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Closing Achievement Gaps: Roles and Tasks of Elementary School Counselors

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Abstract

Achievement gaps among racial-ethnic and socioeconomic status groups are an enduring, pervasive, and multifaceted phenomenon. Therefore, efforts aimed at understanding and addressing these gaps must be developmentally and environmentally broad, involving numerous school counselor roles and tasks, including leadership, advocacy, collaboration, and strategic interventions. In this article, we first document achievement gap trends and then provide a framework for understanding and sequencing outcomes that quantify student achievement gaps. Finally, we present research that identifies critical variables influencing achievement gaps and important school counselor roles and tasks aimed at closing these gaps. The article focuses on outcomes across the developmental spectrum from elementary school through postsecondary education.

Useful sources of data for documenting achievement gaps and educational trends are publications from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Wirt et al. (2002) reported data that revealed some narrowing of the reading achievement gap between African American and white students from 1971 to 1999. A gap, however, remains. In 2003 (Wirt et al., 2005) Asian American and white fourth and eighth graders scored higher in reading than their African American, Latino, and Native American counterparts. A reading score gap also exists among socioeconomic status (SES) groups. In mathematics, Wirt et al. (2002, 2005) reported similar racial-ethnic and SES achievement gaps for fourth and eighth graders. In addition, school environment factors such as disruptions by students, fighting, and lack of school safety are

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more likely to be reported as problems for students from minority groups than for white students.

Achievement gaps are also evident in the percentages of young people who complete high school or its equivalent. Wirt et al. (2005) reported percentages of high school completers, ages 25 to 29, for three racial-ethnic groups. In 1973, 84% of whites, 64% of African Americans, and 52% of Latinos completed high school. In 1993, 91% of whites, 83% of African Americans, and 61% of Latinos completed high school. The percentages of completers in 2003 were 94% for whites, 89% for African Americans, and 62% for Latinos. Although it is evident that the high school completion gap has closed somewhat between whites and African Americans, a wide gap remains between Latinos and whites. Immigration is one challenge related to high school completion for Latinos. That is, dropout rates are higher for recent Latino immigrants than for other Latinos (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002).

Achievement gaps naturally follow into postsecondary educational attainment. Wirt et al. (2005) reported the percentages of young people ages 25 to 29 with bachelor's degrees. In 1973, 21% of whites, 8% of African Americans, and 6% of Latinos had bachelor's degrees. In 1993 the percentages were 27% for whites, 13% for African Americans, and 8% for Latinos. In 2003, 34% of whites, 18% of African Americans, and 10% of Latinos had bachelor's degrees. These gaps have narrowed slightly, and, although results are encouraging over time for all three groups, significant discrepancies remain.

Education translates into economics, and earnings differences exist based on educational attainment. Wirt et al. (2005) reported data on earning differences for full-time workers ages 25 to 34. In 1977, African Americans with at least a bachelor's degree earned 39% more than African Americans with a high school diploma only. In 2003, this earnings difference had increased to 60%. Latinos with a bachelor's in 1977 earned 24% more than Latinos with a high school education only; this percentage increased to 57% in 2003. For whites, the percentages for earnings were 20% in 1977 and 49% in 2003. These data reveal a trend toward greater economic rewards for postsecondary educational attainment, regardless of racial-ethnic group. That is, in today's economy, postsecondary education has a greater economic benefit as compared to years past, and higher levels of education dilute employment and earnings gaps between racial-ethnic groups.

The Proximal-Distal Outcome Framework

In the preceding section, we presented data on numerous important educational achievement outcomes. These outcomes cover a broad developmental spectrum (childhood through adulthood) and vary in nature (e.g., test scores, postsecondary attainment). Educational achievement is an expansive area, and thus a framework for conceptualizing achievement outcomes is useful. One framework (e.g., Brown & Trusty, 2005b; Ryan & Adams, 1995) organizes achievement in terms of proximal and distal outcomes. Proximal outcomes are more immediate and more directly connected to educational interventions or practices. Distal outcomes are more long-term, less directly influenced by specific interventions or practices, and more likely influenced by a broad array of phenomena. For example, if a counselor delivers a classroom guidance unit on study skills and organizational skills for fourth graders, the most proximal outcome is the degree to which students met the learning objectives of the unit by demonstrating gains in the skills targeted by the intervention. A slightly less proximal outcome, yet an important one, is students' immediate performance in their classes. A more distal outcome is students' performance on state-mandated basic skills tests in elementary

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school. Study skills and achievement in middle school, effective organization and planning for high school, completion of an academically demanding curriculum in high school, graduation from high school, and graduation from college are progressively more distal outcomes.

