Implementing a School-Based "Life Coaching" Mentoring Program: Keys to SUCCESS for a Family-District-University Partnership

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Presenter Background:
PUUSD (CA) SUCCESS “Life Coaching” Program Creator
- SUCCESS Coaching Program ran in Pasadena Unified School District from 2004-2009; in LAUSD from 2010-Present
- 24 Middle School Students per Year were served (initially as part of a Tier 2 “Credit Reclamation” Class)
- One-on-One Graduate Student “Life Coaches” (M.S. Counseling students) connected with each student for 50 minutes weekly for 8 weeks
- Tier 2-Tier 3 “Hybrid” – Individual Life Coaching Sessions tied to Tier 2 “Credit Reclamation” Class or Teacher Referral

Presentation Goals:
* Increase understanding of a successful “individual” Tier 2 Life Coaching (Mentoring + Brief Counseling) intervention model with elementary, middle/high school students
* Come away with:
  a) Key “Lessons Learned” in Implementing a School-based Mentoring program that incorporates Families-Schools-Community Partnership
  b) Knowledge of the 6-Step Life Coach Goal-Setting Process
  c) Specific “life coach” worksheets and scaling tools designed to involve the student in their own progress-monitoring

Key Elements to SUCCESS
Related to:
- Selling the Program to District, Parents, and Students
- Process of Goal-Setting
- Mentors/Counselors skilled in Active Listening/Solution-Focused Brief Counseling (SFBC)

Rationale to District included:
- Children are best served by adults appropriately guiding them to inhibit or modify behaviors to avoid negative future consequences
- Children fare better academically and socially when they have at least one mentor/older adult they turn to regularly

(Garmezy 1985; Benard 1991)
Research-Based Benefits
of Mentoring
Taken From: http://www.learningtogether.com/documents/STRATEGIES_MENTORING.pdf

Overall, youth participating in mentoring relationships:

- Had positive academic returns: better attendance and better attitude towards school
  (Jekielik, Moore, Hair and Scarupa, 2002)
- Increased retention and participation
  (Bein 1999; Pascarelli 1998; Shumer 1994)
- Enhanced self-confidence and higher self-worth and motivation
- Promotion of competence, self-assurance and support in new situations
  (Hamilton and Darling 1989)
- Improved problem solving skills
  (Pascarelli 1998)

What is a “Life Coach”?
http://www.lifecoachinghq.com/

A Life Coach is a specific type of mentor who helps you solve a challenging problem, achieve a specific goal or outcome, improve your performance and/or advance your career.

What Makes a “Life Coach” Truly Effective?

Effective Life Coaches:

- Pay attention to the young person’s “whole” self. Learning about their life is critical to creating solid goals/rewards.
- Take advantage of the help and advice of educators and other resources.

Our SUCCESS Program-Specific Additions:

- Emphasize a student-led, collaborative (parent-teacher-life coach-student) TEAM approach.
- Learn and Use Effective BRIEF (SFRC) Counseling Communication Skills that Encourage Change and Reflection.

What makes “Life Coaching?” Involve?


Adapted from: http://www.webs1.uidaho.edu/enrich/results/mentors/ws1/mentor.ppt#13

Student-Led!
STEP 1: Connect - Establish Rapport

GET TO KNOW THE WHOLE STUDENT

- Use VISUALS to Draw Out The Student’s Story (e.g., “Life MAP”)
- Use Active Listening (e.g., Open Questions, Paraphrasing) to Show you are HEARING them
- Remember Developmental Differences (Middle School Students still Concrete and Visual; Logic/Abstract Thought is Still Developing!)

Collaborative Team Approach

- Meeting 1: Meet Together – Scaling of “Life Map”
- Mid-Point Meeting: Conference Check-In; Scaling of Maps and modifications/changes to goals discussed
- End-of-Program Meeting: Collaborative Check-Out and Evaluation

Step 2: Assess Needs

“Life Map”: Ask and Scale

Step 3: Set Goals

- A. Use “Life Map” Scaling (1-10) to Create Goals
- B. Never Focus on One Goal Alone! Ideally, 1 Academic AND 1 Behavioral or Non-Academic Goal
- C. Praise (don’t LAUGH at) High Goals/Aspirations; but Manage Expectations!
- D. Distinguish between “Short Term” and “Long-Term” Goals

Step 4: Help Student Create Concrete Strategies to Reach His/Her Goals

Example Goal:  (Social)

I will be a better student at school and avoid being sent to the office.

Example Strategies:

- When I feel like talking back to the teacher, I will write down what I would say in my journal instead.
- I will listen to my teacher and be quiet when I am supposed to be working.
- I will say “no” when my friends ask me to do something that I know is against school rules, like hanging out in the bathroom during recess or throwing sticks across the fence.

