Increasing the Graduation Rate for Students with Low Socioeconomic Status: A Reference for School Counselors

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Abstract

The graduation rate in the United States is an important topic and large area of concern. Since the 1960’s, statistics have shown little or no increase in the number of students who finish high school with a diploma (Heckman and LaFontaine, 2010). Overwhelmingly, the most affected by this are students across our country in low socioeconomic status. This research paper lays out the critical issues regarding high school graduation for students who are part of the low socioeconomic status in the United States. It covers what issues affect graduation rates among low SES students, trends and concerns of the current graduation rate in our country, and the role of the school counselor regarding this issue. It looks at what is being done and what needs to be done in order to improve the graduation rates among this group of students.
Increasing the Graduation Rate for Students with Low Socioeconomic Status: A Reference for School Counselors

This research paper is significant to the 21st century school counselor as it will provide a basic understanding of why low SES students struggle to complete high school. It provides ways in which school counselors can directly affect the high school graduation rate across the country even if they find themselves with limited resources. School counselors need to be aware of the struggles that low SES students face in succeeding in high school and beyond. The United States has a trend of this group of students dropping out of high school, which in turn leads them into an adult life that is just as unstable as their childhood.

School counselors are the first line of defense against letting these students slip through the cracks and dropping out of high school. The research provided allows counselors the ability to provide a comprehensive school counseling program for their students in low SES. Although the research does not provide a step by step model, it does allow the counselor to examine their counseling program and identify what services are needed to increase graduation rates for their low SES students.

This research also provides counselors the data they need to inform administrators and their local politicians why counselors are needed in all districts at all educational levels. With that, counselors across the United States can begin the long road of making positive changes in our educational system that provides equal opportunity and education to all of its students’ regardless of SES status.

The question this researcher wants to know is what school counselors can do to increase graduation rates for low socioeconomic status students. This researcher is assuming that the statistics and review of data driven research is accurate. The researcher will also assume that
across the country regardless of race, ethnicity, or place of residence, there will be specific concrete measures that should be taken in order to increase graduation rates for those students in the low SES population of society.

The purpose of this research paper is to identify the issues that low SES students face that affect their ability to complete high school in four years. It will examine the current research available to determine how necessary it is to address the issue of graduation from high school within this specific group of students. Finally, it will review practices that are currently being used by school counselors and how well they combat the issue of dropping out of high school. The researcher will also address what, if any, additional interventions should be used by school counselors to make a larger impact. This paper is limited by the references used and the data retrieved that is viewed by the researcher as valid and recent.

Low Socioeconomic Status

This research paper is focused on helping school counselors address the issue of high school graduation rates. A high school diploma is a basic educational achievement that students will need in order to be successful later in life. Counselors working with students from low socioeconomic status can see that high school graduation is a challenging goal for these students. This research paper will lay out the many barriers to problems counselors face in trying to help these students succeed in high school and beyond.

There are many barriers for students from low socioeconomic status that prevent them from receiving a high school diploma. Low SES is not just about income. Being below the poverty line is a large part of low SES but it is not the sole factor. These families not only struggle with poverty, but also find that they are under-employed or unemployed. The researcher will discuss 5 major areas of concern for the school counselor when working with students in
poverty, including; the impact of poverty, mental health issues, substance abuse and violence in the home, childhood development, race and ethnicity, and neighborhood and social network.

**Impacts of Poverty**

There are many factors that impact the success of students living in poverty. Poverty is only one part of the picture that affects students from low SES. Most often students who come from low SES backgrounds attend school districts with less money. This creates a difficult learning environment for many reasons. The main issues include having fewer teachers, minimal after school activities, less technology and fewer learning resources contribute to the increased difficulty in these students obtaining a high school diploma (Rouse & Barrow, 2006). Class size tends to be large because of the low number of teachers.

It may also be true that the quality of teaching is lower at these schools. Most graduate students looking for teaching jobs do not want to work in schools where there are a high percentage of low SES students. These positions are often filled by less qualified teachers or those that have less experience. These applicants know classes will be large and resources will be few. Research has shown that smaller class sizes and higher teacher quality is an important factor for improving disadvantaged students’ school success (Rouse & Barrow, 2006). The authors also found that class size reductions costing $9,200.00 per pupil for grades K-3 increased children’s achievement by thirteen percent. The lack of support teachers experience in these schools makes their difficult job even more challenging. Regardless of a student’s socioeconomic status all students should be able to earn a high school diploma. But not all are given the resources, thus further expanding the gap from low SES to high SES families across the nation.
Family income directly affects whether a student will continue and succeed in school and also plays a role in the low SES of a student. Parents who find themselves unemployed or underemployed often fall into the low SES status in society. This does not necessarily mean they are living in poverty. There are greater psychological affects that come from a family living in low SES which directly impacts students making the choice to leave school and get a job to help support the family. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote in 1967, “The job of the school is to teach so well that family background is no longer an issue” (Rouse & Barrow, 2006, p. 100). Even today, 40 years later, our society still struggles to make this dream a reality. Academic achievement is linked both to income and to occupation. There is a strong correlation between education and income in adult life. Those that pursue higher education typically have better jobs which increase their income. This is why keeping low SES students in school to finish a high school diploma needs to be a counselor’s number one priority, especially when working with students from low SES.

