

# Colorado School Counselor Corps Grant Program: Early Experiences and Lessons Learned

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*Colorado established a School Counselor Corps Grant Program (SCCGP) in 2008 to provide competitive grants to school districts in order to increase the availability and effectiveness of school-based counseling services for secondary school students. State leaders created the program to improve graduation rates and increase percentages of students preparing for, applying to, and continuing on to postsecondary education. This report provides information about the SCCGP and its initial successes, including participants' experiences, in order to inform and assist other state education agencies and policymakers who might be interested in developing similar initiatives in their states.*

## The Role of School Counselors in Cultivating Postsecondary Readiness

Colorado's grant program was founded on the idea that school-based counselors can play pivotal roles in helping students plan their futures and can provide guidance for students' academic achievement, career development, and personal and social growth. An American School Counselor Association (n.d.b) review of research articles in peer-reviewed journals found evidence that appropriate access to school counselors helps students complete high school on time (Lapan, Gysbers, Stanley, & Pierce, 2012; Lapan, Whitcomb, & Aleman, 2012) and helps them prepare for postsecondary studies (Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, & Holcomb-McCoy, 2011; Hurwitz & Howell, 2014; Pham & Keenan, 2011). Colorado's SCCGP addresses the need to prepare students for postsecondary success by attempting to increase the number of licensed school counselors serving secondary school students in the state.

*"In the past, our school has had low numbers of students attending any form of postsecondary education. In the past few years we have had a Boettcher [Scholarship] and three Daniels Scholarships awarded to our graduating seniors. This success is a result of the hard work and effort put in by our teachers, but more importantly by our SCCGP-funded counselor, who emphasized the importance of being prepared for life after high school."*

— Excerpt from a letter to the state SCCGP Coordinator, after a school site visit

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Since the SCCGP's inception, the program has funded more than 200 licensed school counselors to work with Colorado students in 233 secondary schools, in 75 districts, and through a Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES). A 2016 legislative report found that in districts receiving SCCGP funding, graduation rates increased steadily from 65 percent for the class of 2010 to 74 percent for the class of 2015, whereas graduation rates in comparison districts that had not received SCCGP funding increased from 65 percent for the class of 2010 to only 70 percent for the class of 2015. Dropout rates also improved for SCCGP sites. According to the 2016 report, dropout rates in comparison districts without

SCCGP funding fluctuated between 5.5 percent and 3.9 percent over the years from 2010 to 2015, while dropout rates for districts that had received SCCGP funding stabilized at 3.7 percent, close to the state average (Engelman, 2016).

In districts receiving SCCGP funding, concurrent enrollment rates (the rates at which secondary school students enrolled concurrently in college-level courses) went up as well. According to the 2016 report, between 2012 and 2015, student participation rates in concurrent enrollment increased 74 percent in SCCGP-funded districts, while rates for students in comparison-group sites increased 48 percent. The state average increase during this same time period was 71 percent (Engelman, 2016).

## Jason's Story

*On a site visit to a rural community, the state SCCGP Coordinator learned about how the program's funding had made a positive difference in the local school. Following are some of the coordinator's notes from that visit:*

As I toured the school, the superintendent described some of the positive changes, wanting me to comprehend the impact within the school, across the student body, and for the community as a whole. The school's counseling position was eliminated about 10 years ago due to budget cuts. The SCCGP provided funding to rehire that critical position.

I was introduced to students, teachers, and other staff. Each individual stressed the importance of the school counselor and the impact the counselor had made. As we walked into a physical education class, a student came over and asked if I was the person with whom he was to visit. He wanted to tell me his story.

The student, Jason, is the youngest of four children. His family has resided in this community for many years. Last year, as a junior, Jason hated

school and did not want anything to do with it. Each of his siblings quit school during their junior year. Why shouldn't he do the same? What harm would ensue? His parents were unlikely to care, and his sister and brothers provided limited advice. So why not?

He told me he had gone to tell the counselor his decision and asked to be dropped from all classes. He was done with high school, or so he thought. The counselor asked him to take a seat so they could talk awhile. She asked about his plans for tomorrow, next week, and next year. What did he want to do? How was he going to pay bills such as his cell phone, the center of every teenager's attention, let alone any other bill? He didn't know. All he knew was he wanted out.