To better understand the proximal-distal outcome framework, five essential characteristics are identified:

1. *The proximal-distal framework represents a continuum and not discrete proximal and distal categories.* Achievement outcomes fall logically along a continuum ranging from more proximal to more distal, as in the study-skills example in the preceding section. Temporal proximity is a major consideration, but the nature of outcome variables is also important. For example, study skills in middle school are more proximal to study skills in elementary school than basic skills test scores in middle school are to study skills in elementary school.
2. *The proximal-distal framework can be used to express a logical causal sequence.* For elementary school counselors and other educators to demonstrate accountability, it is important that counseling activities (e.g., interventions, school counseling program components) be causally linked to student achievement (Brown & Trusty, 2005b). The proximal-distal continuum allows counselors and others to form specific causal sequences connected to school counseling efforts. Whereas activities in the career and academic domains have clearer and more proximal connections to achievement outcomes, activities targeting the personal-social domain also have causal linkages to achievement outcomes (see the American School Counselor Association national model [ASCA, 2003] regarding developmental domains targeted by comprehensive school counseling programs).
3. *It is more tenable to link interventions and practices to proximal outcomes as compared to more distal ones.* We may seem to be stating the obvious when we note that links to more proximal outcomes are more tenable than links to more distal outcomes. Questionable leaps to more distal outcomes, however, are too common in schools. The current outcome of focus for most school administrators is scores on basic skills tests. These scores are used in many states to evaluate, reward, and penalize schools, and it is natural that they have received much attention from educators. Heavy focus on these test scores, however, can lead school counselors and others to lose sight of important proximal outcomes.
4. *The proximal-distal framework is developmental and hierarchical.* An exclusive focus on one outcome (e.g., basic skills test scores) ignores important distal outcomes such as preparation for and completion of postsecondary education. The developmental context of educational achievement is illuminated in the proximal-distal framework. Achievement is largely hierarchical across the developmental spectrum. That is, one level of achievement must be met before the subsequent level is pursued. The developmental and hierarchical nature of achievement underscores the point that all outcomes, be they more proximal or more distal, are important.
5. *The proximal-distal framework is a heuristic structure for school counseling and educational practice, theory, and research.* Salient proximal and distal outcomes expressed in the framework help guide school counselors and others toward more appropriate and more refined interventions, ac-

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tivities, practices, and programs. Expressed outcomes provide the context for designing, implementing, and evaluating program components and programs. An appropriate and specific set of proximal and distal outcomes helps school counselors build accountable programs, and it helps educators—including school counselors—transform and reform programs and schools to better meet the needs of all students.

Developing and implementing proximal-distal sequences will require a prekindergarten through grade 12 (P–12) systematic approach to school counseling program development. Some of the many rewards of such efforts will be increased accountability data for school counselors, better data for refining interventions and programs, closer connections of counselors to the academic missions of their schools, and more effective service delivery to students and families. Perhaps the greatest advantage of using the proximal-distal framework is that it gives context, coherence, and meaning to school counselors' activities and efforts. When proximal-distal outcome data are disaggregated by groups (e.g., groups experiencing achievement gaps) and analyzed, interventions and programs can be refined to better meet the needs of students in those groups.

Achievement gaps are evident in both proximal (e.g., elementary school achievement) and distal outcomes (e.g., postsecondary educational attainment). In subsequent sections of this article, we use the proximal-distal framework to organize research findings on educational outcomes. The meaning of the research findings for school counselor roles and tasks is presented within each section. We begin with research on distal educational outcomes, followed by sections on proximal outcomes, including school-level and intervention-level outcomes.