Yet other researchers suggest that it is genetics that play a role in socioeconomic status. Rouse and Barrow state that:

If it is true that genetics play a key role in socioeconomic status the next question should be, not whether wealth or social advantage affects educational attainment per se, but whether the behaviors and resources made possible by wealth and social advantage affect educational attainment (2006, p. 101).

From an Adlerian perspective, this is the concept of nurture vs. nature. What, if any, physical or mental limitations do students from low SES have that would make them unable to achieve a high school diploma? Adlerian theory would suggest that regardless of a physical or mental
limitation, individuals are unique in a way that they will compensate for their limitation and find a way to succeed even without.

**Mental Health, Substance Abuse, and Violence**

Years of research has documented the prevalence of mental health issues, substance abuse and violence in homes of families from low SES. Families from low SES are under greater stress because of their financial instability (Azzi-Lessing, 2010). Too often it is seen that parents from these families have an increased level of harsh discipline for behavior of their children. Substance abuse is also more common among low SES families, which often causes disengaged parents who do not develop connected relationships with their children.

Youth from low SES families show a higher rate and likelihood of re-admittance to hospitals for things such as violent and suicidal behavior. Adolescents from low SES age 13 to 18 were more likely to be re-hospitalized for behavior problems (Lapointe et al., 2010). Higher rates of re-hospitalization were also shown for adolescents in foster homes or alternate care situations. This study shows that stability in a child’s life can have a dramatic impact on a child’s mental health. Families from low SES are in a constant state of change. It would be fair to conclude that children who are re-admitted to hospitals for mental health issues are those that cannot handle change and restructure in their lives. This is because they have not learned basic life skills that would allow them the opportunity to deal with and handle these types of situations (Lapointe et al., 2010). It would seem likely that these children would therefore have a higher incidence of mental health problems.

**Childhood Development**

There are many core elements that are needed in a child’s development for them to become happy, healthy, contributing adults in our society. Three of these core elements were
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studied by Crosnoe and Huston (2007) to determine how socioeconomic status affects a child’s development and life tasks. Adlerian theory suggests that all humans regardless of their place in society have the life goals of belonging and contributing. Crosnoe and Huston (2007) evaluated these two life tasks of Adlerian Theory. The “three elements of adolescence studied were personal control, parental consultation and academic progress” (Crosnoe & Huston, 2007, p. 1097). Personal control was viewed as an adolescent believing that they were the directors of their own lives and have control over it. “Young people with a sense of personal control often have more success in the high stakes world of education because they are more confident, open to challenges, and motivated” (Crosnoe & Huston, 2007, p. 1098).

The second component they studied was that of parental consultation. “During adolescence we tend to seek adults for consultation with our lives, not necessarily for command of our lives” (Crosnoe & Huston, 2007, p. 1107). This concept of consultation verses command makes the child-parent relationship very different than in previous years. Not only does the child struggle with this, so does the adult. “Consultation with parents appears to be especially relevant, even to the point of trumping peer influence, for adolescences making decisions with potential long-term impacts on their lives” (Crosnoe & Huston, 2007, p. 1106).

Both personal control and parental consultation directly impact a student’s academic progress, which was the third element of childhood development studied by Crosnoe and Huston. The researchers found that students from lower SES families showed a lower level of personal control and parental consultation.

Higher status parents engage in an active type of parenting, concerted cultivation that teaches children to be goal oriented and to “work the system”. Their lower status counterparts engage in a more open type of parenting of natural growth that encourages
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happiness but does not empower children in societal institutions (Crosnoe and Huston, 2007, p.1107).

Crosnoe and Huston (2007) conclude that because of this difference in teaching and motivating from the parents, students have a different outlook and motivation towards success in school. This may be one significant factor in helping students from low SES achieve and work hard in school. From Adlerian thought, it is the idea of belonging and contributing. Parents from low SES teach their children belonging, but they are missing a key element of development and mental health, that of contributing.

There are many other developmental stages a student must work through that will play an important role on their ability to earn a high school diploma. As in Adlerian thought, our belief about our world has a tremendous impact on us. It not only affects our ability to achieve academic success, but it impacts the way we think, work, play, and behave. This is no different for the developing adolescent. In fact, as we work through the change between being a child and becoming an adult, our beliefs and values are being challenged on a daily basis (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956).

The belief that we live in a just world promotes adolescents well-being and mental health as well as shows decreased delinquent behavior. It also helps reduce feelings of uncertainty (Laurin, Fizsimons, & Kay, 2011). Social fairness beliefs encourage a student’s commitment to the pursuit of long term goals, which can be very difficult for members of low SES groups. Long term goals including building relationships, obtaining a career, having financial stability, and good health are affected by a child’s belief in social justice. Achieving goals over time is easier in a supportive and encouraging social environment and a student’s pursuit of their goals is higher in these environments.
For members of low-SES groups, the likelihood of being victims of societal unfairness is much higher than those from higher SES groups and this directly impacts a student’s long term goals and their effort to achieve these goals (Laurin et al., 2011). If they do not believe that their efforts will matter, they are less likely to work towards their goals or even set these goals to begin with. “Members of low-SES groups must develop the belief that their efforts will be evaluated and rewarded fairly in order to be motivated to achieve life goals” (Laurin et al., 2011). The authors also found that the more a student from low SES believed their efforts were being evaluated fairly, the more likely they were to continue to work toward their goals. The research did not replicate the same way for students from higher SES students.