The conversation continued, and little by little the counselor expanded Jason's perspective on the value of education. The school counselor arranged his class schedule to be more meaningful and relevant. She also scheduled time daily to meet with him, assist with issues, and prepare a plan for the future, which included earning a high school diploma and enrolling in college.

Postsecondary matriculation is another major objective of the SCCGP. According to the 2016 report, the matriculation rate in SCCGP-funded districts increased from 31 percent for the class of 2011 to 44 percent for the class of 2014. This rate has remained stable over the last three years. The state average was approximately 56 percent across the same time span (Engleman, 2016).

In 2015, the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) contracted with the Center for Research Strategies to collect information regarding the number of SCCGP positions sustained beyond the grant, as well as on programs and services that were implemented using SCCGP funds and then sustained beyond the grant. Survey results revealed that approximately 90 percent of the school counseling positions were sustained and nearly 100 percent of the programming was continued.

### Documenting the SCCGP Experience

In 2016, to document the state's experiences and capture lessons that could be informative to other states, the CDE asked WestEd and subcontractor RMC Research Corporation to develop this report about the SCCGP and participants' perspectives.

RMC researchers collected information for this report primarily through focus groups in February 2016: one conducted during an SCCGP training at Aurora Community College, and another with counselors from a BOCES. RMC researchers also interviewed program participants in March and April 2016. Participants in the focus groups and interviews represented 19 school districts and 2 BOCES, and included 18 school counselors, 10 grant coordinators, 3 administrators, and 2 individuals serving in a consulting role for grantees or for the grant program in general. Participants responded to questions about their experiences with the SCCGP, training and technical assistance, and tasks completed during their first year of having an SCCGP grant.

RMC gathered additional information during two SCCGP training sessions held in February, and from materials that included the program's training webinars and resources, *The ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs* (American School Counselor Association, 2012), pertinent legislative documents, SCCGP annual reports, and application materials for SCCGP funding.

### The Creation of Colorado's School Counselor Corps Grant Program

In April 2007, Colorado Governor Bill Ritter established the P-20 Education Coordinating Council (Lopez, 2011), consisting of representatives from early childhood education, K-12 and higher education, business and industry, and the state legislature. The council was charged with making recommendations for developing a seamless education system, from preschool through graduate school, that prepares youth for the 21st century. The council's subcommittee on postsecondary preparation found that even though counseling was consistently associated with strong postsecondary preparation, the student-to-counselor ratio in Colorado was about 500 to 1, which greatly exceeded the ratio of 250 to 1 recommended by the ASCA for effective programming (ASCA, 2012).

The subcommittee also determined that simply increasing access to school counselors would be insufficient for improving student outcomes. Counselors needed to adhere to standards set forth by the ASCA (ASCA, 2012) and be part of comprehensive postsecondary preparation efforts involving schools, districts, community-based organizations, and institutions of higher education. The subcommittee also decided that counselors needed to work with individual students to discuss and systematically develop plans for the future. The subcommittee thus recommended that postsecondary preparation be part of the accreditation process for K-12 schools and that

## SCCGP Grant Cycle

- » Four-year grants: one planning year and three implementation years.
- » Funding ranges from \$25,000 to \$50,000 per funded school for year one, and up to \$80,000 per funded school in later years.
- » Applications are released in January of each year, due in March.
- » Sites are notified in mid-June.
- » Applications are rated by reviewers using a rubric.
- » Evaluations and annual reports are due July 1.

every student develop an Individual Career and Academic Plan (ICAP).

To assist schools and districts in meeting these goals, the group worked with the legislature to create the SCCGP, which provides competitive four-year grants and professional development for Colorado districts in need of funds and guidance (see next section for eligibility criteria). Program development and implementation are guided by an advisory board. Members include representatives from the CDE, the Colorado Department of Higher Education, the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment, community colleges, school districts, and school counselors. Initially, the advisory board conceptualized the program components, held annual retreats to reflect on the program's effectiveness, advised CDE staff, communicated with stakeholders, publicized outcomes, and reported to policymakers. Today the board continues to provide strong support for the program, particularly through communication with legislators.

