

CASC Monograph Manuscript:
Support Personnel Accountability Report Card (SPARC):
A Pilot Study of Accountability for California School Counselors

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Background

Support personnel accountability report card (SPARC)

In 2001, an advisory group of school counseling professionals from Los Angeles County and the California Department of Education (CDE) consultants developed a Support Personnel Accountability Report Card (SPARC). The SPARC was constructed to address school support personnel accountability in California. It is modeled after the School Accountability Report Card (SARC). In 1988, *The Classroom Instructional Improvement and Accountability Act* (also known as Proposition 98) passed. The proposition required California public schools to annually prepare and disseminate a SARC. The intent of a SARC is to provide the public with “important information about each public school and to communicate a school's progress in achieving its goals” (California Department of Education, 2004).

SARC is a mandatory process for all public schools with enrollment reported in the California Basic Educational Data System. The SPARC, on the other hand, is a voluntarily program undertaken by elementary, junior and high schools. Its main purpose is to monitor and document student support services. “The SPARC is a continuous improvement document that gives a school counseling program an opportunity to demonstrate effective communication and a commitment to getting results” (Los Angeles Office of Education website, 2004).

The report card results are useful to student services in four general areas: (1) Preparing a self-evaluation; (2) Promoting the support program to school administration, school board, community partners and businesses and parents/guardians; (3) Preparing reports for school accreditation; and (4) Implementing the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Standards for School Counseling and National Model for School Counseling Programs (Los Angeles County Office of Education website, 2004).

Over the last four years, over five hundred and fifty SPARCs have been submitted for review (Lyn deNeef, LACOE personal communication, May 24, 2005). As of 2004, seventeen of the schools had earned the “Best in the West” distinction. “Best in the West” schools have successfully participated in the SPARC for three consecutive years. Such continuous participation builds school accountability to the communities they serve.

Literature Review

School reform and school accountability

American schools were facing a national crisis in the early 1980s, and Gardner’s *A Nation At Risk* (Gardner, 1983) became a catalyst for school reform in the United States. However, nowhere in this widely read book were school counselors mentioned as a part of the solution to major problems in the schools. “This was a real wake-up call to the counseling profession and during the next decade, a number of major initiatives resulted” (Schwallie-Giddis, Maat, Pak, 2004, p. 170).

Over the last two decades, from the mid 1980s to the present, these initiatives resulted in development of school counseling standards, a results-based guidance approach to school counseling, and data-driven decision making models for school counseling (National Education Association, 2004; Dahir, 1997; Johnson & Johnson, 1991, 2003; Issacs, 2003). In response to the widely misunderstood role of school counselors, professional organizations sought to redefine and legitimize the profession (Dahir, 1997). Legitimization of the profession necessarily involves accountability for school counseling programs. Accountability is a process which includes measurement, data collection, decision making, and evaluation (Isaacs, 2003). Accordingly, school counselors are increasingly “being asked to demonstrate that their work

contributes to student success, particularly in student academic achievement” (Gysbers, 2004, p. 1).

Development of school counseling standards and improvement models

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Standards (Campbell & Dahir, 1997) are intended to help counselors “focus on student development, articulate a professional mission, and provide momentum for the future of school counseling” (Dahir, 2001, p. 4). Specifically, the standards were developed to enhance student learning in three concentrations or domains. The domains are as follows: (a) Academic Development, (b) Career Development, and (c) Personal/Social Development (Campbell & Dahir, 1997; Mariani, 1998; Perusse, Goodnough, Donegan, Jones, 2004; Myrick, 2003).

In 1996, The Education Trust, with support from the Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, introduced the Transforming School Counseling Initiative (TSCI). The TSCI primarily focuses on academic achievement, but also includes the importance of assisting students in their social, emotional, and personal development (The Education Trust, 2004; Perusse, Goodnough, Donegan, Jones, 2004). In addition to the ASCA National Standards and the TSCI, the concept of improvement models aimed at results-based and data-driven counseling techniques were among the most well know developments over the last two decades.