The more members of disadvantaged groups believe in social fairness, the more they believe in the own personal fairness, and thus the more motivated they are to pursue long-term goals. It should be concluded that the belief a low SES student has about social fairness would in turn affect their academic outcomes and commitment to working toward life goals (Laurin et al., 2011, p. 151).

In Adlerian theory and practice, life goals should be seen as a way to belong and contribute to society as students leave high school to pursue a career. However, reality is in the eye of the beholder. What is actual societal fairness is determined by the individual. If counselors can work to increase the numbers of students from disadvantaged groups who believe that, through hard work and dedication, the student can belong and contribute; counselors will have a great impact on the success of these students in school and beyond.

**Race and Ethnicity**

There is little disagreement among researchers that race and ethnicity play a role in low SES. It has been shown that students who are in the racial minority have a higher likelihood of
falling into the low SES group in society (Lapointe, Garcia, Taubert & Sleet, 2010). Students from the African American, Latino, and Asian communities are more prevalent in low SES group than their White American counterparts. This knowledge can play a role in how school counselors’ work to improve graduation rates among low SES student populations.

The study done by Lapointe et al. (2010) on mental health of students from low SES, surveyed students from low income communities that fell under the category of African American or Latino who had been hospitalized at least once in a twelve month period. The study did not show differences in self-reported attitudes with school, social stress, anxiety, depression, self-esteem or any other factors from those who had been hospitalized only once to those who were hospitalized more than once in a 12 month period (Lapointe et al., 2010). While this was interesting, the author points out that the racial attitudes of African American and Latino cultures have something to do with the lack of differences in her findings. African Americans, specifically, view having a mental health problem as a negative in their culture as does the Latino community. Lapointe says, “This may result in these youth rationalizing, minimizing, or denying their troubling thoughts, feelings, and behaviors because of the stigma attached to them in their community and culture” (2010, p.170).

African Americans as a group are disproportionately impacted by poverty and belonging to the low SES group in society (Leach and Williams, 2007). Academic achievement is therefore also compromised for this group. Poor academic achievement is associated with developmental outcomes as well, including delinquency, behavioral problems, substance use, and dropping out of school (Leach and Williams, 2007). “According to the National Center of Education Statistics, dropout rates for 16 to 24 year olds are nearly double for African American youth as compared to their White counterparts” (Leach & Williams, 2007, p. 44). The NCES
reported in 2000, the dropout rates for White Americans in this age category were 6.9% and for African Americans it was nearly double at 13.1% (Leach & Williams, 2007, p. 44). As lower SES students, African American students receive lower educational requirements, expectations, and resources. This makes it more likely that they will achieve the same lifestyle as their parents. “African American children are more likely to attend schools of poorer quality, less likely to be referred to gifted or AP classes, and encounter lower teacher expectations with their academic abilities” (Leach & Williams, 2007, p. 50).

If we behave how we are expected to behave, then stereotypes from educators impact our psychological concepts of ourselves. Adlerian theory addresses this issue in its treatment with individual counseling. Lifestyle, a concept of Adlerian theory, includes our beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors regarding ourselves and others in our world (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). Adolescents of minority groups are often aware of the negative stereotypes that exist about them. They behave in the expected way in order to belong and contribute. They believe that they will gain belonging in the community if they act a certain way. It is the actual impact of being a lower status in society that affects a student’s achievement, not the color of the student’s skin. It is the lifestyle that impacts a student’s efforts to achieve in school.

**Neighborhood and Social Network**

Social networks and neighborhood environment also impacts academic success and graduation from high school. Risi, Gerhardstein, and Kistner (2003) found that while student likability was not a main factor in predicting high school graduation or dropout rates, students viewed as aggressive by their peers in fact did predict high school dropout. It can be argued that many things like grade retention, poor academic achievement and truancy are all factors that influence a student’s option of dropping out of high school. However, this study by Risi et al
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(2003) shows the impact that student relationships have on the academic achievement of a student. The study used students from 8 schools classified as middle or low SES. What was found was the dropout group contained more boys than girls, more African American students than Caucasian, and students who were typically older than their peers in the same grade. The student’s behavior however was the key indicator to dropping out of high school. Aggressive behavior was the most prominent behavior predictor of drop out. It can be concluded then with this study that something is missing from these student’s childhood development that is increasing their aggressive behavior or not allowing them the skills to control the behavior.

Withdrawal was another behavior indicator of drop out for African American students in low SES schools. The study seemed to find that peer relationships are not a predictor of graduation; rather, a student’s behavior, gender, socioeconomic status and race were significant predictors in graduation rates (Risi et al., 2003).

