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Using counseling to help improve attendance and achievement of high-risk students at Garfield Alternative Center

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USING COUNSELING TO HELP IMPROVE ATTENDANCE AND ACHIEVEMENT
OF HIGH-RISK STUDENTS AT GARFIELD ALTERNATIVE CENTER

MASTER'S PROJECT

Submitted to the School of Education
University of Dayton, in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science in Education

by

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School of Education

UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON

Dayton, Ohio

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Approved by:



Official Advisor

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest challenges for educators today is trying to create a good school climate in order for students to achieve academic excellence. (Thompson, 1987). Students who are academically successful receive good grades, special privileges, and are praised. Students who are successful will receive a diploma and be prepared to continue on through life and be successful at whatever it is that they might do. Students who are not so successful are frequently reminded of this by exclusion from the incentives for school success. (Thompson, 1987) These students are considered to be underachievers, and often show such characteristics as apathy, depression, absenteeism, tardiness, and irresponsibility.

Background of the Problem

The author is currently teaching business courses to at-risk (or high risk) students at Garfield Alternative Center, which is a Middletown City School. Problem students are sent to this school from Middletown or Monroe High Schools, or from the two junior highs in Middletown. Most of

the students are considered to be underachievers and have the same characteristics as mentioned above. They come from a lower socioeconomic background, are pregnant or have children of their own, are on welfare, and come from single-parent families. Socially, the students lack the skills to properly communicate with peers and adults. They suffer from depression and low self-esteem. The students' problems range from very mild to extremely severe. The main problem at Garfield is getting the students to come to school on a regular basis. They have so many negative factors weighing on them from outside of school, it is hard for them to come everyday, or anytime at all. Educators today need to create a positive climate that encourages the students to attend. Research shows that positive-climate teachers tend to be good listeners, good empathizers, high rewarders, and fair evaluators, and are generous with positive feedback to all students. (Hamachek, 1990). These characteristics describe the staff at Garfield. These characteristics motivate at-risk students are to attend. By attending, the students will start succeeding and receive better grades, and therefore receive enough credits to earn a diploma. Garfield has set a goal which expects 80% of all seniors to receive a diploma. If students do not come to school, the goal cannot be met. The staff must put in extra effort to help the

students, as well as the school, succeed.

The Problem Statement

At-risk students need to improve their attendance so they will be able to graduate and receive their diploma. By receiving a diploma, students have many alternatives to choose from upon completion of high school. They will be able to continue with their education or be eligible to become part of the work force. By not receiving a diploma and graduating, the student sets themselves up for failure. They will have to depend on welfare or unemployment, or if they are lucky enough to get a job, it may not pay well or have chance for promotion. The problem now lies on how to get the students to start coming to school, and then to keep them coming. They need to understand the importance of graduating. Most of the students sent to Garfield are, for the most part, behaviorally handicapped. The teachers need professional counselors to come in and work with the students on their personal problems and situations. This will encourage the students to attend on the specific day they have their session with the counselor. By participating, the students may begin to feel better about themselves and be able to work more easily through the problems they may be having, and begin to develop a positive self-image. They would then want to start coming to school more because they will

begin to have successes with their academic classes and also their social lives. Coming to school and receiving good grades goes hand-in-hand, and good grades lead to receiving credits, which leads to graduating with a diploma!

The Hypothesis

The hypothesis is that participation in an on-site counseling program during school hours will significantly increase the achievement (grade point average) and attendance of at-risk students as opposed to at-risk students who do not.

Definitions

At-Risk Student - A student who is likely to drop out due to many varying circumstances. The circumstances are so broad that it would be impossible to list all of them, but some may include poor family life, low socioeconomic status, attention deficit disorders, or poor communication skills.

On-Site Counseling - At Garfield Alternative Center, counseling is

offered to the students through an agency which is located in Middletown. The agency is called Pastoral Counseling. The school social worker, Jan Henninger, wrote a grant and received \$35,000 to fund the program. Counselors offer individual and group therapy, and also art therapy. Sessions are for 45 minutes, one day a week. Currently, there are 70 students involved with nine counselors.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literature I have found supports the hypothesis that some type of counseling is beneficial for at-risks students.

