

Closing the Gap: Graduation and Post-Secondary Readiness

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In order to implement a successful comprehensive school counseling program that benefits every student, school counselors must provide a multi-tiered system of support, or MTSS, to ensure that the academic and behavior needs of all students are addressed. The school counseling department at Woodward Career Tech High School collaborates with administration and other school personnel to support students in their college and career readiness and in meeting their graduation requirements. Data has indicated that student college and career readiness and the graduation rate are some of the most glaring achievement gaps within Woodward. In order to decrease these gaps, Woodward faculty has been collaborating to meet the needs of students in this area by providing a multi-tiered system of support.

The first meeting I attended was on October 12, 2020 and focused on reaching out to students who were identified as “at risk” for graduation from data. This meeting also discussed the “3 E’s” for post-secondary readiness and common barriers that students face to graduation. I engaged in this meeting by collaborating with my site supervisor and our B-Wing team to brainstorm ideas to support students in overcoming common barriers and developing goals for their post-secondary success. I also engaged by collaborating with our team on identifying students who could benefit from Tier 3 intervention. The second meeting I attended was on October 28, 2020 and covered ways to motivate students to attend class regularly, complete their assignments, and be proactive about their academic progress. I engaged in this meeting by collaborating with our team in determining potential small groups that could benefit students. I also contributed to our meeting by brainstorming incentives for attending class and getting excited about college, including finding some virtual college search resources. These two

collaborative meetings were an excellent way to develop an understanding of how to support students by closing the data-identified achievement gap.

Advocacy

Advocating for each student to have access to an equitable education is at the heart of professional school counseling. The American School Counselors Association's (ASCA) position statement on multi-tiered systems of support states that school counselors have a responsibility to advocate for equitable education for all students and must work to remove systemic barriers through implementing a multi-tiered system of support (American School Counselors Association, 2019). Professional school counselors must advocate for the social-emotional, academic, and college/career needs of all students to ensure that they have the necessary supports to be successful. It is critical that school counselors address each of these domains at multiple levels when advocating for students as a part of their closing the gap efforts.

Woodward's closing the gap efforts are focused on increasing the graduation rate and post-secondary readiness. In order to actively engage in advocacy that address three domains of student needs, I uncovered resources, met individually with students, analyzed and discussed potential barriers to their success, and collaborated with a team to brainstorm potential interventions to aid in our closing the gap efforts. To support students' social-emotional needs, I considered results from a needs assessment and other informal assessments that indicated students are interested in learning about emotional regulation and mindfulness/stress reduction techniques. This information reinforced our understanding that students could benefit from a wellness and mindfulness small group intervention. In addition to engaging in advocacy for students' social-emotional needs, I advocated for students' academic needs by communicating my students' interests in learning study skills, to our team, as informed by my individual

graduation planning meetings with 11th grade students. This reinforced that students could benefit from additional strategies and support regarding study skills and balancing their coursework. Finally, I advocated students' college and career readiness needs by supporting students in their college search and career development and by finding resources to support their post-secondary success. I communicated these efforts to our collaborative team to demonstrate my support for implementing college/career core curriculum. Overall, my active engagement in collaborative advocacy efforts across multiple domains has reinforced that supporting students is a team effort in which counselors, teachers, administration, and other student services personnel contribute their unique knowledge and abilities to meet the needs of each student and remove barriers to their success.

Data

The Ohio Department of Education (2019) School Report Card data shows that, as of 2019, the four-year graduation rate for students at Woodward is 67.4%, which falls 18.5% below the state average. Information from the ODE School Report Card also displays that only 31.1% of students in the Woodward class of 2017 enrolled in college within two years of graduating (Ohio Department of Education, 2019). These data points suggest that post-secondary readiness and the graduation rate are areas for improvement. These statistics were considered in the school counseling department's comprehensive school counseling program action planning and their annual goals. Woodward's school counseling department has prioritized these issues, based on the School Report Card data, and is working with administration, teachers, and other personnel to collaborate on identifying potential interventions to address these achievement gaps.