The data from this study indicates that the relationship between social preference and educational outcome is no longer directly linked. These negative peer perceptions established as early as kindergarten may already have affected attitudes therefore impacting behavior and academic achievement by those students who drop out of high school later in life (Risi et al., 2003, p. 360).

According to one study, “Living in a neighborhood with more affluent families, with a higher percentage of professional workers, a lower unemployment rate, and more ethnic diversity increases the chances of an adolescent completing high school” (Owens, 2010, p. 289). This seems obvious that socioeconomic background is a substantial predictor of high school graduation; the increase in a student’s SES also increases the probability that the student engages
and completes high level learning during high school and in turn increases the student’s attendance and success in college (Owens, 2010).

The neighborhood a family chooses to live in may not be much of a choice at all. The families that live in lower SES neighborhoods have many factors working against them. Many of these families are single parent families. These parents do not have the time or resources to watch out for other children in the neighborhood, including finding it difficult to have time for their own children (Owens, 2010). The level of trust and social cohesion can be low in these neighborhoods, leading to an increase in exclusion and isolation from family to family. Again, the Adlerian idea of belonging and contributing to our communities seems relevant here. Adlerian theory suggests that all human beings want to feel as though they are part of something larger than themselves and that they play an important role in that larger system to make it work effectively. Neighborhoods of low SES families are missing this connectedness, even though working to achieve more for each other gives greater satisfaction to our own lives.

Owens (2010) found that neighborhoods with higher poverty resulted in more African American residents, more single parent homes, and higher unemployment and, therefore, reduces the odds of high school graduation. The author also found that neighborhood background influences the track or coursework a student receives in school by their teachers. It is the stigma of stereotyping by the educator that is directly influencing the academic ability and success of students from low SES.

The impact of belonging to the low socioeconomic status group of society has far reaching effects on students and their academic success. The belief that students can succeed no matter what the school has to offer or who is teaching them is a myth. As Americans we have a right to an education, but not all institutions are created equal. School counselors are in a
position to address these issues for those students from low SES. There are factors that school
counselors cannot change, such as the systematic flaw of the way our government has set up our
educational system. This is not an issue counselors can tackle alone. Counselors are trained in
mental health and development of children. Counselors need to address as soon as possible the
developmental deficiencies of these students. They need to identify mental health needs of
students and refer them to outside resources when their needs are beyond a school counselor’s
capability of helping. A counselor’s knowledge of a child’s developmental tasks and stages can
work with teachers and parents alike to provide educational tools for them to help foster the
growth and development of our students.

For so many living in poverty, substance abuse and violence occurs in the home. We
need to give these children the skills to deal with their home life issues and give them the tools to
be successful even with the obstacles they face. This intervention cannot begin in high school.
There is a high need for elementary school counselors. Starting early with students and parents
gives the group a chance to make positive changes that can have a lasting effect into high school
and beyond. Change can begin, but success will only happen by focusing on early interventions.
Prevention, not reaction, is a counselor’s job.

**Graduation Rates**

Finding the true percentage of graduates from high school seems to be more difficult than
one would assume. Depending on the source you look at, graduation rates in the United States
range from 66% to 88% (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010). This is a wide range for a simple
measure of diplomas handed out in a given year. Recent estimates for high school graduation
find that on average 1 in 10 students do not graduate high school (Gregory & Rimm-Kaufman,
2008). Research has indicated that graduation rates peaked in the late 1960’s and has since
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fallen or not shown growth (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010). For the purpose of this research, focus is being placed on those who graduate high school within a four year period and obtain a diploma, not a GED. The research done includes a review of current graduation rates, the impact of race and ethnicity, mother-child relationships and school quality and climate on a student graduating high school from low SES.

The students from the lowest SES in society are having the most difficulty of any subset of groups to graduate on time with a diploma from high school. Research from the NCES found that in 2004, “students from the lowest SES represented 21% of the on time graduate population but accounted for 48% of the dropout population for that year” (Hampden-Thompson, Warkentien, & Daniel, 2009, para. 20). According to the NCES, 82% of students graduated on time for the 2003-2004 school-year (Hampden-Thompson et al., 2009). This implies that 18% of our adult workforce in the United States does not hold a high school diploma.

An even more alarming fact is the number of graduating high school students that are not proficient in reading and math. It is estimated that nearly 35% of graduating high school students are not proficient in reading and 15% are leaving high school without basic math skills (Gregory & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008).

**Race and Ethnicity**

The NCES places African Americans and Hispanics at a graduation rate significantly lower than their White counterparts, with only 65% leaving high school with a diploma (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010). A study done by Oyserman, Bybee, and Terry (2006) shows the importance of an adolescent’s view of themselves and what they are able to achieve in school. “Minority youth living in low SES neighborhoods are exposed to images of the group as low achieving, raising the possibility that their group views of possible selves may not feel
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congruent with academic possible selves” (Oyserman et al., 2006, p. 189). It is this negative view youth have between minority status and academic attainment that has shown to have an incredible effect on not only academic success in high school but also increased behavior problems. In their study, Oyserman et al. interviewed high school students to find that “high school students perceive Latinos as more likely to become manual laborers, Asians to do well in school, and African Americans to do poorly in school” (2006, p.190). When low-income students were asked about expected performance from other students also labeled as low income, they said they expected worse performance from low social class peers than their middle or higher social class peers. Oyserman et al. define possible self as “comprised both of what one thinks about ones-self and the feelings they have of thinking about ones-self” (2006, p. 188). So it is not just what one believes they can accomplish, or should accomplish for that matter, but also how it makes them feel about setting their goals to achieve. Minority students who are not equipped with positive possible selves see attending school as more difficult. A positive self, much like the Adlerian concept of one’s lifestyle, can provide tools and initiative for students to complete homework and ask teachers for help when they need it. Without this positive thinking, these students are more likely to fall behind and not graduate.

