

Primary Transitions: How Elementary School Counselors

Promote Optimal Transitions

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### Abstract

Early school transitions provide students with opportunities and challenges that will impact their academic and developmental pathways, but the role that the elementary school counselor can play in these transitions is often overlooked in school counseling literature. The transition into kindergarten and the transition from second to third grade are critical times where school counselors can support students. Practical recommendations, based upon research, for best practices are provided for elementary school counselors in order to support students and families as they transition into kindergarten and across second and third grades.

## Primary Transitions: How Elementary School Counselors Promote Optimal Transitions

The importance of transitions in elementary, middle, and high school is well documented in the education and school counseling literature (Sink, Edwards, & Weir, 2007; Akos, Shoffner, & Ellis, 2007; Turner, 2007). Transitions are key times where children face new and challenging tasks as they move from familiar to unknown and more complex surroundings. Educators recognize that transitions have opportunities to promote positive development for students, but, if unmanaged, can result in anxiety or stress that affects learning and relationships (Turner, 2007). Failure to cope effectively with the demands of the new environment can have consequences that impact immediate and long term adjustment. Most noted by educators, researchers, and administrators are the academic struggles faced by children as a result of unsuccessful transitions. Because of these challenges, transition planning is essential in schools in order to encourage academic achievement for all learners.

Research suggests that an effective school counseling program is one component that addresses transitions systematically and proactively in efforts to support all students (Dimmitt & Carey, 2007). When a comprehensive school counseling program promotes optimal transitions, outcomes include lower retention rates, higher graduation rates, more students from underrepresented populations being placed in higher level courses, fewer behavior problems and expulsion rates, and more satisfied parents (NCDPI, 2007).

The transition into kindergarten and the transition from second to third grade are critical times in a child's elementary school experience that are often overlooked in

school counseling research. Literature shows that kindergarten is one of the most significant transitions faced by elementary school aged children (Dockett & Perry, 2001; Pianta & Cox, 1999; Zill, 1999). Studies have found that approximately 50% of students have difficulty adjusting to kindergarten (Pianta & Cox, 1998), which affects their academic and behavioral success in elementary school. The kindergarten transition allows school counselors the opportunity to support children and families during this shift into school and provide the first induction for the key stakeholders to the school counseling program.

While the transition into kindergarten provides school counselors with the first chance to nurture children and families in an unfamiliar environment, addressing the transition from second to third grade allows school counselors the opportunity to prepare children and family for one of the first dramatic academic and developmental shifts that occur in elementary school. Teachers, school counselors, and administrators alike tend to recognize that the importance of third grade, as standardized testing begins and children have higher demands and expectations placed upon them (Kainz & Vernon-Feagans, 2007).

This manuscript will highlight the relevant research about these two transitions and provide research informed recommendations about the vital role elementary school counselors can play. We argue that if students and families are supported during these transitions, students will have more opportunities to be successful and schools will initiate enhanced relationships with families from the start.

### Transition Into Kindergarten

The transition into kindergarten represents a distinct shift in children's lives (Dockett & Perry, 2001; NCDPI, 2007; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). The discontinuity between preschool and kindergarten settings presents a dramatic transformation. Class size, school environment, parent involvement, social relationships, academic demands, and behavioral expectations change as children enter kindergarten and begin formal schooling (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). Recent studies have found that children starting school exhibit higher levels of stress than do children in preschool settings (Schleibs, 2007). Concurrent with these challenges associated with the transition into school, studies have demonstrated that critical competencies, such as social and academic skills, for future school successes are established in kindergarten (Early, Pianta, Taylor, & Cox, 2001). Pianta and Kraft-Sayre (2003) found that "children's early schooling can be considered a critical period that sets the trajectory for their future school adjustment" (p. 2).

#### *Developmental Perspectives*

When children make this significant transition into school, the environment and expectations shift concurrent with growing developmental changes. Children ages three to five are beginning to demonstrate positive assets, including increasing independence and responsibility (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000), while also starting to feel more comfortable when separated from familiar people.. Children's social networks change from interacting primarily with adults to interacting more with other children, and many experience difficulty in these novel interactions with peers. Cognitively, children are expanding their language skills, exploring their world by being actively involved with the

materials and people in their environment, and developing a sense of how reading, writing, and numbers work. They are still concrete learners, needing hands-on experiences and choices, and remain egocentric, but are beginning to see that others may have different perspectives.