While Isaacs (2003) called for counselors to change their methods of evaluating school counseling and to use data to plan, implement and evaluate school counseling interventions and programs, the results-based guidance program focuses on student success in acquiring competencies in school and beyond (Johnson & Johnson, 2003). Fairchild and Seeley (1995) went a step further by proposing thirteen “practical, how-to strategies for collecting and reporting” counselor accountability information. “Data collected through accountability activity

can be used for several purposes, most notably to improve services, to provide evidence of effectiveness, and to enhance professional image” (Fairchild & Seeley, 1995, p. 377). Dahir (2004) believes that ongoing collection of data, gathering of information, and conducting research are “critical to determine the effectiveness of school counseling programs, their relationship to the educational agenda, and, ultimately, to the survival of the profession” (Dahir, 2004, p. 352).

The *ASCA National Model: A Foundation for School Counseling Programs* resulted from combining a number of the aforementioned strategies and ideas for improving school counseling departments. Specifically, the ASCA National Model is a result of incorporating the curriculum and framework from the ASCA National Standards with the (1) need to include a delivery and management system for counselors, (2) need for a data-driven evaluation system that is accountable for student and program results, (3) importance on including the intentionality of the program addresses underserved and underprivileged students (i.e., TSCI concepts), and (4) infusion of concepts of systematic change, leadership and advocacy throughout the model (Bowers, Hatch & Schwallie-Giddis, 2001).

Methods for implementing counseling standards and the national model

A number of methods have been used to implement the ASCA National Standards (Perusse, Goodnough, Donegan, Jones, 2004; Dahir & Stone, 2003; Los Angeles Office of Education, 2004). Dahir & Stone (2004) introduced M.E.A.S.U.R.E., a seven-step process that assists school counselors in delivering a data-driven school counseling program that supports the accountability component of the ASCA National Model.

Another approach used to address counselor accountability and the application of the ASCA National Standards is a statewide support personnel accountability report card. Currently

California, Massachusetts, New York, Rhode Island and Alabama have adopted a voluntary support personnel accountability report card (Bob Tyra, personal communication, May 24, 2006). Of these three report cards, California's SPARC has been used for the longest period.

Purpose of this study

As creators of the SPARC, Bob Tyra and the California Counselor Leadership Academy have numerous questions regarding the current condition and growth of SPARC. In the summer of 2004, Bob contacted the University of San Diego's Center for Student Support Systems (CS3) to inquire about the possibility of having a collaborative action research team (Rowell, 2005) assigned to work with him on researching aspects of SPARC. Specifically, Bob expressed an interest in collecting data on and comparing characteristics of the seventeen 2004 "Best in the West" schools. Although the SPARC model has spread both in and beyond California, no research had been conducted to date that examines SPARC. Research was needed that identified the characteristics of schools that have successfully completed the SPARC.

The purpose of the present action research study was to examine characteristics of seventeen "Best in the West" schools. The primary research topic/question of the study was: What are the distinguishing characteristics shared by the "Best in the West" schools? Additional questions addressed included: What motivates "Best in the West" schools to participate in the SPARC process? And, how is the SPARC document used by "Best in the West" schools?

Methods

Participants

A survey was sent electronically to the SPARC leads at the seventeen "Best in the West" schools. The authors projected 50 potential respondents from these seventeen schools. This figure reflected our understanding of the number of people at the targeted school sites who had

been involved with the SPARC process. Of the twenty-four survey respondents (24 of 50 possible= 48% return) 62.5% ($n = 15$) were high school counselors, 20.8% ($n = 5$) were middle school counselors, one counselor (4.2%) worked as a middle and high school counselor, and 12.5% ($n = 3$) were school administrators. Seventy-nine percent ($n = 19$) of the respondents worked at a high school site and 21% ($n = 5$) worked at a middle school site. The participants represented at least nine schools in California.