Woodward's closing the gap efforts address the three domains of student needs. Our collaborative efforts to decrease the identified gaps are developed with the understanding that

barriers to students' basic needs and social-emotional wellness must be addressed along with their academic and college/career readiness gaps. Data shows that 100% of students at Woodward qualify for free and reduced lunch, indicating that a significant number of students' families may be considered lower-income (Ohio Department of Education, 2019). Research shows that students who are considered "economically disadvantaged" are more likely than their less economically disadvantaged peers to struggle with motivation for school (Young et al., 2011). Based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, students will not be able to attend to their educational responsibilities if their basic needs are not met (Gobin et al., 2012). Furthermore, many teachers and administrators have reported a significant decrease in class attendance, since the COVID-19 pandemic. Informal data collection has indicated that several students are having difficulty focusing in online classes, due to the number of people who live with them, the quality of Wi-Fi, and juggling responsibilities at home, including taking care of siblings and cousins while their caregivers are at work. These barriers contribute to chronic absenteeism for Woodward students, which is at 30.1%, according to data from the ODE School Report Card (Ohio Department of Education, 2019). This data reinforces the importance of collaborating with student support personnel, administration, and teachers to ensure that students have equitable access to resources that will promote their overall wellness and aid in their ability to be successful.

Collaborative efforts to remove barriers identified by report card data has been at the heart of Woodward's closing the gap meetings. Our teams have been working together to identify potential supports to dismantle barriers, increase access to resources, and support student achievement and overall wellness. So far, we have developed ideas and initial plans for potential interventions that will support these students. Each team member's personal expertise and

experience have contributed to our plans to support students, reinforcing the importance of collaboration when addressing achievement gap data.

Development

The experience of engaging in closing the gap efforts with a collaborative team of administration, teachers, and student support personnel was highly enlightening and has significantly influenced my future school counseling practice. The opportunity to work with this team to advocate for students' needs was impactful in my development as a school counselor in training, as I gained experience with engaging in a collaborative team. I also learned how to interpret data to support the needs of students. These skills are critical to my future role as a school counselor, as they will contribute to my ability to advocate for students and implement an effective comprehensive school counseling program.

Informed Implementation of a School Counseling Program

The first key area of professional growth that I've identified aligns with the ASCA Professional Standards and Competencies for School Counselors Professional Foundation Behavior 5 (B-PF 5), which requires school counselors to use the ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success to inform the implementation of a school counseling program (American School Counselor Association, 2019). My experience working with a collaborative team on Woodward's closing the gap efforts helped me to grow in this area of professional competencies by providing me with the opportunity to develop ideas for potential evidence-based interventions. I utilized the ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success to inform potential evidence-based school counseling programs that would address data-informed areas of improvement through a multi-tiered system of support, by implementing supports for students on multiple levels. This corresponds with several of the ASCA Professional Standards and

Competencies Mindsets, including Mindset 2 which states that every student should have access to and opportunity for a high-quality education. This also relates to Mindset 3, which explains that every student should graduate from high school prepared for postsecondary opportunities. Finally, it relates to Mindset 4, which describes how every student should have access to a school counseling program (American School Counselor Association, 2019). The correlating mindsets and behaviors reinforced the importance of utilizing the ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success to inform student support interventions.

Collaboration to Facilitate Student Success

The second key area of growth that I identified was my developing abilities in collaborating with staff to support student success. This area of growth aligns with ASCA's Professional Standards and Competencies for School Counselors Student Services Behavior 6 (B-SS 6). This behavior states that school counselors have a responsibility to collaborate with families, teachers, administrators, other school staff and education stakeholders for student achievement and success (American School Counselor Association, 2019). Collaboration was at the core of our advocacy efforts and data interpretation. Our team was comprised on individuals from different departments and I was impacted by our ability to use each individual's unique knowledge and skills to develop potential supports for students. The importance of collaboration aligns with ASCA's Professional Standards and Competencies Mindset 5, which explains that effective school counseling is a collaborative process involving school counselors, students, families, teachers, administrators, other school staff and education stakeholders (American School Counselor Association, 2019). This mindset was reinforced in our team meetings and I was reminded that effective interventions and student supports are born out of collaboration.