### *Ecological Challenges*

While these cognitive, social, and physical shifts are taking place within kindergarteners, they also are presented with environmental opportunities that can impact their development. Factors that affect the transition to school include teacher expectations for children, children's expectations of school, social relationships, academic challenges, and family support for children starting school (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000).

Academically, kindergarten is an environment that places an emphasis on formal instruction, often differing from a more child-centered, less demanding preschool environment. Kindergarteners tend to spend more time in large and small group settings, participate in more structured activities, and have larger teacher/student ratios than previous preschool or home settings (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). One preschooler observed changes in kindergarten by noting, "At preschool they read to you, at school you learn to read" (Perry, Dockett & Tracey, 1998, p. 6). Though kindergarten is becoming increasingly focused upon academics, many children are not developmentally ready for the formal instruction taking place and have difficulty with adjustment. Further, the basis of children's reward system changes as children enter school. They become rated according to how well they do *in comparison* to their peers, as opposed to being rated primarily by how much they have improved or grown up

(Entwisle & Alexander, 1999). This shift can present anxieties among children as they begin to compare themselves academically to peers.

Along with expectations, kindergarteners have indicated that they are most concerned about rules and consequences in the classroom (Dockett & Perry, 2001). They are expected to learn new social routines and follow rules in unfamiliar places, including the classroom, cafeteria, or bus (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Educators seem to prioritize students who can function successfully in the classroom as opposed to students with high academic skills (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta).

While students are experiencing shifts academically as they transition to kindergarten, tension exists between change and stability among a child's social relationships (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Children are expected to create relationships with unknown adults and peers when they enter kindergarten. Students that exhibit a lack of appropriate social skills are at risk for rejection by teachers and peers when they transition to kindergarten (Stormont, Beckner, Mitchell, & Richter, 2005). Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (2000) found evidence that the system of relationships among social contexts plays a functional role in influencing transition outcomes; when the child is supported by strong social relationships with peers, family, and teachers, transition outcomes are improved. Similarly, Dockett and Perry (2001) suggest that effective transition programs focus on building and enhancing these relationships. Children's ability to form meaningful relationships is crucial to their successful transition and influential in their later school careers.

The emphasis on academic skills and demands to interact with wide ranges of children is very challenging for students as they transition into kindergarten (Rimm-

Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Teachers have indicated that 48% of children entering kindergarten have transition problems, including difficulties following directions, working independently, and struggling academically (Early, Pianta, Taylor, & Cox, 2001). Parents have also recognized that the transition into school presents obstacles. In an analysis of parent observations and perceptions, forty-seven percent of parents perceived the transition process to be negative and reflected difficulties throughout the process (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 1999). Parents in the study indicated that ongoing communication, agreed upon performance standards, familiarity with school, and previous experience preschool or childcare were helpful in easing the transition process.

In addition, parents have also emphasized their concerns about children adjusting socially to the school environment (Dockett & Perry, 2001). The study of parent observations about children's transition to kindergarten showed that parents worry about their child adjusting to other adults in the unfamiliar settings, separating easily to join the kindergarten class, and being able to interact and respond appropriately with nonfamilial adults. Further, parents may be anxious that someone would not appreciate the "specialness" of their child or that teachers would not come to know and appreciate their child in a positive and responsive way.

These ecological connections between children, parents, and teachers may play an important role in determining early school trajectories and in establishing a pathway toward positive outcomes (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). A full understanding of a child's social and academic readiness for school must examine these relationships among the child's characteristics and home, school, peer, family, and neighborhood

contexts. The ecological contexts have a direct influence on the child's competence and adjustment to school (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta).

*Risk Factors.* While the transition to school presents opportunities and challenges for all students, it can be particularly difficult for students from impoverished backgrounds (Early, Pianta, Taylor, & Cox, 2001). Familial risk factors include parent's educational attainment, family income and poverty status, race/ethnicity, and family structure, (McLeod, 2007). The gap in school readiness is widened when English is not the primary language spoken at home (Farkas & Hilbel, 2007). Children who occupy disadvantaged social locations (e.g., emerging or existing disabilities) have more cognitive and behavioral barriers at the time of school entry. Studies have shown that low income students are at greatest risk of school failure at kindergarten entry, are more likely to have parents who are not involved in their education, and are more likely to attend schools that do not offer transition practices (Schulting, Malone & Dodge, 2006).