Distal Educational Outcomes

Longitudinal Research on Distal Outcomes

Adelman (1999) noted that the outcome of college completion, important as it is, is woefully ignored in the research literature. In the last several years, however, some researchers (e.g., Adelman, 1999; Rosenbaum, 1998; Trusty, 2004; Trusty & Deil-Amen, 2007; Trusty & Niles, 2003) have used large national databases to study the effects of middle school and high school variables on postsecondary educational attainment. Although data from these studies do not include variables from the elementary school years, the results have many implications for students' experiences in elementary school. In all five studies, high school academic variables had the strongest influences on postsecondary educational attainment. In particular, the number of advanced math and science courses that students completed in high school had the strongest effects on degree completion. For example, Trusty and Niles (2003) used a longitudinal, nationally representative sample of students who were pursuing bachelor's degrees soon after high school. They found that when a student added one high school credit in higher-level, intensive math (algebra 2, trigonometry, precalculus, calculus), the likelihood of the student completing a bachelor's degree more than doubled. This strong effect of intensive math courses was present above and beyond the effects of students' math and reading ability in middle school. Thus, the effort that students put forth in high school is much more important than the ability they bring to high school. This finding underscores the salience of developing positive academic attitudes and personal initiative in elementary and middle school.

Researchers (Adelman, 1999; Trusty, 2004; Trusty & Deil-Amen, 2007) found that the effects of high school course-taking were strong across racial-ethnic and SES groups. Results demonstrated that the rigor

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of the curriculum students experience in schools is critical to closing achievement gaps.

Of the recent large-scale studies on precollege experiences and postsecondary attainment, Trusty's (2004) study is the most comprehensive regarding precollege variables. In addition to demanding coursework, variables that reflect social engagement in the school had strong effects on postsecondary outcomes. For example, the more students engaged in extracurricular activities in high school, the greater their chances were of completing a bachelor's degree. Interestingly, the positive effects of extracurricular engagement were stronger for Latino, African American, and lower-SES students (Trusty, 2004; Trusty & Deil-Amen, 2007) than for other students.

Findings (Trusty, 2004) point to another salient means for closing achievement gaps. Parenting variables (i.e., parental involvement in children's education and parents' expectations for their children's postsecondary educational attainment) had positive effects on the distal outcome of college completion. The parenting variable with the strongest effect for Latinos and African Americans was parents' expectations. Students whose parents had high expectations regarding their children's postsecondary attainment were more likely to complete a bachelor's degree. The two aforementioned critical variables (i.e., participation in extracurricular activities and parents' expectations) reflect students' social engagement in the school and parents' engagement in their children's learning, and these variables can and should be positively influenced by elementary school counselors.

It is notable that researchers (Adelman, 1999; Rosenbaum, 1998; Trusty, 2004) who used nationally representative samples found that almost half of students who entered college with the purpose of attaining a bachelor's degree did not complete the degree within 8 years. These findings demonstrate that a large portion of young people have high expectations for postsecondary attainment but lack the preparation to be successful in college.

Trusty (2004) developed the Long-Term Educational Development model (LTED model) from the study. This empirical model is presented in Figure 1 (for statistical information on the LTED model, refer to Trusty, 2004). Note in Figure 1 that, the stronger the effect on the outcome, the darker and larger the arrow depicting the effect. Trusty (2004) found that the LTED model is valid for major U.S. racial-ethnic groups (i.e., African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, and whites). Trusty and Deil-Amen (2007) found that the model is valid for lower-, middle-, and upper-SES students and for girls/women and boys/men.

Some variables that Trusty (2004) studied had only weak effects on college completion, and thus they were not included in the LTED model. Psychological variables such as self-esteem and locus of control had little effect on college completion, and, unexpectedly, school behavior (getting into trouble, getting suspended) had little effect on the outcome. The influence of the variable *attendance* (students not cutting school and classes) was stronger for Asian American and white students and weaker for Latino and African American students.

The LTED model identifies numerous variables critical to closing achievement gaps, and, more broadly, it attests to the importance of student engagement-disengagement. When students are engaged academically through taking demanding courses, when they participate socially through extracurricular school activities, and when parents are engaged in their children's education, students benefit in the long term.

Roles and Tasks Supported by Distal Outcome Research

Elementary school counselors play a primary role in fostering students' and parents' engagement. In academics, two broad