Instrument

The survey tool was created by the graduate student coauthors, in conjunction with the practitioner partner. First, the group explored the information needed to answer the research questions posed. The research team then brainstormed potential survey questions, and decided to use a five-point Lickert scale (including “strongly agree”, “agree”, “neutral”, “disagree”, and “strongly disagree”) for some questions, combined with multiple choice, as well as open ended questions. Then the team created and reviewed drafts of the survey, and sent a draft version of the survey to two graduate students with action research experience, the professor coauthor, and the practitioner partner. All were asked to proofread the document and record the amount of time it took to complete the survey. The final survey consisted of 23 questions and had three main sections: information about the survey respondent, information about the school the survey respondent worked at, and information about the survey respondent and their respective school. The survey was constructed online utilizing Zoomerang™ survey software and was tested online in the Zoomerang™ format. The instrument provided qualitative and quantitative data.

Procedures

The research team employed a flexible research design and utilized action research techniques throughout the research process. Research subjects were located in schools

throughout the state of California, with contacts provided by the California Counselor Leadership Academy. In order to reach participants, our team used an electronic survey (Zoomerang™ survey software) to gather data. Specifically, we sent an initial letter, via email, announcing and introducing our project to the main contacts, or “SPARC leads,” at the “Best in the West” schools. In addition, this letter provided an explanation and directions for completing the survey. The contacts at the specified schools were asked to forward the letter and online survey link to other student support staff at their school location.

A total of four letters, via email, were sent to the main contacts. Each letter contained a link to the survey and survey information. Additionally, one of the emails requested that those who had responded to the survey send an email to the research team contact with the name of the school that had responded. The total number and the names of the schools that had participated were collected. Two letters were also sent to the main contacts from the “practitioner partner” (Rowell, 2005, p. 28), Bob Tyra. One letter, via email, was to notify the main contacts that a letter from USD and a survey link would be sent to them. The other letter, via email, was sent in an effort to encourage those who had not yet filled out the survey. The letters and the survey stated that all information would be used solely to help expand the use of the SPARC as well as to improve the SPARC process. The time the research participants spent on the survey was estimated at five to 15 minutes.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data collected in the survey was analyzed by the survey software using standard evaluation techniques, focusing on percentages. The research team then reviewed the survey data and reported the findings according to the Zoomerang™ software analysis.

Qualitative data was coded for analysis, although only two returned surveys contained responses to the open-ended question.

Results

The study investigated aspects of the SPARC “Best in the West” student support programs. The main research questions addressed were ‘What sets “Best in the West” student support programs apart from other programs that have not successfully completed a SPARC for three consecutive years?’ and ‘What are the distinguishing characteristics of the “Best in the West” schools?’ The study further investigated if funding, counselor leadership, or support from school administration contributed to the willingness of these programs to successfully utilize the California support personnel accountability tool. Based on the survey participation rates and the content of the data collected, the research team decided to make the research a pilot study.

The 24 survey respondents had varying amounts of experience working in education. All but two (91.6%, $n = 22$) had worked in education for at least five years. Seventy-seven percent ($n = 16$) of the respondents had worked in education for over 10 years and 25% ($n = 6$) had worked in education for over 25 years. In addition, 100% of the participants had three or more years of experience in student guidance or student support services. More specifically, 41.7% ($n = 10$) of the respondents had over 10 years of experience in student guidance or student support services.

The respondents filled several roles during the SPARC process: seventy-five percent ($n = 18$) of the respondents identified themselves as coordinators of the SPARC process, 66.7% ($n = 16$) considered themselves data-gatherers in the SPARC process, 41.7% ($n = 10$) considered themselves editors, and 33.3% ($n = 8$) considered themselves a technical/graphic assistant.

When specifying the number of students in respondent’s caseloads, 77.3% ($n = 17$) of the counselors stated they were responsible for over 450 students. However, 18.2% ($n = 4$) of the

respondents had over 600 students in their caseload. Eighty-eight percent ($n = 21$) of the respondents specified that they devoted time to NON-counseling tasks as outlined by ASCA (e.g., performing disciplinary actions or clerical work). Of those respondents, 77.3% ($n = 17$) estimated that they spent less than 30% of their time performing these NON-counseling tasks.