While family factors are an indicator of children who may experience difficult transitions, the educational backgrounds of children can also be a variable. Children who have not attended preschool are more likely to be academically or behaviorally unprepared (Bierman, Nix, & Makin-Byrd, 2007; Schulting, Malone, & Dodge, 2006). Academic skills needed by incoming kindergarteners include language, pre-literacy skills, and number concepts, while behavioral skills needed involve the ability to appropriately manage attention, emotions, and behavior in a school setting (Bierman, Nix, & Makin-Byrd, 2007). This research allows school counselors to target and support individual children most at risk in order to help close the gaps in student achievement.

### *Recommendations for Best Practice*

Current literature on the transition into kindergarten highlights effective transition practices and programs, but neglects to account for the role of the school counselor in this process. Elementary school counselors have the developmental and intervention expertise to play a large role in promoting an optimal transition into kindergarten and this concurrently provides an opportunity for school counselors to induct students and families to a comprehensive school counseling program (e.g., ASCA National Model).

Presently, transition practices are far from optimal because they tend to vary from teacher to teacher, require more teacher/administrator preparation (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003), and do not incorporate child, parent, and teacher focused activities (Early, Pianta, Taylor & Cox, 2001). The kindergarten transition often solely involves minimal contact with children immediately prior to the start of kindergarten (Stormont, Beckner, Mitchell, & Richter, 2005). Low intensity, group oriented strategies that occur just before or right after the beginning of the school year are the most common practices among schools. Most schools do not provide a comprehensive transition plan that allows teachers and parents to exchange important information about child development and school expectations (Nelson, 2004). A majority of parents and teachers express preference for transition programming practices which are more geared toward the individual needs of families and children and are planned and implemented by a team of people involved in the transition (Dockett & Perry, 2001).

Although barriers exist to transition planning, such as receiving class lists late or lack of parent participation, kindergarten transition programs have been shown to have a positive effect on academic achievement and parent initiated school involvement

during the kindergarten year (Schulting, Malone & Dodge, 2006). We aim to present and suggest how school counselors can use effective transition practices to support children as they enter kindergarten. Our integration of recommendations from research and intervention studies are provided for primary school counselors under a COPE framework: Collaborate, Outreach, Promote, and Evaluate (COPE). We provide two types of action plans utilizing the ASCA National Model format for elementary school counselors to address the transition to kindergarten in Tables 1 and 2. The first, a curriculum action plan, includes four practices aimed at supporting the transition to kindergarten for all children and families. The second, a closing the gap action plan, outlines outreach practices that target students and families that may be at risk for a difficult transition. While not exhaustive, these action plans are based upon the COPE framework and drawn from previous intervention studies shown to be effective in supporting children's transition to kindergarten.

*Collaborate.* The transition to kindergarten is not just an experience for the individual child, but it is a community experience involving a wide range of people including teachers and school personnel, families, and preschools. When children realize that they have the support of groups within their respective communities, starting school can be a positive and exciting experience (Dockett & Perry, 2001). Collaborative practices should occur between schools and families to encourage parent involvement throughout the transition. In situations where positive relationships had been established between families and schools, children, parents, and teachers reported positive feelings about the transition to school; where such relationships were not evident, hesitations, anxieties, and concerns prevailed (Dockett & Perry, 2001). The use

Table 1.

*Transition to Kindergarten Curriculum Action Plan*

Audience	Content	ASCA Domain/Standard	Resources Needed	Projected Start/End Date	Projected Number of Students Affected	Location	Evaluation Methods	Contact Person
Incoming kindergarten families	Family and school collaboration to provide opportunities for children to “practice” being in kindergarten with their parents acting as a scaffold	Academic: Improve Academic Self-Concept and Achieve School Success;  Personal/Social: Acquire and apply self-knowledge	Teachers, open classrooms, open cafeteria, snacks, bus, transportation for families	One-two weeks prior to start of school	All incoming kindergarten students	At school	Parent and teacher surveys	School counselor
Incoming kindergarten students from local preschools and day care	Outreach to local preschools to offer school tours for rising kindergarten students and their parents	Academic: Improve Academic Self-Concept and Achieve School Success;  Personal/Social: Acquire and apply self-knowledge	Preschool teachers, tour guides (possibly 5 <sup>th</sup> grade student ambassadors), open classrooms and resource rooms	April - June	Incoming kindergarten students who attend preschool	At school	Preschool teacher surveys	School counselor
Kindergarten students	Promote overall student strengths through a classroom guidance unit that focuses on expectations, rules, and routines within the kindergarten structure	Academic: Improve Academic Self-Concept and Achieve School Success;  Personal/Social: Acquire and apply self-knowledge	Lesson plans, children’s literature, activity resources	September - October	All kindergarten students	In classrooms	Teacher pre/post assessments  Student pre/post assessment  Teacher observations	School counselor

Table 2.