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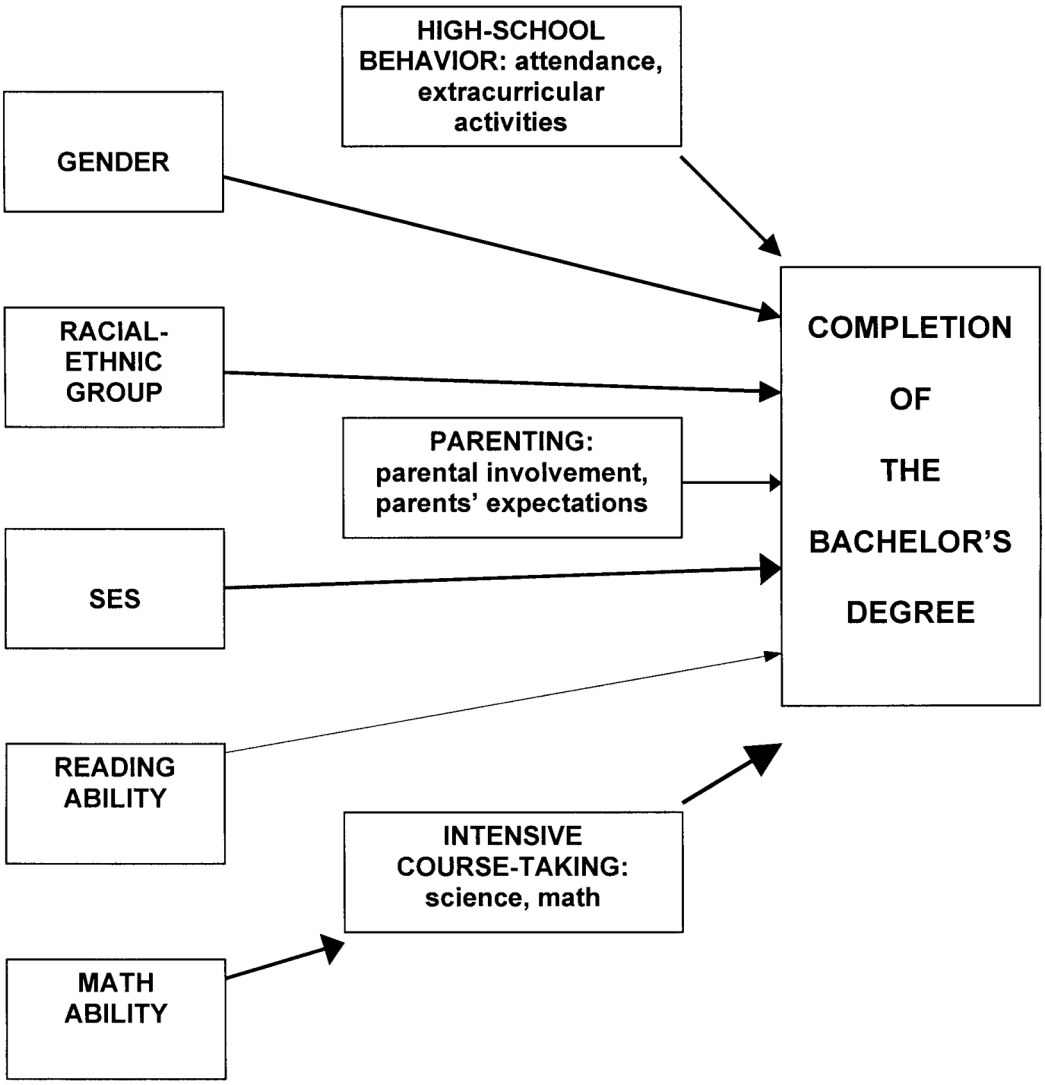

FIG. 1.—The Long-Term Educational Development (LTED) model

areas of focus for counselors are illuminated: (*a*) academic skill development and (*b*) education-career planning. With regard to academic skill development, the better elementary students are prepared for a rigorous curriculum in math and science, the greater the likelihood they will reach their long-range educational goals. Reading, language arts, and social studies should not be ignored, but the empirical data show that a focus on math and science carries long-term benefit. In terms of achievement gaps, elementary school counselors should lead and advocate toward ensuring that all students have access to high-quality curricula and instruction. Counselors can also support student learning by working directly with students (e.g., teaching study skills, test-taking skills, time- and task-management skills) and by consulting/collaborating with teachers, administrators, and parents (e.g., child study teams, academic referrals, generating interventions and support mechanisms). Proximal-distal outcome sequences

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could be formulated for each activity in which school counselors engage. For example, referrals to after-school tutoring might have an outcome sequence of frequency of participation in tutoring, enhanced student engagement in academic tasks, enhanced feelings of belonging in school, better quality in homework assignments, improved school grades, and improved basic skills test scores.

