

**GEAR UP Counseling Program:
An Effective Model for Increasing Counseling Services in Schools with Students at Risk**

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Children living in poverty are faced with many obstacles such as poor physical health, family instability and a lack of services in the community (Costello-Wells, McFarland, Reed, & Walton, 2003). This often results in emotional and behavioral adjustment issues in the school setting and a lack of academic success (Power, 2003). According to Armbruster & Lichtman (1999), school-based programs remove the barriers and provide access to an underserved population.

Schools are a primary setting to address the counseling and referral needs of children living in poverty. However, many schools lack the resources to adequately address the multiple challenges presented by these children and their families. The GEAR UP Counseling Program is an effective and inclusive approach for expanding the counseling services available for middle and high school students in economically impacted areas by utilizing the skills of advanced master's and doctoral level students in counselor education and counseling psychology.

The Purpose of the GEAR UP Counseling Program

The primary purpose of the GEAR UP Counseling Program is to provide counseling services to schools with students at risk. Romano and Kachgal (2004) have emphasized the importance of schools as the primary setting for the identification and referral of children and adolescents needing mental health services. They also point out that many parents simply do not have the economic resources to seek counseling services external to the school. Yet the ratio for school counselors to students remains extremely high. These counselor-student ratios do not consider that the makeup of many schools in economically impacted communities have as many as 70% - 80% of their student populations on free school lunch programs which is one of the determinants of poverty. These schools also have large numbers of students with assessed needs for special education services which exacerbates difficulties in the schools. As Whiston (2004) notes, it is important that these students benefit from advocacy and leadership skills of school counselors but it is also important that they have the benefit of receiving direct services in the school in the form of brief individual counseling and group work. Some of this work may also involve parents and/or guardians as needed. Given these circumstances, it is clear that school counselors need additional resources as they try to meet the needs of the children and the families they serve.

According to the Michigan School Counselor Association (2005) recommendations for the distribution of counselor time, at the middle school and high school level, a counselor should spend 30-40% of their time on responsive services which include individual and group counseling, crisis counseling, referral and peer facilitation. Due to the demands placed on school counselors to provide individual student planning and systems support, there is often inadequate time to provide these responsive services. By contrast, GEAR UP counselors are able to focus on working with students in this capacity, providing a unique opportunity for students with serious emotional need. In addition, the GEAR UP counseling program provides other services that are not normally provided on a regular basis by school counselors. Some examples of these programs are, school-wide programs and parenting programs. The services provided through the GEAR UP

program, like similar school-based mental health programs, augment but do not replace the programs delivered by the school personnel (Kenny, M., Waldo, M., & Warter, E., 2002).

The Beneficiaries

The primary beneficiaries are the students and families of Bangor Public Schools, in Bangor, MI. These student and families may benefit directly or indirectly. They benefit directly in that the counselors work with identified students and/or their families in individual or group counseling. The families may attend a workshop put on by the counselors, or may consult with the counselors about a student's progress.

The students and families benefit indirectly in that the counselors provide additional manpower which ultimately reduces the workload of the school personnel. The counselors provide specific services that assist staff in their role. An example of this is that the counselors may provide classroom guidance lessons touching on a particular topic that a teacher may deem relevant to their students. The counselors are also available to assist teachers with specific issues that may be occurring in their classroom. For example, if a particular teacher determines that there is a need for training in diversity in his/her classroom, a counselor can provide this training. Counselors are available to assist with certain students if they are struggling with behavioral problems, and can be part of the teaming process. Counselors can write behavior intervention plans for students and can do observations of students in classrooms and provide feedback to the teacher and/or student and family.

Implementation

The GEAR UP Counseling program is a collaborative effort between Western Michigan University's (WMU) Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology Department (CECP) and Bangor Public Schools. The counseling program is set in the middle school, high school and Community Education Center (CEC), which is the district's alternative high school. The sites were selected based on the GEAR UP grant funding of particular student cohorts.