Understanding Influences and Barriers

My next key area of growth was my understanding of barriers to student success and influences on their achievement. This area of growth aligns with ASCA's Professional Standards and Competencies for School Counselors Professional Foundations Behavior 6 (B-PF 6) which states that school counselors must demonstrate an understanding of the impact of cultural, social and environmental influences on student success and opportunities (American School Counselor Association, 2019). Engaging in collaborative data interpretation encouraged me to reflect on the barriers that many students at Woodward face, as well as the ways they are impacted by their lives outside of school. It also reminded me of how it is crucial that school counselors advocate for their students' needs. This area of growth related to many of the ASCA Professional Mindsets, but most reminded me of Mindset 6, which states that school counselors are leaders in the school, district, state and nation. Mindset 6 is applicable to this area of growth because it highlights how school counselors have a duty to use their leadership to advocate for students. This has impacted my future school counseling practice as it has helped me to become more aware of the systemic and environmental barriers that many students face and my role in helping remove some of these obstacles.

Data Interpretation

My final key area of growth was my competence regarding data interpretation. This aligned with ASCA's Professional Standards and Competencies for School Counselors Planning and Assessment Behavior 2 (B-PA 2), which requires school counselors to identify gaps in achievement, attendance, discipline, opportunity and resources (American School Counselor Association, 2019). This area of growth also aligned with the Planning and Assessment Behavior 4 (B-PA 4), which states that school counselors must develop and implement action plans aligned with annual student outcome goals and student data (American School Counselor

Association, 2019). These behaviors relate to my area of growth because they are focused on using data to identify achievement gaps and implement action plans to address the identified areas for improvement. This area is also aligned with Mindset 7, which states that school counseling programs promote and enhance student academic, career and social/emotional outcomes (American School Counselor Association, 2019). From my experience working on closing the gap efforts, I've learned how important it is to use data to inform programs that enhance student outcomes across multiple domains.

Engagement

Woodward's identified goals of improving the graduation rate and post-secondary readiness necessitate evidence-based interventions to support students. Following the analysis of school report card data, Woodward's collaborative teams have identified the importance of implemented a multi-tiered system of support to address these barriers and offer supports at multiple levels. These gaps will be addressed through engagement on an intensive individual (tier 3) level, targeted small group (tier 2) level, and core curriculum (tier 1) level (Hatch, 2017). Through implementing a multi-tiered system of support and evidence-based practices, the school counseling department will be able to meet the needs of all students and aid in the school's closing the gap efforts.

Individual

The evidence-based program Check and Connect would be an effective intervention for students that are identified as needing intensive tier 3 supports. Check and Connect is an intervention used with students who are displaying academic disengagement and who are at risk of dropping out of high school (Check & Connect Student Engagement Intervention Model, 2020). Students are referred to Check and Connect when they are identified as displaying

warning signs, such as behavioral challenges, low grades, and poor attendance. Students in the Check and Connect program work with a trained mentor who advocates for the student and encourages them to attend to their educational engagement (Check & Connect Student Engagement Intervention Model, 2020). Mentors are either Check and Connect employees, community volunteers, or school staff. Mentors work with students for at least two years and act as a liaison between home and school (Check & Connect Student Engagement Intervention Model, 2020). This mentor is also responsible for monitoring the student's performance variables, including absences, behavioral referrals, and grades. The mentor "connects" with the students by providing individualized interventions to help students solve problems, build skills, and enhance competence (Check & Connect Student Engagement Intervention Model, 2020). Based on our closing the gap efforts that are focused on improving graduation rate and college/career readiness, Check and Connect would be an excellent tier 3 intervention because it provides intensive support to students who are at risk of dropping out.

Check and Connect aligns with ASCA's Mindsets and Behaviors that school counselors encourage for all students. Mindset 2 describes the importance for school counselors to promote students' self-confidence in their ability to succeed (American School Counselor Association, 2014). This corresponds with Check and Connect's program goals of empowering the students in their academics through mentorship and individualized interventions. Mindset 4 states that school counselors must encourage an understanding that postsecondary education and life-long learning are necessary for long-term career success (American School Counselor Association, 2014). This statement also aligns with Check and Connect, as another primary program goal is to encourage students to reach their full potential by providing them with support on their post-secondary planning and goal-setting.

