

Analyzing the Impact of ESOL/ELL School Counselor Ratios on Student Outcomes

Released October 2024

The following study, supported through an ASCA research grant, investigated the impact of an ongoing, collaborative partnership between Florida Atlantic University's (FAU) Department of Counselor Education and the School District of Palm Beach County's (SDPBC) Department of Multicultural Education Office. To date, five cohorts of English as a second language (ESOL) school counselors ($N = 64$) have successfully completed FAU's school counseling graduate program (data included in this study), and an additional sixth cohort is in effect with an anticipated completion date of fall 2025. Students in these cohorts complete a master's-level education in school counseling that meets or exceeds the requirements stipulated by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) and certification requirements for the Florida Department of Education.

For the purpose of this research, de-identified, retrospective achievement, attendance and behavior data were analyzed for students at schools where bilingual/bicultural school counselors who completed FAU school counseling graduate degrees between 2001 to 2019 were employed/placed. The study followed a correlational design, and regression analyses were conducted using secondary data sets, provided by the partnering district, to determine the relationship between ESOL school-counselor-to-student ratios and increased specialized services on student outcomes. ESOL/ELLs comprise 19% of the SDPBC's K-12 student population, representing a diverse student body from over 194 countries and speaking 150 languages.

English-language learners (ELLs) or students who speak English as a second language comprise the fastest-growing group of school-aged population in the United States (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2018) representing 10.6% of all K-12 students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). These students often encounter barriers to academic achievement, such as acculturation stress, discrimination, assimilation and communication difficulties, and are at higher risk for poor academic achievement and require additional interventions to support both their learning and social/emotional development (Albers et al., 2009; Cook et al., 2012; Mendenhall, 2017; Ridley et al., 2019; Sanders et al., 2018).

School counselors collaborate with various school and community stakeholders to help close achievement gaps (ASCA, 2019) and aid students in acclimating within the school community (Yildiz, 2021). Providing a supportive environment for all students has been linked to positive academic outcomes (Atkins & Oglesby, 2019; Cook-Sandifer & Gibson, 2020; Dimitrova et al., 2018). As “keepers of school culture” (Atkins & Oglesby, 2019, p. 55), school counselors promote positive, safe and trusting environments within their schools, observed through high levels of student engagement, healthy relationships among students and staff, and increased levels of attendance (Atkins & Oglesby, 2019; Cook-Sandifer & Gibson, 2020). Unfortunately, there are limited studies available aligning school counselor interventions and supports with positive outcomes for ESOL/ELL students (Cook et al., 2012; Shi, 2018). As the social/emotional learning experts in schools, counselors can provide support for these students through various interventions, such as small- and large-group counseling. However, Shi and Watkinson (2019) reported that ESOL/ELL students were less likely to seek services, struggled with curriculum and classroom placement and that schools did not offer appropriate culturally responsive professional development. Further, these researchers noted that school counselors’ inability to communicate with students in their native language, often needing a liaison to connect and communicate, was an additional barrier (Shi & Watkinson, 2019). Therefore, increasing the number of school counselors who specialize in working with this population is critical.

Researchers

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Research Questions

- Is there a correlation between ESOL school-counselor-to-student ratios and achievement outcomes (promotion/retention/graduation rates, GPA, standardized test scores, students in course recovery)?
- Is there a correlation between ESOL school-counselor-to-student ratios and attendance outcomes (unexcused absences, days present)?
- Is there a correlation between ESOL school-counselor-to-student ratios and behavioral outcomes (referrals, expulsions, bullying incident reports)?

Methodology

The theoretical framework employed in this study is the relational-cultural theory (RCT) approach. RCT is centered on the strength of the relationship between counselors and clients and the congruence in their cultural approaches. Having a trained ESOL school counselor who can relate to a student’s contexts should lead to better outcomes (*note the hypotheses below in findings*). Methodologically, because there was no control group and no ability to randomize the participants due to the retrospective nature of the study, a correlational design was utilized. In addition, predictive models using regression analyses were employed to study the relevant data and determine the relative contribution of each of the selected variables to the observed outcomes.

Summary of Findings

This study analyzed student achievement, attendance, and behavior outcomes at 64 sites ($n = 30$ elementary; $n = 19$ middle; $n = 20$ high school; $n = 1$ K-12) where FAU graduate-level trained ESOL school counselors were placed between the years of 2001 and 2019. To evaluate the differences in the schools before these school counselors were employed at the school and then after they were hired, paired samples t-tests were used. To evaluate the magnitude of the findings, Cohen's d was also computed. Traditionally, an effect size of .2 is considered low, .5 is considered medium and .8 or above is considered a large effect size (Watson, Lenz, Schmit & Schmit, 2016). Significant results of the paired samples t-tests follow:

Achievement Data:

- **Promotion Rate** (*researchers hypothesized this would increase*)
Before the additional ESOL school counselors were employed, the promotion rate was 83%, while after the promotion rate was 85%. A paired samples t-test was run from just before the ESOL school counselors were employed in the school, and three years after they were employed (when they completed their master's program). The difference was significant ($t(62) = -2.398, p = .01, d = -.302$). The effect size was in the small to medium size range.
- **Retention Rate** (*researchers hypothesized this would decrease*)
Before the additional ESOL school counselors were employed, the retention rate was 16.4%, and after the retention rate was 14.0%. A paired-samples t-test was run from just before the ESOL school counselors were employed in the schools and three years after, and the difference was significant ($t(63) = 3.931, p < .001, d = .455$). The effect size was in the small to medium size range.
- **Average GPA** (*researchers hypothesized this would increase*)
Before the additional ESOL school counselors were employed, the average GPA was 2.48 and after the rate was 2.57. A paired-samples t-test revealed a significant difference ($t(18) = -4.025, p = .001, d = -.923$) between before the ESOL school counselors were employed in the schools and three years after they were employed. A large effect size was reported.
- **Proficiency Level on Standard Assessment in Geometry** (*researchers hypothesized this would increase*)
The proficiency level on standardized assessment in geometry was 68.3% before the additional ESOL school counselors were employed, and after the proficiency level in geometry was 71.3%. Results of a paired-samples t-test indicated significance ($t(18) = -5.7793, p < .001, d = -1.329$). The effect size was in the large size range.