Investigations/Experiments

An investigation by Rosemary A. Thompson (1987) set out to show that instructional and counseling programs could be tailored to reach high risk students more adequately so their achievement and attendance would increase. The purpose of the investigation was threefold in nature: 1) to identify secondary students' perceptions of their school-related problems and attitudes, 2) to examine intervention strategies from a diagnostic-prescriptive, and 3) to develop a plan of action and intervention to change the outcome of students' self-defeating behaviors. Thompson selected 44 ninth-grade students who were 16 years or older and had a history of poor grades, poor attendance, and disinterest in school. The experimental group was manipulated through preassessment, counseling, scheduling, and systematic instructional methods and strategies. The control group was monitored but not given any specific intervention. The goal of the

program was to decrease absences, improve achievement, and concurrently enhance self-concept. The results found that there was a significant difference in the grade point averages and attendance between the control and the experimental group. The counseling seemed to enhance academic performance and school attendance of underachieving, high-risk students. In another study done by Fleisher, Westfield, and Bank (1990), similar results occurred from having a counseling session for behaviorally disturbed students in regular classrooms. The counseling sessions were run by a social worker and were held twice a week for one hour during school. During the sessions, they students would discuss problems, establish mutual trust, and form a support group. Everyone involved felt very positive about the outcomes of the experiment. The teachers noted improvement in attitudes toward school as well as successful academic achievements. The in-school therapy helped to build self-esteem in the students.

Counseling Techniques/Strategies

The literature supports that counseling enhances overall performance of underachievers in secondary schools. (Thompson, 1987). Six factors were offered that would predict the cognitive, affective, and

behavioral learning outcomes and gains. The six predictors are used as a basis for many counseling sessions. They are: 1) student motivation, 2) student ability, 3) intensity of instructional focus, 4) amount of instructional focus, 5) the social-psychological climate of the classroom, and 6) the stimulation of the child by the parent(s). By understanding the behavioral, cognitive, and affective outcomes, a student may improve their achievement internally, socially, and academically. In an experimental study done by Adams (1974), it was found that groups exposed to guidance and counseling differed significantly in academic achievement. Other researchers found that counselors who worked closely with teachers, principals, and parents were helpful for increasing academic achievement for students who were dealing with emotional and social problems that interfered with their achievement. (Bertoldi, 1975). Bennet (1975) found that an individual and group counseling program, designed to improve the self-esteem of students, significantly reduced the dropout rate and improved attendance and general achievement. Reference was made in Thompson's article to a study done by Grala and McCauley (1976) which found that a counseling program specifically combined with supportive instruction was successful in motivating truant, low income students back to regular attendance in school.

CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY (DESIGN)

Participants

The participants that will be used are 10 high-school students (five boys, five girls; two blacks, eight whites; five juniors, five seniors). The students will be randomly selected from the business program at Garfield. Table 3-1 gives specific information on each of the students involved in the study. The students are all considered to be at-risk and are 16 years or older. All have a history of poor attendance and a disinterest in school. The students who are participating in the counseling program have been

TABLE 3-1
STUDENTS INVOLVED

Name	Class	Sex	Race
Beatty, Judie	Junior	F	White
Brock, Danielle	Junior	F	White
Cox, Michele	Senior	F	White
Gibbs, Jason	Sophomore	M	White
Hawkins, John	Junior	M	White
Jackson, Tino	Senior	M	Black
Messer, Joni	Sophomore	F	White
Million, Nikki	Junior	F	Black
Stamper, B.J.	Junior	M	White
Thompson, Dwight	Senior	M	White

Students in **bold are involved in counseling.

placed there by the school counselors. The counselors have placed the students as they see a need for therapy. Most of the students sign a consent form when they register with the school to participate. Other ways a student may become involved is through a recommendation by a teacher or from the advice of a friend.

Procedure

Five students began attending counseling sessions on a weekly basis in the middle of October. The other five students are not currently attending any type of counseling. The study will include gathering information from the previous year semester averages (1991-92), and be monitored through the first semester of the current school year (1992-93).