Seventy-five percent ($n = 18$) of the respondents' schools had budget cuts over the last 3 years. Of the schools that had budget cuts, 29.4% ($n = 5$) resulted in the loss of a school counselor at the school and the loss of counselor outreach programs, while 41.2% ($n = 7$) of the schools reporting budget cuts lost individual and group counseling time.

Participants were asked to provide information regarding student support services' program budget and funding. The survey asked those polled to select from a variety of funding sources. According to survey results, 95.8% ($n = 23$) of the survey respondents stated that their school counseling program procured at least some of their funding through the school district general fund. While 62.5% ($n = 15$) of the respondents stated that at least some of the funding for their school counseling program came from school site funds. In addition, 12.5% ($n = 3$) of the respondents procured funds through Parent Associations (such as the PTA).

Final survey calculations showed 75% ($n = 18$) of the respondents completed a SPARC to gain clarification of student guidance and support staff roles within the school structure. Seventy-one percent ($n = 17$) of the respondents specified that they completed a SPARC not only to assist in the implementation of American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Standards, but also to provide accountability measures for student support staff.

A majority of those surveyed found the SPARC process challenging for two outstanding reasons. Primarily, 91.6% ($n = 22$) of participants found the SPARC difficult to complete because of time and resource limitations. Also, 66.6% ($n = 16$) saw technical difficulties (i.e.,

creating graphic representations of program results, formatting the document, etc.) as an obstacle to completing the SPARC.

For the most part, survey respondents believed the SPARC was beneficial to their guidance and counseling program. Survey results showed 83% of respondents believed SPARC involvement encouraged better teamwork within the student support staff, improved communication (i.e., parents, faculty and staff, school district, etc.), and increased district and on-site support for student guidance programs. Other positive affects include an improvement in organization of student guidance and support programs, (88% of respondents selected this option). In addition, 75% believed SPARC completion assisted with implementation of ASCA standards.

The respondents specified that they have shared their school's SPARC with a number of groups within the school system and community. Specifically, all respondents stated that they had shared their SPARC with their school board and with school administrators and staff. Additionally, over 80% of the respondents shared their SPARC with parents, faculty and staff, school administrators, and district administrators.

When asked the reasons why the school has continued to complete a SPARC for three years in a row, 95.8% ($n = 23$) of the respondents cited counselor leadership as one of their reasons. Additionally, 70.8% ($n = 17$) specified strong administrative support as a reason for continued participation in the SPARC process.

Limitations

Location, location, location

The SPARC is marketed across California. Therefore, the schools that have completed the SPARC are spread over a large geographic area. The seventeen schools that had gained the

title of “Best in the West” at the time of the present project were varying distances from San Diego and the university where the research team resides. The distance between study participants and the research team created obstacles several times during the research process. The team was unable to interact and regularly keep contact with SPARC coordinators and participants. As a team, we could not stress the importance of our project in person (e.g., visit school sites). The team and our practitioner partner could not fully explain the effect our study could have on the future of SPARC and educational support services in California. The authors believe our survey response rate would have been substantially higher had we been able to establish rapport with “Best in the West” schools’ faculty and staff. The miles between the research team and the schools we examined presented a problem that ultimately limited the survey results.

Marketing the survey

It should be noted the team made several attempts to promote awareness of the research project and survey. Prior to the survey’s launch, SPARC coordinators were sent a letter introducing the team and our objectives. The research team and the project practitioner also dispersed numerous emails to SPARC contacts. The emails encouraged contacts to share the survey with colleagues. The content of the emails also informed the reader of the purpose of the research and the deadline for survey submission. Despite the team’s numerous promotional attempts we were unable to increase interest in the survey.

If participants completed the survey, they were simply thanked and results were submitted. Perhaps if the team had been given a budget with which to work, this budget could have been used to purchase gifts for survey respondents. Team members could have promoted the survey by promising a small gift in return for survey completion and submission.

