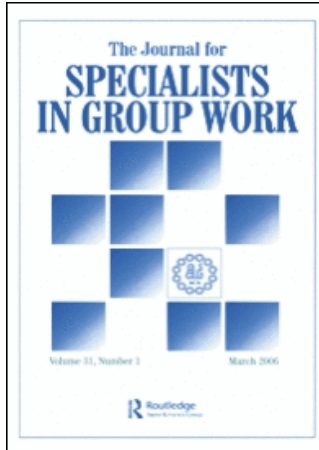


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### Student Success Skills: A Structured Group Intervention for School Counselors

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# Student Success Skills: A Structured Group Intervention for School Counselors

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*This article describes the Student Success Skills (SSS) small group intervention developed for school counselors targeting academic outcomes. The SSS program is based on extensive reviews of research about the skills students need to be successful. Studies supporting program effectiveness are briefly reviewed and show consistent patterns of improved academic achievement outcomes for treatment group students. The structured group format and intervention are described in detail. Effective school counselor group work practice is described.*

**Keywords:** *achievement; group; research; school counselor*

In recent years it has become increasingly important for school counselors to establish themselves as essential contributors to improved academic and social outcomes for students (Green & Keys, 2001; House & Hayes, 2002; Issacs, 2003; Lapan, 2001; Myrick, 2003; Paisley & Hayes, 2003). In support of the goal, the American School Counselor Association developed the *ASCA National Model* (ASCA, 2003) to provide guidance to school counselors in identifying academic, personal/social, and career competencies with outcomes that can be affected through comprehensive school counseling programs. In the model, group counseling is identified as an important direct service intervention targeting these outcomes. Group counseling allows school counselors to work with small groups of students identified as needing support in developing key academic and social skills beyond what can be provided by the teacher or counselor in the classroom. A program developed for school counselors, Student Success Skills (SSS), includes a structured group counseling intervention aimed at teaching these key skills to students.

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## Research Supporting SSS Program Development

SSS was developed for students in grades 4 through 10 and is based on three skill sets consistently identified in extensive reviews of research as contributing to improved academic and social outcomes for students (Hattie, Biggs, & Purdie, 1996; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994). These skill sets include: (a) cognitive and meta-cognitive skills such as goal setting, progress monitoring, and memory skills; (b) social skills such as interpersonal, social problem-solving, listening, and team-work skills; and (c) self-management skills such as managing attention, motivation, and anger. SSS program components continue to be supported by a growing body of literature tying social and emotional competence to achievement outcomes, making a strong empirical case linking social-emotional learning to improved behavioral and academic performance for students, including those at risk for academic failure (Arbona, 2000; Daly, Duhon, & Witt, 2002; Elias et al., 2003; Marzano, Pickering & Pollack, 2001; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004).

## Research Supporting SSS Program Effectiveness

With a strong research base supporting the development of the SSS program, the next step was to implement the program using a research design that would link improved outcomes to the school counselor led intervention. Evaluating the efficacy of the SSS program involved four studies, 50 school counselors, 36 schools, two school districts, and over 1100 students in grades 5, 6, 8, and 9 (Brigman & Campbell, 2003; Brigman, Webb, & Campbell, 2007; Campbell & Brigman, 2005; Webb, Brigman, & Campbell, 2005). In two studies, students in targeted grade levels scoring between the 25th and 60th percentiles in reading on the previous years Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) were randomly selected and assigned to treatment and comparison groups. In the other two studies, students from treatment and demographically matched comparison schools were randomly selected for participation. Treatment group students received the SSS large group and small group intervention. The FCAT, the annual state-wide achievement test used to determine adequate yearly progress, was used to measure math and reading achievement outcomes. Using an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) with pretest scores as the covariate, the achievement improvements were statistically significant in all four of the studies for math and in two of the four studies for reading. In addition, the improvement for treatment group students in all four SSS studies was consistent. Eighty-six percent of students who participated in SSS improved their FCAT math scores an average of 30 scale

score points. Seventy-eight percent improved their FCAT reading scores an average of 25 scale score points.

