Colorado School Counseling Investments Payoff for Students!

CCD Center Case Study

In 2008, the Colorado legislature established the School Counselor Corps Grant Program (SCCGP) to provide competitive grants to school districts in order to increase the availability and effectiveness of school-based counseling services for secondary school students, particularly those with high dropout rates and rates of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch (FRL). State leaders created the program to improve graduation rates and increase percentages of students preparing for, applying to, and continuing on to postsecondary education. It was founded on the idea that school-based counselors play a pivotal role in helping students plan for their futures and provide guidance for students’ academic achievement, career development, and personal and social growth (Lapan, Gysbers, Stanley, & Pierce, 2012; Lapan, Whitcomb, & Aleman, 2012; Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, & Holcomb-McCoy, 2011; Hurwitz & Howell, 2014; Pham & Keenan, 2011). Colorado’s SCCGP addresses the need to prepare students for postsecondary success by increasing the number of licensed school counselors serving secondary school students in the state and resources to support them in developing and sustaining comprehensive school counseling programs.

Shortly after the creation of SCCGP in 2009, the Colorado legislature enacted a law requiring all students grades 9-12 have access to a process within their high school to create and manage their individual career and academic plan (ICAP) by September 2011. Beginning in 2014-15, the ICAP became a Colorado high school graduation requirement. The successful and meaningful implementation of ICAP within secondary schools makes the role of school counselors all the more critical.

Prior to the establishment of the SCCGP, Colorado’s student-to-counselor ratio was roughly 500 to 1, which was double the American School Counseling Association’s (ASCA) recommendation of 250 to 1. Over the course of the grant program, over 300 licensed school counselors have served in over 427 schools in over 100 school districts across all regions of Colorado (CDE, n.d.). In 2019-20, Colorado’s student-to-counselor ratio was 295 to 1 due in large part to the SCCGP effort.

**SCCGP RULES CHANGE OVER TIME BASED ON LESSONS LEARNED**

Initially, SCCGP grantees received three years of implementation funding. Then, based on lessons learned from the first few grant cycles, beginning in the 2014-15 school year, grantees applied for four years of funding with the first year supporting planning at a lower funding level. This development year allows schools, districts, and Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) to conduct an environmental scan and a school community needs assessment to identify goals and align with ASCA best practices. The Colorado Department of Education (CDE, n.d.) provides resources and guidance using Carlson’s Environmental Scan Model for School Counselors (2013, 2020), which includes analyzing counselor qualifications and ongoing professional development. The results of these data-driven planning efforts are the final deliverable for the development year and drive the budget and work plan for the following three years of full implementation and funding. For subsequent implementation years, an end of year report focused on postsecondary and workforce readiness outcomes and indicators along with comprehensive school counseling outcomes is required.

From 2008-09 through 2017-18, only secondary schools that served a greater percentage of students eligible for FRL than the state average and/or a higher dropout rate than the state average were eligible for funding. Recognizing the need to begin postsecondary readiness earlier, elementary schools were able to apply for funding beginning in the 2018-19 school year.
This brief examines school-level outcome data and grantee reports provided by CDE from the 99 non-alternative, secondary schools located across Colorado, 12% of all secondary schools, that had completed at least one three-year grant cycle during the 2011-12 through 2019-20 school years. For comparison purposes in this brief, schools that are designated alternative education campuses were removed from the state average for a more valid point of comparison.

Notably, SCCGP was successful in reaching their prioritized schools as demonstrated by comparing SCCGP funded schools’ averages compared to the state averages in these two key grant qualification criteria:

- SCCGP schools had a 0.7 to 1 percentage point higher dropout rate on average; and
- SCCGP schools served student bodies where 69% qualified for free or reduced price lunch as compared to 41%.

On average, the gaps between SCCGP funded high school graduation rates have been closing. Beginning in 2012, with a four percentage point difference, schools that have completed their SCCGP funding cycle by 2020, on average, are now two percentage points below the state average. SCCGP matriculation rates, entering postsecondary education, have also seen substantial growth, particularly in the last five years. Beginning with a nine percentage point difference in 2012, the difference in 2019 was two percentage points, nearly closing the gap between them and the state average.

Part of the success for matriculation may be due to the success SCCGP schools had supporting their students in completing the FAFSA, which is one of the ICAP personal financial literacy indicator elements (CDE, n.d.). SCCGP schools and the state averages had similar FAFSA completion rates until 2015 when SCCGP schools began realizing higher rates of three to six percentage points as compared to the state.

Another reason for SCCGP’s matriculation success could be attributed to its success in increasing concurrent enrollment in postsecondary coursework (early college), which is another ICAP element within the academic planning indicator. Most cohorts saw a substantial increase in concurrent postsecondary enrollment since receiving their SCCGP funding, ranging from 27 to 231 percent. The only exception is a highly rural cohort with limited access to higher education partners in their area.

“The school counselors were actively engaged across the district with a unified effort to increase FAFSA completion.”

/~ District Grant Coordinator
SPECIFIC INTERVENTION HIGHLIGHTS

SCCGP funds are used to hire additional licensed school counselors, develop or implement a comprehensive school counseling program aligned with ICAP state requirements, implement career awareness postsecondary preparatory services and programs, provide professional development to counselors and school staff aligned with SCCGP goals, and pay for college visits for students. District and school staff often note how impactful these funds are in carving out time and resources for planning and prioritizing the work.