Survey software and technology

The team launched the survey online using Zoomerang™ software and technology. Although Zoomerang™ gave respondents a myriad of options when answering survey questions, the room set aside for “other” responses was minimal at best. When survey-takers were given the opportunity to elaborate, the text boxes provided space for few words or characters. Since confidentiality was guaranteed, it was impossible to gain a solid understanding of these responses.

According to practitioner feedback, the survey may have been too long and this may have stunted prospective participant interest. Although we had tested the survey on-line prior to distribution and had found that, on average, it only took 6.6 minute to complete, those who tested it were not practicing school counselors in the field. It is possible that the survey seemed longer than it actually was to counselors working in environments of high stress and high caseloads. The survey’s content was direct and purposeful but it is unknown whether survey respondents felt survey completion was difficult due to factors beyond the research team’s control. Another potential obstacle to survey completion was participant’s comfort with computer-based and/or Internet survey technology. As a result these factors may have played a role in rate and level of survey response.

Research question and methodology

The present project sought to provide our practitioner partner with the distinguishing characteristics of the seventeen “Best in the West” schools. The team hoped surveying these schools would provide an accurate picture of what continuous and successful SPARC participants have in common. In hindsight, the lack of a comparison group limited the team’s understanding of the characteristics of “Best in the West” schools.

Perhaps the team should have surveyed schools that have completed the SPARC only once or twice. By closely examining the schools without a “Best in the West” distinction, we could have identified the specific differences between “Best in the West” schools and other SPARC award winning schools. Knowing what prevents schools from continuing with the SPARC would have provided the team with a panoramic view of SPARC and the “Best in the West” schools. Alternatively, the research question could have been more narrowly defined and possibly looked to ask a question that could be answered by surveying a single population.

“Best in the West” contact information provided by the practitioner partner was limited to a short list of seventeen “Best in the West” school leads. Although the list gave the team a place to begin in creating project and survey awareness, it did not allow the team to contact all individuals and support staff involved in the SPARC process. In the team’s correspondence with SPARC coordinators we requested our survey be shared with any staff or faculty who had been involved with SPARC in the past. Given our limited access to SPARC participants, it was impossible to know whether survey respondents shared, or forwarded, the survey on to other people.

In order to insure participants’ comfort and honesty, the team promised all survey responses would be strictly confidential. In the end, this promise presented a further obstacle. Survey responses did not require the use of school names or the names of the people participating. Since the team had no knowledge of who did respond, it was impossible to contact and encourage individuals who chose not to take part in the survey. In the end, confidential survey participation hindered the research team’s ability to fully promote and explain the importance of the survey and of the research project itself.

Discussion

In reviewing the survey results, the use and purpose of creating a SPARC came to the forefront. Survey responses confirmed that the SPARC (both the document and the process of filling out a SPARC) is producing a desired result, at least for the nine schools represented by our respondents. For example, completing a SPARC is supposed to unify a student support team (i.e., promote open communication lines between counselors, school psychologists, nurses, etc). Accordingly, over 80% of respondents agreed creating a SPARC has encouraged better teamwork within the student support staff team and has also improved communication with parents, faculty and staff, and the school district.

Survey participants also indicated the SPARC had been shared with a large number of people and organizations, such as school boards, school administrators, school staff, faculty, parents, community businesses, and district administrators. SPARC is designed to hold student support personnel programs accountable for their initiatives and actions. By sharing the report card outcomes with individuals and organizations outside of the counseling office, these student support programs are holding themselves responsible for their services.

It is also apparent that the SPARC can be used for a variety of reasons by a school. Survey respondents' listed several reasons for completing a SPARC, including to gain clarification of student guidance and support staff roles with the school structure, to assist in the implementation of the ASCA National Standards for School Counseling Programs, and to provide accountability measures for student support staff.