Statistics will be given for each on student for their grade point average and attendance. The grade point average results will be shown as a true average, whereas the number of absences will be reported by using the median .

The results will be given for the previous year's semester average as compared to the current year. Results will be given for the changes that might take place for each individual student, for the group with

counseling, and for the group without counseling. Hopefully, a significant increase will be achieved with the group involved in counseling with the partnership of experienced counselors working close with professionals in the educational field.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The findings included gathering data from two areas: Grade point averages and absences. The data on each individual student is given in Table 4-1.

TABLE 4-1
ABSENCES AND GRADE POINT AVERAGES
1991-92, 1992-93

<u>Name</u>	<u>Semester Averages</u>		<u>Absences</u>	
	<u>1991-92</u>	<u>1992-93</u>	<u>1991-92</u>	<u>1992-93</u>
Beatty	0.67	2.42	27	14
Brock	2.68	0.38	28	24
Cox	2.32	3.56	14	17
Gibbs	1.33	1.93	14	33
Hawkins	1.64	3.50	49	3
Jackson	2.71	2.00	8	0
Messer	0.04	2.14	84	34
Million	1.40	1.20	13	21
Stamper	2.25	3.81	14	6
Thompson	2.93	2.87	4	3

Students in **bold are involved in counseling.

GRADE POINT AVERAGES (GPA)

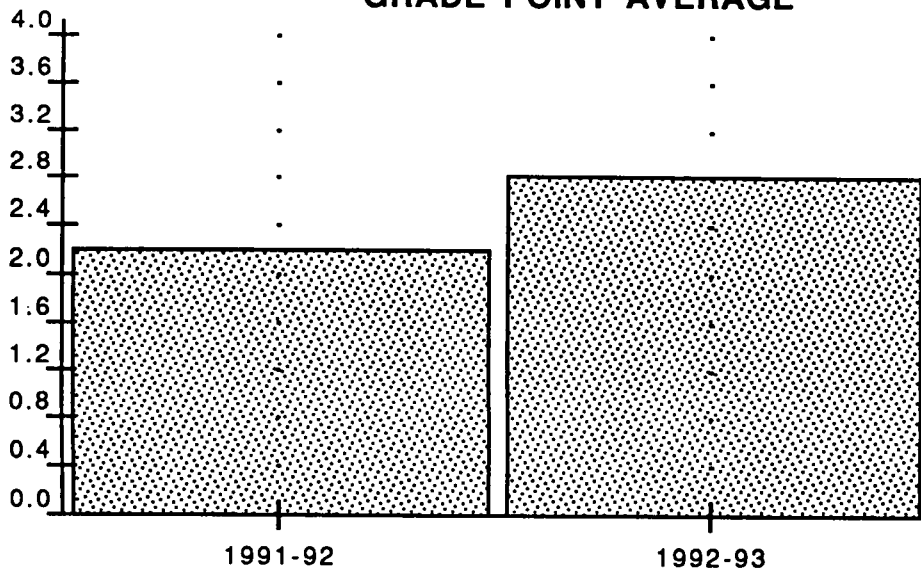
The data gathered on the ten students included finding an average of their grade point averages from the first and second semesters from the 1991-92 school year, and from the first semester of the 1992-93 school

year. The information is given as a true average as it reflects the most realistic sense of the grade. Students who were involved in counseling averaged 2.18 in the 1991-92 school year and increased to a 2.80 in the first semester of 1992-93 year. This is an increase of 28.4%. The students not involved in counseling, however, increased their GPA by 36.6%. It went from a 1.42 during the 1991-92 year to a 1.94 in 1992-93. The students having counseling did not have a significant increase of their GPA over the students who did not have counseling. (See Table 4-2, Graphs 1 & 2)

