

Counseling Awareness in Albuquerque Middle Schools

AFT/ATF Leadership Program
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Rationale

Extreme behavior has been running rampant across the United States, with schools and districts struggling to find a solution. This research study focuses on a middle school in Albuquerque, where this absolutely rings true. When comparing data from the 2017/2018 school year to the 2018/2019 school year, a drastic trend appears (see Appendix A). In the 2017 school year, there were a total of 117 incident referrals in 22 recorded weeks of school compared to 2018's 192 referrals in the same time period: an increase of 64%. Additionally, the 2019 school year was also the second year the school practiced restorative justice, which in theory should have reduced the school's incident referral rate.

This increase is on track with the rest of the district, which saw a suspension rate increase of 51% and that this increase is "inclusive of charter schools" (Perea). Note that the suspension rate for the district and incident referrals are not the same data. Not all referrals led to either In-School Suspension or Out-of-School Suspension. Furthermore, if the restorative practices set up by schools and districts failed, there seems to be little that can be done. However, we can continue to search for new answers and possibly look to bolster existing programs to better assist students' behavioral needs. One of these answers could be focusing on counseling awareness in schools.

Literature Review

According to Gallant and Zhao's 2011 study on high school students' perceptions about counseling, 93% of respondents reported awareness of counseling services, but only 60% of respondents said that they were aware of personal, social, or emotional counseling services in their school. In addition, "less than one-fourth of respondents indicated visiting the school counselor at least once for personal, social, or emotional services." They concluded that counseling needs are not being met because a "large proportion of students are not visiting the school counselor." They advise that counselors must find creative ways of engaging students both individually or in small groups to meet their needs.

This is also not a new problem: in a 1991 study that surveyed the reasons that students do not see a school counselor, 29.3% of respondents reported that "they do not like to tell a stranger about personal things" and 18.3% said that they were "afraid the counselor will pass information about me to other people" (West et al, 1991). Similar to Gallant and Zhao, they found that "clients who are unprepared for counseling or who have negative attitudes toward this service may simply be unaware of what counseling is, its objectives, and its benefits." Given the history of students being misinformed about the function of counseling services in schools, perhaps this should be a focus. While awareness of counseling has increased overall, there still may be negative attitudes and stigmas surrounding school counseling departments. Given the rise of extreme behavior at the middle school level in recent years, a campaign to increase positive attitudes towards school counseling may benefit students.

Study Design

Initially, this study was designed to collect data from the entire seventh grade class at the school in order to ensure a large sample size that was as inclusive as possible. However, due to the COVID-19 closure, the research could not be completed in this manner. As an alternative, two of my English 7 classes were chosen to complete a survey about counseling services. A total of 25 students completed the survey, which was based upon the study done by Gallant and Zhao and West et al. Ten questions were designed based on the responses that West et al were given in their study. Four more questions were included in the survey that asked students about their satisfaction and awareness of counseling services and frequency of visits. The last question was an optional fill in the blank question (see Appendix B).

Data Analysis

All of the respondents stated that they were aware of services, showing that our counselors are visible and known. However, awareness does not correlate with understanding of services. A total of 68% of respondents stated that they had never been to the counseling office. Of the 32% who had been, 87% reported that they were either “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with their services. 84% of respondents claimed that they were aware that the counseling office offered personal, social, or emotional services.

However, for questions 5-14, which were based on the findings of West et al, an average of 35.6% of respondents did not agree or disagree with the question given. This means that an average of 35.6% of students said they do not have a reason to go to the counseling office. Question 15 addressed this by giving the students an open-ended question to state their own reasons why they do not go to the counseling office. All of the responses given were either a rephrasing of a reason stated in the survey or that they have no reason to go.

Many of the responses to questions 5-14 became inconclusive after taking out the “neither agree nor disagree” option. 44% of students claimed that they 1.) are afraid the counselor will pass along their information to others 2.) would be too embarrassed to share their real concerns 3.) that they do not know how to begin talking with a counselor and 4.) think that their concerns are important enough to talk to a counselor. 48% of respondents reported positive interactions with counselors and 40% said that they do not think they would be judged for their issues. 60% reported avoiding the counselor because it is difficult to talk to them and 52% said that they do not like to tell strangers personal information.

Recommendations

Most of the responses must be viewed with a critical eye as many students report an understanding of what counseling is, but that is not borne out in the data collected. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s report *Kids Count*, New Mexico ranks last in the nation overall for child well-being. Further, the school is in a community that is highly affected by the negative aspects of the 16 indicators that the report uses to rank well-being.

What this data shows is a fundamental misunderstanding of what counseling is. Students are reporting based on what they believe counseling to be rather than what it is. Perhaps many of their most common fears could be allayed with a school-wide counseling education campaign, similar to what Zhao and Gallant suggest in their 2011 study. For example, Gallant and Zhao refer to a study done by Clark and Breman (2009) that outlines an inclusive counseling program that has counselors work in collaboration with teachers to minimize loss of instructional time,

bolster classroom instruction with the support of a counselor, and practice both academic and socioemotional skills in the classroom.

