

No *Childhood* Left Behind: Advocating for the Personal  
and Social Development of Children

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### Abstract

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) national model recognizes the importance of school counselors addressing the personal and social development of students, as well as the academic development, to ultimately help them succeed. A number of concerns have been raised regarding the impact of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act on education. This manuscript reports on current criticisms of the NCLB Act's impact on education and provides arguments for school counselors to use in advocating for the importance of meeting the personal and social needs of all students so schools can truly work toward leaving no child behind.

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In 2002, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act was passed with the purpose of changing the culture of American schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). The NCLB Act stresses the importance of increased academic accountability, testing standards, and proficiency levels for all students in the core academic areas of mathematics, reading, and writing (U.S. Department of Education). A primary focus on accountability is to close the achievement gap between minority and white students that continues in education today and to see that all students are academically proficient by the school year 2013-14. The requirements of NCLB are intended to provide an equal opportunity for all children to become academically proficient.

Some have suggested that NCLB's heavy focus on academic proficiency and accountability has detracted from needed attention to the personal, social, and emotional development of children (Dollarhide & Lemberger, 2006). Martens and Witt (2004) have argued that, while it is important for children to learn as much as possible to be competitive with their international peers, it is also important that they have the opportunity to flourish socially and emotionally to aid in the ultimate goal of becoming lifelong learners.

According to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model, an important role of the school counselor is to advocate for and help respond to the personal and social needs of students (American School Counselor Association, 2005). In this manuscript, the authors explore recent criticisms of the NCLB Act and the potential negative consequences produced by schools focusing on test scores in a few

academic areas in order to be deemed adequate. Specifically, the authors argue that the narrow definition of success under NCLB, which is dominated by high stakes testing, are causing schools to leave the personal and social development of childhood behind as they strive to make Annual Yearly Progress (AYP). Therefore, the authors identify several points for school counselors to consider using in order to advocate for and remind others of the importance of addressing the needs of the whole child in order to ensure success.

### Concerns with NCLB

In a number of ways, NCLB and the ASCA National Model align. Primary tenets of the NCLB Act include: (a) accountability, (b) flexibility and local control, (c) more parent involvement, and (d) a shift to what works (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Closing achievement gaps and creating a safe and drug free learning environment are also central to NCLB. NCLB also recognizes that school counseling has a positive effect on reducing classroom disruptions, increasing student grades, aiding teachers in effectively managing classroom behavior, and enhancing the mental health of students (U.S. Department of Education).

The ASCA National Model also emphasizes accountability as important to a quality counseling program, the use of data to determine what works, and building strong relationships with parents (American School Counselor Association, 2005). Additionally, the ASCA Model encourages removal of academic barriers so all students can learn in a safe and healthy environment. Finally, the ASCA organization highlights research which supports the vital role school counselors' play in helping all students succeed (American School Counseling Association, 2007).

So, where is the problem? The answer seems to lie in how the NCLB Act is impacting education, school counselors, and most importantly, the students. While the overarching goals and intentions of NCLB are valuable, the actual impact this legislation is having has raised a number of concerns.

The NCLB Act appears to be causing schools to reduce time and resources in many important areas in order to boost student proficiency. There has been a recorded increase in the number of school cutbacks in subjects such as physical education (Blankenship, 2000), social studies (Rock et al., 2006; Manzo, 2005), and the arts (Ashford, 2004; Chapman, 2004, 2005) to make way for more mathematics and reading time, the main areas of focus of the NCLB Act (Davis, 2006). Also, one study found 40% of schools around the country to have eliminated recess time in recent years (Cromwell, 2006), an activity that Pellegrini and Smith (1993) have argued is vital to aid in the educational success of students. Cook (2004) found free play, naptime, and longer lunch times have also been removed from the school day to make way for the standards set by NCLB.