Given that almost half of students who attend college do not earn a degree, effective education-career planning is a critical task for school counselors. Many students do not take courses that are consistent with their postsecondary educational goals (see Trusty, 2004; Wirt et al., 2005). Elementary school is not too early to help students become intentional in their education-career planning, connecting learning to careers, and exploring educational and career options (see the standards, competencies, and indicators presented in the ASCA National Model; ASCA, 2003). When elementary school counselors take a career perspective on their work, their approach is appropriately developmental. Several authors (e.g., Gysbers & Henderson, 2000; Starr, 1996; Trusty & Niles, 2004a) maintain that the best approach to career development in schools is one that involves grades P–12. Students benefit most when developmentally appropriate student activities, tasks, and data articulate smoothly across grade and educational levels. For example, Trusty and Niles (2004a) described how portfolios can help students in education-career planning from elementary school through college. Numerous tools in the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2003; e.g., Developmental Crosswalking Tool, Curriculum Crosswalking Tool) can help counselors develop effective scope and sequence in the school counseling program's guidance curriculum and in the school counseling program in general. These tools and others relate to education-career planning and to other developmental areas as well.

Important proximal and distal outcomes related to education-career planning in elementary school and beyond are that students (*a*) engage in education and career exploratory behavior, (*b*) gain knowledge and self-awareness around education and careers, (*c*) have functional, appropriate education-career goals and written or electronic education-career plans, and (*d*) perform consistent with their ability and goals. These outcomes are related to a broad array of school counselor activities, including classroom guidance, student advising, individual and group counseling, leadership and advocacy, collaboration, and counseling program development. In a research-brief format accessible on-line, Trusty and Hutchinson (2004) present numerous practical school counseling activities and measurable outcomes. It is important that elementary school counselors also devote attention to barriers to learning that students experience. Successfully closing achievement gaps depends heavily on students having the opportunity to learn and the opportunity to reach their educational and career goals.

In addition to students' academic engagement, the LTED model shows that social engagement in school has a positive effect on the distal outcome of college completion. Again, the effect of engagement in extracurricular activities was strongest for groups with lower achievement. Students' social engagement with the school presents particular difficulties of a developmental nature. That is, as students progress through elementary school, they tend to become less emotionally and cognitively engaged with school, and this disengagement is likely a natural aspect of development. For example, Trusty and Dooley-Dickey (1993) studied students' feelings of belonging with their schools and valuing of their schools, using a largely African American and lower-SES sample. They found that belonging and valuing dropped significantly from grade 4 to grade 5, and from grade 5 to grade 6, then stabilized at this lower level through middle school. Thus, it

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seems that elementary schools and counselors have salient roles in promoting students' emotional, cognitive, and social engagement with school, particularly at the upper-elementary grades when students naturally gravitate toward an identity more separate from the adults in their lives.

Although students move away from a close identity with adults in preadolescence and adolescence, no similar generation gap exists in the area of career development. That is, numerous researchers (e.g., Kotrlik & Harrison, 1989; Peterson, Stivers, & Peters, 1986; Sebald, 1989) have found that, in the area of career development, young people rely more on parents for help than on peers, teachers, or school counselors, and this is the case for low-income and minority-group youth. Thus, it is no surprise that parents' expectations emerged as an important variable in Trusty's (2004) longitudinal research and in the LTED model. An important task for elementary school counselors is to teach parents the LTED model and other empirically based models so that parents can help their children in education-career planning and development. Because parents are continual resources for their children, helping parents support their children is likely one of the most productive roles for all school counselors. Recent correlational, nonlongitudinal research (Alliman-Brissett, Turner, & Skovholt, 2004; Turner, Steward, & Lapan, 2004) supports the importance of parents' roles and school counselors' tasks in helping parents help their children.

When parents are involved in their children's education and career planning, students' planning, academic development, and extracurricular involvement can all be enhanced. Parents, better than any other adult, can ensure that their children are engaged academically and socially with the school. Partnerships involving the community can foster positive relationships between parents and schools. Trusty and Niles (2004b) noted that school-family-community partnerships are an effective means for promoting students' academic and social engagement with the school.

Outcomes Proximal to Elementary School

In this section we describe empirically supported elementary school counselor activities on two levels: (*a*) the school level and (*b*) the specific intervention level. At the school level, counselors' leadership and advocacy for effective school policies, practices, and programs is the major focus; at the intervention level, we present a sample of strategic interventions that demonstrate efficacy for closing achievement gaps. The reader should keep in mind that the proximal outcomes discussed in this section naturally connect with one another and with the distal outcomes presented in the previous section.