- **Graduation Rate** (*researchers hypothesized this would increase*)
Before the additional ESOL school counselors were employed, the graduation rate was 78.9%, and after the school counselors were employed, the graduation rate was 83%. A paired-samples t-test was run from just before the ESOL school counselors were employed and three years after, and the difference was significant ($t(12) = -1.9540, p = .037, d = -.507$). The effect size was in the medium size range.
- **Number of Students in Course Recovery** (*researchers hypothesized this would decrease*)
The number of students in course recovery was 82.11% before the additional ESOL school counselors were employed, and after the school counselors were employed the number of students in course recovery was 59.11%. A paired-samples t-test was run, and the difference between these two points in time approached significance ($t(8) = 1.789, p = .056, d = .596$). The effect size was in the medium size range.

Attendance Data:

- **Number of Students Absent 21 or More Days** (*researchers hypothesized this would decrease*)
The number of students with 21 or more days absent was 82.38 before the additional ESOL school counselors were employed, and after the school counselors were employed the number of students absent 21 or more days was 97.95. A paired-samples t-test was run from just before the ESOL school counselors were employed in the school, and three years after they were employed. The difference was significant but needs further investigation. ($t(63) = -2.346, p = .011, d = -.293$). The effect size was in the small to medium size range.
- **Percent of Students Absent 21 or More Days** (*researchers hypothesized this would decrease*)
Before the additional ESOL school counselors were employed, the percentage of students with 21 or more days absent was 6.2%, and after the school counselors were employed the percentage of students with 21 or more days absent was 7.4%. A paired-samples t-test was run from just before the ESOL school counselors were employed in the school and three years after. The difference was significant, but needs further investigation. ($t(63) = -2.355, p = .001, d = -.419$). The effect size was in the small to medium size range.
- **Percent of Students Present** (*researchers hypothesized this would increase*)
Before the additional ESOL school counselors were employed, the percent of students present was 95.1%, and after the school counselors were employed the percent of students present was 95.7%. A paired-samples t-test was run from just before the ESOL school counselors were employed and three years after, and the difference was significant ($t(63) = 4.026, p = .001, d = -.419$). The effect size was in the small to medium size range.

Additional analysis is being conducted to determine additional factors influencing attendance.

Behavior Data:

- **Number of Referrals** (*researchers hypothesized this would decrease*)
The number of referrals was 606.73 before the additional ESOL school counselors were employed and after the counselors were employed the number of referrals was 439.07. A paired-samples t-test was run and results revealed a significant difference ($t(44) = 2.822$, $p = .004$, $d = .425$). The effect size was in the small to medium size range.
- **Number of Expulsions** (*researchers hypothesized this would decrease*)
The number of expulsions was .16 before the additional ESOL school counselors were employed and after the number of expulsions was .04. A paired-samples t-test was run from just before the ESOL SCs were employed in the school, and three years after they were employed. The difference was significant. ($t(50) = -4.031$, $p < .0001$, $d = -.570$). The effect size was in the medium size range.
- **Number of Bullying Incident Reports** (*researchers hypothesized this would decrease*)
Before the additional ESOL school counselors were employed, the number of bullying incidents was 5.04, and after the school counselors were employed the number of bullying incidents was 2.69. A paired-samples t-test was run from just before the ESOL school counselors were employed and after they were employed. The difference was significant. ($t(50) = 1.714$, $p = .046$, $d = .242$). The effect size was in the small size range.

Implications of the Research

Studies reveal that the majority of public schools still struggle to provide adequate support for the ESOL/ELL population (Haas & Brown, 2019; McFarland, 2018; Olson, 2014). In addition, many school counselors lack the time needed to work with underserved populations due to high student-to-school-counselor ratios and being tasked with non-counseling-related duties (Perez & Morrison, 2016). School counselors who are hindered by non-counseling duties may be further limited in their ability to develop effective and positive rapport with students (Lewis et al., 2022). School counselors, including ESOL school counselors, must have ready access and adequate resources to support their students, particularly those with specific needs, like ESOL/ELLs (Yildiz, 2021).

Recent statistics from the 2022-23 school year indicate that Florida reported a student-to-school-counselor ratio of 423:1, almost double the recommended ratio of 250:1 (ASCA, 2023). Thus, the addition of school counselors to reduce ratios is needed. More importantly, adding ESOL school counselors who have specific education, training and personal experiences and can better relate to and advocate for this population will improve student outcomes.

The addition of 64 ESOL school counselors improved student outcomes across several measures of achievement, attendance and behavior. Although this study assessed secondary data from several school sites in one large school district in South Florida over a near

20-year period, results cannot definitively be attributed to the addition of the ESOL school counselors alone. Rather, the addition of these key personnel with specific training to address the needs of these underrepresented groups is likely one factor that contributed to student gains. Other contributing factors might include the implementation of evidence-based prevention curriculum, early identification and intervention for students in need, and a positive school culture and climate.

About the ASCA Research Grants

The American School Counselor Association awards research grants for projects examining the effectiveness of comprehensive school counseling programs, particularly the ASCA National Model, in improving student outcomes; projects investigating the optimal school-counselor-to-student ratio(s); and other projects that advance school counseling practice. ACT has provided funding support for the grants. Learn more about ASCA at schoolcounselor.org.