NCLB may also be having a negative effect on gifted students specifically, and all students in general, by reducing the challenging nature of the curriculum to focus on rudimentary knowledge in a few content areas (Gentry, 2006). Gentry identified four negative effects of NCLB on education. These included: (a) schools focusing only on what is tested at the expense of a more enriched and challenging curriculum; (b) a deficit, rather than strengths-based, approach to education; (c) the setting of standards that lead to a curriculum which is too easy for many; and (d) a problematic message

sent to students that the end test results are the primary priority and may justify questionable means of achieving such results.

Another result of NCLB may be increases in student stress levels as well as the amount of clerical tasks for educators and school counselors. Dollarhide and Lemberger (2006) conducted a survey in which school counselors perceptions of the effects of NCLB were recorded. While positive effects such as more accountability, collaboration, data driven decisions, and help for certain at-risk students were recognized, several important negative effects were also perceived. These included increased stress on teachers being transmitted to students as well as increases in the time educators spend on paperwork. School counselors also reported a reduction in the time and attention given to student emotional and social needs. Additionally, counselors reported concern regarding diminished developmental considerations for students as a result of the increased attention to core academic content.

Another finding of Dollarhide and Lembergers' (2006) study was that school counselors find themselves spending increasing amounts of time on testing. With an average student to school counselor ration of 479 to 1 nationally (American School Counseling Association, 2007), and the high number of tests given in many schools, school counselors, who may be required to coordinate testing, will likely spend a great deal of valuable time on this task. The ASCA national model specifically identifies the "coordinating or administering cognitive, aptitude, and achievement tests" falls into the category of "inappropriate activities for school counselors" (American School Counselor Association, 2005, p. 56). With the increased focus on testing and accountability, administrators may feel more pressure to pull or keep school counselors in the testing

and test support efforts, leaving students potentially to suffer from diminished help with their personal and social development.

The NCLB's definition is also cause for criticism, specifically, what does it mean to *not be left behind* or, in other words, what does it mean for a student to succeed? Based on the requirements of NCLB, students who are proficient in math, reading, and writing and who graduate are considered not left behind (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). School counselors and educators have criticized this narrow definition of success as leaving out other important aspects of student life (Dollarhide & Lemberger, 2006; Gentry, 2006). The ASCA National Model recognizes the importance not only of the academic development of students, but also of career, personal, and social development as important factors to student success (American School Counselor Association, 2005). Goleman (1995) highlighted many years of research which support the idea that emotional intelligence can be as important as cognitive intelligence when it comes to succeeding in life. The intense and narrow focus NCLB has placed on a few academic subjects to determine if schools are adequate, may be leading schools to ignore or leave little time and resources for the crucial needs of the whole student. Ironically, this lack of attention may ultimately lead to lowered academic proficiency, as unaddressed personal and social concerns of students can interfere with achievement (Aviles, Anderson, & Davila, 2006).

NCLB has also been criticized for holding educators accountable for variables out of their control, such as socioeconomic status, learning readiness, and home life of students (Gentry, 2006). Hwang (1995) argued that without reforming the culture of apathy and lack of self-responsibility among students in American schools, efforts of

educational reform will fail. The author suggested that holding schools solely accountable for poor student performance misses the key role students themselves play in their own academic progress and argues that students can and do excel within American schools if they are motivated and value education. Hwang identified apathy, lack of self-responsibility, and false self-esteem as key components that lead to an anti-academic attitude among American students.

While there are clear and significant consequences for schools that do not meet Annual Yearly Progress (AYP), there are no consequences for the individual student who fails to make sufficient progress under NCLB. In this way, schools and faculty are being held to account for something which is difficult to control. Certainly, schools and their faculty play a critical role, but without learning-ready students who are motivated and open to education, it is arguably difficult to expect that the consequences of failing to make AYP alone will create real change.

