

Social-Emotional Counseling: A Greater Need within the School

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“Why counseling?” – An honest question that is raised by the curiosity of many whenever I disclose my professional background. Growing up as a Vietnamese American, the concept of choosing a career path that one is intrigued and passionate about is rather foreign. It's been engrained in the Vietnamese and other Asian cultures for children to follow their parents' footsteps or endeavor to become successful by adhering to well-recognized jobs that often relate to the business world or medical field. However, my experience of “success” takes place in the school where I become the emotional support and voice of guidance for students as they make their daily choices or long-term decisions that can influence their future.

Throughout my work experience with counseling students from different ages and cultural backgrounds, I've found that most of them have dreams and ambitions at a very young age but as they grow older and enter into middle or high school, their motivation to succeed starts to crumble as they encounter certain obstacles. May it be family expectations, tragic accidents, peer conflicts, or competitive academic standards that often result in high stress levels, students struggle to find a healthy balance between enjoying their classes and dreading school. On top of that, fear of failure or fear of being a disappointment can clog their vision of what a successful future may look like. When confronted with internal and external pressures, many of these students can start retracting from their parents and even their teachers, leaving many caring adults perplexed.

When nothing seems to retain students attention in class (even academic counseling and extra tutoring), social-emotional counseling is needed to help re-engage students in their schooling. Students whose mental, social, and emotional states are suffering will most likely struggle academically because these fundamental areas are interconnected. For example, when students have a physical illness, it is absolutely normal for them to go see a school nurse or take time off from school to recover. It would be unrealistic to expect those students to participate in class as though they are well. The same concept applies to a students' mental and emotional health. If their personal problems go untreated, the symptoms will become evident in their academic performance. Unfortunately, it is unlikely for some students and parents to voluntarily seek

counseling for help due to possible stigmas or misconceptions of what the process involves.

The American Counseling Association defines counseling as *"a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals."* It is a collaborative and transformative process where the counselors assist their clients make necessary changes in how they think, feel, and make decisions (Austin, 2017). One of the many false beliefs about counseling is that it is needed for "extreme" cases only, when in reality counseling is for anyone with mild to moderate problems. Some of the many life issues that counseling addresses can range from depression, self-esteem, adjustment problems (e.g. adjusting to a new school or college life), anxiety, to anger management, stress management, and relationship conflicts. The ultimate goal of social-emotional counseling is to help students from all ages obtain wholeness in many areas of their life by enhancing their ability to cope in a positive manner.

When students' emotional needs or stress-inducing situations are being dismissed, manageable issues can escalate to problems out of their control leaving students to have anger outbursts, panic attacks, or potentially suicidal thoughts. It has been reported in an article called "Students Under Pressure" that students who struggle are more likely to give up or drop out of college. Data showed that 48.6% of students who sought counseling in colleges and universities were mental health-related concerns (Novotney, 2014). This percentage reiterates the high need for non-academic counseling support within an educational environment. But why wait for students to enter into college to receive this valuable service? When social-emotional counseling is embedded in the K-12 education system, students can be better equipped in handling difficulties that may arise any given time and any given situation.

With both academic and social-emotional counseling available at The American School, parents and students can receive an in-depth and more holistic support. The benefit of receiving counseling on school campus is that students' personal and urgent needs can be identified immediately. Students' who feel emotionally, socially, intellectually, and mentally supported will find more motivation to excel academically. In return, parents, teachers, principals, and school counselors can witness the students' personal growth and their academic endeavors drawing them closer to their future goals.