Evaluation of the SSS research yielded strong and promising evidence of effectiveness as reviewed by the National Panel for Evidence Based School Counseling (Carey et al., 2005). We believe the program research also meets criteria for strong evidence of effectiveness using guidelines developed by the U. S. Department of Education (2003). The research supporting SSS contributes to the group work literature providing evidence of the effectiveness of school counselors in facilitating group experiences that improve academic and social outcomes for students.

Aggregated data from the four previous studies (Brigman & Campbell, 2003; Brigman et al., 2007; Campbell & Brigman, 2005; Webb et al., 2005) examined the differential effects related to ethnicity of students participating in SSS. Results suggest that regardless of ethnicity, students' scores improved following participation in SSS (Miranda, Webb, Brigman, & Peluso, in press). This becomes particularly important as school counselors show they are working to make a difference in achievement for all students.

## **THE SSS GROUP COUNSELING INTERVENTION**

Previous studies (Brigman & Campbell, 2003; Brigman et al., 2007; Campbell & Brigman, 2005; Webb et al., 2005) evaluated the effectiveness of the introduction of key skills and strategies in large classroom groups followed by continued intervention in small groups. This article describes the small group intervention.

### **Structured Small Group Session Format**

Students who need additional support to develop the skills associated with school success are voluntarily selected to participate in the small group intervention. Teachers identify students and their specific academic, social, and self-management needs along with their strengths. This allows the counselor to select a balanced group and increases the chances of improved academic and social outcomes for participating students. The small group intervention involves eight 45 minute sessions spaced a week apart followed by four monthly booster sessions. Follow up booster sessions allow students to continue to share successes, monitor progress, and reinforce key concepts throughout the school year. A structured group manual (Brigman, Campbell, & Webb, 2004) provides detailed plans for each session.

## Effective Implementation of the SSS Group Intervention

Several effective group work practices and strategies are built into SSS program delivery to increase member interaction and group involvement including:

- 1) balancing the group and pre-screening participants for a good fit,
- 2) decreasing anxiety and encouraging participation through the establishment of group agreements, allowing volunteers to share ideas first and empowering students with the right to pass,
- 3) providing structure including a think, write, pair share, volunteer share-sequence to allow for personalization of information and strategies,
- 4) keeping each session focused on real life issues, while setting goals and monitoring progress in areas the students choose,
- 5) allowing students to share successes and small improvements and to connect changes in their own behavior to changes in academic and/or social outcomes and,
- 6) teaching a language of encouragement and optimism.

Each of these strategies is aimed at optimizing group outcomes and building caring, supportive, encouraging relationships among group members throughout the sessions.

## Description of Small Group Sessions—Beginning, Middle, End Format

*Beginning of session one (20 minutes).* Several activities are introduced in the beginning of Session One. First, the counselor introduces the SSS logo (Figure 1) as a way to provide a visual overview of group goals including: 1) developing a caring, supportive, encouraging group environment, 2) learning some skills that will help them with their work in school and their relationships with others, and 3) sharing successful application of skills that have been learned and linking those experiences to increased effort and confidence leading to SUCCESS. The logo becomes an important visual anchor.

Second, the counselor introduces the *name game*, explains the importance of personalizing communication as a relationship-building tool, and models this skill throughout the group sessions. Students state their names and the name of an animal that starts with the same letter. After the first student, the next student does the same and then repeats all names and animals that have been shared so far. The last student says them all.

Third, the group leader introduces and gains consensus regarding SSS group expectations and participation. Group agreements include: 1) When others are talking, I will listen with my eyes, ears, and heart.



**Figure 1** Student success skills logo.

2) I will respect the opinions of others even if I disagree. If I forget and give a *put-down*, then, I agree to say two *put ups* to that person. 3) What I say in here belongs to me and I can share it with anyone I want. What others say belongs to them, and I agree not to share it with anyone else outside of the group. 4) Everyone has the *right to pass* during any group activity.

The beginning of session one concludes with introductions and interviews. Students interview each other in pairs then introduce their partner to the group. Listening with *eyes, ears, and heart* is introduced and practiced as a way to build attending, listening and empathy skills. Students find out about each other with prompts related to where they are from, siblings, pets, things they do for fun, and favorite or least favorite school subjects.