A final criticism has to do with support for school counseling positions. The NCLB Act provides the allocation of funds and grants for programs that would help carry out the purpose and mission envisioned (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). The goal of NCLB funds allocated specifically to school counseling programs is to provide the care and support students need for academic and social success through the addition of more counseling professionals. However, during United States budgetary meetings held between 2003-2005, the president recommended the elimination of the Elementary and Secondary School Counseling Program (ESSCP-U.S. Department of Education), which stands in contrast to the original implication of the act supporting the need for school counselors and to needed support for the personal and social development of students.

### Advocating for Student Personal and Social Development

School counselors can play a critical role in educational reform and addressing these concerns created by NCLB by calling attention to the importance of the personal and social development of students as a critical component to student success. The ASCA National Model's (ASCA, 2005) definition of personal and social development is "maximizing each student's growth and social maturity in the areas of personal management and social interaction" (p. 152). This includes students gaining the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to succeed, such as: (a) develop respect for self and others, (b) set and achieve goals, (c) to develop positive relationships, (d) resolve conflicts, and (e) gain personal safety and survival skills. In this section, several key points of advocacy are presented to help school counselors advocate for experiences, support, and opportunities that promote the personal and social development of childhood so schools truly work toward leaving no child behind.

#### *Promoting Student Safety*

Keeping students safe is a critical priority for schools, and NCLB requires schools to maintain a safe and drug free academic environment (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). However, to do so requires time and resources committed to the personal and social development of students which can be difficult when school counselors face more testing and paperwork requirements (Dollarhide & Lembergers, 2006).

For example, there is an association between being a victim of school violence and having poorer academic performance (Beale, 2001). Victims of bullying also have higher rates of school absenteeism as well as a number of other mental health concerns (Rigby, 2002). Those who bully others have been found to have an increased chance of

disliking school and more conduct problems (Nansel et al., 2001), and bystanders who witness such aggression often report feeling fearful of becoming targets of violence themselves (U.S. Department of Education, 1998), all of which are likely to have a detrimental impact on student academic performance.

Measures such as zero tolerance policies alone have not been found effective in curbing school violence (Skiba, 2000). Rather, it is the programs that are preventative, comprehensive, and developmental in nature and which address the personal and social problems underlying aggressive behavior that have shown the most success (Olweus, 2003). School counselors can help others understand the connection between safety and achievement and the types of interventions needed to help students develop the personal and social capabilities necessary to maintain a secure learning environment.

#### *Raising Awareness Regarding Student Mental Health Need*

Schools are seeing increasing numbers of students with mental health concerns (Koller & Bertel, 2006). Concerns such as suicide (King 2000; Popenhagen & Qualley, 1998), eating disorders (Bardick, Berries, McCulloch, Witko, Spriddle, & Roest, 2004), teenage pregnancy, (Kelly, Sheeder, & Stevens-Simon, 2007), and substance abuse (Coker, 2001; Halverson, 1999) are all too common in the lives of today's students. Test anxiety (Cheek, Bradley, Reynolds, & Coy, 2002), hunger (Winter, 2004), and bullying (O'Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999; Olweus, 2003) are also prevalent. School counselors can remind officials of the real and relevant nature of these issues in order to attain more time to help remove such barriers and facilitate true student success. It is hard to argue, for example, that a student who is academically proficient on NCLB tests and

graduates, but who is addicted to drugs, suicidal, or on a path toward prison, is not in a significant way, left behind.

*Demonstrating the Personal/Social and Academic Connection*

While violent behavior and mental health issues are critical to highlight, it is also essential for school counselors to educate others as to the significant importance of personal and social development on the academic achievement of all students.

Goleman (1995) demonstrated a strong research-based argument for the importance of emotional intelligence in helping young people succeed. Impulse control, empathy toward others, and the ability to manage emotions such as anxiety, anger, and sadness are some of the essential emotional skills students need to survive and excel in today's educational environment. Yet these skills are lacking and deteriorating among young people (Goleman), and this lack of emotional skill can directly interfere with student academic learning. Indeed, a number of studies have found an association between limited social and emotional development among students and poor academic performance (Aviles, Anderson, & Davila, 2006). Before academic learning can take place, students must be emotionally and psychologically ready, able to self-motivate, willing to take self-responsibility, and able to see the value and meaning in education.