*Transition to Kindergarten Closing The Gap Action Plan*

Contact Person	Intended Effects on Academics or Behavior	ASCA Student Competency	ASCA Domain/Standard	Type of Activity to be Delivered in What Manner?	Resources Needed	Projected Number of Students Impacted	Evaluation Methods	Project Start/End Date
School counselor	Collaborative, strengths-based educational group counseling to impact parenting for children deemed at risk in order to build successful transitions	PS:A1.4 PS:A1.11	Personal/Social: Acquire self-knowledge	Parent Psycho-Educational Groups, breakfast sessions over the year	Breakfast, group session plans, resources for parents	At risk kindergarten families that volunteer to participate	Pre/Post test for parents	Throughout the year
School counselor	Outreach to students identified as having academic/behavioral difficulties in kindergarten transition	PS:A1.1 PS:A1.6 PS:B1.2 A:A1.2 A:A1.5	Personal/Social: Acquire and apply self-knowledge  Academic: Improve Academic Self-Concept	Kindergarten group counseling, weekly sessions for 8 weeks	Session plans and resources for individual sessions	"At risk" kindergarten students	Pre/Post survey to kindergarten teachers	November-January
School counselor and ESL teacher	Promote information about kindergarten readiness and registration to parents who do not speak English as their primary language	A:A1.2 A:A1.5 A:B1.4 A:B1.5	Academic: Improve Academic Self-Concept, Improve Learning	Newsletters translated in Spanish, information sessions provided in Spanish	Spanish translator, easily accessible community location to hold information/registration sessions	ESL kindergarten families	Parent interviews	April - September

of informal gatherings, such as family days during the summer at a local park, classroom open houses, or open days for rising families to tour kindergarten, or formal practices, such as kindergarten information sessions or preschool tours, can provide opportunities for school personnel and teachers to get to know families and children. One example is to provide a family day in kindergarten one to two weeks prior to the start of the year. Parents are able to accompany students to the school and act as a scaffold while students engage in typical kindergarten activities such as listening to stories, working at centers, eating a snack in the cafeteria, getting on and off the bus, and cooperating with peers. By spending a morning at school with their family, children are able to become introduced to kindergarten expectations, feel more comfortable with school routines, and create connections between peers and families. Concurrently, school counselors can use these types of gatherings as a means to inform parents about the role of a comprehensive, developmental school counseling program in supporting student development and achievement. When families are involved in kindergarten transition practices there is a positive effect of parent involvement in schools which, in turn, contributes to academic achievement (Schulting, Malone, & Dodge, 2006).

Transition practices that are specifically designed to meet the needs of high risk families may have an even greater positive effect on kindergarten outcomes (Schulting, Malone, & Dodge, 2006), which suggests that school transition policies should be expanded to focus on targeting low income students and families (or other potential risk factors). Predicted achievement scores of average and low income children receiving kindergarten transition practices were substantially higher than they would have been

had they attended schools that did not offer such practices. Suggestions for practices with at risk families include utilizing a parent support group to provide culturally sensitive interventions targeting parent skills and building resources and social networks to parents, as noted in Table 2 (Bierman, Nix, & Makin-Byrd, 2007). Brief family meetings over the first few months of school at easily accessible community locations (e.g. churches, libraries, etc.) is an example of an intervention that addresses parenting skills while also creating a support system for parents.

*Outreach.* The collaborative practices have to be a result of significant outreach by school counselors to preschools and those families that are at risk for difficult kindergarten transitions. Currently, there is a disconnect between children's prior to school settings (preschool, Headstart, or home) and kindergarten. This dissonance negatively influences children's adjustment to kindergarten (Stormont, Beckner, Mitchell, & Richter, 2005). School counselors can advocate on a district-wide or school-wide level for outreach practices that involve local preschools during the spring before kindergarten begins. These practices could include holding orientation meetings, taking preschool children to visit kindergartens, and providing information sharing activities for preschool and current kindergarten families in local settings (Dockett & Perry, 2001). School counselors can implement guided kindergarten tours for local preschools, as noted in Table 1. Depending on appropriate matching, upper elementary students can serve as Student Ambassadors and act as tour guides for small groups of students. The purpose of these tours is to introduce children to kindergarten, ease anxiety about kindergarten expectations, and create excitement for the upcoming year. In the best of circumstances, elementary school counselors do not have to add the bulk of these

duties. Instead they can play various roles in these practices, such as advocating for a district level early childhood education coordinator, organizing the meetings, or presenting about the personal/social aspect of the kindergarten transition.