The GEAR UP counselors are master's or doctoral-level counselors in the CECP department at WMU. The program is supervised by a department faculty member, and an advanced doctoral student provides on-site supervision.

The counselors were selected through extensive interviews and based on training and prior work experience. Once selected, the counselors participated in a thorough orientation process provided

by the department faculty member and covered such issues as confidentiality, record keeping, and professionalism. They were also given training on the Bangor School District policies and on the nuances of working in a school setting. The counselors were also expected to attend the Bangor School District professional development training prior to the start of the school year and throughout the school year.

Four GEAR UP counselors provided service at Bangor Public Schools during the 2007-2008 school year. Two counselors were at the middle school, one counselor was at the high school, and one counselor was at the CEC. The GEAR UP counselors were provided with office space in each of the schools. Each counselor provided approximately 16 hours of services per week, with a total number of service hours of 64 hours per week.

Each GEAR UP counselor typically worked with approximately 6-10 students per week providing individual counseling on a regular basis. In addition, counselors met with students for crisis intervention, conflict resolution, and academic support. GEAR UP counselors provided group counseling on an on-going basis including such groups as Anger Management, Social Skill Development, Career Planning, Issues of Grief, and Life Skills. The counselors developed and implemented school-wide anti-bullying programs, conflict resolution programs, and a mock college-draft activity promoting an interest in post-secondary education. In addition, the counselors provided parenting programs for families of the Bangor School District including a “G2 Conference” which was a morning workshop offering training in teen substance abuse, relaxation techniques, teen self-harming behavior, and self-esteem issues for children.

In addition to the on-going programming activities and regular direct service with students, the GEAR UP counselors were available to assist teachers in the classroom by providing classroom guidance lessons, and by observing students with behavioral issues upon request. The counselors took part in teaming meetings with students, consulted with staff, families and out-side agencies, and maintained appropriate case documentation and record keeping.

Program evaluation

Since the outset of the program, the primary focus has been on providing direct service to students and families of the Bangor Public School district. There has been on-going quantitative data collection through the use of a log in which counselors report the number of students they have seen each day and the type of service provided.

Qualitative data has been from annual written evaluations from school personnel and students. The results of this data collection are provided in the chart below:

**GEAR UP COUNSELING SERVICES
END OF YEAR FEEDBACK
RESULTS OF SURVEY:**

Teacher:	<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>
1. I have referred one or more students for counseling services	10	2
2. I am familiar with what services are provided by GEAR UP counselors	9	1
3. I believe my student(s) are benefiting from the services	12	0
4. The counselors have worked in my classroom in some capacity	1	11
5. I believe my student(s) have benefited from the school-wide programs	12	0
6. I would like to see GEAR UP counseling return next year	12	0
Student:	<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>
1. I Know how to see a counselor	121	30
2. I have seen a counselor for individual counseling this year	46	104
3. I have been a member of a counseling group this year	37	113
4. I think the counseling services should continue next year	114	33
5. I think the counseling services were a positive addition	112	38

Teacher comments:

“I love the services! We desperately need them next year for the incoming 6th graders. Both boys and girls coming up to the 6th grade are in conflict most of the time with each other. We could really use intensive conflict resolution programs to help them. PLEASE, PLEASE, COME BACK AND HELP US!”

"I think you are a wonderful addition to our school. You have provided professional services that some of these students may never have received. Please come back next year."

"Could they start it earlier next year? I think especially the academic counseling help has really made a difference!"

"I think the students really benefit from your services and hope the program continues for a very long time! Thanks for all that you do!"

Student comments:

"I've been behaving better."

"I learned not to say things or spread rumors about anyone."

"I'm more confident in myself." It relieves me from stress and it helps when I need to talk to someone."

"I had a change because you helped me open up."

"I've been nicer."

"I have better grades."

"I learned that bullying is not the way to go."

"It has helped me set better goals."

"I learned to take anger out in a positive way."

(References, next page)

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