completing at least one credit in three or more core subjects. Research indicates students' sense of school belonging is correlated with academic success, and students who are retained to a grade level report decreased sense of belonging at school (Allen et al., 2022; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2018; Valbuena et al., 2020). The social impact of being retained to a grade is likely a reason the on-track factor is more closely associated with graduating than other factors individually, such as grade point average (GPA), attendance, or discipline as well as demographic factors such as socioeconomic status (Allen et al., 2022; Allensworth, 2013; Allensworth & Easton, 2005).

Sense of school belonging, or a student's internal feeling of being safe, supported, accepted, and welcomed by other members of their school community, is closely associated with academic success, or the student's prior achievement of their academic goals, and academic self-efficacy, the student's internal sense of their ability to reach their future academic goals (Allen et al., 2022). Students who repeatedly receive failing grades are, through those grades, receiving messages of their lack of belonging in school. Continuously receiving these messages through their grades, and possibly additional messages through disciplinary action or grade-level retention, without the support of an adult in the school community, can lead to a decreased sense of belonging, decreased academic self-efficacy, and feelings of helplessness (Allen et al., 2022; Allensworth, 2013; Gubbels et al., 2019; OECD, 2018).

Most students who do not complete high school report a lack of positive relationships within the school building, particularly with adults, and students reported lack of positive relationships with teachers as one of the common reasons they chose to miss school (Gubbels et al., 2019; OECD, 2018; Scheel et al., 2009; Wu & Zhang, 2022). While all adults within a school building can increase students' sense of school belonging through building relationships, school counselors, as school leaders with access to comprehensive student progress data, have an opportunity to help students holistically interpret these messages. Students receive messages through their grades, and these messages can reduce their sense of school belonging. School counselors can assist students in interpreting these messages and their connection to circumstances, actions, and future goals. Additionally, school counselors have skills in assisting students in processing thoughts and feelings in a non-judgmental manner, as well as bounds of confidentiality, and knowledge of area resources. This combination of access to comprehensive student data, knowledge of school requirements and expectations, skills for helping build relationships and process emotions, and ability to build connections between the student and other potential support networks make counselors the best professionals in school buildings to assist these students.

Often instead of engaging with students in these important ways, school counselors find themselves burdened with non-counseling related duties, especially at the start and

end of the school year (Fye et al., 2017). Knowing this, a recent study by Shi and Brown (2020) found when school counselors can focus more on counseling-specific duties there are increases in grade-level promotion for ninth-grade students. While studies have described the barriers school counselors face in prioritizing counseling job tasks and ways to advocate for fewer non-counseling related duties, research has not explored the experiences of school counselors related to their role in ensuring ninth-grade completion and using this data to advocate for the expansion of these efforts (Fye et al., 2017; Shi & Brown, 2020). This article will explore the impact of grade-level retention on students' sense of belonging, academic self-efficacy, and likelihood of graduation, and propose a model school counselors can utilize to increase all three of these important components of student success.

Impact of Grade-Level Retention

Research indicates repeating a grade level, especially in secondary school, is correlated with higher likelihood of high school dropout, decreased sense of school belonging, and decreased academic self-efficacy (Allensworth & Easton, 2005; Giano et al., 2022; Gubbels et al., 2019; OECD, 2018; Strategic Data Project, 2012; Valbuena et al., 2020). In the United States, specific criteria for grade-level promotion before high school may be difficult to find, but credit requirements in grades 9-12 may be determined by state law or the state's department of education (de Bray et al., 2021). These credit requirements are often unrelated to student GPA, discipline, attendance, and test scores. Therefore, when determining if a student is on-track toward grade-level promotion, it is important to distinguish between factors that will impact the student's ability to achieve their goals and those that likely will not. This may be why grades during the first year of high school have routinely been found to be the best indicator of high school graduation, and GPA has not (Allensworth, 2013; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012). Students who are on-track at the end of their first year of high school, meaning that they have earned the required credits for grade-level promotion, are at least four times more likely to graduate than their peers who do not meet this goal (Allensworth & Easton, 2005; Bornsheuer et al., 2011; Strategic Data Project, 2012). Since being on-track at the end of the first year of high school is pivotal in terms of successful completion of high school, schools then need to determine the best way to allocate resources to assist students in completing this task.