In considering the importance of the *ASCA National Standards for School Counseling Programs* (Campbell & Dahir, 1997), 75% of respondents believed creating a SPARC assisted with the implementation of the ASCA National Standards. Eighty percent of the "Best in the

West” respondents refer to ASCA National Standards on a monthly basis. Further study and discussion is needed to grasp how often student support programs in California that do not complete the SPARC refer to the ASCA National Standards. It is also worth noting that seventeen of the respondents from “Best in the West” schools spend less than 30% of their time performing ASCA defined non-counseling tasks (i.e., performing disciplinary actions or clerical work). In the future, it would be valuable to research the task delineation of counselors on a national or state level and compare time spent on non-counseling duties with the results of our survey.

In reviewing the caseload of “Best in the West” counselors, there is no tangible evidence to suggest counselors have a larger or smaller caseload than the national and state average. Fifty percent of the “Best in the West” counselor respondents claimed a caseload range of 450 to 550 students to one counselor. In contrast, the national counselor to student ratio is 477 to 1 (California Department of Education website, 2005). Additionally, the mean range for “Best in the West” high school counselor respondents’ caseloads is 500-550 to one counselor which is higher than the average student-to-counselor ratio in California high schools (486 counselors to 1 student - California Department of Education website, 2005). Given both the low number of counselor respondents to the survey in comparison with the total number of school counselors in the state (i.e. 21 out of 7,000) and the total number of school counselors at schools that have completed SPARCs, the authors of the present study cannot make any meaningful comments regarding school counselor ratios and the characteristics of “Best in the West” schools.

While the results of the present study provide a glimpse into the defining aspects of “Best in the West” student support programs, further research on a larger scale is needed to understand what distinguishes these schools and their programs from other schools on a state and national level.

Implications and future research

The results of the present study do point to some implications for future research. First, to gain a higher return on school counseling surveys in California, perhaps there needs to be incentives offered to survey respondents. Incentives could come in the form of a gift or reward. Additionally, the results indicate the importance of researchers establishing rapport with potential survey respondents. Rapport building could begin by making phone calls to the potential respondents or by visiting schools sites. In establishing rapport, the potential respondents may feel more personally invested in the process and thus be more likely to participate in the survey. Finally, the names and contact information for all of the potential respondents should be clearly identified prior to distributing the survey.

One important finding relates to leadership development in school counseling. A total of 96% of the survey respondents believed counselor leadership is one of the main reasons a SPARC has been completed for three years in a row. This might suggest that when strong counselor leadership exists at a school site, there is more of a willingness to take on the accountability issues addressed in the new National Model (ASCA, 2005). Hence, promotion of the National Model and promotion of leadership development in school counseling may be synonymous. However, further research is needed that examines what counselor leadership entails for individual schools and school districts. Does counselor leadership mean one counselor has rallied her or his fellow counselors and student support team members? Is counselor leadership defined as a group of counselors who work well together and take the time to continually assess and evaluate their programs?

In addition to counselor leadership, over 70% of the respondents believed that strong administrative support was vital to the successful completion of three years of an award-winning

SPARC. Here, of course, we do not know how these two influences – i.e. counselor leadership and administrative support – interact with one another. If a school has strong school counselor leadership and mild or weak administrative support, how likely is it that the school would stick with SPARC for more than one year? However, it seems reasonable to conclude that strong administrative support for SPARC can serve as a strong incentive for a counselor or counseling team at a site to get involved with the SPARC process. Further research can explore how strong administrative support is related to counselor leadership in schools. Further research also can examine the nature of the relationship between administrators and counselor leaders in “Best in the West” schools and schools in general.

The majority of respondents (92%) held that time and resource limitations were a primary challenge in completing a SPARC. Sixty-seven percent of the respondents also believed the technical specifications of the SPARC document were challenging. The SPARC sponsoring organization may want to provide additional technical assistance to potential applicants in the future, so that this challenge does not impede schools from applying. Further studies might look at how support staffs’ computer and technical skills relate to their participation in SPARC.