Example Goal: (School/Academic)

Improve Algebra grade from “C” to “B+”

Example Strategies:

- I will bring home my Algebra book every day.
- I will start my Algebra Homework at 5pm (after a snack) every day.
- I will ask my teacher about at least one item that I don’t understand per week.
- I will write down my Algebra Assignment in my Planner each day.
- I will reward myself with a new game if I get a “B” on a Quiz.

Step 4: Create Concrete Strategies to Reach Goals

Example Goal: (School/Academic)

Improve Algebra grade from “C” to “B+”

Example Strategies:

- I will bring home my Algebra book every day.
- I will start my Algebra Homework at 5pm (after a snack) every day.
- I will ask my teacher about at least one item that I don’t understand per week.
- I will write down my Algebra Assignment in my Planner each day.
- I will reward myself with a new game if I get a “B” on a Quiz.
Step 5: Execute/Support Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GOAL</th>
<th>BENEFITS</th>
<th>COST</th>
<th>TIME</th>
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<tr>
<td>ACADEMIC: I will improve my Algebra grade from &quot;C&quot; to &quot;B+&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>OTHER: I will learn how to get into UCLA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strategies: • I will go online to UCLA’s website and look up application criteria. • I will learn about UC requirements that I can fulfill. • I will ask my cousin what he did to get into UCLA.</td>
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Step 6: Re-Assess

- Check-ins Regularly Scheduled with Student to See if Strategies are working
- If not working—do not chaste. Simply Ask, “What Could we Try Differently?”
- Remind Student about Purpose of Goals (Long-Term vs. Short-Term Goals)

REMEMBER TO:

1st VALIDATE STUDENT’S DIFFICULTIES

- “I know this is not easy—you have a challenge in front of you…”
- Then show confidence in their abilities (…but you’ve worked hard to get to this point and that shows me you can do this”)
- Reward with SPECIFIC Praise & Encouragement

Student Evaluation Data for SUCCESS program from 2004-09:

| 82% Coaching Changed Attitude toward Goals |
| 78% Improved SUCCESS Coaching |
| 88% Met Academic Goal |
| 97% Met Both Goals |

Life Coaching

What does “Life Coaching” Involve?

Collaborative Team

Parent

Student

Life Coach

Solution-Focused Brief Counseling (SFBC) Approach

Brief Counseling Method

Used a Research-Based Solution-Focused Brief Counseling (SFBC) Approach

The SFBC model:
- Deals with and solves immediate, pressing life problems
- Easy to use after minimum initial training and with on-going monitoring and professional support sessions
- Action-oriented
- Useful tool for improving clients’ coping skills and providing a forward-looking focus
- Uses classic “Miracle Question” to focus client on observable differences in behavior and environment—not inner psyche
Examples of a Solution-Focused Interview

Types of questions you might ask:

- What’s one way that you’ve already been successful?
- What did you do to make that happen?
- Who noticed that you succeeded?
- What will YOU do instead of ________?
- How will YOU succeed anyway?

In response to “I don’t know”…wait and then ask:

- Well…if you DID know…what might you do? Or I know, it’s a tough question. I’ll ask them.

Key Elements to SUCCESS

- “Sell” Program to School via documented research on benefits of mentoring/life coaching.
- Speak to Parents AND students as PARTNERS – meet them where they are, rather than having them come to your “expert” way of thinking.
- Have a transparent, tangible mentoring process that all stakeholders understand, and:
- Partner this with mentors/coaches skilled in Active Listening/SFBC.
- Create Human “Real” Relationships with Office Staff (they will be your saviors!)

Additional Resources

- Sklar, Gerald (2014). Brief Counseling That Works: A Solution-Focused Approach for School Counselors and Other Mental Health Professionals. 3rd Ed.
Phase I: Who Am I?
Discussing with your SUCCESS coach your Strengths, Interests, Hobbies, Friends, Family, School, Future Goals, and Areas for Improvement

Phase II: Mutual Goals
Coming up with 2 Goals for your Life that are Realistic and Obtainable

Phase III: Taking Charge with Strategies
Coming up with Strategies (Steps) to Help you Meet your Goal(s). Includes practicing at home, being proactive, and “taking charge”

Phase IV: Making Change Happen
Continuing to use and revise strategies to work on Goals. What is working for me? What is not working? Am I making changes? How can I improve or change myself to better reach my goals?

Final Phase: Reflection
What have I learned about myself with SUCCESS coaching? How much choice and ownership do I have over my goals and life changes? How can I continue this great work?