Studies indicate a negative correlation between repeating a grade level and sense of school belonging and academic self-efficacy (Gubbels et al., 2019; OECD, 2018; Valbuena et al., 2020). Considering the social impacts of repeating a grade level, including separation from peers and social stigma, along with student's seeing failing grades and understanding what they mean, the impact on sense of belonging and self-efficacy makes sense. Most students indicate a high sense of belonging in school, making this relationship between repeating a grade level and decreased sense of belonging of greater significance (Allen et al., 2022; OECD, 2018; Valbuena et al., 2020). Valbuena and colleagues' (2020) meta-analysis exploring the impact of grade-level retention, did not identify any long-term positive benefits of grade-level retention for students, in addition to the previously mentioned negative impacts on students' sense of belonging. Additionally, while academic self-concept, defined as "students' perceptions of their academic abilities" (Postigo et al., 2022, p. 1), seems to decrease for all students as they transition from elementary to secondary school, students who repeat a grade level, especially in secondary school, show greater decreases in academic self-concept (Postigo et al., 2022; Valbuena et al., 2020).

Relationships with Adults

Positive relationships with adults at school, caregivers, and community members have been found to be positively correlated with academic success, academic self-efficacy, sense of school belonging, and high school completion (Giraldo-Garcia et al., 2019; Grey, 2019; Gubbels et al., 2019; Scheel et al., 2009; Wu & Zhang, 2022). Overall, interventions designed to support students currently struggling academically and building a positive relationship between these students and an adult at school were found to have significant results, regardless of whether the program focused on academics, attendance, behavior, or a combination of these factors (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015). Mentorship programs are a common intervention schools have utilized to increase students' sense of belonging, especially for students who show signs of struggling academically. Grey (2019) examined data related to school-based mentorship programs for Black and white middle school students. Students were chosen based on a history of academic and behavioral concerns at school; Grey examined the relationship between the race of the school-based mentor and the impact on the student's math GPA. While all students who participated in the school-based mentor program showed increases in their math GPA, Black students showed greater increases, particularly when paired with Black mentors. While it is important to recognize the significance of same-race mentorship for Black students, it is also important to continue to investigate ways of assisting students without overtaxing Black faculty and staff (Patel, 2021). Involvement in mentorship programs for students from Latine backgrounds with similar academic concerns was positively correlated with graduating from high school, in some cases by as much as a 90% increase (Giraldo-Garcia et al., 2019). Similar to Black students, there is evidence these increases would be greater with more mentors from Spanish-speaking backgrounds. In all cases, a relationship with a supportive adult at school resulted in a greater likelihood of staying on-track academically and eventually graduating, and not having a positive relationship with a supportive adult was often a key reason students chose to drop out (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Gubbels et al., 2019; Scheel et al., 2009). It appears a positive relationship with an adult at school can offset other messages

students are receiving, through grades and disciplinary action, that they do not belong.

Positive relationships between caregivers and the school also result in more positive academic outcomes (Gubbels et al., 2019; Scheel et al., 2009; Vera et al., 2018). Gubbels and colleagues (2019) conducted a meta-analysis of risk factors for high school dropout and found low caregiver involvement in school to be correlated with dropping out of high school along with other significant factors such as history of grade-level retention. Scheel et al. (2009) found a theme of family influences in their qualitative study examining academic motivation in students found to be at risk of dropping out. Several participants made statements indicating support from their caregivers to be an important reason they continue to strive for success in school. Evidence that both sense of school belonging and caregiver involvement influence vocational hope, an important protective factor for reaching graduation, in middle school students from minoritized racial backgrounds, has also been supported by research findings (Vera et al., 2018). By increasing opportunities for caregiver involvement, we demonstrate to students and families the understanding that they are not only individuals but also members of systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). They are valued in school for who they are and as members of their family and culture.