Four high schools that have completed at least one SCCGP funding cycle over the program’s history have seen at least twenty percentage point increases in their graduation rate and nine percentage point increases in their matriculation rates since receiving SCCGP funds. The strategies these four schools employed had some similarities despite representing four different districts and some differences in types of schools and students served. They include:

- a traditional urban high school that serves more than 1,500 students with slightly more than half qualifying for FRL received funding in 2011-12 and again in 2017-18;
- an early college program in a low income suburb of Denver that serves nearly 250 students with 65% qualifying for FRL also received funds in 2011-12;
- a traditional high school in a smaller urban environment that serves approximately 750 students, of which 81% qualify for FRL, received funding in 2014-15; and
- a comprehensive high school in a low-income suburb of Denver and serves nearly 2,400 students with 78% qualifying for FRL received funds in 2015-16.

While each of these schools were engaged in other school-wide initiatives focused on improving academic achievement, each of them also focused on two key school counseling strategies that contributed to their significant improvement during and since the time they were funded by the SCCGP: individual career and academic plans (ICAPs); and interventions to keep students on-track to graduate, reflecting the academic planning element within the ICAP.

THE ROLE OF INDIVIDUAL CAREER AND ACADEMIC PLANS (ICAPs)

In 2009, the Colorado legislature passed a law requiring that all students grades 9-12 have an ICAP (1 CCR 301-81, rule 2.02 (1)(d)), which is defined as:

“a multi-year process that intentionally guides students and families in the exploration of career, academic, and postsecondary opportunities. With the support of adults, students develop the awareness, knowledge, attitudes, and skills to create their own meaningful and powerful pathways to postsecondary and workforce readiness” (CDE, n.d.).

Each of the four schools described above leveraged SCCGP resources to design ICAP lessons, upgrade to online systems and tools that hold the ICAP, and collaborate with district and school staff to effectively advocate for regular class time dedicated to the ICAP process and lessons delivered by counselors and/or teachers. One school that had not had a counselor for three years prior to receiving SCCGP funds created a comprehensive school counseling program with ICAPs at the center. The school counselor at that high school worked with other counselors within the district and teachers to develop ICAP lessons and activities that supported multiple learning objectives. The counselor was able to provide professional

“Having one more counselor allowed us to organize and implement ICAP with fidelity and reach all students”
~ Middle School Coordinator

“College visits to Metro State University and CU Boulder increased interest in ICAP completion and college attendance.”
~ High School Coordinator
This year’s coordination with core counseling to deliver ICAP instruction allowed the content to be better integrated with building priorities. In each setting, support for ICAP by the teachers and administration was higher than in previous years and the District support for the work is evident in the Management Plan that dictates District priorities for the next three years.

Finding a repository for student data and using the ICAP to shift course selection into a career planning activity demonstrates a true shift of practice in the District toward increased student directed support for their long-range plan.”

~ District Grant Coordinator

“Each senior participated in an individual meeting with the school counselor and [Denver Scholarship Fund] DSF college counselor. Based upon the meetings, students began applying for their future post-secondary interest.”

~ High School Coordinator

One of the schools hired an Education Specialist, who supported a group of significantly struggling students from an asset-based, student-driven approach to removing barriers to their academic success. The students decided they and their community needed a summer program to stay engaged over the break. This program was so successful that these student leaders continued to plan enrichment programming during all school breaks into the next year. These struggling students developed immense leadership and program planning skills that supported their ability and desire to stay on track and graduate as well as support their school community in breaking down systemic barriers to academic inequities.
SUGGESTIONS FOR OTHER STATES

School counselors should be viewed as change agents supporting the system in focusing on each student’s postsecondary and workforce readiness. Without counselors trained and focused on identifying data to develop comprehensive school counseling programs aligned with postsecondary goals, too often the system is unable to make the necessary shifts for sustainable, systemic change. Conversely, without systems that have the infrastructure to support data-driven postsecondary readiness programs, school counselors will not have the systemic impact that comprehensive school counseling programs can produce.

Thus, SCCGP was developed to prioritize the development and implementation of comprehensive school counseling programs, based on the ASCA National Model. With career and college readiness being one of the primary ASCA domains, the ICAP, or similar individualized career and academic planning processes, should be central to school counseling programs. While the ICAP requires a schoolwide approach, the school counselor is the champion of the process and supports the development and implementation of a robust process that ensures impact through meaningful career conversations with all staff. SCCGP is about more than reducing ratios; it’s about ensuring every student has access to and support from a licensed school counselor to develop and achieve their postsecondary and career goals.

After the first few years of implementing the grant program, SCCGP staff realized that to achieve this vision of school counseling, focused data-driven planning and school community engagement are an essential initial phase in the process of implementing a quality, schoolwide, sustainable program. Thus, SCCGP added a development year to the funding cycle that requires and supports grantees in utilizing data to design their programs while engaging their whole school community in identifying their priorities and opportunities. This development year requires great commitment from the state education agency to provide training and resources, which is only possible through strong collaboration with ASCA, the state school counseling association, and at least one school counselor education program. At this time, CDE provides three in-person trainings and monthly webinars to first year SCCGP grantees to build their capacity for developing quality comprehensive school counseling programs aligned to the ASCA National Model and that supports the state mandated ICAP process.
RESOURCES

Individual Career and Academic Plans www.cde.state.co.us/postsecondary/icap
School Counselor Corps Grant Program www.cde.state.co.us/postsecondary/schoolcounselorcorps

REFERENCES


Colorado Department of Education. (n.d.) High School ICAP Quality Indicators. Retrieved from www.cde.state.co.us/postsecondary/hsqualityindicatorsandelements


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