Welcome to the ______________ SUCCESS program. Your SUCCESS Coach will work with you over the next few weeks to problem-solve areas in your life that you feel you can improve upon.

Together, you two will help create SUCCESS goals and work on ways to reach these goals. To make SUCCESS a fun and rewarding experience, make sure you come to each session and practice the skills and strategies that you and your SUCCESS Coach discuss together.

At the end of the program, we will have a celebration of your SUCCESS!
Establishing a SUCCESS-ful School Counseling Program through University-Community Collaboration

Sheri A. Castro-Atwater

This article describes four main “keys to success” in implementing a comprehensive school-based “life coaching” counseling program for at-risk students at diverse Los Angeles area schools, based upon seven years of the author’s direction of the program. Specific techniques that work to create and sustain a family-school-community partnership are highlighted. The “keys to success” emphasize three main goals critical to a school-based counseling program: (a) counselor training in clinical communication microskills and brief counseling methods, (b) ongoing clinical needs assessment and program evaluation, and (c) a six-step goal-setting process that mimics the stages of the clinical interview process. Counseling programs must also retain flexibility of goal implementation based on individual client progress.

Introduction

School-based counseling and mentoring programs attempting to reach “at-risk” students and motivate them to succeed abound in schools across the country (Garringer, 2010). Many of these programs aim to provide one-on-one counseling opportunities to youth in schools in order to increase academic performance, modify school or home behavior, and/or increase motivation.

Although these programs exist in abundance, even those that report statistically significant data on the effectiveness of such programs can lack clear program modifications made and “lessons learned” that other programs can take away. Thus, although many programs appear to be successful given quantifiable data, academics and program directors may be left to “reinvent the wheel” when it comes to implementing similar counseling programs in their own school district. The goal of this article is to review practical “keys to success” in the seven year history of a successful school-based clinical counseling program, with the hope of providing insight prior to implementation of other, similar programs across the country.

Program Description

The SUCCESS “life coaching” counseling program is an established University-school partnership, most recently created between California State University, Los Angeles (CSULA) and the Los Angeles Unified School district. From 2004-2010, the program was created as part of an after-school program within the Pasadena Unified school district, a surrounding district in the regional Los Angeles area. Through the experience of implementing the program in both districts, the author came away with both a series of key successes to implementation and a list of mistakes to avoid.

The SUCCESS program enlists the participation of 24 graduate students enrolled in the Counseling program at CSULA. Every graduate student is trained, prior to their experience as an individual “SUCCESS coach”, in two quarters of clinical counseling microskills and brief counseling theory. Despite their training and enthusiasm, many of these students are “green” to the counseling field; thus, this opportunity to engage in a community partnership and serve their first client is both exhilarating and nerve-wracking. Each life
coach is assigned one client for a series of eight sessions to be held at the school site; all clients are recruited from an after-school program at an elementary or middle school, and referred by teachers or administrators for needing extra academic and/or social support.

The goal of the SUCCESS program is for graduate student “life coaches” to successfully guide clients through an individual 6-step, goal-setting process using brief counseling methods over a period of 8 weeks. Life coach counselors use a colorful worksheet entitled the “Life Map” with their clients each week, using the scaling techniques for both a baseline and a progress monitoring tool (see Appendix).

**Keys to SUCCESS**

How then, does a University go about creating a successful individual counseling program? How can a program be marketed to participants to ensure maximum participation? What steps are necessary to create a unique bond with the community and parent participants so that the program is sustainable and not a “burden” to parents, school staff, clients or counselors? How can the progress of clients be monitored over the course of the program? How does one measure “success”? The following keys to success attempts to address each of these questions. While some answers were clear from the outset of implementation, others were deduced after a long (and sometimes painful) trial-and-error approach.

**Key to Success #1: Market the program without using “stigma-inducing” terms**

This lesson to success comes only after two years of using, in hindsight, what can only be referred to as “psychologically unhelpful” terms when describing the program. The SUCCESS program began in Spring 2004 at a middle school that had a majority of students coming from a historically racial minority background (Latino/a, African-American) and from poverty (76% received free and reduced lunch). The program began as the “CSULA Counseling” program – and marketing materials were sent home and placed in teachers’ boxes to recruit clients into the program. It soon became evident that the term “counseling” was seen as a deficit. Many parents who had to return permission slips had a difficulty time with the term “counseling” (often stating indignantly that their child “wasn’t crazy” and/or did not need “a shrink”), while teachers tended not to refer the student in need of academic/social support if they did not sense any psychological problems associated with that student in class. Despite this resistance to the term, the program persisted for two years with “counseling program” as its main title, leaving participants to view it as nothing more than a “stigmatized” program designed to help students that were (often reluctantly) referred. The author initially believed that the program would “prove that counseling could be a good thing” – however, eight weeks was not enough time to change the stigma of the term.