*Middle of session one (15 minutes).* The middle of session one begins with the counselor discussing the purpose of the group by introducing five things on which they will focus: 1) setting goals and making plans to help reach our goals, 2) building on our strengths, practicing new skills, and giving and getting good coaching feedback, 3) sharing successes and improvements, even if small, and being encouraging to ourselves and others, 4) getting better at brainstorming how to solve problems and remove blocks that keep us from our goals, and 5) challenging ourselves to reach higher and working on our balance so we will have the energy and positive attitudes to keep us motivated and going forward.

Students are then introduced to four key concepts aimed at helping them to stay encouraged and optimistic as they try out new skills throughout the group sessions. First, students are introduced to the Japanese concept of *Kaizen* involving recognizing small and continuous improvements as they work toward reaching their goals. Next, students are introduced to the idea that to be successful in reaching their goals, they must be able to *imagine* themselves being successful. Imagining is followed by both mental and real practice and having the courage to start over if their strategy isn't working. Students also learn to reframe negative thoughts using prompts such as "That's not like me to . . . , I'm usually more . . ." and "Up until now . . . , but from now . . ." Finally, students learn to use positive lyrics in music, referred to as *Keep Kool Tunes*, as a tool to divert negative thought patterns and increase mood and energy. After the first group session, students are encouraged to bring their own music with positive lyrics. Adding movement to the music can also provide a needed break from studying.

*End of session one (10 minutes).* The end of session one is the same as the end of all remaining sessions. A progress rating and monitoring tool, *Seven Keys to Course Mastery* (Figure 2), is introduced and passed out to each student. The counselor asks for a volunteer to read the first

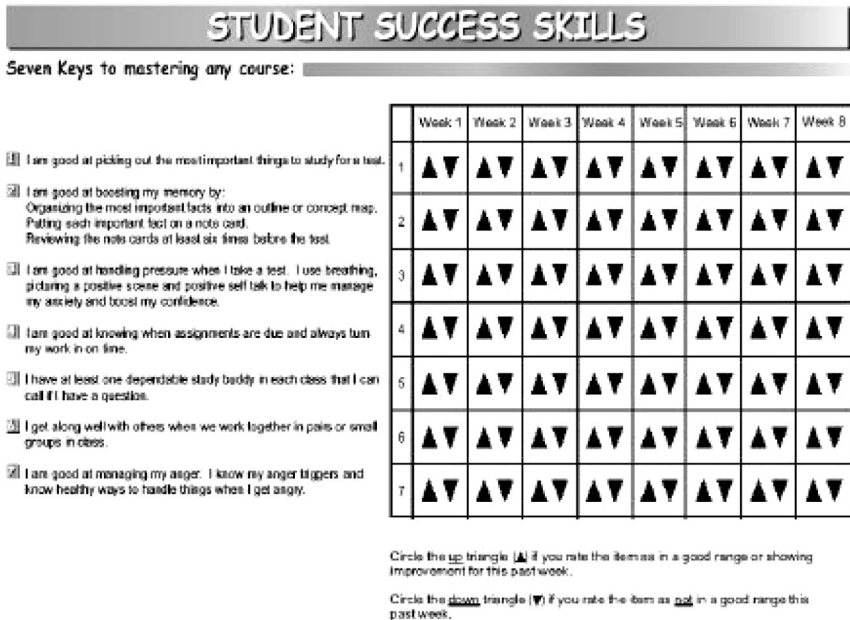


Figure 2 Seven keys to course mastery.

*key*. Students rate themselves with an *up* arrow indicating they are good at or have improved on that skill or a *down* arrow if this is a skill they need to improve. Students who circle the *up* arrow are asked what they do or what they have done to improve. This opportunity to share successful strategies with others in the group helps build the repertoire of behaviors, skills, and attitudes others might try. This process is continued for the second key, followed by each of the remaining seven keys. Next, students decide on something they would like to improve for the coming week and make a plan for improvement. For example, one student said he would like to improve his grade on an upcoming science test. His plan was to check with another student in the class who usually did well on tests to make sure he had picked out the most important information to study, to put that information on note cards, and to review them at least six times before the test. Students then run a *success video* in their heads in which they see themselves reaching their goals and experience the feelings associated with accomplishment. This goal and plan are then shared with a partner. One or two volunteers share their plan with the group allowing the group leader to provide coaching feedback, such as helping students to be specific in their plans, which can be used by all students as they learn to set goals and make effective plans for reaching goals.

