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Measure What Matters Most To Children  
Then Watch Them Achieve

## Achievia.org White Paper

### *Falling through the cracks*

#### **Why all students don't achieve**

Working as a school counselor, it doesn't take long to notice that student success is not just about finding the "right school", "right program", "right teacher", "right schedule", "right incentives" or "right consequences", even increased parent engagement can be lacking of real impact for certain students. Student achievement relies on something else. Sure, peer influence, teacher/student personality clashes and student life circumstances sometimes make student achievement difficult but these are not at the core of student success. Well, then what is? Great question.

Before I discuss what makes the biggest difference for students in regard to their achievement. It's important to talk about which school professionals are generally responsible for the oversight of student achievement and what their challenges are. If you haven't guessed it already, I'm talking about the modern day school counselor.

Well to start, some of my colleagues are single handedly responsible for the social, emotional and academic success of over 500 students throughout the school year. This alone makes the idea of providing customized support to every student quite daunting if you think about it. I have heard stories of school counselors being found crying under their desks from such overwhelm in the workplace and I must admit it, the thought has crossed my mind once or twice during the most hectic days of my career. And that's not all, along with caring for the academic, social and emotional success of their caseload, typical school counselors are also required to perform supervision during break and lunch, work on scheduling, event planning and testing coordination along with a plethora of team meetings and other district mandates. I don't say this to gain the pity of the reader however to honestly depict the challenges currently faced by our schools.

The fact is, schools have limited resources and generally only have the means to provide a minimal amount of individualized support to students. This level of support is enough to maintain general school operations and "Put out any fires" but is not enough to ensure that all students are truly successful. Sure, students get some basic academic help if they need it, some basic social/emotional support if they need it, some services and individual counseling, if they need it. The problem with this is the word NEED and how schools identify this need. The way that school counselors will commonly determine which students need support is when a student is referred. You may be wondering how a student gets referred, well I'll tell you.



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Currently, student referrals can be initiated in the following ways: by the student himself, the teacher, a parent, or another staff member and can relate to academics, social/emotional challenges or something else. The question that I want to ask you is what about the students who need support but have not gained the awareness of school staff or may not even know help is available. A referral for these students may take years if it happens at all. Many will thus fall through the cracks. But they don't have to.

The fact of the matter is, the longer students go without receiving the proper academic, social and emotional support, student achievement gaps become progressively wider to the point where for some students', achievement becomes nearly impossible. These students may experience life long struggles as a result and be seen later using drugs, or being incarcerated. We need to remember these students once spent over 6 hours a day surrounded with educators and professionals who care tremendously about children but still weren't able to make enough difference for them. So what went wrong?

The reason I bring these details to light is not to depress you regarding our country's youth, or instill hopelessness about our education system but to inspire educational leaders that a lack of massive student achievement is a problem that can be solved, and one that is worth solving. That is if something can be done about it.

Ok I'll say it; it is quite impossible for School counselors to reach every student with the counseling methods and resources that are currently available to them. Not because they don't have a heart big enough to do so, or the communication channels to reach every student, because they do. They can make morning announcements to the whole school, have assemblies, classroom presentations, facilitate small groups and provide support individually. It is in the process with which a school counselor identifies students who are requiring support and the process with which support is provided that needs a makeover.

Even when support is provided, accurately identifying what students really need is not as easy as it may sound. To help make this point a bit clearer, I'd like to tell you a story shared with me by a colleague regarding one of her students. Let's call him John.

*John is a 7-grade student who has been having recurring academic and behavioral problems in school (behaviors such as throwing things in class, cursing at other students, fighting and sleeping in class). John has been referred to the school counselor for individual counseling, met with the principal, dean, and other school staff all of which attempts had minimal impact on John's achievement. He has even had multiple parent/teacher conferences however continue to struggle.*



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*One day, in observing another student, the counselor noticed that John was squinting while viewing the whiteboard; this momentary behavior was then followed by a typical outburst as John initiated a conflict with another student.*

*The counselor later asked John, "I noticed you squinting when trying to view the board, were you able to see the assignments clearly?" John said "no". When asked how long John has struggled to see, it became clearer to the counselor that John's challenges which caused so much confusion among his parents and the school staff may have had a more simple solution than she ever could have imagined. John stated that he has struggled to see the board for multiple years.*

This case may sound unique, but "Aha" moments like these happen quite often in schools. The reason for this is that students are not always aware of their own limitations. Their young age prevents them from having the ability to see what stifles them. Parents don't have it much easier. They are often so busy making a living and lacking the information necessary to help their child achieve success. For many students, it is dependent on the diligence of the school that many life-impacting limitations are brought to the surface and remedied for students.

John's counselor then called the parent and provided information and research regarding the impact that a lack of glasses can have on a student struggling to see in the classroom environment and requested that John be taken to get glasses immediately. The counselor even offered information regarding a local community agency that provides free eye exams and glasses to children called "Vision to Learn". A couple weeks later, the counselor went to observe John in the classroom and noticed a much higher level of engagement from John. John finally got his glasses. This is a reality for many students, not just John.

### Section 3: But where are the parents?

It is quite common amongst school staff to regard parental influence as the primary factor impacting student success. For many schools, this is a fair determination as depending on the school's schedule, some teachers may see a student no more than an hour a day, and remember that their time is split between the whole class. Sometimes leaving no more than 3 minutes of dedicated time per student per day.

The problem with this belief is that it is disempowering for teachers and school staff. Through this lens they will always see themselves as lacking the ability to fully support students. And thus students, who come to school successful, will continue to be successful and those who don't won't.



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But where are the parents anyway. Well for many public school parents, working enough hours to maintain the household monopolizes family time, and a lack of information, research and resources means they are not utilizing best practices for parenting school age children. Many families require support themselves which they may lack the access to. For these reasons, students are perfectly positioned to act as a mediator to get families the support and resources they need. When students come to school knowing that their families are doing well, they are more able and willing to do their best as students.

In summary, the methods currently employed by schools to understand students and identify their needs are inadequate. The general lack of a school's real and honest understanding of students is hurting students' ability to succeed and limiting their future. Some areas in which school may benefit from better understanding students are: general student needs such as in the case of John, student strengths, student learning styles, Love language, etc. Schools have a responsibility to better understand their students and by doing this, they can improve the efficacy of the resources provided and be able to reach more students by not providing ineffective support. In an environment where resources are already so limited, being resourceful, and efficient is key.

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