TABLE 4-2
AVERAGE GRADE POINT AVERAGES

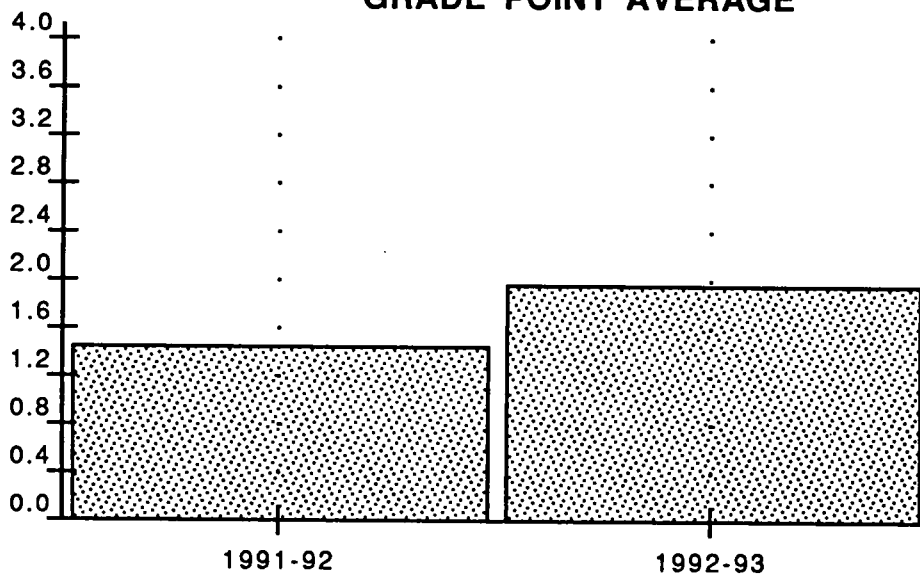
	Semester Averages		<u>Change</u>
	<u>1991-92</u>	<u>1992-93</u>	
<u>With Counseling:</u>			
GPA	2.17	2.80	28.4%
<u>Without Counseling:</u>			
GPA	1.42	1.92	36.6%

GRAPH 1
GRADE POINT AVERAGE



 With Counseling

GRAPH 2
GRADE POINT AVERAGE



 Without Counseling

ABSENCES

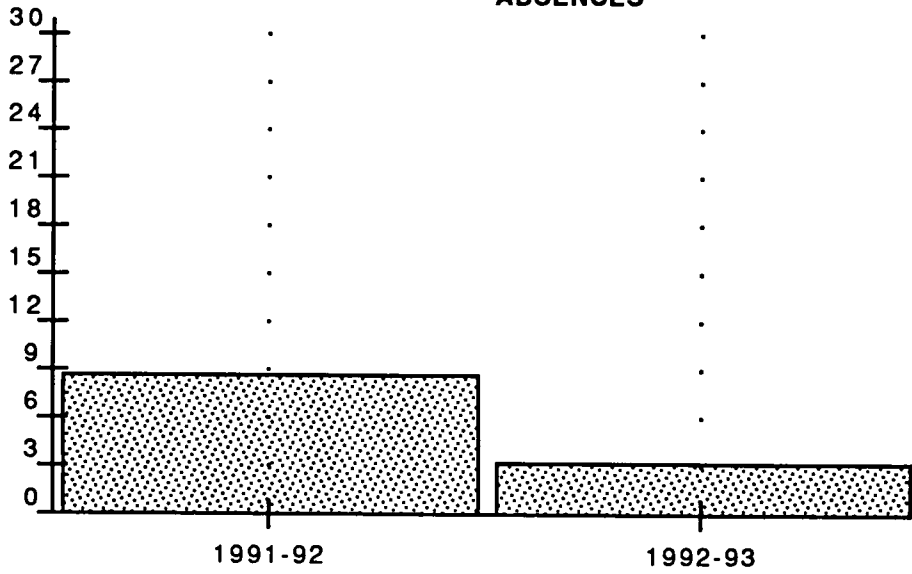
The data gathered for the ten students on absences were given by using the median. By using the median, a more true representation was given. The students with counseling had an amazing decrease in the number of absences. It went from 8.5 absences in the 1991-92 school year to only 3 in the 1992-93 year. This was a change of 64.7%. The students without counseling decreased their absences by 20.8%. It went from 26.5 during the 1991-92 school year to 21 for the 1992-93 year. The students with counseling made a significant decrease in the number of absences as compared to the students who did not have counseling. (See Table 4-3, Graphs 3 & 4)