As indicated earlier, a criticism of NCLB and educational reform has been that it holds educators accountable for variables beyond their control, specifically, the learner. If students are apathetic and do not take responsibility to learn, as Hwang (1995) suggested, there is a high likelihood of academic failure regardless of the efforts of educators. ASCA national standards (ASCA, 2005) hold school counselors accountable to help students "display a positive attitude toward learning" and "take responsibility for

their actions” (p. 114). Through advocacy, guidance, and counseling, school counselors can help students and parents understand the importance of such personal attitudes and skills in education. A recent study by Miranda, Webb, Brigman, and Peluso (2007), for example, found that the implementation Student Success Skills program by school counselors, which addressed personal and social competencies, led to positive academic achievement outcomes among students. This program included helping students learn to develop cognitive strategies such as goal setting, social skills, and the ability to self-motivate and manage emotions. The results also demonstrated similar academic improvement for African American, Latino, and White students.

An important caveat is that improving student personal and social development does not always equate to academic improvements and that, while academic outcomes are central to the school mission, there are other priorities in the lives of students. For example, keeping potentially suicidal students alive and safe is arguably more important than having those students pass a test, regardless if such school counselor efforts result in measurable improvements in AYP scores.

#### *Moving From AYP to Enrichment*

Helping more students become proficient by NCLB standards is important. However, as it has been argued, many problems have arisen due to an overemphasis on NCLB’s narrow definition of student success. In order to really leave no child behind, schools must move beyond just striving for AYP and place a much greater emphasis on providing an enriching educational experience. Three points of advocacy school counselors can communicate to provide an enriching educational experience for students include promotion of: (a) a broader definition of education, (b) a more

developmentally driven school experience, and (c) an increased dedication of time and energy toward services that address the personal and social development of students.

A first step toward a more enriching environment is to recognize there is more to education than passing NCLB proficiency tests. Hwang (1995) argued that anti-academic attitudes in our culture are a primary cause of poor student achievement in American schools. NCLB's narrow definition of success may be contributing to a lowered appreciation of the value of learning. School counselors can advocate and teach that basic proficiency in all subjects, (including science, social studies, etc.) aspiring to higher levels of knowledge, developing imagination, stimulating curiosity, and gaining a better appreciation for learning are important to education.

A second step is to recognize the developmental nature of students. Play, physical activity, and creative expression provide young people with many benefits (Landreth, 2002). Cutting or reducing physical education, recess, the arts, and other personally and socially educational experiences in school may only serve to contribute to educational problems. Many of these activities may keep otherwise discouraged or alienated students engaged in school and inspire others to strive to meet their potential. Additionally, such activities have the potential to boost student strengths, which could help prevent or resolve other concerns that arise, thereby reducing deficit-based remediation (Gentry, 2006). School counselors are often in the position of being developmental experts within schools and can use that opportunity to remind others of the value of these experiences in helping students succeed.

Finally, more time dedicated to efforts that specifically target and promote student personal and social development is needed. Both the ASCA National Model and

NCLB Act agree that school counselors should be spending the majority (approximately 80%) of their time providing various face-to-face services to students (Bowers & Hatch, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 2002). The reality of time usage might be quite different. By demonstrating how personal and social development are critical to the success of all students, school counselors can better advocate for their own role and time in helping meet these needs.

### Conclusion

The NCLB Act has raised concerns regarding how we define student success. Attention and resources dedicated to helping students develop personal and social competence may be diminished by pressure to make AYP. School counselors can share important information regarding student safety and mental health needs to remind others of the serious issues beyond AYP. Also, school counselors can help others recognize the important connection between personal and social development and academic success and promote a more enriching school experience as ways to improve the chances of leaving no child behind.

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