The lifestyle, as Adlerian theory would put it, can have a positive or negative affect on a student’s desire to achieve in school. Interventions in developing minority students’ possible selves showed a significant change in behavior, including, “self-regulation, going to school rather than skipping, behaving and participating in class, and spending time on homework. Self-regulation not only improved academic outcomes but equally reduced risk of depression” (Oyserman et al., 2006, p. 200). Minority youth who obtained possible academic outcomes through positive possible selves spent more time doing homework, were less disruptive, more
behaviorally engaged in the classroom activities, and improved their academic success through intervention methods delivered by Oyserman et al. (2006).

**Mother-Child Relationship**

There is strong evidence that mother-child relationships play a significant role in determining dropout rates for students. “In 2004, low-income adolescents were found to be five times more likely to drop out than adolescents from high income families” (Gregory & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008, p. 500). However, the researchers also found that high quality mother-child relationships observed in elementary school showed higher academic achievement in middle school. As well, this relationship was shown to have a great impact on classroom behavior, specifically with African American students (Gregory & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008). Through data and research it was shown that early intervention through mother-child relationships could drastically improve a child’s expectation of high school graduation.

A longitudinal study done by Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson and Collins (2005), followed a group of low-income mothers and their children in Minneapolis, Minnesota. This study found that positive relationships and strong attachment between mother and child predicted a higher reading and math achievement when the children were measured again at age sixteen. Sroufe et al. (2005) measured the relationship of mother and child based on attachment at the early stages of life. They measured attachment of the child to the mother beginning at one year in six month intervals up to three and one-half years of age. “Researchers found that the quality of mother-child interaction when the child was three-and-one-half years old was a significant predictor of education attainment nearly 20 years later” (Sroufe et al., 2005, para. 34).

Another study done by Gregory and Rimm-Kaufman (2008) attempted to confirm this attachment theory on school achievement. They measured 8 dimensions of attachment between
mother and child. From the mother they measured supportive presence, quality of instruction, and respect for child autonomy. From the child they measured affection, reliance, negative effect, task orientation, and enthusiasm. Mothers that were reported to be supportive, encouraging, responsive, and focused on child autonomy increased the likelihood of graduation nearly three and a half times of those not possessing these qualities. This researcher finds that there are two reasons for this strong correlation between attachment and school success. First, mothers who have an ability to control emotions, teach this to their children, which would explain why students with positive attachment to their mother show less behavior problems at school. Children model and copy what they see. A mother’s ability to teach problem solving-skills and help-seeking skills through encouragement gives children the ability to find solutions and ask for help in school. Learning how to advocate for themselves can help every child succeed beyond IQ restrictions or other limitations.

Gregory and Rimm-Kaufman (2008) found in their study of mother-child attachment that a positive attachment in early life indicated a greater chance of completing high school. The relationship was the strongest however for those students that were most at risk of school failure due to low SES. “These findings show that supportive and positive parenting offers a resiliency tool for children living under adverse conditions” (Gregory & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008, p. 511). Again, it is from an Adlerian perspective that we can see how being valued, encouraged, and possessing the feelings of belonging has a tremendous impact on behaviors needed for students to achieve in school. Parents of students from low SES struggle to provide this encouragement, attachment, and support that is needed for school success.
School Quality and Climate

While a child-parent relationship is important, it cannot affect the success of that child in school solely on its’ own. Research finds that “interventions aimed at improving the quality of teacher-student interactions provide support for the importance of socio-emotional skills for a range of positive schooling outcomes” (Gregory & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008, 511). It is believed that through the mother-child relationship, children learn how to develop positive and meaningful relationships with their teachers, which in turn has shown to reduce high school dropout (Gregory & Rimm-Kaufman, 2006).

However, strong findings show that it is the communication between school and home that builds the most successful students. A study done by Crosnoe (2009) found that the stronger the communications between family and school during the transition year from middle school to high school, the more academically successful students were from low-income families. This author studied students from low-income families and families of English Language Learner students to see how an increase in communication from middle and high school personal and family impacted math and science course selection and achievement in those classes. “Young people achieve more when parents are engaged in their education, including providing cognitive stimulation, meeting with school personal, and participating in school activities” (Crosnoe, 2009, p. 1072). Again, this correlation was the strongest with at risk students, specifically students from low SES. When family-school connections are formed they allow the amount of information given and received to be greater in both directions, from parents to school and from school to parents. Information that is needed about a student included a child’s needs, talents, and circumstances. This communication between family and school promotes academic progress by working together to develop decisions, interventions, and plans for that particular student.
Crosnoe also found that “adolescents in a triangulated family school communication were associated with higher level math coursework at the start of high school” (2009, p. 1071). Triangulation here, meaning the connection between middle school, high school, and family, was shown to increase the likelihood that students were placed in higher level math and science coursework when arriving at high school. This increase in high level learning was particularly significant among low SES students.