School counselors have an opportunity to provide avenues for increased caregiver support in ways many other school professionals do not, given their skills in relationship building, processing feelings, active listening, and access to comprehensive academic and school information. Many caregivers experience barriers to communicating with their student's school, whether they are language barriers, work schedule conflicts, or previous negative experiences (Kim et al., 2017). Based on these findings and historical understandings, there have been numerous articles in school counseling literature related to providing culturally specific information for working with families of different racial and ethnic backgrounds (Dotson-Blake et al., 2009; Griffin et al., 2021; Mitchell & Bryan, 2007; Talleyrand & Vojtech, 2019; Warren & Locklear, 2021). These articles often focus not only on addressing barriers to communication for caregivers but also on the need for continuous work by school counselors toward greater cultural competency and understanding of the impacts of racism and systemic oppression. Utilizing the strategies from these articles, along with a consistent practice of self-reflection, is necessary for school professionals to have the skills to cultivate meaningful relationships with their students and families equitably.

Focus on Systems and Structures

School counselors, as mental health professionals tasked with supporting students as they progress throughout their education, are ideally positioned to support interventions related to grade-level promotion. With social justice as a main objective of the counseling profession (Chang & Barrio Minton, 2022), school counselors must identify students most impacted by systemic barriers within their schools and communities to understand and address these areas of oppression. The first mindset in the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) school counselor professional standards and competencies is "every student can learn, and every student can succeed" (ASCA, 2019, p. 2). Focusing on this standard, school counselors can work to move from a deficit-reduction-focused method of academic intervention to a strengths-based systems-focused method.

Targeted interventions by educators, including school counselors, have a history of being deficit-reduction-focused; meaning the intention behind the intervention is to change something currently unacceptable about the student (Galassi et al., 2008). This perspective does not consider the systemic barriers facing our students and their families (UNPRPD & UN Women, n. d.). These barriers include but are not limited to discriminatory school discipline practices (Gilleskie & Li, 2022), racial differences in special education enrollment (Elder et al., 2021), and lack of representation of students from minoritized racial backgrounds in advanced placement, honors, and STEM courses (Bjorklund, 2019; Mulvey et al., 2022). Providing interventions for the students most in need of additional support can focus on addressing barriers rather than changing individuals. Achieving this goal requires intentional strengths-based interventions and a continuous focus on critical reflection and advocacy (Byrd et al., 2021). To develop meaningful relationships with students and families, counselors must be continuously self-reflecting on their own biases and seeking out greater understanding of the systems of oppression impacting their students currently and historically. Additionally, there must always be an underlying focus on how to advocate for the removal of systemic barriers impacting student success, such as the examples listed above.

With large caseloads and seemingly endless other duties as assigned, it is difficult for school counselors to prioritize seeking out students who are experiencing barriers to staying on-track and cultivate ongoing relationships (Fye et al., 2017; Shi & Brown, 2020). We provide a model integrating these research findings to support students in ending their first year of high school on-track and building strong relationships with these students and their families as they advocate for their needs.

Proposed Intervention

We provide strategies for integrating these findings more intentionally into school counseling curricula. This model will discuss incorporating the use of the on-track factor for ninth-grade students, determining which students may need assistance to end their first year of high school with at least one-quarter of their required credits for graduation and three or more credits in core classes (Allensworth, 2013; Allensworth & Easton, 2005). We will also explore how to increase students' sense of school belonging, academic self-efficacy, and grade-level promotion through building relationships with students and families who may need support. Included are ideas for determining students who may need assistance in staying on-track, identifying when these

students and their families may need ongoing support, and how to cultivate these relationships in meaningful strengths-based ways. Strategies for using this information to advocate for students with teachers and other school leaders are also discussed.

