

Bring Out the Brilliance: A Counseling Intervention for Underachieving Students

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Source: *Professional School Counseling*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (2013/2014), pp. 86-96

Published by: American School Counselor Association

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/profschocoun.17.1.86>

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# BRING OUT THE BRILLIANCE: A COUNSELING INTERVENTION FOR UNDERACHIEVING STUDENTS

*This study evaluated the impact of a small group counseling intervention designed for students who underachieve. The results of the study demonstrated significant improvement for ninth- and tenth-grade underachieving students in the areas of organizational skills, time management, and motivation. The author discusses implications and recommendations for school counselors working with underachieving students.*

Two significant issues on which school counselors must focus are graduation rates and college and career readiness (Carr & Galassi, 2012; College Board Advocacy & Policy Center, 2010; Dockery, 2012; Public Agenda, 2010). Although high school graduation rates have improved over the years, there is still a need for progress in this area. Among public high school students in the class of 2009-2010, the average freshman 4-year graduation rate was 78% (Aud et al., 2013). The 4-year graduation rate among public high school students (class of 2004) in the 50 largest cities in the U.S. was only 52% (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2008). Each year, approximately 1.2 million students do not graduate and only 70% earn their high school diploma on time (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009).

Although no study to date has directly examined the graduation rate of underachieving students, a possible hypothesis is that students who underachieve are contributing to lowering the graduation rate. School counselors recognize that working with students who underperform is a crucial issue to raising graduation rates. In a survey of 55 high school counselors who worked in urban areas, one of the top five reported needs included training regarding effective services for underachieving students who consistently earn low to failing grades (Owens, Pernice-Duca, & Thomas, 2009).

The need for school counselors to raise students' college and career readiness is also crucial. In 2010, Public Agenda, a group sponsored by the Bill

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and Melinda Gates Foundation, published a report that demonstrated concerns with U.S. high school students' college and career readiness (Public Agenda, 2010). This report outlined the challenges school counselors face, including their high student caseloads. However, one of the report's findings was that, overall, school counselors did not adequately prepare students for college. More than two thirds of those surveyed reported their school counselor did a "fair" or "poor" job of helping them decide which college they should attend. Similarly, 62% of respondents reported that their school counselor did a "fair" or "poor" job of helping them think about the types of careers they might want to pursue. In addition, the American College Testing (ACT) organization, in its recent college and career readiness report, found that only 23% of students were ready to enter college-level courses without remediation (ACT, 2011).

Students who do not perform up to their potential are at risk for one or both of these two major issues: dropping out of school and/or not succeeding in college and careers. Although many external factors affect graduation rates, one factor contributing to this problem is the large number of high school students who underachieve. One study (Hodis, Meyer, McClure, Weir, & Walkey, 2011) supported the theory that identifying underachieving students early in their education would prevent students from school failure and dropout. Studies have shown that students who underachieved in high school ended up receiving lower wages later in life (Dougherty, 2003; Murnane, Willett, & Levy, 1995). Peterson (2000) found that of the underachieving students who attended college, only 52% finished college in four years as compared to 83% of achieving students. McCall, Evahn, and Kratzer (1992) found that underachieving students are less likely to pursue a college degree and more likely to drop out of post-secondary education than students of comparable mental ability. Intervening

## ONE OF THE TOP FIVE REPORTED NEEDS INCLUDED TRAINING REGARDING EFFECTIVE SERVICES FOR UNDERACHIEVING STUDENTS.

with underachieving students is crucial for educators so that these students are more likely to graduate and be successful in college and in careers.

If school counselors can implement an approach to address underachievement and intervene with students who underachieve, student graduation rates and college/career readiness are likely to improve. This study focuses on a small group counseling intervention that was designed to help underachieving students improve their school performance and school success skills.

## DEFINING UNDERACHIEVEMENT

Underachievement is a controversial and debated topic in the literature (Smith, 2005). The most common definition of underachievement is a discrepancy between a student's ability and his/her actual achievement (Reis & McCoach, 2000). The definition of underachievement used in this article is:

Underachievers are students who exhibit a severe discrepancy between expected achievement (as measured by standardized achievement test scores or cognitive or intellectual ability assessments) and actual achievement (as measured by class grades and teacher evaluations) (Reis & McCoach, 2000, p. 157).