It is apparent that graduation rates are an issue of concern in the United States. More so, it seems that our focus needs to be on the students who have the biggest barriers to overcome in order to achieve a high school diploma. Those students from low SES families, which by-and-large are students of minority, have the most barriers to overcome in order to achieve a high school diploma. Through this research, it is shown that childhood development of our minority and low SES youth has to be the number one priority for school counselors. From an early age major life developmental tasks of these children that focus on parent-child relationships are one key factor to beginning school with less difficulty and improving academic success throughout school.

**Implications for School Counselors**

In addition to improving the transition from grade to grade and promoting positive self-images with attainable academic goals, school counselors can be sure they are making a difference for those students who come from low SES. For these students the Adlerian ideas of belonging and contributing are main components of development that are missing. The encouragement of these students must be a daily task from counselor and teacher alike. Working with families and acknowledging the values and ethnic differences students have will be necessary to developing appropriate plans to help these students achieve positive academic
outcomes. This research will now examine the role of the school counselor in effectively assisting students from low SES to achieving a high school diploma. This will be looked at from all aspects, including using the American School Counseling Association national model, family, school, and community as well as the implications of school readiness and early mental health services for students.

**American School Counseling Association National Model**

The American School Counseling Association has developed a plan for student success. It includes academic, career, and personal/social growth and development. The ASCA model is a comprehensive program for school counseling departments. It includes how the school counseling department will deliver those services. These services are delivered by guidance curriculum, individual student planning, responsive services, and support systems. Guidance curriculum allows counselors to provide guidance in the form of classroom lessons. This gives the counselor with the opportunity to reach a large number of students at one time. The individual student planning allows one-on-one time with students to provide them the tools and support they need for personal development and future planning. Responsive services allow the counselor to attend to immediate needs of the students. This part of the ASCA model works to address crisis type interventions and counseling. The idea of system support is that of working together to advocate for all students. Counselors working with other counselors, administrators or the district will provide the best use of a counselor’s time with students.

The management system of the ASCA model is used to help school counseling programs layout a year-long calendar that includes the when and why of providing counseling services to students. Within this management system ASCA stresses the importance of data collection. A comprehensive counseling department will gather data and use it to ensure the goals of the
school or district are being met by the counselors in a given time frame. It addresses the issue of working towards a goal and successful completion of that goal by the counseling services provided to students.

There are four themes of the ASCA model including leadership, advocacy, collaboration, and systemic change. These four themes are used in all domains of the ASCA model. It entails how to be a leader, advocate, collaborate, and produce systemic change in the academic, personal/social, and career areas of the ASCA model.

The three domains of academic, personal/social, and career are further broken down into goals, standards, competencies and skills. As an example, the personal/social development domain is broken down into goals that counselors want to see students achieve at each grade level, including respect for self and others, goal setting and attainment skills and survival and safety skills. Each goal is further broken down into standards and competencies allowing the counselor to deliver the curriculum and counseling services. Then the counselor will be able to assess whether or not the student has acquired the needed developmental skills in that area.

Through research we have discovered that all of these areas need additional attention for students that fall into the low socioeconomic status of society. There are many services a school counselor can provide to improve a student’s success in school and help them towards earning a high school diploma. Powell-Stanard (2003) did some research into what services can make an impact on improving high school completion for low SES students.

Dropping out of school should be viewed as a process rather than a single event, and interventions must be developed to address the problem on multiple levels. Intervention and prevention strategies must be comprehensive, flexible, and culturally specific and must begin early in a student’s academic career (Powell-Stanard, 2003, p. 219).
The change, according to this author needs to begin with the system. This is an incredible undertaking for a counselor alone. While it is well out of a counselor’s reach to make whole scale systemic changes, there are still things they can do to impact systems and improve graduation rates.

**Family, School, and Community Collaboration**

The family, school, and community must all be involved in reworking the framework of our education system. For low SES students, traditional schooling is less then effective in helping them to succeed in school. School counselor interventions are just one way an impact can be made on academic success for these students. By working with school administrators, counselors can help educate politicians and their community about strategies that have been shown to reduce dropout rates and improve academic performance for low SES students.

Initiatives such as small school size, small class size, low student-teacher ratio, clear expectations, portfolio-based performance assessment techniques, and staff commitment to the school’s ideals and values have all been proven to work to increase graduation rates with at-risk students (Powell-Stanard, 2003).

Counselors may not be in a position to bring about such a drastic change as restructuring a school system, but they are in a position to implement the practices that contribute to the success of these students in their own schools and communities (Powell-Stanard, 2003, p. 220).