## Program Elements

### Eligibility and selection criteria

School districts, BOCES, and charter schools are eligible to seek SCCGP four-year grants by filling out an extensive application. Priority is given to applicants that serve schools where the dropout rate and/or the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch is higher than the state average, and/or where postsecondary remediation rates exceed the state average.

CDE provides an annual training webinar detailing how to complete the SCCGP application process, and CDE staff members are available to provide additional information and support. The selection process is competitive. Applications are reviewed using a rubric-based point system to rate the quality of each applicant's program development, internal and external partnerships, postsecondary plans, and budget. Bonus points are allocated for providing a clear picture of indicators that students are at risk of not succeeding in postsecondary education, and for operational sustainability plans.

To be awarded a grant, an applicant must show previous support for school counseling programs, provide information on current student-to-counselor ratios, and commit to sustaining grant-funded counseling positions. Applicants must also describe ways in which district- and school-level administrators are engaged in the grant-writing process, and must commit to ongoing administrative involvement throughout the four-year grant period.

### Funding and requirements

Applicants that receive an SCCGP grant may use the funds to supplement, but not supplant, resources that they currently use for secondary school counseling activities. Funding may be used for licensed secondary school counselor salaries and benefits, postsecondary preparatory services, professional development, and/or program development. Funds can also be used for the school counseling team to attend three required professional development

sessions per year, provided by CDE. The trainings are for counselors funded under the grant, counseling teams, and key leadership staff most closely related to the success of the grant. At a minimum, counselors funded under the grant and principals or assistant principals must attend these trainings. A series of seven webinars is also required for first-year grantees.

Receipt of first-year funding is not a guarantee of funding for subsequent years. To be eligible for funding in years two through four, the grant recipient must meet several conditions. The grant recipient must: (1) conduct and report a thorough needs assessment and environmental scan in year one; (2) submit evaluation materials to CDE by July 1 of each year after year one; (3) demonstrate adequate progress toward annual objectives, as determined by CDE's review of submitted online reporting protocols; (4) complete a program development report that demonstrates the ability to continue services in years two through four; and (5) provide properly completed budgets each year.

### Needs assessment

The needs assessment that grantees are required to complete in year one is compiled through surveys of students, parents, teachers, staff, and community members. CDE's guidance specifies that the needs assessment must be short, be easy to complete, measure the current state of the school, and depict the desired state. CDE provides sample needs assessments during trainings and on the SCCGP website. The samples include questions for stakeholder groups, allowing grantees to adapt surveys to fit their needs. Training and technical assistance address how to develop survey items (e.g., avoiding jargon and being aware of sensitive topics), distribute surveys (e.g., available languages, distribution format), and analyze completed surveys (e.g., meaningful disaggregation). Sites use findings from their needs assessment to identify priorities for each stakeholder group.

*“The webinars, workshops, and informational sessions constituted the backbone of [SCCGP's support]. These have assisted me . . . in developing data-driven, meaningful, systemwide counseling programs designed for student success. The opportunities to share ideas and best practices were exceptional and provided an avenue for the grant recipients to grow professionally and personally.”*

— Jane Thornton, Professional School Counselor,  
Adams County School District 14

### Environmental scan

The environmental scan that grantees are required to complete in year one focuses on identifying school and community factors that may impact student outcomes. Environmental scans are completed by examining four types of factors: (1) internal, micro-systemic/school-counselor factors; (2) internal, macro-systemic/school-counseling program factors; (3) external, micro-systemic/school factors; and (4) external, macro-systemic/community factors. CDE created worksheets that provide guidance to grantees regarding which data sources to use for the environmental scan and how to use the resulting information for further planning. Data sources include school counselor résumés, the ASCA Use-of-Time Assessment (American School Counselor Association, n.d.a), the school counseling core curriculum and program assessment (American School Counselor Association, 2012), the school data profile, local and regional press coverage, and online databases maintained by the U.S. Census Bureau and the National Center for Education Statistics. Analyzing the environmental scan includes entering pertinent information into a factor-analysis summary sheet that helps grantees interpret the data. The data from the environmental scan are used in conjunction with needs assessment data to help determine root causes of problems.