However, considering other factors, such as environmental influences, socioeconomic status, and family background, is important when identifying underachieving students to reduce the bias in this process (Smith, 2005; Thorndike, 1963).

Reis and McCoach's definition was the basis for the method of identifying

underachieving students for this study. Therefore, one of the inclusion criteria for the participants was that their expected achievement (as measured by the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test) was higher than their actual achievement (as measured by letter grades in school). The process for identifying students is addressed more thoroughly in the method section.

## CONSIDERING THE NEEDS OF UNDERACHIEVING STUDENTS

After identifying an underachieving student, a school counselor must examine the student's characteristics, behaviors, and attitudes that might contribute to his or her low school performance. Over the past few decades, researchers have identified characteristics of underachieving students. These characteristics are at times disparate, indicating that underachieving students can think, act, and behave quite differently from one another (Mandel & Marcus, 1988, 1995; Rimm, 2008). Personality characteristics of underachieving students include: easy-going, sociable, dependent, anxious, perfectionist, depressed, and possessing low self-esteem (Bruns, 1992; Mandel & Marcus, 1995; Rimm, 2008; Van Boxtel & Monks, 1992). Underachieving students also behave in a variety of ways. For example, they have been shown to procrastinate, use defense mechanisms, question authority, externalize problems, blame failure on others, lack goal-directed behavior, and fail to use self-regulation strategies (Bruns, 1992; Mandel & Marcus, 1995; Rimm,

## STUDENTS WHO UNDERACHIEVED IN HIGH SCHOOL ENDED UP RECEIVING LOWER WAGES LATER IN LIFE.

2008; Van Boxtel & Monks, 1992; Whitmore, 1980).

Since underachieving students have been shown to demonstrate different characteristics from each other, researchers have developed typologies (or categories) of underachieving students. For example, Mandel and Marcus (1995) proposed a typology consisting of six underachievement patterns linked to major personality types: (a) the Anxious Underachiever, (b) the Wheeler-Dealer, (c) the Coaster, (d) the Identity-Search Underachiever, (e) the Defiant Underachiever, and (f) the Sad or Depressed Underachiever. Researchers who examine underachieving students through a typology lens suggest that educators should consider the type of the underachieving student in the formulation of an intervention plan (Mandel & Marcus, 1995; Rimm, 2008).

In addition to the literature on underachievement typologies, another helpful line of research is the work regarding motivation as it relates to student achievement. The Achievement-Orientation Model (AOM) provides a framework that enables school counselors to help raise the motivation level of underachieving students (Rubenstein, Siegle, Reis, McCoach, & Burton, 2012). Since the AOM focuses on each student's unique perceptions, this model integrates well with the research regarding underachievement typologies. The AOM is based on the idea that students' perceptions in three areas regulate motivation and achievement. These three areas include self-efficacy, goal valuation (meaningfulness), and environmental perception. Students with high self-efficacy are more likely to work harder at tasks and persevere even if the task gets difficult (Bandura, 1986). The tasks must also be meaningful to students; therefore, students need to see a link between their school tasks and their future goals. Environmental perception refers to the students'

perceptions of teachers' and parents' expectations and support. If students do not feel supported by caring adults, they will not be productive at school tasks (Rubenstein et al., 2012).

When students function highly in the areas of self-efficacy, meaningfulness, and perceptions of the environment, they set realistic goals and are able to regulate themselves in order to accomplish a task. Therefore, self-regulation is an additional component to the AOM (Rubenstein et al., 2012). Interventions that focus solely on self-regulation with underachieving students have not been found to be successful (Stoeger & Zigler, 2005). However, other research has addressed teaching students skills such as organization and time management (Brigman, Webb, & Campbell, 2007; Zimmerman, Bonner, & Kovach, 1996). Therefore, including self-regulation as a component of a group intervention for underachieving students is important.

The author took into consideration the research regarding the effectiveness of counseling format. Research has supported the premise that low-achieving and underachieving students benefit from the small group counseling format (Whiston & Quinby, 2009; Wilson, 1986). One study to date has examined the impact of an AOM small group counseling intervention with gifted students and, while the results were positive, more research needs to be done to examine the effectiveness of the AOM in small group counseling format (Rubenstein et al., 2012).