It is imperative that school counselors be involved in school policy and procedure development. Counselors need to be part of addressing the problematic behaviors of students who are often dealt with by punishment such as retention, suspension, and expulsion. School counselors recognize that these solutions to problem behaviors give no incentive for coming to school or
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completing schoolwork (Powell-Stanard, 2003). It is an issue of prevention, not reaction that needs to be addressed.

Even in lower elementary grades, retention significantly increases the likelihood that a student will drop out of high school. Collaboration between counselors, parents, teachers, and administrators should focus on developing policies and procedures to manage problematic student behaviors and to foster the success of these students rather than dealing with the problem by pursuing policies that seem to be pushing at risk students out of school (Powell-Stanard, 2003, p. 219).

Powell-Stanard (2003) found that most problematic attitudes and behaviors of students at risk of dropout appear as early as elementary school. In turn these behaviors and attitudes need to be evaluated in the primary school setting and prevention strategies should be implemented as early as possible. Waiting until high school where there are the most counselors available, is a reactionary plan, one which will provide the least amount of results.

By the American School Counselor’s Association standards, counselors play the role of advocate and collaborator in working with students, teachers, and parents. Counselors are the ones that can connect with a family, allowing the family to become aware of their student’s struggles and provide resources to help the student’s situation. They can offer helpful strategies to improve a student’s academic success such as individual or family counseling that can focus on an array of family issues including things like conflict resolution or parenting skills.

Powell-Stanard (2003) reflects on the need for “counselors to be able to know how to use data so that at risk students can be identified early in their academic career and appropriate strategies can be implemented”. Using individual and small group counseling has proven to be effective. Building a relationship with a student increases the student’s chances of school
success significantly. It has also been shown that counselors can make an impact in a student’s academic success by using small groups that consist of both high and low risk students (Powell-Stanard, 2003). Group counseling may consist of working on social skills, time management, study skills, survival skills, decision making, and stress reduction. These topics have been effective in school dropout prevention (Powell-Stanard, 2003).

For many schools, their programs will only show success of reducing high school dropout if they are made from a multicultural perspective (Powell-Stanard, 2003). The high rate of low SES students that are also from a minority group must be addressed. Each culture is different in the way they run their community, engage at home as a family, and instruct their children on the importance and completion of school (Powell-Stanard, 2003). During individual and group counseling sessions the ideals of each ethnic group must be respected. Development of strategies for improvement must respect the values and beliefs of all individuals, not just the majority view.

Cross and Burney (2005), did research on the program Project Aspire, a dropout prevention program. Project Aspire is a federally funded program that works to improve the lives of the low SES student population by improving academic success and providing comprehensive counseling services. In their research, they found that it is imperative to have counselors to provide important information and encourage these students in order for high school success. During their research in evaluating the program itself, Cross and Burney (2005), found that the number one concern of the counselors participating was the difficulty of convincing students of their potential. This relates to the Adlerian issue of lifestyle. Attempting to change ones views of reality, their reality, is not easy. Counselors were finding that convincing those students from the low SES to take on more advanced courses in high school
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was challenging. The students felt as if though the courses would not help them after high school or that they would take too much time outside of school to complete the work. Moreover the view from the family at home was equally as detrimental to getting these students in more advanced courses. Counselors found that there was no support from home for these students, especially when it came to doing additional work for school. The argument from student and parent alike is that these courses are a waste of time and that they would take up too much time outside of school (Cross & Burney, 2005).

Cross and Burney (2005) found that when counselors worked with these students from low SES and taught respectful behavior, discussed a student’s choices, and focused on relationship building, the success of the student was much greater. The more the counselor worked with the student, parent and teacher together, the more likely the student was to complete high school and also succeed in more advanced coursework during high school. Aspiration of higher education for those students with low SES was just one of the positive outcomes of counselors building encouraging and supportive relationships with students (Cross and Burney, 2005). “There are four reasons one leaves poverty, it’s too painful to stay, a vision or goal, a key relationship, or a special talent or skill” (Cross & Burney, 2005, p. 155).

School Readiness and Early Mental Health Services

Azzi-Lessing (2010) reviewed practices from some of the top early childcare and education programs in the United States. Programs such as Head Start, a federally funded preschool program for children from low income families, was reviewed for practices that best served families with low income. Programs like Head Start offer key components to improving child development including the use of early childhood mental health consultants, building
effective partnerships with mental health agencies and other community based groups, providing support and training for teachers, and establishing family based support.

Azzi-Lessing (2010) reports that approximately 20% of children in the United States live in poverty. To pose an even greater challenge, most of these families are headed by a single parent. Single parents living in poverty have an incredible amount of daily stress and this not only affects their own mental health but the mental health of their children.

A lack of emotional availability from parent to child leads to attachment problems in early years and emotional self-regulation problems that can lead to behavior problems as the child develops. With poverty comes a higher incidence of abuse of drugs or alcohol and being a victim of domestic violence (Azzi-Lessing, 2010, para. 7).

Poverty has the greatest negative effect on a child’s development when it occurs in their earliest years of life. This leads to lower cognitive ability and behavior and emotional problems as children develop (Azzi-Lessing, 2010).