School-Level Proximal Outcomes

Research on school-level outcomes. Borman and Overman (2004) used national data to study student and school characteristics that differentiated low and high math achievement for lower-SES and minority students. Participants were from a cohort of sixth graders, and the outcome was better-than-expected performance in math (academic resilience) versus worse-than-expected performance (academic nonresilience). Student characteristics such as academic engagement and attitudes toward school had strong effects on resilience status. Somewhat surprisingly, peer group variables (e.g., percentage of economically disadvantaged minority students in the school) had little effect on resilience. Likewise, school resources (e.g., class size, availability of instructional supplies) and effective schools variables (e.g., percentage of time devoted to academic instruction, strong principal leadership, monitoring of student progress) had little influence on academic resilience. In contrast, variables that measured the supportiveness of the school community

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had strong effects. When schools were safe and orderly, when students and teachers had positive relationships, and when schools supported family involvement, students were much more likely to perform at a higher level than expected in math.

Borman and Overman (2004) concluded that lower-SES and racial-ethnic minority students benefit most when elementary schools focus on the psychosocial adjustment to and academic engagement of students in the school environment. Psychosocial adjustment targets the lack of fit between socialization in low-SES communities and social expectations in schools. The authors stated, "school-based initiatives that actively shield disadvantaged children from the risks and adversities within their homes, schools, and communities are more likely to foster successful academic outcomes than are several other school-based efforts" (p. 193).

Griffith's (2002) research findings underscore the importance of students' social and academic engagement for closing achievement gaps. Using a large sample of students in grades 3 through 6 from one metropolitan area, Griffith found that positive student-teacher relationships and safe and orderly school environments were associated with higher student-reported grades.

Ordonez-Jasis and Jasis (2004) noted strong research support for the relation between family involvement and students' academic achievement. Fewer studies have focused on the relation between community involvement and students' achievement; however, Sheldon and Van Voorhis (2004) maintained that studies that have been done consistently show positive influences of community involvement. Current educational policy in the United States reflects the common understanding that family and community involvement are important influences on achievement. Bryan (2005) pointed out that No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and other current and previous school reforms mandate that schools include parents and local communities in the design and delivery of school improvement activities.

Obstacles to school-family-community relationships. Despite consistent research evidence and prevailing educational policies that stress the positive influence of families and communities on achievement, schools struggle to work in meaningful ways with families and community organizations (Broussard, 2003). The lack of productive partnerships is often not due to a lack of effort on the parts of schools, families, or communities but often results from a combination of overlapping issues. Three of the most common obstacles include cultural barriers and difficulty accessing resources, lack of connectivity, and lack of resources.

Cultural barriers and accessibility: According to Broussard (2003), universal issues often create cultural barriers to partnerships between families and schools. School administrators and teachers, in contrast to school counselors, often have less exposure to learning and experiences that result in informed approaches for working with diverse families. Families and schools, as a result of differing socialization and worldviews, often have conflicting ideas about what constitutes parent involvement. In addition, policies and procedures of schools often give little attention to the values and perspectives of family members that would help create occasions for families and schools to clarify how families can and want to be involved.

Lack of connectivity: Bryan (2005) observed that there is frequently an underlying lack of trust among schools, families, and communities when there is little integration of the three. This observation is consistent with the research findings of Borman and Overman (2004) presented previously. Teachers often comment that parents "just don't care what their child does," community organizations state that "all schools care about is testing," and families often perceive that schools "only have

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bad things to say about my child." Such environments have little social capital (e.g., connections and resources in the community that are stored in human relationships) with which to build meaningful partnerships. The lack of trust among these groups often develops from differences in values and expectations between schools and families, parents who have had negative experiences as children with schools and social service agencies, lack of consistent and positive interactions between parents and schools, and discrimination experienced by marginalized families.

Lack of resources: In a study of school- and community-based organization partnerships, Adger (2001) found that funding was the primary obstacle to successful collaborations. Although this finding seems inconsistent with that of Borman and Overman (2004), lack of funding likely does limit or stall sincere partnership efforts. Fundamentally changing or improving the ways schools, families, and communities work together to improve children's achievement may require resources to support staff, training, reorganization, and flexibility. The time-consuming requirements of collaboration, lack of funding, and the immediate demands on schools, families, and community organizations may often result in failure to develop meaningful partnerships that would likely increase achievement of children from marginalized populations.