## GROUP COUNSELING INTERVENTION DESIGN AND FORMAT

Prior to developing the Bring out the Brilliance group, the author developed a six-session group counseling cur-

riculum based on recommendations from the literature on typologies of underachieving students (Mandel & Marcus, 1995; Rimm, 2008). However, the data from the original group did not show any significant results. The author consulted with school counseling professionals and examined the literature to determine ways to make the group more effective. As a result of examining the research and consulting with school counseling professionals, the author integrated the Achievement-Orientation Model into the original group counseling intervention. To include all the essential components, the group sessions were increased from six to eight. The Bring out the Brilliance group was the result of this collaboration. This eight-session group was primarily based on the AOM, but with consideration for the different typologies of underachieving student characteristics (Mandel & Marcus, 1995; Rimm, 2008). The objectives and activities for each session can be found in Figure 1.

## METHOD

### Purpose and Hypotheses

The main purpose of this study was to determine whether or not Bring out the Brilliance, a small group counseling intervention based on the AOM, was effective at raising achievement data and achievement-related data of underachieving students. The hypothesis was that the Bring out the Brilliance intervention will lead to an increase in student achievement data, specifically grade point average. Achievement-related data were also hypothesized to improve, with decreases in both absences and disciplinary referrals. A further hypothesis was that the organizational skills and time management scores would increase, while the students' low motivation and test anxiety would decrease. The author used the School Motivation and Learning Strategies Inventory (SMALSI) to measure students' organizational skills, time management, low motivation, and test anxiety.

**FIGURE 1** BRING OUT THE BRILLIANCE SESSION OBJECTIVES AND ACTIVITIES

	Session Objectives* Students will:	Session Activities
Session 1	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Develop connection between group members and group leader (Greenberg, 2003)</li> <li>2. Build self-efficacy (Peters, 2000; Rimm, 2008)</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Paper Bag Self (Amatea, 1975): Students use art supplies and magazines to decorate the outside of a small paper bag with how they think people view them. The students also cut out pictures and words from magazines to place inside of the paper bag that represent how the students view themselves. In processing the students' Paper Bag Selves, the group leader focuses on the students' strengths and the commonalities between group members.</li> </ul>
Session 2	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Build self-regulation skills through setting long-term and short-term goals</li> <li>2. Understand the link between their school tasks and future goals (meaningfulness)</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Guided imagery: Students visualize they are receiving an academic degree or an award for an accomplishment</li> <li>● Goal setting: Students reflect on this visualization to help them write long and short-term goals</li> <li>● Processing activity: Discussion of role school success plays in relation to goals</li> <li>● Challenge activity: Students research how a role model became successful</li> </ul>
Session 3	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Continue working on self-regulation/goal valuation skills by developing strategies for overcoming obstacles that might get in the way of their goals</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Follow up on last session's "challenge activity"</li> <li>● Externalization activity (Winslade &amp; Monk, 1999): Students draw their main obstacle to achievement by giving it a face and a name. The counselor helps students discuss how they can keep this obstacle from leading them to fail in school.</li> </ul>
Session 4	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Learn time management strategies for self-regulation</li> <li>2. Discuss their support team who will help them reach their goals (environmental perception)</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Time management activity: several methods of time management are demonstrated and students practice them during group</li> <li>● Students choose one time management method to practice</li> <li>● Students discuss people who support them and make a concrete plan for using support people to help them stay on track with their time management</li> </ul>
Session 5	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Follow up on time management strategies</li> <li>2. Discuss effective ways to manage procrastination (self-regulation)</li> <li>3. Discuss support team (environmental perception)</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Report back on time management plan</li> <li>● Guided imagery for managing procrastination (Fiore, 1989)</li> <li>● Discuss how using their support team will help them avoid procrastination and feel less stressed/anxious/etc.</li> <li>● Compare "Procrastinator Talk" with "Producer Talk"</li> </ul>
Session 6	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Be able to identify feelings</li> <li>2. Identify feelings that are related to their achievement (e.g., school grades, test scores, etc.)</li> <li>3. Practice relaxation strategies for dealing with unpleasant feelings (Mandel &amp; Marcus, 1995)</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Read poems and have students identify feelings in the poems using a feelings list</li> <li>● Students will write down feelings related to times when they did not achieve in school</li> <li>● Teach muscle relaxation and breathing exercises to overcome unpleasant feelings</li> </ul>
Session 7	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Review goals and the link between school achievement and future goals</li> <li>2. Make a plan for practicing the skills they learned in group after group ends</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Students will go over goals they set in session two and revise as needed</li> <li>● Students will write a concrete plan for how they will reach goals, and how they will reward themselves if they reach their short-term goals</li> </ul>
Session 8	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Celebrate their accomplishments</li> <li>2. Build self-efficacy</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Bring treats to celebrate end of group</li> <li>● Highlight students' accomplishments</li> <li>● Give a card or small poster board for each student. All group members and the group leader will write positive feedback in each person's card.</li> </ul>