**TABLE 4-3
ATTENDANCE**

	Semester Averages		<u>Change</u>
	<u>1991-92</u>	<u>1992-93</u>	
<u>With Counseling:</u>			
ABSENCES	8.5	3	64.7%
<u>Without Counseling:</u>			
ABSENCES	26.5	21	20.8%

GRAPH 3

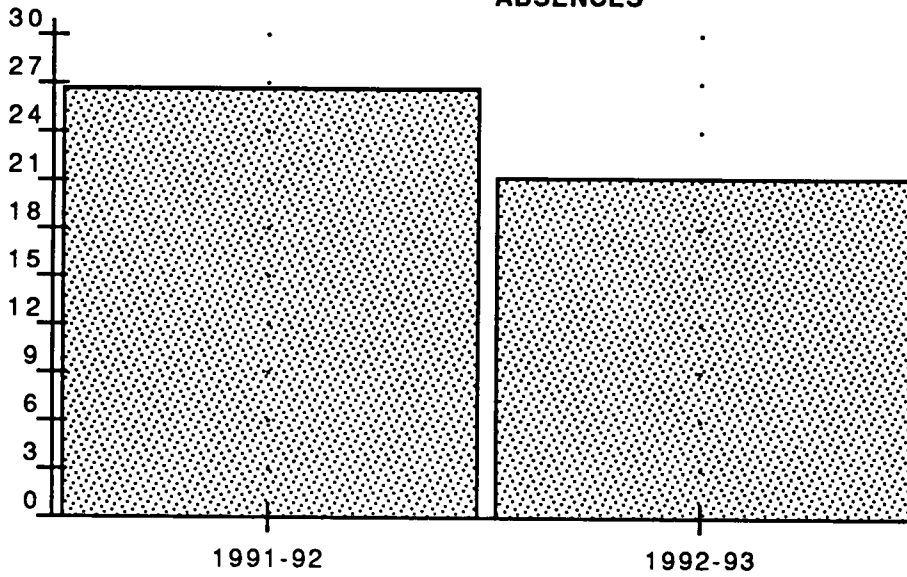
ABSENCES



 With Counseling

GRAPH 4

ABSENCES



 Without Counseling

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS

Students are sent to Garfield Alternative Center for many discipline problems, but mainly due to lack of attendance. To help solve this problem, Garfield offers free counseling to students through a local agency. By attending counseling sessions, students will improve their self-esteem and be more willing to come to school. By attending school, students will increase their grade point average. Information was taken on ten students who currently attend Garfield. Five were involved with counseling, five were not. It was found that both of the groups decreased the number of absences and also improved on attendance. The hypothesis stated that the students with counseling would show a significant increase in GPA, and a decrease in the number of absences over the group without counseling.

The hypothesis was not confirmed wholly, as the group without counseling improved their GPA's by 36.6% as compared to the group with counseling improving only 28.4%. Referring to page 13, Table 4-2 shows that the students with counseling did not have as much room for improvement as the group without counseling. This makes the results

seem like they are significantly different, but actually the group with counseling improved more, their GPA was just higher, so the percentage of increase did not show to be as high. The group without counseling, even after the improvement, is still lower than the group with counseling.

The hypothesis was confirmed, however, by the number of absences. A significant decrease in absences was shown by the group with counseling decreasing 64.7% and the group without counseling decreasing only 20.8%.

The hypothesis does not take into consideration the aim of the school. The school itself is responsible for the students having better attendance records, which helps improve their GPA. Garfield was developed to be a "last chance" type of school. If students do not make it at Garfield, they will not have another school to attend. Teachers pay special attention to the student's needs, and classes are much smaller than at a regular high school. This encourages the students to come. Another factor affecting the hypothesis is that two of the students were expelled during the 1991-92 school. The large number absences skewed the results when they were averaged, so the median was used because the results came out more accurate. These absences also had an impact on the GPA because it lowered the averages.

It is recommended that any student able to participate in any type of counseling do so. The counseling sessions help to improve behavior and self-esteem, which are not measurable. From observation of the five students involved in this study, and from other students in the school, much improvement in these non-measurable areas has occurred as well in the areas of attendance and achievement.

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