Incorporating RTI

Response to intervention (RTI) functions by moving students who appear not to be successful in the tier one, or full group setting, to group interventions in tier two and, if more support is needed, to individual interventions in tier three (Goodman-Scott et al., 2019). To give students the benefits of the RTI model, counseling lessons and tier-one interventions focused on academics for ninth-grade students need to be implemented as close to the start of the school year as possible. This allows for the earliest identification of those requiring interventions beyond tier one while still allowing students to show success in tier one interventions (Allensworth, 2013). These tier-one interventions, while not explored in depth here, must focus on the creation of positive relationships with adults in the school building, since this is a strong protective factor related to sense of belonging (Edirmanasinghe et al., 2022; Scheel et al., 2009). Another benefit of early counseling lessons for ninth-grade students is the opportunity for them to see and hear from a counselor early in the school year.

Once tier-one interventions are employed, the next step in the RTI model indicates moving those students found to need greater support to a small group intervention focused on academics (Goodman-Scott et al., 2019). While there is evidence that small group interventions are effective in assisting students with academic self-efficacy, motivation, and organizational skills, these groups often rely heavily on being able to identify the specific barriers a student is currently experiencing, and group students based on similar experiences (Berger, 2013). Factors contributing to a student's academic success are often multifaceted and grouping students by similar experiences will require in-depth screening (Allensworth, 2013; Scheel et al., 2009). Students have a combination of variables impacting their academic engagement, making their experience unique. Identifying commonalities to create a successful group intervention takes careful consideration. As a result, conducting individual meetings with students to begin understanding these factors is necessary before determining the best course of action regarding tier two and three interventions. Whether you plan to utilize counseling groups or focus on individual student meetings, we next explore a method for conducting screening meetings with students to better understand individual barriers to sense of school belonging, academic self-efficacy, and potential grade-level promotion that may result in the information needed for counselors to create groups. However, given how individual these barriers and combinations of barriers can be, a group setting may not be appropriate for all students.

Student Relationships

To support students in ending their first year of high school on-track, the first obstacle is identifying students needing further support. Since early identification is important, and data such as GPA, test scores, attendance, discipline, and even student grades from previous school years may not apply to requirements for grade-level promotion in high school, using the parameters for staying on-track for your school district is important when determining which students may need further support (Allensworth, 2013; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; McKee & Caldarella, 2016). Midway through the first marking period, usually between three and six weeks into the school year, is a good time to begin meeting with students who, if their grades remained consistent, would not end the year on-track. Meeting with students at this time, allows the counselor and the student to make adjustments that might impact their grades before they are finalized. These adjustments may result in the student receiving fewer messages through their grades that they do not belong at school and increase their feelings of being able to achieve their academic goals.

When conducting these screening meetings, it is important to remember the history of deficit-based practice when it comes to this work (Galassi et al., 2008). These meetings need to be transparent and relationally focused, providing students with the reason for the meeting, information about requirements if appropriate, and earnest interest in learning more about their thoughts, feelings, goals, and barriers to success (Webber, 2018). The purpose of this meeting is to get to know the student, help the student identify potential connections between school and their future goals and purpose, and assess what structural barriers might be in the way of their academic success (Scheel & Gonzalez, 2007). Focusing on the student's goals first will guide the counselor in determining the information the student needs and assist the counselor in providing this information without judgment. The counselor can begin this conversation by letting the student know they were looking at the student's grades and wanted to ask the student's thoughts on seeing their grades. Depending on the student's answer, the counselor might then want to ask the student more about themselves, how they feel about school, and their goals for the future. This allows the student to place value on these different factors instead of the counselor making assumptions about the student's goals. For example, if a student wants to leave school as quickly as possible, the counselor can speak with the student about graduation requirements and whether graduating early may be an option. If the student wants to be in a certain section of the yearbook or a specific course next year, the counselor can speak with the student about the requirements for reaching that goal. If the student has a failing grade because they missed two weeks of school for an illness, the counselor can ask whether the student feels they need support in catching up with their work. In all these cases, the student's agency is prioritized. Creating plans to support the student in reaching their goals increases feelings of academic self-efficacy; validating the student's feelings

related to their school experience increases their sense of school belonging.