\*All objectives are based on the Achievement-Oriented Model (Rubenstein et al., 2012) unless otherwise noted.

A secondary purpose of the study was to learn underachieving students' perceptions of what they need to be more successful academically. The final session of Bring out the Brilliance asked students to answer questions that assessed whether or not they felt the group intervention was helpful and what else the students needed to become more academically successful.

### Setting

Three high schools in South Florida were chosen for the Bring out the Brilliance groups. The schools were chosen using convenience sampling; the research team had a relationship with each school. The school counseling interns who ran the Bring out the Brilliance groups were placed in the school settings at the time of the study, and the author was the university supervisor for these interns. The enrollments of the three schools ranged from approximately 1300 to

the three high schools. Three separate groups were conducted, one at each of the three high schools. Four ninth-grade students were in the group at the smallest school, three students (one in tenth grade and two in ninth grade) were in the group at the mid-sized school, and six tenth-grade students comprised the group at the largest school. The demographics of the participating students were: Black/African American (5 students = 38%), White/Caucasian (6 students = 46%), Hispanic (1 student = 7.5%), and Native American (1 student = 7.5%). In order for a student's data to be considered in the study, he or she had to attend at least six of the eight group sessions with their peers. The participants were in attendance 84.7% of the time. When a student missed a session, he or she met with the group leader individually for approximately 15-20 minutes to cover the material that was missed.

## CONSIDERING OTHER FACTORS, SUCH AS ENVIRONMENTAL INFLUENCES, SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS, AND FAMILY BACKGROUND, IS IMPORTANT WHEN IDENTIFYING UNDERACHIEVING STUDENTS

2200. The smallest school's student demographics were: 59% White, 19% Hispanic, 12% Black, 4% Asian, 5% Bicultural, and < 1% Native American. The demographics of the mid-sized school's students were: 20% White, 55% Hispanic, 20% Black, 3% Asian, 2% Bicultural, and < 1% Native American. At the largest school, the student demographics were: 57% White, 27% Hispanic, 12% Black, 2% Asian, 2% Bicultural, and < 1% Native American. The graduation rate for the school district was approximately 74%, and the truancy rate was approximately 6.5% (21 days or more of school missed per school year).

### Participants and Procedures

The Bring out the Brilliance group participants were 13 students from

The group leader was a counselor educator who previously served as a school counselor in middle and high school settings. The group leader trained two school counseling interns to assist with leading the groups. The interns helped lead the sessions in each of the three schools, in collaboration with the group leader. The school counselors assigned to each of the three schools were crucial for helping to set up the group, recruit students, and assist with monitoring student progress. The school counselors gave the group leader and interns insight on the students' academic progress to provide information that would assist with facilitating the group.

Each student in the group was identified as underachieving by at least one teacher and by the school counselor, in

accordance with Reis and McCoach's (2000) definition of underachievement. Teachers were asked to refer students whose actual academic performance was less than their expected performance (i.e., students who were not performing up to their potential). A total of 33 students were referred by teachers to participate in the group. The school counselors then looked at the referred students' academic profiles for evidence of a discrepancy between actual performance (i.e., grades) and expected performance (i.e., standardized test scores). The student had to achieve a level 3, 4, or 5 on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) in both math and reading, which is at or above proficiency. The students' report cards had to reflect grades with a C average or below in reading and/or math. For example, if the student currently had an F in a math class, but scored at or above grade level on the math standardized test, he or she could be identified as underachieving. However, if the student had below average test scores and below average grades, then the student would not qualify for the group but would need to receive other counseling services instead to assist with low achievement (e.g., tutoring and other academic resources). Students selected for the group could not have a diagnosed learning disability, nor could they be in the English Language Learners program, as these factors would complicate their identification as an underachieving student.