Check and Connect also aligns with many ASCA Behavior Standards, including Behavior Learning Strategies 4 (B-LS 4), which states that students will apply self-motivation and self-direction to their learning, and B-LS 7, which describes that students should identify long-term and short-term academic, post-secondary, and social-emotional goals (American School Counselor Association, 2014). These behaviors align with Check and Connect, as the program promotes academic engagement and empowers students to prioritize their education. Check and Connect most notably aligns with Behavior Self-Management Skills 4 (B-SMS 4), which encourages students to demonstrate ability to delay immediate gratification for long term rewards (American School Counselor Association, 2014). The program also aligns with B-SMS 6 and B-SMS 7, which indicate that students should demonstrate the ability to overcome barriers to learning, as well as demonstrating effective coping skills when facing a problem (American School Counselor Association, 2014). These standards correspond with Check and Connect, as they focus on working to achieve goals and overcome hardships to success. Finally, Check and Connect aligns with ASCA's Behavior Social Skills standard 3 (B-SS 3) states that students should create relationships with adults that support their success (American School Counselor Association, 2014). This standard is at the core of Check and Connect, which highlights the importance of mentorship. Check and Connect's emphasis on developing social skills and maturity through the mentorship relationship also aligns with B-SS 9, which states that students should demonstrate social maturity and behaviors appropriate to the situation and environment (American School Counselor Association, 2014).

Small Group

The evidence-based program, Student Success Skills (SSS) Small Group would be an effective intervention for students that are identified as needing tier 2, small group supports. SSS

Small Group is an evidence-based intervention that helps students develop academic, social-emotional, and self-management skills that they need to be successful (Atlantic Education Consultants, 2020). This small group program is used with students who have had the Student Success Skills (SSS) Classroom program and need additional support. This small group program is comprised of eight weekly 45-minute sessions that reinforce the SSS Classroom strategies, in addition to adding a social-emotional problem-solving model that improves social/emotional student outcomes and self-management skills (Atlantic Education Consultants, 2020). This evidence-based program would be an effective tier 2 intervention for Woodward's closing the gap efforts because it addresses post-secondary readiness, academic success, and social-emotional skills which is highly necessary, based on student data.

SSS Small Group aligns with ASCA's Mindsets and Behaviors that school counselors encourage for all students. Mindset 2 describes the responsibility of school counselors to foster students' self-confidence in their ability to succeed (American School Counselor Association, 2014). This relates to SSS Small Group's program goals of helping students develop the skills that they need to be successful, by promoting an inclusive, supportive, and encouraging environment (Atlantic Education Consultants, 2020). SSS Small Group also corresponds with ASCA Mindset 5, which states that school counselors should encourage students to use their abilities to their fullest to achieve high-quality results and outcomes (American School Counselor Association, 2014). This is an integral component of SSS Small group, as the program promotes supplementing their unique abilities with new strategies they are acquiring regarding social skills, learning skills, and self-management skills (Atlantic Education Consultants, 2020).

SSS Small Group also aligns with several ASCA Behavior Standards, including Behavior Learning Strategies 3 (B-LS 3), which states that students will use time-management,

organizational and study skills (American School Counselor Association, 2014). These behaviors align with SSS Small group, as the program has been shown to improve student academic achievement (Webb & Brigman, 2007). SSS Small Group also aligns with Behavior Self-Management Skills 5 (B-SMS 5), which requires students to demonstrate perseverance to achieve long- and short-term goals (American School Counselor Association, 2014). Similarly, to Check and Connect, the SSS Small Group program also aligns with B-SMS 6 and B-SMS 7, which indicate that students should demonstrate the ability to overcome barriers to learning, as well as demonstrating effective coping skills when facing a problem (American School Counselor Association, 2014). These standards relate to SSS Small Group, as the program promotes social-emotional learning and self-advocacy (Atlantic Education Consultants, 2020; Webb & Brigman, 2007).

Additionally, SSS Small Group aligns with ASCA's Behavior Social Skills standard 2 (B-SS 2) states that students should create positive and supportive relationships with other students (American School Counselor Association, 2014). This standard corresponds with SSS Small Group because the group setting allows students to build connections with each other. The promotion of students' whole-self and small group setting also aligns with B-SS 7, which describes that students will use leadership and teamwork skills to work effectively in diverse teams (American School Counselor Association, 2014). Lastly, this program aligns with B-SS 9, similarly to Check and Connect. B-SS 9 states that students should demonstrate social maturity and behaviors appropriate to the situation and environment (American School Counselor Association, 2014).