Roles and tasks supported by school-level proximal outcome research. School efforts targeting safe school environments, positive communication, and elimination of barriers for students and families are worthy tasks for elementary school counselors. Counselors have the unique combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes to effectively lead and advocate for productive environments within schools and for partnerships among schools, families, and communities. Trusty and Brown (2005) presented the dispositions, knowledge, and skills school counselors need to effectively advocate for positive systemic change. Leadership and advocacy focus on creating opportunity to learn for all students. The respect for the intrinsic strengths and wisdom of communities and a sincere desire to find solutions within families should be the foundation for any leadership and advocacy efforts led by elementary school counselors (Ordonez-Jasis & Jasis, 2004; Trusty & Brown, 2005).

Nationally recognized school-family-community partnership models such as the School and Family Integration Model (Bemak & Cornely, 2002) and the National Network of Partnership Schools (2006; Sheldon & Van Voorhis, 2004) provide direction for practical counselor roles and tasks aimed at closing achievement gaps. Reviews of these and other models will likely generate creative leadership approaches for elementary school counselors and school systems that want to create partnerships with families and communities. The following are four suggestions for initial leadership and advocacy tasks that counselors can assume to begin addressing cultural and accessibility issues, lack of connectivity, and lack of funds that are common barriers to school-family-community collaborations.

Learn and discover: Although school-family-community partnerships are difficult to create and sustain, there are easily accessible descriptions of and tools for building successful collaborations. The first step in building these partnerships is to review information and resources from organizations and initiatives that have demonstrated success (Broussard, 2003). The National Network of Partnership Schools (2006), the National Association of Partners in Education (2006), the National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools (2006), and the UCLA School Mental Health Project (2006) are a few of the sources of learning for elementary school counselors. These organizations have the common purpose of providing support and resources for creating strong school, family,

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and community partnerships that will result in improved learning and social outcomes for children and youth. Review of the research, resources, and upcoming events sponsored by these initiatives is an excellent starting place. These Internet sites also provide links to funding opportunities.

Expand the roles of elementary school counselors: After learning more about model school-family-community partnerships, counselors could develop proposals that outline how their responsibilities could be expanded to lead and advocate for critical school collaborations with families and communities. These proposals may then be presented to principals and other key school administrators, and counselors can ask for support in expanding their roles. The presentation of data and outcomes from successful collaborations is instrumental to eliciting support from principals and other school administrators (Bryan, 2005). Note that these efforts (i.e., developing proposals and presenting data), in and of themselves, are advocacy efforts, and that data strengthen advocacy considerably (Trusty & Brown, 2005). Once they obtain support from school administrators, counselors can begin developing a local team of family members, community agencies, and school staff that share responsibility for organizing and implementing school-family-community partnership activities.

Lead systematic assessments: To know what needs to be done, counselors need data on the following: (*a*) current barriers to successful partnerships; (*b*) the culture of the community; and (*c*) what schools, families, and community agencies want from collaborations. These assessments can be done informally (interviews, focus groups, observation) and formally (needs assessments, readiness surveys, and other tools developed by national initiatives). Developing these partnerships can support ongoing outcome evaluation in addition to the leveraging of resources and development of new ideas to support current and future partnerships.

Begin creating an action plan: To provide structure for guiding school-family-community partnerships, elementary school counselors and their team, using the data collected from systematic needs assessments, must develop a plan of action, along with measurable proximal and distal outcomes. These outcomes are critical to maintaining momentum and garnering support because building successful collaborations can often take years rather than months. Sheldon and Van Voorhis (2004) indicated that school-family-community partnerships that analytically evaluate their efforts are more likely to develop model programs and are more focused and informed in their efforts. One way for counselors and their team to accomplish this is to design a proposal for grant funding. Grant applications provide structure necessary to creating an action plan, demand outcome measures, and, if awarded, are an excellent source of additional funding and resources that will support partnership efforts. In addition, school administrators and other personnel are more likely to support projects that will bring recognition and funding. Federal, state, and local agencies and foundations are common sources of funding for partnership efforts (Adger, 2001). The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), for example, recently released the Caring across Communities grant program, which provides fiscal support for school-connected mental health services for marginalized youth. This innovative initiative encourages the delivery of culturally informed, linguistically accessible school-connected mental health services for children and youth of immigrant and refugee families.

Intervention-Level Proximal Outcomes

Brown and Trusty (2005b) suggested that school counselors at all levels employ strategic interventions for closing achievement gaps. Strategic interventions are de-

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signed to closely match students' needs and proximal outcomes and are most strategic when they are supported and refined by research. In this article, we provide three divergent examples of strategic interventions that have empirical support.