Once the school counselors screened for the inclusion criteria, 30 students remained as potential group participants. The school counselors contacted the parents/guardians of these 30 students to obtain written consent for participation. The students were also contacted to obtain assent to participate in the study. All risks and benefits were clearly explained. Parents and/or students could opt out of participating in the group. Out of the 30 students who met the inclusion criteria for the group, 12 students did not return the consent and assent forms for partici-

pation, leaving a total of 17 students to participate in the groups. Of these 17 students, two students transferred schools during the timeframe the groups were meeting. Two other students stopped attending the group after 1-2 sessions. These four students' data were excluded from the study, resulting in 13 student participants. These 13 participants averaged a 1.38 GPA, well below the 2.0 minimum GPA required for graduation.

The groups met eight times for 45-minute sessions over a 9- to 11-week period. Each group typically met once per week, although holidays and/or testing dates required the group to reschedule on occasion. The method of pulling students from class varied from school to school. One school had a 45-minute lunch period and utilized this time to hold the group. One school had common elective periods and used elective class periods for group meeting times. The third school used a rotating schedule so students would not miss the same class period on a regular basis. The group schedule was determined by consulting with the administration.

Each group session included a check-in and a summary of the previous group meeting's topic (refer to Figure 1). If students were given a task in the last group (e.g., to practice relaxation exercises), the students were asked to share how this task went for them this past week. Honesty in self-reflection was encouraged as it was important for each student to find what worked for him or her.

One important consideration that the group leader and student interns kept in mind for each group was the importance of keeping the group on task. Since the groups were composed of students identified as underachieving, straying from the main topic of the activity or discussion was common for them. Therefore, it was crucial that the person running the group redirected the students as needed to help them remain on task. The activities in each group kept the students busy, and this reduced the likelihood that students would stray off the topic.

### Instruments

The School Motivation and Learning Strategies Inventory (SMALSI), a scale that has been tested for reliability and validity, was used to measure change in student motivation before and after the Bring out the Brilliance group (Stroud & Reynolds, 2006). The SMALSI has a teen form (ages 13-18) and a child form (ages 8-12). Since all group participants were 13 years of age or older, the group leaders gave students the Teen Form version of the SMALSI. The scale includes ten subscales; however, for the purposes of this study, only four of the subscales were used. These subscales included: Organizational Techniques (ORG), Time Management (TIME), Low Academic Motivation (LOMOT), and Test Anxiety (TANX). The alpha coefficients for these scales are strong and range from .79 to .91, thereby supporting the reliability of these subscales (Stroud & Reynolds, 2006). The remaining subscales on the SMALSI were not directly relevant to the goals of this small group counseling intervention, and since time was a factor, reducing the number of items helped students complete the survey more quickly.

**ELEVEN STUDENTS REPORTED THEY FELT THAT THE GROUP HELPED THEM IN SOME WAY . . . THE TWO MAIN THEMES WERE CODED AS "REALIZATION" AND "SKILLS".**

Two of the SMALSI subscales, Time Management and Organization, assessed student strengths. Therefore, improvement in these areas would be supported if the students' scores increased on these two subscales. The remaining two subscales, Low Academic Motivation and Test Anxiety, assessed student liabilities. Improvement in these areas would be supported if the students' scores decreased on these two subscales.

In addition to collecting quantitative data from the SMALSI, the group leaders collected qualitative data at the end of the study. This qualitative

data was in the form of a seven-item, short-answer questionnaire, the End of Group Survey. Students were asked questions such as, "Do you think this intervention plan helped you? Why or why not?" and "What skills (if any) did you learn through this group that help you with your schoolwork?" The purpose of this qualitative survey was to give the group leaders insight into how to make the group more effective to meet students' needs in the future, and to assess students' perspectives regarding the overall effectiveness of the group. The qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### Data Collection and Analysis

In addition to collecting students' perception data using the SMALSI and End of Group Survey, the group leaders collected school achievement and achievement-related data. This data included grade point average (GPA), attendance, and discipline. The researchers compared GPAs from progress report grades immediately prior to the beginning of the group to GPAs from progress reports approximately 2 to 4 weeks after the group ended.