The “Best in the West” schools included in the present study are sharing their SPARCs with large numbers of individuals and organizations. A future study could determine if SPARC completion and disbursement has assisted student support programs in procuring and or maintaining funding for school counseling.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to determine characteristics of SPARC “Best in the West” schools. The SPARC was constructed to address school support personnel accountability in California. “The SPARC is a continuous improvement document that gives a school counseling

program an opportunity to demonstrate effective communication and a commitment to getting results” (Los Angeles Office of Education website, 2004). Over the last four years, over one-hundred fifty California schools as well as three to four district-wide guidance departments have participated in the SPARC (Bob Tyra, personal communication, May 24, 2006). Of these schools, at the time of the present study (2004) seventeen had earned the “Best in the West” distinction, having successfully participated in the SPARC for three consecutive years.

Legitimization of the school counseling profession involves accountability for school counseling programs. As world renowned counselor educator Norm Gysbers put it, school counselors are increasingly being asked “to demonstrate that their work contributes to student success, particularly in student academic achievement” (Gysbers, 2004, p. 1). Similarly, Dahir (2004) asserted that ongoing collection of data, gathering of information, and conducting research are “critical to determine the effectiveness of school counseling programs, their relationship to the educational agenda, and, ultimately, to the survival of the profession” (Dahir, 2004, p. 352).

The results of the present study indicated that counselor leadership and strong administrative support are key aspects of completing a SPARC. Although time and resource issues often presented major challenges to those completing SPARCs, the “Best in the West” schools that responded not only found a way to get the self-study done but saw important benefits in their participation. Teamwork seemed to be a particularly significant benefit of participation in the SPARC process. Participants in our study reported that SPARC completion encouraged improved teamwork among student support staff, and this alone seems to us to be a powerful benefit. Other strong benefits included increased district and or site support for the

counseling and guidance program and improved communication with school site faculty, administrators, parents, and students as well as with district officials.

Although the study did not address the link between student support programs and student academic achievement, the findings indicated that the ongoing data collection and data analysis that goes with completing a SPARC document does contribute to laying a foundation of accountability among participating schools. The SPARC process, furthermore, strengthens the relationship of counseling and guidance to the rest of the educational agenda at school sites. Finally, as an accountability tool, the results of the present study, although limited by a relatively small number of respondents, do suggest that for the “Best in the West” schools, participating in SPARC contributes to the development of, or links itself directly with leadership in school counseling. This contribution is critical to the survival and revitalization of any profession, including school counseling.

Project Artifacts

USD 'Best in the West' Survey

Thank you for participating in our survey. The information you provide is important and will be used to further improve the field of student guidance and support services.

PLEASE NOTE: By completing this survey, participants are giving informed consent. All information provided will be held in confidentiality and will be used for research purposes only. Again, The University of San Diego's Center for Student Support Systems (CS3) appreciates your participation.

First, please answer some questions about yourself (Questions 1 - 4).

1. My job title is: (a) Elementary Counselor (b) Middle School Counselor (c) High School Counselor (d) Adult School/Higher Ed. Counselor (e) School Psychologist (f) School Nurse (g) School Administrator (h) District Administrator (i) Teacher (j) Registrar (k) Technician (l) Other, please specify.
2. What role did you take in helping to complete a SPARC? (a) Coordinator (b) Data Gatherer (c) Editor (d) Technical/Graphic assistance (e) N/A (f) Other, please specify.
3. Please indicate how many years you have worked in education: (a) 1 to 3 years (b) 3 to 5 years (c) 5 to 10 years (d) 10 to 15 years (e) 15 to 20 years (f) 20 to 25 years (g) over 25 years.
4. Please indicate how many years of experience you have had in student guidance and/or student support services: (a) 1 to 3 years (b) 3 to 5 years (c) 5 to 10 years (d) 10 to 15 years (e) 15 to 20 years (f) 20 to 25 years (g) over 25 years (h) N/A.

Now, please answer some questions about your school (Questions 5 – 14).