Early childcare programs can have a positive impact on a child’s development before beginning K-12 schooling. Azzi-Lessing (2010) found that early care and education programs offer parent training and support as well as mental health consultants. These consultants come into the childcare centers to provide teachers with specific tools to handle behavior and emotional issues their children display. Home observations can also be done, allowing parents to get feedback from a mental health professional allows them to have learning opportunities and be guided through parenting strategies that are strength-based (Azzi-Lessing, 2010). “Evaluation of early childhood mental health consultation programs documented the success of consultation in improving staff competence and confidence in working with children with challenging behaviors” (Azzi-Lessing, 2010, para. 6).
There are programs available for children from the low socioeconomic status group of society that provide them with the resources and services they need to be successful in school. As a counselor it is clear that early intervention and prevention of further developing problems for these at-risk students is the best and most effective way to give them school success. Early childcare can have a great impact on the success of students coming from impoverished families, but counselors often do not work in these roles. As well, there seems to be a similar need for understanding why elementary school counselors are necessary for students to begin school on the right path toward graduation. Counseling in the schools is a must, to provide not only academic and career counseling services but also to work with students on a personal level. This will ensure they have the basic childhood developmental tasks fulfilled before reaching adult life.

**Conclusion**

This researcher has found that there are interventions school counselors can use to increase the graduation rate among low socioeconomic status students. These interventions and services must be provided as early in a child’s life as possible. The need for elementary and preschool counselors is evident. Our current system is working as a repair model to fix what is already broken. School counselors need to address this systematic issue with their school administrators, policy makers, and communities. Furthermore they should provide them with the data that shows how providing students with counseling services at a younger age will serve our children better than our current practices.

The truth is that student academic success begins at home and is continued and supported by our school’s efforts and practices. Students from low SES do not have the home and family support, encouragement, and direction to achieve school success. What is lacking at home for these students can be directly affected by the presence and interventions of school counselors.
once these students arrive at school. The school environment and climate can also have a
tremendous impact on a student’s academic achievements because financial resources are not
equally available to all districts across the nation. A school counselor must find ways to impact
the graduation rates with the resources they have. Collaboration of school counselors and
teachers, administrators, students, and families can play a major role in increasing student high
school graduation rates.

Employing students to feel a sense of belonging to their school is essential. A counselor
must begin by reframing their beliefs about what students are capable of. This is done by
providing encouragement and goal setting and then giving them the tools to achieve those goals.
As a counselor, it must be known that it will be easier for some students, but by providing the
correct interventions for students it is possible that all students can achieve a high school
diploma. Students from low SES have bigger concerns since many of them are dealing with
extreme home life circumstances that are far beyond their control. Behaviors can reveal the
needs of the student to the counselor, which in turn helps the counselor to provide skills that
students can use to help them cope. Coping, studying, and social skills are only a few of the
areas that these students will need counseling in.

Contributing to their community or their school will also significantly impact a student’s
academic success. Allowing students to feel control over some part of their lives and their
environment are essential to the growth and development of all children. Children from low SES
need these to be provided in the school setting because it is not possible to provide it within their
home or community.

Personal-social relationships must be established as soon as possible in a child’s life.
When entering school many students from low SES have not established these kinds of
relationships. This presents teachers and counselors with the issue of correcting the missing developmental task of attachment. Counselors need to identify these students and instruct teachers on how they can positively influence these children. Counselors then must work with the student to develop these personal-social skills through individual counseling, group counseling, and family advocacy. A school counselor is the main line of defense in identifying homes where basic social and emotional needs are not being met by caregivers.

Since the majority of families in low SES are families of a minority culture, a counselor’s goal in developing a program to increase graduation rates must include multicultural interventions and understanding. Adlerian theory holds true as a basic guideline for multicultural counseling. Regardless of the ethnic background of any student or family, school counselors can make a positive change towards increasing graduation rates by using Adlerian principles. It is the use of concepts such as belonging and contributing, encouragement, goal orientation, and an individual’s lifestyle that can be the basic building blocks for any counselor, regardless of environment, to make a significant change in the graduation rate of students from low socioeconomic status.

Some limitations of this research must be discussed. First, the researchers’ goal was to identify the obstacles that students from low SES face in working towards school completion. The researchers’ limited references could be viewed as a limitation, for it was not meant to be an overview of all research done on the topic. Second, this research and implications of its findings are based off of others work. All studies have some limitations either based on sample size or population, therefore some conclusions may not hold true for all students in low SES across the country. And finally, there are a multitude of other factors not discussed in this research that could encourage a student from low SES to drop out of school. This research is also not a
complete list of implications for school counselors but merely a basis of understanding and intended to help counselors re-evaluate how they serve their students from low SES.

Further research in this area continues to be done across the country. Programs are being implemented all across the United States to help students from low SES complete a high school diploma. Longitudinal studies need to be implemented and data collected to see which programs show the most success. This research shows an increasing concern for the lack of elementary school counselors available to school across the nation. More data needs to be collected to the effectiveness of elementary school counselors. With continued research in this area efforts can be made to change the educational system to operate more efficiently with greater success for all students, regardless of race, gender, religion, or socioeconomic status.
References