Classroom

Student Success Skills 2.0 with College and Career Success Skills is an evidence-based program that would be an effective tier 1 intervention for all students. This core curriculum intervention is rooted in helping students develop skills in five key areas, including goal setting and progress monitoring, creating a caring and encouraging classroom, developing memory skills, managing test anxiety, and positive student story telling (Atlantic Education Consultants, 2020). The College and Career Success Skills (CCSS) extension program centers around preparing students to develop the academic, social, and self-management skills necessary to meet the 21st century college and career readiness demands (Atlantic Education Consultants, 2020; Webb & Brigman, 2007). These evidence-based programs would meet the needs of Woodward students by addressing barriers to success and would assist in closing the identified achievement gaps of graduation rates and post-secondary readiness.

SSS 2.0 and CCSS align with ASCA's Mindset 4, which states that school counselors must promote an understanding that postsecondary education and life-long learning are necessary for long-term career success (American School Counselor Association, 2014). This statement corresponds with the program goals of supporting students in the development key skills that will prepare them for college and career by supplementing their ability to learn, build relationships, and self-regulate (Atlantic Education Consultants, 2020; Webb & Brigman, 2007). This program is aligned with many of ASCA's behavior standards. SSS 2.0 and CCSS relate to Behavior Learning Strategies 7 (B-LS 7), which explains that students should identify long-term and short-term academic, post-secondary, and social-emotional goals (American School Counselor Association, 2014). Behavior Self-Management Skills standard 2 (B-SMS 2) is also aligned to this program, stating that students will demonstrate self-discipline and self-control (American School Counselor Association, 2014). It also relates to B-SMS 6, which states that

students should demonstrate the ability to overcome barriers to learning (American School Counselor Association, 2014). These behavior standards relate to SSS 2.0 and CCSS because the program involves helping students develop self-management skills, which focuses on emotional regulation when faced with a perceived obstacle and the development of goal-setting and progress monitoring skills (Atlantic Education Consultants, 2020). Based on this alignment, we can see that SSS 2.0 and CCSS also relate to B-SMS 7, which requires students to learn effective coping skills when facing a problem (American School Counselor Association, 2014). This program also aligns with Behavior Social Skills standard 5 (B-SS 5), which states that students should demonstrate ethical decision making and social responsibility (American School Counselor Association, 2014). Finally, this program relates to B-SS 9, which states that students should demonstrate social maturity and behaviors appropriate to the situation and environment (American School Counselor Association, 2014).

Collaboration

ASCA indicates that professional school counselors have a duty to collaborate across student service disciplines with teachers, administrators and families to design and implement plans to address student needs and to promote students' academic, career, and social/emotional achievement (American School Counselor Association, 2019). I upheld this responsibility by engaging collaboratively with our designated team to identify resources, strategies to support students on multiple tiers, and potential solutions to common barriers to graduation and post-secondary readiness. From student data, we understand that a significant number of Woodward students may be considered lower-income, indicating that many students may also be struggling to have their basic needs met. This must be addressed in order for students to meet their full academic potential and post-secondary readiness. I collaborated with my team to determine that

student wellness must be addressed, and we decided that a wellness small group could be an effective tier 2 social-emotional intervention to prepare students for graduation and post-secondary success.

Following our collaboration on social-emotional student needs, our team worked to investigate ways to support the academic needs of students. We determined that study skills, peer mentorship, and individual mentorship with student support personnel would benefit students who may be struggling academically. I have started reaching out to students, as a part of the beginning stages of tier 3 intervention, to determine their individual academic needs and I have collaborated with teachers to ensure that each student's needs are met. Finally, our team collaborated to brainstorm ideas for programs that promote college and career readiness. We determined that tier 1 interventions could benefit students in learning about college applications and financial aid, as well as career readiness.

Conclusion

Through collaboration and advocacy, Woodward's staff has been working to close their identified achievement gap by increasing the graduation rate and post-secondary readiness. School personnel has met several times to explore potential resources and supports for students, through multi-tiered system of support. These meetings have addressed multiple domains of student needs, as well as explored multiple levels of interventions. I have learned that collaboration on implementing a multi-tiered system of support is vital when advocating for students' needs. It is clear that, through the implementation of evidence-based programs at multiple tiers, Woodward's student support team is actively working to close their data-informed achievement gap and ensure that all students have equitable access to the education and support they need to achieve their social-emotional, academic, and college and career readiness goals.

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