Although conducting these individual conversations may seem overwhelming with already busy workloads, these early interactions serve several purposes: helping to build relationships between counselors and students in need of support, connecting the student with someone other than a teacher to help make plans on what to do if they feel overwhelmed, and interrupting low sense of school belonging and feelings of helplessness, resulting from receiving failing grades and other messages that they do not belong in school (Allen et al., 2022; Valbuena et al., 2020). For many students, this screening meeting may be enough to allow them to move back to tier-one interventions.

For students the counselor believes may have substantial barriers to reaching their academic goals, part of this initial meeting can focus on building a relationship with the student and assessing whether the student has positive relationships with other adults in the school building (Gubbels et al., 2019; OECD, 2018; Scheel et al., 2009). When interviewed, most students who left school expressed a lack of positive relationships with adults at school as a main contributor in the decision to stop attending (Scheel et al., 2009). For students who do not have a positive relationship with an adult at school, messages of lack of belonging communicated through failing grades and discipline may be more impactful than students who have these relationships (Allen et al., 2022; Valbuena et al., 2020).

School counseling departments can also use these meetings to look for patterns in the barriers impacting these students' sense of belonging in school and academic self-efficacy. Knowing students from minoritized backgrounds experience discrimination in discipline and special education practices, lack of representation in advanced courses, and benefit from same-race mentorship, counselors can observe and document evidence of systemic barriers and advocate for policy changes, stronger community partnerships, and the importance of representation in the school community (Bjorklund, 2019; Dotson-Blake et al., 2009; Elder et al., 2021; Gilleskie & Li, 2022; Giraldo-Garcia et al., 2019; Grey, 2019; Griffin et al., 2021; Mitchell & Bryan, 2007; Mulvey et al., 2022). Assessing for needs through screening meetings at this early point in the year creates an opportunity to dedicate advocacy efforts based on the needs of the groups of students most impacted by barriers, and patterns connecting individual experiences.

Also, through these initial student meetings, the counselor may have a sense a student may be struggling with a disability or may be unable to identify a motivating factor for the student (e.g., a reason they want to move from ninth grade to 10th grade). In this case, the counselor may want to explore the possibility of a higher level of support, requiring input from other stakeholders. In both situations, the counselor may want to ask the student if it would be okay if the counselor reached out to their caregiver to talk about the concerns and if the student would like to be a part of that conversation. This approach protects the student's agency and right to confidentiality while also recognizing the student as part of an ecological system, impacted by not only their relationship with the counselor, but also their relationships with their teachers, friends, caregivers, caregiver's larger environmental structures, and cultural messages (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Support from caregivers and involvement in the student's academic journey is identified as a powerful indicator of student success, and counselors have an opportunity to remove barriers to active involvement (Gubbels et al., 2019; Vera et al., 2018; Warren & Locklear, 2021).

Ongoing Support

After initial student meetings and allowing each student to work towards the academic goals they identified in an initial meeting, counselors can use first marking period grades and beyond to move students in and out of tier two support and create a tracking system for the small group of students. Counseling leadership can determine the specific parameters used to keep the group of students a manageable size, while also striving for the greatest equity in this process. For example, if meeting with every ninth grader with a D or F is too many students, counseling leaders can decide the focus needs to be on those students who are failing core classes or are failing enough elective classes that they would not complete the required credits needed to move to 10th grade if grades remained consistent (Allensworth, 2013; Bornsheuer et al., 2011; Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012). The amount of time school counselors can dedicate to specific counseling-related activities is directly correlated to the number of students who successfully transition from ninth grade to 10th grade, highlighting the importance of structured and consistent support throughout the school year (Shi & Brown, 2020).