The strategic intervention that appears to have the strongest empirical base is peer and cross-age tutoring and peer facilitation. School counselors are often involved as leaders or at least consultants/collaborators in such programs (e.g., see Tobias & Myrick, 1999; Trusty & Brown, 2005). Robinson, Schofield, and Steers-Wentzell (2005) reviewed the literature on peer and cross-age tutoring targeting math achievement. The authors synthesized several important implications regarding achievement gaps: tutoring has strong potential to improve math achievement for students from minority groups and to enhance positive attitudes toward and engagement with the school. Academic benefits are present for both tutors and tutees, and average- and low-achieving students seem to be effective tutors. Programs that are designed so that students can serve as both tutors and tutees appear to be effective.

There are particular advantages to school counselor–led, comprehensive peer-facilitation programs. Comprehensive programs are conceptualized as those that involve peer or cross-age tutoring, mediation, mentoring, and student leadership activities. Brown and Trusty (2005a) noted that comprehensive programs are more flexible than narrower programs in addressing students' needs (e.g., social, emotional, academic). Further, comprehensive programs are able to use varying skills and interests of the peer facilitators.

Researchers (Brigman & Campbell, 2003; Webb, Brigman, & Campbell, 2005) studied the efficacy of the Student Success Skills (SSS) approach for improving achievement, using the distal outcome of state basic skills test scores and the more proximal outcome of teacher ratings of students' academic, social, and self-management skills. The format of the intervention was structured group counseling, and students learned skills in an interactive, experiential manner. Across the Webb et al. study and previous similar studies, gains in skills were evidenced in teacher observations and in math basic skills test scores.

Cox (2005) synthesized the results of 18 empirical studies that focused on parent-educator collaborations and children's school outcomes (e.g., on-task behavior, school grades, schoolwork quality). Cox found that parent-educator interventions are most effective when two-way communication regularly occurs (e.g., daily report cards) and when parents and educators act as equals in the intervention. Important outcomes such as minority parents' increased comfort with the school were evident.

We note that empirically supported strategic interventions are not limited to the preceding three examples. There is not, however, abundant research on strategic interventions led by elementary school counselors. More research, involving both proximal and distal outcomes, is needed to expand the knowledge base.

Summary

Whereas advances have been made in closing achievement gaps, more work is needed. There are numerous educational achievement outcomes, and the proximal-distal framework helps elementary school counselors and other educators develop logical causal sequences and gain useful perspectives on developmental contexts. Proximal-distal outcome sequences can guide research, theory, and the activities of counselors and other educators. Outcome sequences also provide meaning and purpose for school counselors' tasks and activities.

Longitudinal, large-scale studies on the distal educational outcome of college completion reveal the critical influences of students' academic efforts in high school. In particular, the academically demanding

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math and science courses that students complete have heavy bearing on success or lack of success in college. This finding holds for students from all major racial-ethnic groups and SES levels; thus, students' engagement in intensive academics is a salient means for closing achievement gaps. The LTED model and research show that, in addition to students' academic engagement, their social engagement with the school is important to long-term educational success. Parents' engagement in their children's education also has positive influences.

The consistent theme that emerges across studies of both proximal and distal outcomes is that students' academic and social engagement in the school is paramount, and the empirical evidence consistently supports the idea that students' engagement is an especially important means for closing achievement gaps. Research reveals the efficacy of numerous elementary school counselor roles and tasks (academic-focused strategic interventions; education-career planning; parent education; leadership and advocacy for positive school environments; efforts aimed at integrating schools, families, and communities). These roles and tasks support students' academic and social engagement. The distal and proximal outcome research supports the contention that human relationships within schools and among schools, students, families, and communities are the basis of student engagement.

Elementary school counselors play a salient role in promoting healthy relationships among those involved in children's education. Counselors need to be intentional and systematic in (*a*) learning about effective models and interventions; (*b*) expanding their leadership and advocacy roles; (*c*) determining what students, schools, families, and communities need and want; (*d*) setting targeted proximal and distal outcomes; and (*e*) taking action. It is important that elementary school counselors systematically collect data to show the efficacy of their actions. Only then can counselors make informed decisions regarding how to close achievement gaps. The knowledge base on how to close gaps is growing, and the research reviewed in this article can guide counselors. Knowledge generated from data in individual schools can build on this knowledge, helping elementary school counselors determine the most productive actions for their particular settings.

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