Outreach practices can also include targeting students for interventions in order to promote successful kindergarten transitions. One example of an outreach practice is provided in Table 2, outlining a psycho-educational group for students having difficult transitions. This kindergarten group, named “Kindergarten Conquerors,” focuses on skills that kindergarteners need to learn in order to be successful at school. Groups must be culturally relevant and may cover the importance of following rules, using cooperative strategies, getting help from traditional and special education services, handling mistakes, or learning self control. Group activities should include role plays, puppets, and stories to help students transfer learning from the group into the classroom.

*Promote.* Families and children feel encouraged when transition practices promote their strengths and competencies (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). Parents, teachers, and children have indicated that these positive dispositions about school are one of the key factors in a successful transition to school (Dockett & Perry, 2001). School counselors can assess individual and family strengths to utilize these assets in transition practices. Parenting information sessions, parenting meetings, and kindergarten open houses can all focus on eliciting and enhancing what parents are already doing. School counselors can reinforce that all parents do have the capacity to provide for their children the experiences needed to get them ready for school (Bierman, Nix, & Makin-Byrd, 2007). When school counselors are working with individual students,

groups of students, or whole classrooms, identification and promotion of capabilities children bring to school can be utilized to build prevention and intervention plans.

Specifically, school counselors can deliver classroom guidance units to kindergarten classrooms to promote developmental strengths (e.g., independence, responsibility, or curiosity), helping to empower students to learn kindergarten routines and model kindergarten expectations. As shown on Table 1, this unit should be delivered for the first six to eight weeks of school and done within the structure of the kindergarten classroom. The school counselor and kindergarten teacher can collaborate to provide children with opportunities to role play and practice demonstrating kindergarten routines and behaviors. The unit can be designed to target and promote student strengths by observing children during role plays and identifying specific skills demonstrated by students.

School counselors are also able to promote connections between home and school by providing school information to parents of special needs students or to non-English speaking parents. The school counselor can advocate to provide information newsletters, packets, and letters in English and Spanish about special needs and ESL resources within the school and to use a translator if needed during parent information sessions. In order to engage all parents in the school community, services need to be culturally relevant (e.g., discussing cultural expectations of schools) and provided to all parent populations.. Also, practices for at risk students and families could include organizing registration and information sessions at easily accessible locations in efforts to involve more families (Schulting, Malone, & Dodge, 2006).

*Evaluate.* Evaluating the transition programs implemented is essential in order to establish the credibility of the programs and in demonstrating the value of programs to the wider community (Dockett & Perry, 2001). Effective transition plans are well planned and evaluated with clearly stated objectives that have been developed in collaboration with all of the stakeholders. Parents, early childhood educators, and children should all be included in the evaluation. Examples of data that could be used to inform decisions about transition practices include children's drawings and comments, parent surveys and comments, indications of children's well-being at school (e.g. attendance patterns, interactions with peers, familiarity and comfort in the environment), teacher reactions, district kindergarten assessments, and curriculum and closing the gap action plans (ASCA, 2005). These data should also be disaggregated by variables associated with risk (e.g., free/reduced lunch, race, etc.) to determine what is effective for those most in need.

### Second to Third Grade Transition

While students and families are presented with new opportunities throughout the transition into kindergarten, the transition from second to third grade represents a central academic shift for many students. Formal standardized testing begins and students move from learning to read to expectations of reading to learn. Children who make a smooth transition from second to third grade are better able to make the most of their learning opportunities (NCDPI, 2007). While educators recognize the importance of this transition in elementary school, there is very little research available about it. Our experience tells us that the transition from second to third grade is an area where children, families, and teachers need further support and guidance. We present ideas

that are pulled from developmental and related educational literature to address how school counselors can provide best practices during this transition.

### *Developmental Perspectives*

The transition from second to third grade marks a shift for students both academically and developmentally. While students are undergoing differences in their academic environment, they are also building sources of strength in their physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development. Children in this transition are in Erikson's industry vs. inferiority stage (Santrock, 2008), meaning they are encountering a period of imagination, discovery, and enthusiasm for learning. They will eagerly take on tasks where they can be successful and experience mastery. However, if children are not supported during this period and have unsuccessful experiences at school, they are more likely to develop feelings of inferiority, incompetence, or unproductivity.