Comparing attendance and discipline referrals pre- and postgroup was complex because each of the three separate groups met at different points during the fall semester of school. One of the groups started in mid-September and the other two groups began in late September/early October. To make the comparisons as equivalent as possible, the researcher gathered attendance and discipline referral data on the 30 school days immediately prior to the group. This pregroup attendance and discipline referral data were compared to the attendance and discipline referrals of the 30 school days towards the

end of the group sessions (starting at week 5 of the group).

## RESULTS

The researcher used paired-sample *t* tests to analyze the mean differences between students' pregroup and postgroup scores on the SMALSI (see Table 1 for a summary of all pretest and posttest data). Posttest scores for the Organizational Skills and Time Management subscales were significantly higher than pretest scores. Posttest scores for the Low Motivation subscale were significantly lower than pretest scores. Posttest scores for the Test Anxiety subscale were higher than pretest scores; however, these results were not significant.

The researcher also used a paired-sample *t* test to analyze the mean differences between students' pregroup and postgroup school achievement and achievement-related data. Although none of the mean differences in achievement and achievement-related data were found to be significant, these types of data did show movement in the desired direction. Grade point averages increased .18 points between grading periods, while discipline referrals went down an average of .11 for all three groups. Unexcused absences decreased on average 3.22 per student. Excused absences increased by .5.

## THE STUDENTS' IMPROVEMENT IN MOTIVATION, ORGANIZATIONAL SKILLS, AND TIME MANAGEMENT COULD LEAD TO CONTINUED IMPROVEMENT IN THEIR GRADES.

The students took a survey at the end of the group so the researcher could determine the students' perception of the effectiveness of the group. Eleven students reported they felt that the group helped them in some way. The remaining two students did not return the end of group survey. These survey results were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke,

2006). The two main themes were coded as "Realization" and "Skills." Students reported that the group helped "open [their] eyes," "realize I need to reach my goal," and "introspect on [their] future." These types of responses were coded as "realization" because students reported that they learned something new about themselves, whether it was in relation to their future goals, their academic behaviors, or their motivation. The second main theme was termed "skills" because students reported a wide variety of skills that they gained from participating in the group. Students reported the group taught them skills such as: ways to reduce procrastination, goal setting, time management, organizational skills, and how to de-stress.

Secondary themes that emerged included "Connections" and "Improved Academics." Students reported that the group helped them make connections with their peers and with the individual leading the group. They reported that it helped them to share their school problems with each other and to come up with solutions together. In terms of "improved academ-

ics," students reported feeling pleased that their grades improved, or at least that they were now making an effort to improve their grades.

The final question of the survey asked students to share ways educators can more effectively encourage achievement. The most common feedback was that educators need to make school more interesting for all students. For example, one student wrote that educators should "focus on the students' learning type to get better results." The second most common feedback was that teachers and counselors need to get to know students on a more personal level to individualize instruction and education plans. One student wrote, "[teachers and school counselors need to] make a bigger effort to make a personal connection with students."

Several students demonstrated significant changes in grade point average. Below are two students' success stories that demonstrate the effectiveness of this group counseling intervention.

1. "Sam" is a ninth-grade student who should be in the 10th grade due to retention in middle school. He came into the group with a .40 grade point average on his progress report. Sam's standardized test scores demonstrated that he is proficient in math and reading, yet his math and English grades at the beginning of the group were both Fs. Sam loved to be a disc jockey (DJ) at school

TABLE 1 PAIRED SAMPLES T-TEST DATA

Measure	Pretest		Posttest		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
SMALSI- ORG	19.63	4.99	24.67	4.91	-3.372*	11
SMALSI- TIME	12.50	4.07	17.92	6.53	-3.308*	11
SMALSI- LOMOT	21.63	8.37	17.08	8.46	3.716*	11
SMALSI- TANX	13.38	6.04	14.83	9.00	-.674	11
Progress GPA	1.39	1.13	1.57	.77	-.947	12
Discipline Referrals	1.22	2.11	1.11	1.38	.222	12
Unexcused Absences	5.41	7.49	2.19	.70	1.463	10
Excused Absences	1.07	1.28	1.57	.68	-1.372	10