5. Please specify school type: (a) Elementary School (b) Middle School (c) High School.
6. How many school counselors do you have at your school site? (a) 1 (b) 2 (c) 3 (d) 4 (e) 5 or more (f) Other, please specify.
7. Please indicate how many students you have at your school: (a) Less than 500 (b) 500 to 1000 (c) 1000 to 1500 (d) 1500 to 2000 (e) 2000 to 2500 (f) 2500 to 3000 (g) More than 3000.
8. If you are a school counselor, how many students do you have in your caseload? (a) Less than 250 (b) 250 to 300 (c) 300 to 350 (d) 350 to 400 (e) 400 to 450 (f) 450 to 500 (g) 500 to 550 (h) 550 to 600 (i) Over 600.
9. Over the past three years, has your school had budget cuts? If no, please proceed to question 11. (a) Yes (b) No (c) Unsure.
10. If you did have budget cuts, please specify how the budget cuts have affected the student guidance and support services at your school. Loss of: (a) School Counselor (b) School Nurse (c) School Psychologist (d) School MFT/Social Worker (e) Speech/Language Therapist (f) Individual or group counseling time (g) Counseling or outreach programs (h) Other, please specify.
11. Does your school district include student guidance and support staff in the following staff development activities? Please check all that apply: (a) School Site Plan (b) Staff Development Days (c) Department Chair meetings (d) School Governance (e) N/A (f) Other, please specify.
12. How does your school counseling program procure funding? Please check all that apply: (a) School district – General Fund (b) School District – Portion of Federal Funds (c)

School Site Funds (d) Grants (e) Lottery (f) Parent Association(s) (g) Other, please specify.

13. When considering the counseling program tasks outline by the American School Counseling Association (ASCA), do your counselor(s) devote time to NON-counseling tasks (e.g., performing disciplinary actions or clerical work)? If no, please proceed to question 15. (a) Yes (b) No (c) Unsure.

14. If yes, please estimate how much your counselors spend on NON-counseling tasks: (a) Less than 10% (b) 10% to 20% (c) 20% to 30% (d) 30% to 40% (e) 40% to 50% (f) More than 50%.

Finally, please answer some questions about your school and the SPARC process (Questions 15 – 22).

15. Please specify you school's primary reasons for completing a SPARC: (a) Support/Encouragement from faculty (b) Clarification of student guidance and support staff roles (c) Implementation of ASCA standards (d) Support staff accountability (e) Evaluation method of support staff (f) Protection from potential legal action (e.g., liability issues) (g) Collection of information on support staff and community resources (h) Assists with the Accreditation report.

16. Developing and publishing a SPARC is beneficial to your student guidance and support team: (a) strongly disagree (b) disagree (c) neutral (d) agree (e) strongly agree.

17. In what areas has completing the SPARC positively affected your student guidance and support program? Please check all that apply: (a) Assist with the Accreditation report (c) Encourages better teamwork (c) Organizes the student guidance and support staff (d) Increases district and/or site support for the student guidance and support program (e)

Improves communication (e.g., with parents, faculty/staff, school district, etc.) (f) Assists with the implementation with ASCA standards (g) Clarifies student guidance and support staff roles (h) N/A (i) Other, please specify.

18. What, if any, aspects of completing a SPARC are/were challenging? Please check all that apply: (a) Lack of support from administrators and staff (b) Time and resource limitations (c) Lack of district support (d) Technical difficulties with document requirements (e) Other, please specify.

19. With whom have you shared you school's SPARC? Please check all that apply: (a) School board (b) Parents (c) Faculty (d) School administrators/staff (e) students (f) other schools (g) District administrators (h) Community partners/businesses (i) N/A (j) Other, please specify.

20. In your work, approximately how often do you refer to the ASCA National Standards for School Counseling Programs? (a) Weekly (b) Bi-Weekly (c) Monthly (d) Bi-monthly (e) Monthly (f) Every six months (g) Once a year (h) N/A.

21. Specify the reasons why you have continued to complete a SPARC for three years in a row. Please check all that apply: (a) The Accreditation report (b) Strong administrative support (c) Counselor Leadership (d) Legal reasons.

22. Does your school plan on submitting a SPARC for 2004-2005? (a) Yes (b) No (c) Unsure.

23. Please give your school name and add any comments or concerns about the SPARC or "Best in the West" process in the box below.

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