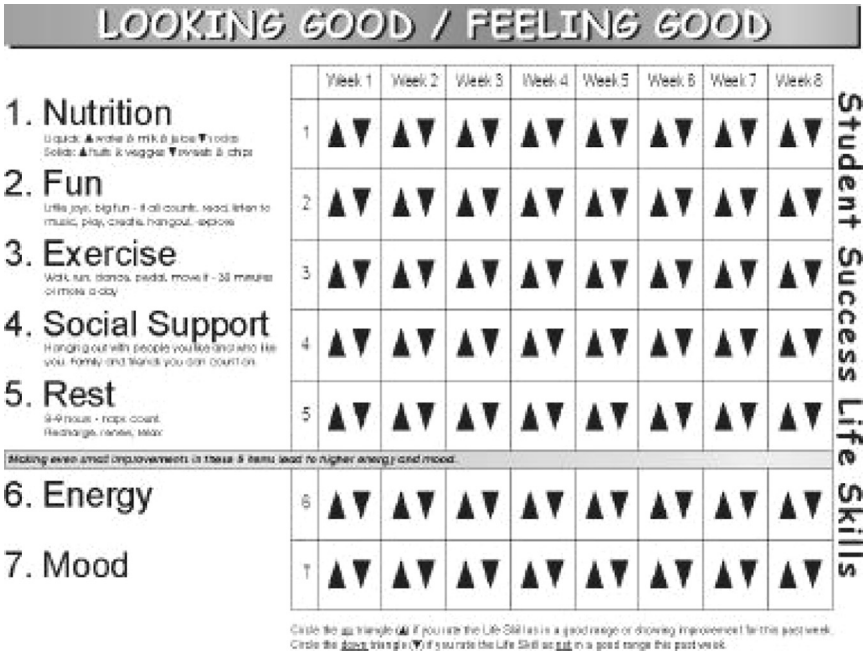
At the end of session one and all subsequent sessions, the counselor previews the next session and leads students in a hand play that helps them remember the concept of *Kaizen*: "Little by little, bit by bit, I'm improving everyday." A group cheer follows this hand play.

*Beginning of session two (12 minutes)*. Session two begins in the same way as all remaining sessions. Session two begins with *Kool Tunes* and movement described in session one. Students look forward to the music and movement that start the group on a positive note. The counselor then facilitates a *temperature check* to get a feel for what kind of experiences, energy, and mood students are bringing to group. Students think about their high and low points for the week and share them with a partner. Next, students use their fingers to rate their energy for the week (1/low to 5/high) followed by sharing one word that describes their current mood.

Students then work in pairs to report on progress toward goals set the previous week (*goal reporting*). Students are encouraged to listen to their partner with *eyes, ears, and heart*, to be encouraging to each other, and to help identify even small improvements that have been made. If there was no improvement, the pair can brainstorm another strategy or alter the strategy for the upcoming week.

The final activity in the beginning of Session Two and all remaining sessions centers around the *Looking Good, Feeling Good* rating scale





**Figure 3** Looking good/feeling good life skills scale.

(Figure 3). Each student is given their own copy. The counselor has a volunteer read the first life skill area. Next, students rate themselves with an *up* or *down* arrow for the week. One or two students who have given themselves an *up* arrow, indicating good or improving habits, are given an opportunity to share what they do or what they have done to improve. The process is repeated for each of the next four areas. Next, students rate their energy and mood for the week by circling the *up* or *down* arrows. The counselor then cues students to look for patterns between energy and mood and the ratings in the five life skill areas. Students select one area they would like to improve for the week, set a goal in that area, and make a plan for reaching that goal. The goal and plan are shared with a partner. One or two volunteers share their plan with the group.

*Middle of session two (25 minutes).* The counselor uses a series of prompts to stimulate a discussion related to identifying, understanding and managing anger. Students rate themselves on a 1 (low awareness) to 5 (high awareness) scale for each prompt with the counselor posing follow-up questions to deepen the discussion. Prompts and follow-up questions include: 1) I know when I am angry. How can

you tell? 2) I am aware of how I handle my anger. What do you do? 3) I know my anger triggers. What are they? 4) My anger causes problems for me. How? and 5) I know some constructive ways to handle my anger. What are they? The counselor emphasizes that the more skilled we are in managing our anger, the more control we have of our lives and the better our relationships.