In these subsequent meetings, the focus needs to be on continuing to develop a strong therapeutic relationship with the student, focusing on exploring the student's goals for the future and self-efficacy related to those goals, addressing barriers to the student's success, and beginning to engage other stakeholders likely to have a positive impact for the student (Allen et al., 2022; Gubbels et al., 2019; Scheel et al., 2009). This process may be different for each student, but for many students, it will involve contacting caregivers and supporting these caregivers as they communicate with teachers regarding their student's needs. Counselors can support caregivers, particularly marginalized caregivers, through continuously growing in cultural competency through self-reflection, seeking out information regarding anti-racist counseling practice and models for creating strong family and community partnerships, focusing on relationships, active listening, and expressing empathy in conversations (Griffin et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2017). Reaching out to caregivers at the start of the year and setting up lines of communication empowers caregivers to reach out for support and ask questions about their student's progress in school. Caregivers who have a language barrier, long work hours, or experience other barriers to feeling comfortable reaching out to the school for assistance may need this

support in starting lines of communication (Dotson-Blake et al., 2009; Griffin et al., 2021; Mitchell & Bryan, 2007).

When communicating with students and families during this ongoing support, it is important to recognize that in many cases in the United States, ninth grade is the first time a student's academic outcomes will directly impact the student (de Bray et al., 2021). This impact may be having to repeat courses, being retained to a grade level, or not reaching their post-secondary goals. Students and caregivers likely need information about requirements and how to achieve grade-level promotion and graduation successfully (Webber, 2018). Lack of access or awareness of this information is a systemic barrier to academic success that school counselors can directly address.

As school counselors committed to removing systemic barriers to success, it is important to consider how these barriers impact the caregivers of our students and reflect on assumptions that might impact willingness to reach out to caregivers, such as implicit biases (Chang & Barrio Minton, 2022; Scheel et al., 2009). In the process of self-reflection, consider asking: a) Who are the students I avoid meeting with, and what assumptions do I have about those students? b) Who are the caregivers I avoid contacting and what assumptions do I have about those caregivers? c) other questions to help more closely examine your own biases, and d) What resources can you seek out to gain more information on how to support those students and families (Byrd et al., 2021).

Although most students will want involvement from their caregiver in this process, it is important to remember each step of the plan must prioritize the relationship between the counselor and the student first, since this positive relationship with a staff member is an important component of students' sense of school belonging (OECD, 2018; Scheel et al., 2009). The counselor must, whenever possible, work with the student to determine next steps rather than denying the student agency in the academic process. This may be providing the student a choice when possible. Some choices might be: a) letting a student know you need to call home and asking them if they would prefer to be on the call or would prefer you call when they have left your office; b) asking permission to share information with teachers; and c) meeting with the student before a family meeting or family teacher conference to talk about goals for the meeting. Simultaneously, it is important to support the student as they develop supportive relationships with other adults in the building, such as teachers, coaches, staff members, or administrators (Scheel et al., 2009). These relationships will allow students opportunities to be successful with less counselor support as they move forward in their school careers. The goal of intensive early support is to allow students the opportunity to move to tier one and be successful in reaching goals with less ongoing support.

School counselors can also support students in the growth of academic self-efficacy by providing opportunities for reflection on previous success. In these ongoing meetings, the counselor can help the student process the messages they have received, the impact of their actions, and the movement toward their goals. Providing opportunities for students to reflect on their successes increases academic self-efficacy in the classroom setting (Chung et al., 2021). In the counseling setting students reflect not only on their academic accomplishments but also on their movement towards purpose and achieving the goals they have set for themselves.

Final Month

Often, the focus of grade-level promotion efforts in high school is directed toward students who are seniors and giving them every opportunity to graduate (Tillery et al., 2022). While these efforts are important, it is also important, given the known negative impacts of grade-level retention on students' sense of belonging, academic self-efficacy, and likelihood of graduation, to question if this same level of resourcefulness can be applied at all grade levels (Allen et al., 2022; OECD, 2018; Valbuena et al., 2020). School counselors, having access to comprehensive student information and often the responsibility of determining grade-level promotion, can be leaders in these efforts to provide all students the resources they need to complete as many courses as possible. School counselors can communicate with teachers to find out which students are likely to complete a course with an opportunity to dedicate more time to a specific assignment, and then find ways to provide students with information and resources. Through communicating with teachers, caregivers, administrators, and students, school counselors have an opportunity in the final month of school to provide opportunities for students to complete courses in ways that are already utilized for students who are seniors.

