

# Counseling in Middle Schools: What Students Expect

Middle schools provide unique opportunities for the growth and development of young adolescents, offering rigorous and integrative curricula as well as schoolwide programs that foster student well-being, and reduce or eliminate social and emotional barriers to learning. Effective middle schools are led by principals who serve as instructional leaders while simultaneously developing, nurturing, and sustaining teams of highly qualified teachers, counselors, and specialists who recognize and embrace their multifaceted role as student mentors, advocates, and guides.

While the overall structure and design of effective middle schools may globally address the social and emotional needs of adolescents, middle school counseling programs specifically address these issues. Integrated into the total middle school program, counseling helps students maximize personal growth, acquire positive social skills and values, set appropriate career goals, and realize their full academic potential (American School Counselor Association, 2005).

Middle school counselors coordinate this schoolwide effort while providing direct counseling services through a school guidance curriculum, individual student planning, individual and small group counseling, and system support. While the specific procedures involved in students' interactions with counselors vary across the nation, effective middle school counselors provide young adolescents with skills and supports that enable them to navigate the unique and challenging developmental issues of the middle years, including:

- Successful exploration of interests;
- Connection and extension of classroom learning to practical applications;
- Search for identity;
- Decision-making;
- Conflict resolution;
- Negotiation; and
- Understanding of relationships with adults and peers.

Although the aim of middle school counseling is clear, what is not as clear is what young adolescents expect from school counseling programs, what they believe about school counseling, and what they are looking for in the adults who seek to provide them with social and emotional support. The answers to these questions have significant implications for those charged with developing and leading middle school programs aligned with the needs of the adolescent population.

## What Young Adolescents Need

Counseling research has provided much insight regarding adults and older adolescents. Little is known, however, about the counseling needs and expectations of young adolescent students. In an attempt to find out more, I conducted a study of 329 middle school students, ages 10 to 15, enrolled in two suburban public schools in the mid-Atlantic region. Thirty-eight percent of the students were male, 42 percent were white, 27 percent were black, 17 percent were Asian-American, 6 percent were biracial, 5 percent were Hispanic, and 2 percent were Native American.

I used a student questionnaire on school counseling services and the Expectations About Counseling-Brief Form (EAC-B) assessment (Tinsley, 1982; Tinsley, Holt, Hinson, & Tinsley, 1991), an instrument used to assess counseling expectations.

I found that 35 percent of the students reported seeing a counselor about a problem related to social and emotional well-being (e.g., getting along with peers or adults, understanding feelings, solving personal problems) during the past academic year, with black students reporting significantly more visits than Asian-American or white students. Furthermore, the results indicated that the students' openness to talk with the school counselor in the future was significantly predicted by their previous experience with counseling and their expectations or beliefs about counseling.

Further statistical analysis suggested that gender played a role in students' expectations in counseling, while race and ethnicity did not. Girls in the study had significantly higher expectations for student roles in counseling and the school counselor's role than did boys, scoring higher on EAC-B items that measured student motivation, responsibility, and openness to counseling. Moreover, girls scored higher than boys on EAC-B items related to expectations or beliefs that counselors should be facilitative, nurturing, and competent.

These findings have three significant implications for principals:

***Principals must recognize that they have a unique window of opportunity to introduce and provide all students with social and emotional instruction and counseling.***

The study's data suggest that, unlike older adolescents and adults, middle school students regardless of race or ethnicity seek school counseling for social and emotional concerns such as getting along with peers or parents/guardians, managing emotions, and figuring out personal goals and values.

This is an important finding for principals who must often make critical decisions about the very existence and direction of middle school counseling programs and staffing. Further investigation is needed to more fully understand the difference in the number of visits black middle school students made to the school counselor for social

and emotional counseling, as compared with those of white and Asian-American students.

*Principals must encourage school counselors to familiarize all students with school counseling services.* This could be accomplished through classroom guidance lessons, small-group role play, school-wide informational displays, student announcements, or newsletter articles that demystify and introduce school counseling as a comprehensive, developmental service for all.

*Principals must lead their staffs to better understand the gender disparity in order to better meet their students' needs.* This research base could significantly contribute to the national literature on implications and gender-specific school counseling needs of young adolescents.

The findings of this study provide empirical evidence for the relevance of middle school counseling programs, supporting the kind of

research-based approaches that are integral to successful middle school education. Using these data, principals can direct the implementation of comprehensive school counseling programs, which help reduce and eliminate students' social/emotional barriers to learning. **P**

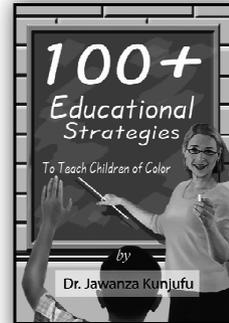
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#### References

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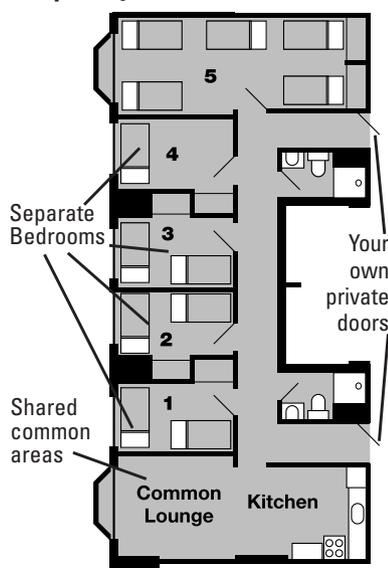
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