*Middle of sessions three through seven (25 minutes).* The beginning and end of sessions three through seven are the same as students set goals and monitor progress using the *Looking Good Feeling Good* and *Seven Keys* tools. The middle of sessions three through seven helps students identify and work on social problems keeping them from reaching their goals using *Social Problem Solving Student Peer Coaching* (SPSSPC).

SPSSPC begins with the counselor asking students to think of a situation from the previous week in which they have had a conflict or problem with another person. Each student takes 30 seconds to briefly share their problem. Group members agree on a typical problem for group focus. For each group session, a typical problem is selected from among those generated by students as the focus of the problem solving process.

Next, the counselor takes about two minutes to collect background details by asking the following questions of the student whose problem has been selected: 1) Who are the characters (not real names)? 2) What is the problem? 3) When and where is the problem occurring? 4) How are you feeling at the beginning, middle and end of the story? 5) How are others feeling at the beginning, middle and end of the story?

The counselor then facilitates the brainstorming of possible solutions and consequences by asking the student: 1) What would you like to try? 2) What might happen? 3) What else might you try? 4) What might happen? The counselor continues with these questions until the student is out of ideas. Other group members are then asked for solutions and consequences are explored. The student selects a solution to try in a role-play. The student plays himself or herself and chooses another group member to play the person with whom they have had a problem.

After completing the role play, group members give feedback to the student about the way they role-played the solution using the following frames: 1) I really liked the way you——, or 2) I thought——was very helpful because——, and 3) One thing you might want to consider or try is——, or 4) Something that helps me in this kind of situation is——. The student considers the positive and constructive feedback and commits to a final plan to be implemented during the week. The counselor facilitates a discussion

allowing for application of strategies discussed in this session to other problem situations students have experienced.

*Middle of session eight (25 minutes).* Session eight culminates the weekly group experience. It begins and ends the same as sessions three through seven, and students are encouraged to continue to use the *Looking Good Feeling Good* and *Seven Keys* tools to set goals and monitor continued improvement after the final weekly group session.

In the middle of session eight, the counselor facilitates a discussion of the group experience with prompts asking about what they have done together as a group, what they have liked, and what they have found helpful. Next, the counselor passes out *strength circles* (small circle inside large circle). Students place their name inside the small circle and then pass their paper to the right for that group member to write an *appreciation* in the large circle. Students are provided suggested leads and asked if they agree that these would reflect appreciations. Leads include: 1) One thing I appreciate about you is———. 2) One thing I respect about you is———. 3) One thing I admire about you is———. and 4) One thing I like about you is———. *Strength circles* continue to be passed to the right until each student has their own strength circle back. Finally, students are asked if they would like to share their appreciations with the group.

*Middle of booster sessions (25 minutes).* The beginning and end of the booster sessions continue to follow the same format. Booster sessions are spaced about a month apart following the conclusion of weekly sessions and allow students to see how changes in their behavior and attitude are affecting school grades. Students are asked to bring their last progress report or report card and use it as a basis to rate themselves on the *Seven Keys to Course Mastery*. Students look for strengths and areas of improvement and share those with a partner. Students think about new or unmet goals and are given an opportunity to share those with the group. Others who have been successful with similar goals share ideas for improving. After group input, plans for meeting new or unmet goals can be written and shared in pairs.

## CONCLUSION

Student Success Skills is a program designed to help students develop the academic, social, and self-management skills they need to be successful in school. Given the climate of educational accountability and focus on improved student achievement outcomes, it is

important for school counselors to identify and implement programs that have been proven effective and are linked to improved achievement outcomes. School counselors are encouraged to set themselves up for success in showing outcomes by implementing the intervention as intended and keeping track of student attendance in group sessions. In closing, we encourage school counselors to use the same skills and strategies introduced through SSS to stay positive and optimistic regarding groups and the implementation of their school counseling programs. School counselors can make a difference in student achievement outcomes through group counseling interventions such as SSS.

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