The interventions during this final month are not significantly different from the ongoing support provided throughout the year, apart from being more strategic. The counselor may provide a student with a place to complete an assignment that needs to be completed, rather than providing a caregiver with a list of assignments. This approach is similar to how counselors often provide a space for students to complete examinations in the final month of school. While finding time to complete these individualized interventions at the end of the year may be cumbersome, the results may be profound (Fye et al., 2017). Many school counselors are tasked with non-counseling-related duties at the end of the school year, often related to testing and graduation. While it may be difficult for administrators to reassign those responsibilities, providing evidence to school leaders of the impact school counselors can have on grade-level promotion and ultimately graduation if able to focus on counseling-related job responsibilities may be one advocacy strategy for prioritizing this work and supporting these students (Shi & Brown, 2020).

Implications and Policy Recommendations

Voices of school counselors are largely absent from the current conversations regarding the impact of grade-level retention on students. Many studies have found individual interventions focused on building relationships between students

and adults in the school building have been the most successful in promoting students' sense of belonging at school, showing that school counselors need to be brought into these conversations (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Giraldo-Garcia et al., 2019; Grey, 2019; Gubbels et al., 2019; Scheel et al., 2009; Wu & Zhang, 2022). Additionally, the negative impacts of grade-level retention on students' sense of belonging in school and academic self-efficacy and self-concept further support the need for school counselors to develop plans for directly addressing retention (Gubbels et al., 2019; Postigo et al., 2022). As professionals trained in creating deep connections with students and families, understanding the impacts of systemic injustice in our school systems and societies, and dedicated to seeing every student succeed, school counselors are the appropriate professionals in the building to lead interventions that will make the biggest impact on reducing student retention and increase graduation rates (Chang & Barrio Minton, 2022; Goodman-Scott et al., 2019). If the trends observed in numerous studies are as consistent among suburban and rural communities as they are among urban communities (Allensworth & Easton, 2005; Bornsheuer et al., 2011; Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012; Strategic Data Project, 2012), interventions focused on assisting students struggling in their first year of high school (e.g., identifying and addressing their barriers to success, ensuring they end that first year on-track) could increase a school's graduation rate by at least 75% of its current dropout rate.

Recommendations for School Counseling Leaders

Research conducted by counselor educators indicates the more time school counselors can spend on counseling-related services results in lower ninth-grade retention (Shi & Brown, 2020). There is little empirical evidence school counselors are utilizing the on-track factor and how it is distinct from other academic data, such as GPA and test scores, to direct their efforts in addressing grade-level promotion (Allensworth, 2013; Allensworth & Easton, 2005). For many practicing school counselors, the focus of increasing graduation rates is assisting 12th-grade students to meet graduation requirements (Tillery et al., 2022). While assisting 12th-grade students is important, since some students do not reach 12th grade because of barriers to their academic success, this focus will not have the same results as assisting ninth-grade students. Additionally, this approach does not award students the opportunity to learn the skills needed to advocate for themselves and succeed without tier two or three levels of assistance as they progress through high school (Allensworth, 2013; Scheel & Gonzalez, 2007)

To convert findings into effective policy changes, school counseling leaders are encouraged to develop policies that focus on supporting ninth-grade students in increasing a sense of school belonging and academic self-efficacy, and achieving grade-level promotion, into the structure of the school year. To be most effective, policies need to include: a) moving tier-one interventions with an academic focus for ninth-grade students to as soon in the school year as possible; b) determining the criteria for remaining on-track based on school system requirements; and c) providing information to counselors. School counseling leaders can also support in: a) developing procedures for counselors to easily identify students with Ds and Fs in courses before grades are finalized for the first marking period; b) working with counselors to develop standardized ways for meeting with these students before any marking period grades are final; and c) including professional development activities requiring self-reflection on systems of systemic oppression (Allensworth, 2013; Byrd et al., 2021; Edirmanasinghe et al., 2022). In addition to developing these policies for the start of the school year, school counseling leaders should utilize research findings to advocate for counselors to dedicate time to these important endeavors (Shi & Brown, 2020); otherwise, new policies may result in frustration and burnout (Fye et al., 2017). Once policies for the start of the year are in place, school counseling leaders can then utilize both the information from this important scholarship along with feedback from counselors to continue to adjust the policies throughout the year and solidify expectations that balance equity, student needs, and manageability (Allensworth & Easton, 2005; Bornsheuer et al., 2011; Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012; Strategic Data Project, 2012).