Cognitively, students are continuing to develop in Piaget's concrete operational stage (Santrock), moving towards multi-step problem solving, and are beginning to view issues from other perspectives. Their brains have matured to where they can begin to learn formal rules of reading, writing, and math (Armstrong, 2007) that students will confront when they enter third grade. Though students are developing new capacities for growth, the heterogeneity in developmental needs to be acknowledged and then nurtured with differentiated instruction.

### *Ecological Challenges*

Just as in kindergarten, these developmental possibilities unfold as students undergo major changes in their learning environment. The focus in academics shifts from learning to read to reading to learn, learning to write to writing in a formalized

format, developing problem solving strategies to solve multi-step problems, and moving from non-standardized assessments to standardized testing (NCDPI, 2007). Elementary classroom curriculum moves away from basic reading instruction; however, subsequent learning in core subjects depends on independent reading, making the transition difficult for struggling readers (Kainz & Vernon-Feagans, 2007). A further discrepancy exists for students that are challenged by these shifts in learning that take place because classroom time and third grade curriculum is becoming more and more focused on preparation for standardized testing (Armstrong, 2007). Third grade students have increased expectations for independent thought and mastery of more complex concepts (Marcon, 2000).

*Risk Factors.* While the transition presents complexities for all rising third grade students, it can be particularly difficult for students who are already displaying low academic achievement (Kainz & Vernon-Feagans, 2007). One factor that contributes to the transition is the independent reading level of students entering third grade. Students that are struggling with independent reading have challenges with assignments that require them to read material in order to learn. Research shows that minority students are overrepresented in having low literacy skills (Foster & Miller, 2007) and that children living in poverty are overrepresented in reading delays (Kainz & Vernon-Feagans). Children's pattern of reading development becomes more difficult to disrupt through general classroom instruction (Kainz & Vernon-Feagans), suggesting that struggling readers need multiple levels of interventions throughout their transition into third grade. Further, studies have shown that low achievers in mathematics tend to have lower self-confidence in third grade (Kloosterman, Raymond, & Emanaker, 1996). Because of

developmental levels, third grade students are sensitive to criticism and tend to only participate in tasks where they can be successful (NCDPI, 2007).

A further risk factor includes family involvement. Parent participation can have a major influence on academic performance of third grade students (Quigley, 2000), but when parents are uninvolved children can suffer. Efforts to identify students that are at risk for a difficult third grade transition should target second grade students who lack parent participation. Second grade teachers can help with this identification.

These ecological and developmental opportunities that students encounter provide a basis for nurturing students throughout this transition. While there is much less research on these shifts, we suspect relationships and family are again important. We also believe that this transition provides an opportunity for school counselors to engage and help families to understand the resources provided by a comprehensive school counseling program.

#### *Recommendations for Best Practice*

The lack of current literature in this area suggests that this important transition and shift in a child's educational journey may be neglected. We again provide the COPE framework as a possible best practice to foster positive student development as children transition from second to third grade. As with the kindergarten transition, curriculum and closing the gap action plans are provided in Tables 3 and 4. These action plans outline the practices identified within the COPE framework and provide a foundation for school counselors to begin proactive practices that address this important elementary transition.

Table 3.

*Second To Third Grade Transition Curriculum Action Plan*

Audience	Content	ASCA Domain/Standard	Resources Needed	Projected Start/End Date	Projected Number of Students Affected	Location	Evaluation Methods	Contact Person
Second and Third Grade Teachers	Opportunity for second and third grade teachers to collaborate to discuss their grade level, observe the other grade level and process the experience	Academic: Improve Academic Self-Concept and Achieve School Success;  Personal/ Social: Acquire and apply self-knowledge	Class coverage, meeting room, Guiding questions for observation	April	All rising third grade students	Second and third grade classrooms	Survey of second and third grade teachers	School counselor
Rising third grade parents	Outreach to second grade families for a Step Up evening that provides information about third grade including developmental milestones, curriculum and testing program	Academic: Improve Academic Self-Concept and Achieve School Success  Personal/ Social: Acquire and apply self-knowledge	'Steppin' Up to Third Grade' handout	April	All third grade students	Third grade classrooms	Pre/Post survey of sample of parents	School counselor
Third grade students	Explicit classroom instruction to promote testing strategies and techniques	Academic: Improve Academic Self-Concept, Improve Learning	Classroom plan and materials, Sample tests and answer sheets	March-May	All third grade students	Third grade classrooms	Pre-EOG scores, EOG scores	March - May

Table 4.