\**p* < .01.



events and parties, and he wrote music on his keyboard in his spare time. When asked about his goals, he said he wanted to pursue a career in music but didn't know where to begin. In the group, we discussed possible careers in music and the training he would need to pursue these careers. The group leader encouraged him to pursue extracurricular activities in music; although Sam expressed interest, he did not sign up for these activities by the end of the group. Sam shared that he never really talks about his goals with anyone, and he frequently skips school because he'd rather just hang out at home and doesn't see the point in going to school. By the end of the group, Sam started to make connections between his schoolwork and his goals to study music. His attendance improved from 13 missed absences before group to 7 absences at the end of the group. His progress report GPA increased from .40 to 2.00. Sam reported that the group helped him really think about why school is important and motivated him to get out of bed in the morning and come to school.

2. "Eva" was a 10th-grade student who frequently missed school and therefore had a 2.25 GPA on her pregroup progress report. Her test scores met the requirement to qualify her for honors level courses; however, she was almost held back in the ninth grade because she failed a few courses the previous school year. Eva had a tumultuous home life and was currently living with a friend (with her mother's permission). Eva knew she could get into college if she tried but was surrounded by chaos in her home life that made it difficult to get work done. She was often overwhelmed emotionally by her life situation, and adding school stress into the mix was too much for her to bear. By the end of the group, Eva improved her GPA from 2.25

to 2.75. Her absences went from 10 to 4.25. Eva reported that the group helped her process her anxieties and stress regarding school, helped her set goals for herself, and helped her realize that these goals are within her reach and her control.

## DISCUSSION

The students in the Bring out the Brilliance groups had GPAs that averaged below the state's requirement to graduate from high school. However, these students' teachers reported that they had potential to succeed, and the students all demonstrated proficient or above proficient standardized test scores. These students had

### THE SCHOOL COUNSELOR IS AN IDEAL PERSON TO CONNECT WITH THE STUDENTS AND TO FOSTER CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE STUDENTS AND TEACHERS.

different characteristics from each other and underachieved for various reasons. The Bring out the Brilliance group focused on the dimensions of the Achievement-Oriented Model (AOM), including self-efficacy, goal valuation (meaningfulness), self-regulation, and environmental perception (Rubenstein et al., 2012). The group also incorporated the need for underachieving students to process their emotional struggles that lead to underachievement (Mandel & Marcus, 1995; Rimm, 2008).

The focus on the elements of self-efficacy, self-regulation, meaningfulness, and environmental perception led the students to show significant improvements in organizational skills, time management, and motivation as demonstrated in the SMALSI results. Although the remaining data were not shown to be significant, these findings demonstrate that the group had the overall desired effect on the students by raising achievement and improving

achievement-related data. The lack of significant findings may be due to the fact that the group's impact may come with more time and may not yet be reflected in the current grades, discipline referrals, and attendance rates.

The group leader and the school counseling interns shared the results of the Bring out the Brilliance group with the school counselors and administrators. All three administrators were supportive of the counseling intervention. One administrator in particular was excited about the results at his school, and he requested his school counselors to continue using the Bring out the Brilliance group session curriculum in the future. All of the school counselors planned to follow up with the students in the group to keep them on the right track.

One limitation of Bring out the Brilliance is that some students may need additional supports that are not met by the eight sessions of this group. For example, if a student is from a family with low income and needs help gaining access to basic resources, the school counselor may need to work this student in additional ways. School counselors always need to take into consideration the individual needs of each student.

A second limitation of this study is that the students' school counselors were not the individuals leading the group. School counselors have particular insight into students' needs and personal motivations that could help make the group more successful. Students may connect more with their school counselors than with an individual coming from outside of the school. The students' school counselors also understand the school climate, specific student-teacher relationships, and other dynamics within the school

that an outside person does not understand.