In 2006, at the suggestion of a school administrator and influenced by recent literature on anti-stigma programs in the schools, the author approached the program with a title designed to inspire and to capitalize on a recent trend – life coaching. Since the late 1990s, life coaching had been increasing in popularity, both within employment agencies, motivational conferences, and even among celebrities in popular culture. Researching life coaching materials and goals led to the epiphany that individual, goal-centered brief counseling and life coaching shared many similarities. Moreover, a “coach” is someone who inspires, guides, and supports a person through a game or skill, and someone who often has the experience and wisdom to do so—someone who is not stigmatized in a negative way. Thus, in 2006, the “SUCCESS life coaching” program was born.
Key to SUCCESS #2: Conduct an ongoing, client-driven clinical needs assessment

It is largely understood that having the ability to determine if your program is successful through quality data-gathering and effective progress monitoring is the key to any successful program. In addition to using traditional clinical assessment instruments to gather pre- and post-data on client self-esteem, social skills, attitude towards school, etc., the SUCCESS program uses a unique, one-page “Life Map” that was created over time using instructor and graduate student input (see Appendix). This Life Map creates a visual marker of student success—in ALL life areas (not just school or behavior). This is consistent with what research has long shown is essential to an effective counselor-client relationship: namely, the need for counselors to take an interest in and gather data on the whole student, not just problem areas (MA Dept. of Education, 1990). This holistic view is also consistent with ecological systems’ theory, which states the need to understand the client within a series of larger systems (micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chrono-) in order to fully comprehend the client’s development (and the impact of interruptions within those systems on that development) (Bronfenbrenner, 1976).

Each “bubble” within the Life Map asks the client to describe a different domain within the client’s life: family, school, friends, career/future, and hobbies/interests. Life coaches begin the first client session by asking each client to “rate, on a scale of 1-10, how happy you are with each domain of their present life”. In this manner, baseline scaling data can be collected, and used throughout the 8-week program to monitor client progress in a manner that is transparent and meaningful to the client.

Key to SUCCESS #3: Train your Counselors Throughout the Program

Even if counselors used within your program are not coming with a background in counseling techniques, training them about microskills in communication and non-judgmental rapport-building strategies is key. Why? If counselors do not understand how to approach a student—particularly one deemed “at risk” who may be well-experienced in judgmental, punitive or reactive communication techniques by adults—they are much less likely to create a positive, effective rapport with the client. Training counselors to use the Basic Listening Sequence (BLS) (Ivey and Ivey, 2010)—including how and when to use open and closed questions, encouragers, paraprases, summaries, and reflection of feeling—will allow them to approach their mentees with basic communication skills designed to elicit trust, empathy, and rapport-building.

Counselors should also be trained in a counseling theory that is effective for use in the schools and that comes from a solution-based (rather than problem-based) approach. CSULACounselors utilize the brief counseling techniques such as the Miracle question (e.g. “If you woke up tomorrow, and this problem were no longer a problem, how would you know?”), scaling, and finding “exceptions” to guide the client through goal-setting.

Key to SUCCESS #4: Use a 6-Step Goal-Setting Process

The SUCCESS program would not be a “success” without a clear, transparent process for client goal-setting. The goal-setting process involves six main steps that are engaged in by both the client and the counselor: 1) Connecting and Establishing Rapport, 2) Assessing Client Needs, 3) Setting Mutual Goals, 4) Creating Strategies to Meet Goals, 5) Executing and Supporting Strategies, and 6) Re-Assessing. These steps to goal-setting will be outlined briefly, below, with an emphasis on lessons learned from the author’s years of implementation of the process with clients.

Step 1): Connecting and Establishing Rapport: In this initial step, the counselor
works to establish a healthy, trusting rapport with the client. As previously stated, the need for clients deemed “at risk” for academic or social reasons to receive a non-judgmental, warm “vibe” from counselors is particularly important, as it sets the stage for a trusting relationship. Too often these students are reprimanded, punished, or ignored by adults in their home and school settings, and breaking this pattern to illustrate that a relationship with an adult can be wholly supportive and trusting can be paramount to their success in the counseling process. Using the Life Map (see Appendix) to open up a discussion about hobbies, interests, career goals, and other interests of the client before delving into a discussion of areas of weakness can go a long way in establishing an effective rapport. Counselors should be instructed to remember this, and to get to know the “whole” student to better develop a healthy rapport.