To utilize Gallant and Zhao's recommendation of counselors finding new ways to engage individuals and groups of students is absolutely necessary for a successful campaign, but more needs to be included. One major difference between these studies is that theirs was far broader in scope, with only a quarter of their research pertaining to personal, emotional, and social services. Also, they focused exclusively on high school students whereas middle school students have much more difficulty with behavior and emotional regulation. Therefore, a successful counseling education campaign should include new and engaging ways to promote positive interactions with students on a much broader scale to build trust and rapport with all students in the school. This could likely dissipate many of their fears of talking to someone new or barriers to entry.

Lastly, any successful program could include a number of activities and duties that would take up a portion of the counselors' duty day. In order for this to work, the district would have two options: hire more on-site counselors or limit the duties of a counselor. Counselors are already overworked and behind, so they could not successfully lead this campaign currently. Hiring more counselors would be costly, but potentially necessary. Given that New Mexico is ranked last in child well-being, a counseling education program could create a stronger demand for services as students become more comfortable going to the counseling office.

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Appendix A: Weekly Incidents 2018/2019

Weekly # of Incidents			
This uses the incident level filter to limit the results. This metric is currently showing incidents for all groups.			
Filter Criteria:			
Zone	Omitted	School Type	Middle School
School	Omitted	Grade	07
Ethnicity	[All]	Gender	[All]
SPED	[All]	EL	[All]
Student Group	[None Selected]		



# Incidents	Week	School Sort
1	1	2018-2019
3	2	2018-2019
5	2	2017-2018
2	3	2018-2019
2	3	2017-2018
2	4	2018-2019
6	4	2017-2018
4	5	2018-2019
11	5	2017-2018
14	6	2018-2019
6	6	2017-2018

8	7	2018-2019
2	7	2017-2018
15	8	2018-2019
8	8	2017-2018
2	9	2018-2019
3	9	2017-2018
16	10	2018-2019
9	10	2017-2018
18	11	2018-2019
14	11	2017-2018
6	12	2018-2019
8	12	2017-2018
25	13	2018-2019
10	13	2017-2018
12	14	2018-2019
10	14	2017-2018
11	15	2018-2019
6	15	2017-2018
17	16	2018-2019
5	16	2017-2018
15	17	2018-2019
10	17	2017-2018
19	18	2018-2019
8	18	2017-2018
10	19	2018-2019
2	22	2018-2019
4	22	2017-2018
12	24	2017-2018
6	25	2017-2018
6	26	2017-2018
5	27	2017-2018
13	28	2017-2018
2	29	2017-2018
6	30	2017-2018
7	31	2017-2018
11	32	2017-2018
8	34	2017-2018
7	35	2017-2018
9	36	2017-2018
11	37	2017-2018
7	38	2017-2018
15	39	2017-2018
6	40	2017-2018
2	41	2017-2018
202	Total	

1. Are you aware that your school provides counseling services?

Yes

No

2. Are you aware that the school counselor's office provides personal, social, or emotional services?

Yes

No

3. How many times have you attended the counselor for personal, social, or emotional services?

I have never been

5-7 times

1-2 times

8-10 times

3-4 times

More than 10 times

4. How satisfied were you after leaving the counselor's office?

Very satisfied

Dissatisfied

Satisfied

Very dissatisfied

Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied

5. I do not go to the counseling office because I am afraid that the counselor will pass along my private information to other people

Strongly agree

Disagree

Agree

Strongly disagree

Neither agree nor disagree

6. I do not go to the counseling office because I do not like to tell strangers about my personal information.

Strongly agree

Disagree

Agree

Strongly disagree

Neither agree nor disagree

7. I do not go to the counseling office because I would be too embarrassed to share my real concerns/issues.

Strongly agree

Disagree

Agree

Strongly disagree

Neither agree nor disagree

8. I do not go to the counseling office because they are always busy.

Strongly agree

Disagree

Agree

Strongly disagree

Neither agree nor disagree

9. I do not go to the counseling office because I am not sure how to begin talking to the counselor.

Strongly agree

Disagree

Agree

Strongly disagree

Neither agree nor disagree

10. I do not go to the counseling office because they cannot help me with my real problems.

Strongly agree

Disagree

Agree

Strongly disagree

Neither agree nor disagree

11. I do not go to the counseling office because it is difficult for me to talk to them.

Strongly agree

Disagree

Agree

Strongly disagree

Neither agree nor disagree

12. I do not go to the counseling office because my concerns are not important enough to bother the counselor.

Strongly agree

Disagree

Agree

Strongly disagree

Neither agree nor disagree

13. I do not go to the counseling office because they would judge me/disapprove of me if they knew the truth.

Strongly agree

Disagree

Agree

Strongly disagree

Neither agree nor disagree

14. I do not go to the counseling office because I have had a bad experience with a counselor.

Strongly agree

Disagree

Agree

Strongly disagree

Neither agree nor disagree

15. (optional: you do not have to do this) If your reasons for not going to the counselor were not listed above, please fill in the blank: I do not go to the counseling office because...