A potential limitation to implementing this program could be the length and frequency of group meetings. Each of the eight group sessions lasted approximately 45 minutes, and finding that amount of time in the school setting may be challenging for school counselors. Some students may not

cus, 1995; Rimm, 2008; Rubenstein et al., 2012). Teaching underachieving students basic school success strategies (e.g., study skills, organizational skills, time management) is not enough (Rubenstein et al., 2012). Therefore, researchers and school counselors need to pay attention to counseling services that consider the wide array of underachieving students' needs.

their needs, they are more likely to succeed.

School counselors are also in an ideal position to incorporate three additional elements into the group counseling unit: weekly grade checks, weekly parent communication, and booster sessions. Most school counselors today can use technology to easily pull up students' current grade status. School counselors have access to teachers to gain feedback on students' academic or behavioral progress in class. School counselors can also e-mail or call parents to gain more feedback on students' progress at home. Booster sessions would have increased the likelihood that students continue to stay on the right path. Many of the students in the group expressed a wish that the group could last throughout the year to help them stay motivated. While a year-long group is not realistic in a school setting, having the group convene on a monthly or bi-monthly basis would be possible to follow up with the students regarding their goals and specific objectives for overcoming barriers.

In the feedback given at the end of the group, students shared a need for more positive connections with teachers and adults at school. School counselors can help foster these connections by communicating with teachers, coaches, and other key adults within the school to set up an advisement or mentorship program. Having an adult mentor or advisor within the school will help underachieving students feel more connected, which can increase achievement as outlined in the AOM model (i.e., environmental perception).

Students also shared feedback at the end of the group regarding the need for relevancy and connection between their goals/dreams and their schoolwork. School counselors and researchers should consider more systemic services that focus on developing this relevancy and connection school-wide. School counselors can hold professional development trainings to remind teachers of the importance of making these connections with students.

## STUDENTS SHARED A NEED FOR MORE POSITIVE CONNECTIONS WITH TEACHERS AND ADULTS AT SCHOOL.

want to be in a group counseling environment, and therefore Bring out the Brilliance would not be a good fit for those individuals. If the school has resources for incentives, bringing food or drinks to the group may help to encourage students to attend. A school counselor who is interested in implementing Bring out the Brilliance may want to consider delivering the content over a longer period of time to increase the impact of the group. For example, rather than doing eight sessions in 8 weeks, a counselor could spread out the material into 12 sessions and deliver the lessons throughout an entire semester.

The primary recommendation for increasing the effectiveness of the Bring out the Brilliance intervention is for the students' school counselor to lead the group. The author recommends this for several reasons. The school counselor would have insight on students' histories, backgrounds, and family information. The school counselor usually has some rapport built with the students already and this connection is very important to implementing an effective intervention. The school counselor's insight on the students' needs would help him or her tailor the counseling lessons accordingly.

Another reason to have the school counselor lead the group is to help students feel more connected to adults in the school setting. In the postgroup feedback, the students communicated that they want to feel like teachers and counselors connect with them. The students liked that they could share their feelings and thoughts with peers in the group, and also that they had an educator with whom they could connect to discuss their situation in school. The school counselor is an ideal person to connect with the students and to foster connections between the students and teachers. During the counseling sessions, students shared feedback regarding their academic needs. The school counselor can advocate for these students' needs with both teachers and administration. If students see that caring adults at the school are willing to help meet

## IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Bring out the Brilliance group provides an example of how school counselors and researchers can effectively work with underachieving students on a variety of key elements that impact achievement. The students' improvement in motivation, organizational skills, and time management could lead to continued improvement in their grades. This study supports an intervention that considers multiple dimensions of needs such as those outlined in the Achievement-Oriented Model, as well as the considerations outlined by researchers studying typologies of underachievement (Mandel & Mar-

## CONCLUSION

The Bring out the Brilliance study demonstrated support for a group intervention that looks at a variety of factors that affect performance. Future school counseling research could examine interventions for underachieving students that incorporate elements such as self-regulation, goal valuation, self-efficacy, and others described in this study. However, underachieving students may need other systemic interventions as well. Parents, teachers, administration, and community members can come together to best serve the needs of underachieving students through a variety of school-based academic supports. Underachieving students have a wide variety of needs and therefore intervention plans for these students need to be complex. A group like Bring out the Brilliance will help school counselors recognize other systemic needs of underachieving students within their schools. ■

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