*Second to Third Grade Transition Closing The Gap Action Plan*

Contact Person	Intended Effects on Academics or Behavior	ASCA Student Competency	ASCA Domain/Standard	Type of Activity to be Delivered in What Manner?	Resources Needed	Projected Number of Students Impacted	Evaluation Methods	Project Start/End Date
School counselor	Collaboration among grade levels as older students mentor at risk third grade students	A:A1.1 A:A2.2 A:A2.4	Academic: Improve Academic Self-Concept, Acquire Skills for Improving Learning	Peer mentoring	Peer mentors, meeting space, activity materials	At risk third grade students	Pre and post survey given to a third grade students and peer mentors	Throughout the year
School counselor	Small group counseling opportunity to provide outreach to struggling learners and teach skills in order to improve student success	A:A1.5 A:A2.3 A:B1.3 A:B2.1	Academic: Improve Academic Self-Concept, Acquire Skills for Improving Learning, Plan to Achieve Goals	"Superstar Student" small-group counseling, weekly sessions for 7 weeks	Group plan and materials	Third grade students who are non-proficient on Pre-EOG in math or reading	Pre-EOG scores, EOG scores, pre/post test on skills	September- November
School counselor	Individual counseling for students at risk for a difficult transition in order to promote individual strengths, build self- confidence, and create academic plans	A:A1.1 A:A1.3 A:A2.4 A:B2.1 A:B2.3 PS:A1.10	Academic: Improve Academic Self-Concept, Acquire Skills for Improving Learning, Plan to Achieve Goals  Personal/Social: Acquire Self-Knowledge	Individual counseling sessions	Academic plans	At risk third grade students	Pre-EOG scores, EOG scores, progress reports	September- November

*Collaborate.* Collaboration between second and third grade teachers can provide preparation for students that could reduce the stress of this shift (Akos, Augst, & Cockman, 2007). This vertical collaboration could involve several meetings between second and third grade teachers to discuss their grade level, student expectations, and teaching methods. Allowing open communication across grade levels allows for further consistency among classes. Involved in this process is an opportunity for teachers to observe or shadow teachers in the other grade level and get a better understanding of how to align and scaffold classroom curriculum and methods to better prepare or meet the needs of students. The school counselor's role in this collaborative process involves organizing meeting times among the second and third grade teachers, facilitating meetings, and assisting in organization of grade level observations. These meetings can take place throughout the year to enable teachers to understand developmental needs.

One of the meetings among second and third grade teachers can involve administrators in order to discuss curriculum expectations and gaps that are identified for struggling students. Although these conversations can be difficult, a school counselor is able to utilize specialized skills in communication to provide a solutions-focused framework during discussions that focuses on the goal of removing academic barriers for students. Engaging in this open dialogue about how best to prepare struggling students can begin to facilitate academic interventions and support that will continue throughout grade level transitions.

Further collaborative practices could involve targeting those students who are at risk for experiencing challenges during this transition. In particular, using student and

teacher data to identify students that are struggling with independent reading and have low family involvement provides a group of students that could benefit from transition practices. Utilizing collaboration among grade levels, carefully selected and prepared older students can serve as peer mentors when matched appropriately to third grade students most at risk. The mentor program involves the peer mentors and third grade students meeting throughout the school year. These meetings allow older students to share experiences of third grade, act as a role model, and help struggling students to build connections to school. The school counselor's role in this outreach practice can vary from organizing the student pairing of third grade students and mentors, training mentors, and collaborating with teachers to develop the outline or schedule of meetings throughout the year. Sessions can be focused around what students wish they had known about third grade, how to receive help, or advice for testing.

*Outreach.* In addition to vertical collaborative practices among teachers and administrators, school counselors can develop an informational session for family outreach. Transition research demonstrates that students are better prepared and experience more successful transitions when families and students are aware and informed about demands of a new environment (Turner, 2007). Supporting a successful transition into third grade includes reaching out to the family system of the students. Parents and teachers have a major influence on children at this age, so it is important for them to work closely together as they help children prepare for rigorous work and standardized tests (Quigley, 2000). An investigation of the impact of parent and teacher partnerships in third grade found that parent training workshops increase parent involvement and improve communication between teachers and parents, especially with

regard to issues surrounding academics and homework (Quigley, 2000). The involvement of parents also had a positive impact on student behavior, homework, and performance. These positive changes in teacher and parent perceptions and the shared responsibility for children's education have implications for promoting parent involvement at the third grade level. The school counselor can address parents in the spring before third grade begins through Second Grade Step-Up Night, an informational meeting discussing developmental milestones, third grade curriculum, and testing programs. Also included in this practice is the distribution of a handout, provided in both Spanish and English, addressing how parents can best help their child to succeed in third grade (Akos, Augst, & Cockman, 2007). Parents will be informed about third grade expectations and aware of ways they can stay involved to support their child's education.