Step 2): Assessing Client Needs: In this step, the client’s needs are assessed visually through the Life Map, with specific scaling methods used to obtain client ratings on each life domain. Often within the space of a few minutes during an initial interview session, a counselor can assess needs using this scaling method, particularly if questions and data-gathering regarding each life domain are saved for after the scaling is complete.

Step 3): Setting Mutual Goals: In this step of the goal-setting process (which often occurs during the second-fourth sessions), the two Life Map domains rated the least satisfactory are used to create goals for the client (e.g., “2” on a scale of 1-10 in Family, etc.). Using a series of open and closed questions and the use of brief counseling methods (e.g. Miracle question, etc.), the counselor encourages the client to identify his/her “ideal” situations in each of these life domains. Goals are then mutually created based on these client responses. The author has found that two client goals—no more and no less—are often the most desirable amount for the client given the SUCCESS program’s eight-week timeframe. At least one goal should be school or academic-based, ideally, as this addresses (or is often associated with) the reason for referral. Less than two goals focuses the client on one area too intently—one that is often evokes feelings of failure or frustration, particularly if it relates to a school subject or situation. More than two goals can dilute the time and effectiveness of the counseling process, while two goals tend to provide a healthy balance and shift of focus within the sessions without overwhelming the client.

It is most important for the goals created to be client-controlled, specific, and attainable for the client within (or close to) the timeframe of the counseling program. For example, if the life domain of Family was rated “2”, and the client revealed that he has a tenuous relationship with his step-mother, a goal may be “To show respect to my stepmother by using positive communication skills with her”, rather than simply, “To be nicer to my stepmother”. Strategies on how to achieve the goal flow more directly with a specific and attainable, rather than vague, goal.

Step 4): Creating Strategies to Meet Goals: Once goals are established, strategies or steps to meet the goals should be clearly written and outlined. These strategies can involve a brain-storming session with the client, but ideally they should come from the client to increase motivation and buy-in. Example strategies for the goal, “Explore the Careers of Doctor vs. Nurse” may be “I will complete the Career Interest Inventory Test to see which career may suit me best”, and “I will look up requirements for Medical School and Nursing School by next session”, etc. Three to four strategies per goal offer a good target, as this allows for creativity of strategies for successful goal completion without overwhelming the client.

Step 5): Executing and Supporting Strategies: This step occurs during Ivey and Ivey’s (2010) “working stage”, in which the client is actively working to change his/her thoughts, feelings, and behavior toward
a particular issue. Once the strategies are written, it is the job of the client to try the strategies at home or school. Subsequent counseling sessions are an opportunity to reflect on how the strategies are working for the client. If they are working, praise and encouragement to continue the hard work are in order; if they are not working, they can be re-visited and “tweaked” to allow for greater success or eliminated and re-written as needed. The important thing for counselors to remember in this step is to avoid blaming the client for strategies that go untried, or are carried out unsuccessfully. It is during this stage that client motivation (or lack of) often surfaces as an issue; it is difficult to change habits or patterns of behavior! Rather than becoming frustrated with the client or blaming him/her, the counselor can validate the difficulty of implementing new behaviors while simultaneously looking at ways to alter the strategies to ensure optimal chance for success. When a counselor follows this more constructive mindset and indicates that they are still “on the client’s side”, many clients sense this trust and acceptance and try harder to change their behavior.

Step 6: Re-Assessing: The final step in the goal-setting process involves checking in with the client to re-scale all areas of the Life Map. This should be done regularly (e.g. weekly) to ensure that the client’s needs are being met. Client’s will often have a “crisis” occur in their life that alters the focus of the counseling session for a particular session. Using the Life Map at the start of each session to re-assess client’s needs and feelings in all areas of his/her life puts this “crisis” in a context that is relatable to the client.

Summary
School-based counseling programs can be a “win-win” for all parties concerned: schools that lack the designated funding and/or resources to provide counseling services to students can receive such supervised services, free of charge, through an established counseling graduate training program at an accredited University. Conversely, University faculty in charge of graduate training programs in counseling can have their training needs met for their “green” counselors-in-training by connecting with an underserved school site and providing a program of quality supervised counseling for students in need of academic and social support. Throughout the authors’ years of experience conducting such a program in two different school districts, “keys to success” emerged in several domains, including how to market such a program for maximum buy-in and the importance of helpful “scaling” Life Map worksheets that collect data and serve as a goal-setting catalyst simultaneously. Hopefully, sharing these keys to success will allow those implementing similar programs the chance to avoid “reinventing the wheel” when it pertains to school-based counseling services.
Appendix
SUCCESS Program Life Map (Castro-Atwater, S. 2012)
References