Future Directions for Research

In addition to more research from the school counseling lens on the impact of grade-level promotion on students' sense of belonging, more research should be conducted to determine if rural and suburban students are also four times more likely to graduate from high school if they finish their first year on-track (Allensworth & Easton, 2005; Bornsheuer et al., 2011; Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012; Strategic Data Project, 2012). Currently, studies have primarily been completed in urban environments, however results are remarkably consistent. Also, studies on the impact of student relationships with school counselors on students' sense of school belonging, academic self-efficacy, and grade-level promotion would further support the need to reduce counselors' non-counseling duties and decrease caseloads.

Recommendations for Advocacy with School Leadership

To support the successful use of the proposed model, administrators need to prioritize counselor-student relationship building and assisting students throughout the school year by minimizing the amount of non-counseling related responsibilities assigned to their counseling team and advocating for smaller caseloads (Fye et al., 2017; Shi & Brown, 2020). When school counselors can engage in this work, even if it is not consistent, capturing quantitative and qualitative data is important to advocate for reducing other duties as assigned. As a result of employing these strategies as a school counselor, the first author Kristen Tuxbury was able to assist all her students in moving from one grade level to the next in the school year 2019-2020, but also advocated for removing all her testing-related responsibilities.

School counselors can help administrators understand the difference between this on-track factor and how it differs from other indicators that are not as linked with dropping out of school, such as test scores, GPA, attendance, discipline, or student demographics (Allensworth, 2013). When the impact on graduation rate is addressed and the relationship between success in ninth grade and future graduation is discussed, advocacy may have a greater impact (Brooks-McNamara & Pedersen, 2006). When school counselors collaborate and notice patterns in the conversations they are having with families, it can also result in more impactful ways of advocating for meaningful systems change (Gay & Swank, 2021), since school counselors are utilizing the perspective of those they serve rather than making assumptions based on numbers. As leaders, school counselors must track patterns in the barriers impacting their students, and advocate for changes in school policies to work towards eliminating discrimination and systemic oppression.

Conclusion

Not every student has equal access to learning in the current United States K-12 school system because of systems of power and oppression (Weis & Fine, 2012). With this understanding and knowing the negative implications of being unable to obtain a high school diploma on earning potential, health, and other quality of life concerns, one of the highest priorities of a high school counselor is ensuring all students have the opportunity, information, resources, and skills they need to achieve their goals (Breslow, 2012; Vaughn et al., 2014). With continued evidence that students are four times as likely to graduate from high school if they are on-track at the end of their first year, meaning they have completed at least one-quarter of their required credits for graduation and completed at least three of their core classes successfully, and that being retained to a grade level has negative impacts on students' sense of school belonging, academic self-efficacy, and likelihood of graduating, school counselors need to be a part of these important conversations (Allen et al., 2022; Allensworth, 2013; Allensworth & Easton, 2005; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; OECD, 2018; Scheel et al., 2009; Strategic Data Project, 2012; Valbuena et al., 2020). Through identifying students who are being most impacted by barriers to their academic goals early, before the end of the first marking period, working to establish strong relationships with students and their families, while also working to address systemic barriers to the student's success, counselors can assist students in increasing their sense of school belonging and ending the first year of high school on-track (Allensworth, 2013; Scheel et al., 2009). School counselors can provide students with opportunities for self-reflection, potentially increasing academic self-efficacy and the potential connections between school and reaching their future goals (Chung et al., 2021; Vera et al., 2018). Counselors can also communicate with other school leaders about patterns they notice working with these students to help focus advocacy efforts and promote systemic change.

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