Outreach practices can include all second grade students or target particular students in need of further support. An outreach practice that works to close academic achievement gaps involves the implementation of "Superstar Student" groups (Akos, Augst, & Cockman, 2007). Utilizing the Delivery Service component of the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2005), school counselors can assist students by providing groups for students who are deemed at risk for problematic transitioning (Dimmitt & Carey, 2007). These groups can teach skills that help students to develop positive learning habits, goal setting behaviors, and problem solving strategies. Targeting students that have special needs, poor academic records or low pre-test scores from the standardized tests given at the start of the year is beneficial because the gap for academic achievement widens in third grade (Foster & Miller, 2007). Because low

achievers in third grade tend to have lower self-concept, studies have shown that elementary educators need to make a pointed effort to help these students to believe their efforts are worthwhile (Kloosterman, Raymond, & Emanaker, 1996). The Superstar Student groups are opportunities for school counselors to address achievement gaps, foster positive academic skills in students, find additional resources and supports, and help low achievers build self-confidence in academic areas. The goal of these groups is to promote student strengths and skills, regardless of individual needs, weaknesses, or difficulties.

*Promote.* In addition to reaching out to families and students in third grade, school counselors can promote testing preparation for all third grade students, particularly those that are at risk for low achievement. A study found that low income and low achieving students can greatly benefit from instruction upon explicit testing strategies and techniques (Spatig, 1996). School counselors can address this need by providing classroom guidance that focuses on helping all students to develop test taking skills. Providing practice tests and answer sheets, teaching stress management techniques, and instructing about test taking tips provides explicit guidance that many students need on their first experiences with standardized testing.

Further, efforts to promote strengths of individual students that are most at risk for a difficult transition can improve self-confidence and academic habits (Kloosterman, Raymond, & Emanaker, 1996). Utilizing school data, school counselors can meet with struggling third grade students (e.g. low academic achievement and/or students with special needs) individually at the beginning of the school year. These individual counseling sessions can serve two functions. First, school counselors will use strategies

to recognize, promote, and enhance current sources of resiliency and strength in individual students. Second, school counselors can use these assets to develop individualized academic plans to serve as an intervention. Utilizing a strengths based approach allows school counselors to reframe academic problems that have occurred in the past into new opportunities to tap into abilities and teach academic habits (Rubin, 2005).

*Evaluate.* Evaluative practices can resemble practices from the kindergarten transition, but can also involve school data from standardized pretest and test scores. Testing data can help school counselors to target individual students, identify the academic gaps from second to third grade, and evaluate the effectiveness of transition practices. Also behavioral, attendance, and teacher perception data can be utilized to further identify students at risk for a difficult transition in third grade.

#### Conclusion and Implications for School Counselors

Elementary school counselors are in the unique position to nurture and support students and families throughout early transition processes. These transitions provide universal opportunities for growth, development, and academic preparedness. Addressing the transition into kindergarten and the transition from second to third grade is incumbent for elementary school counselors in efforts to promote positive development and opportunities for academic achievement. The research, intervention studies, and recommendations emphasize the importance of early transitions for developmental and academic pathways of all students, particularly those most at risk. Through proactive transition practices, elementary school counselors are able to reach out to the entire student population during these processes.

Though transitions are periods where children can build and enhance assets to impact their educational futures, they are also times where elementary school counselors are able to inform parents and other key stakeholders about the school counseling program. Role induction is necessary to educate families about the resources and services provided by the school counselor as well as the effectiveness of the school counseling program. In order to promote effectiveness of the school counseling program and transition practices, there is a need for continued research and evaluation. In particular, further research could provide evaluations from the specific interventions and action plans and examine the impact that school counselors can have on early school transitions. The early transitions impact the future school trajectories for all students, particularly those most at risk, and, with support and preparation, allow students to utilize personal assets. Elementary school counselors can continue to use the suggested COPE framework and student strengths to facilitate the future transition into middle school.

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