### SMART goals

The SCCGP requires grantees to create SMART goals — Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Time-Bound — for what they intend to accomplish with their SCCGP funding. Creating a SMART goal involves identifying a specific goal, along with how and when to assess progress toward achieving that goal. During year one, each grantee is expected to develop no more than four SMART goals related to student counseling; the grantee must then report annual progress on those goals. CDE reviews and approves the SMART goals set by grantees, providing assistance on developing the goals, as necessary.

### Interventions

To address the goals that they have set, grantees select interventions, which can include delivery of direct and indirect services (as described in the ASCA model; ASCA, 2012) and/or professional development for school personnel. Interventions are based upon contextual fit and available resources and are expected to clearly align with the needs, root causes, and SMART goals that grantees have identified. In selecting interventions, grantees are encouraged to consider the research base, feasibility, effectiveness, and delivery method of the interventions. Grantees may also choose to implement a comprehensive guidance curriculum that aligns with ASCA standards. Grantees must continually assess the impact of interventions that they choose to implement, and may change interventions if the initially selected interventions are not having the desired impact.

### Sustainability

From the first training and throughout involvement with the SCCGP, participants are advised to build a schoolwide culture that promotes postsecondary preparation and that includes all staff members understanding how to help students envision their postsecondary aspirations and knowing how best to support students toward reaching those aspirations. When initially awarded an SCCGP grant, schools and districts are asked to indicate how they will sustain the activities and services that they

create with the grant funds, and to commit to keeping school counselors in place when the grant ends. Funding can be reduced by 10 percent each year to help sites adjust and learn to reallocate resources to sustain the improvements they make.

## Supporting Grantees: Role of the State Education Agency

CDE has developed and refined a multiyear, multi-phase approach for supporting grantees. The grant application and planning process, implementation, technical assistance and professional development, and monitoring are integrated and carried out with the intention of developing grantee capacity to deliver high-quality programming.

### Planning

In the initial years of the SCCGP, CDE observed that the inclusion of a planning year along with various forms of support led to the most effective implementation and sustainability of projects in later years. Now all grantees participate in a planning year. Depending upon local context and resources, some sites elect to hire a counselor to participate in the planning process. During this time, school teams refine their preliminary needs assessments and environmental scans, solidify SMART goals, and develop counseling program strategies that align with ASCA standards. Administrators and staff attend professional development sessions three times a year and regularly communicate with CDE staff about grant administration, implementation, reporting, and other issues.

### Implementation

Schools implement their grant plans during years two, three, and four. Counselors are expected to be in place, participate in professional development sessions, provide a comprehensive school counseling program, and communicate regularly with CDE staff. Participating districts complete detailed online reports each year, which require information about staffing and the number of licensed school

counselors, progress toward meeting goals, counseling program strategies and services, professional development, continuation plans, and requests for follow-up years. During year four, grantees are expected to have plans in place for sustaining their efforts beyond the SCCGP funding.

### Technical assistance and professional development

CDE communicates general information about the SCCGP through webinars and email. CDE staff provide most SCCGP training and technical assistance in face-to-face settings, with the focus and activities customized to the grantees' needs. A kickoff meeting for new grantees covers grant expectations and management, ASCA model basics, and end-of-year reporting, as well as providing an overview of the SCCGP website, current legislative report, and upcoming webinars. Fall meetings address the competencies needed to complete a needs assessment, conduct an environmental scan, identify SMART goals, and select and implement evidence-based interventions. During subsequent years, grantees learn expectations for interim reports, explore strategies for encouraging students and their parents to apply for federal student aid, and analyze data for decision-making.

Technical assistance also includes providing information on fostering a college-going culture, as well as helping grantees to address challenges facing underserved populations, support program effectiveness, and comply with reporting requirements. At least one member of the school leadership team is required to attend all CDE-led sessions. CDE personnel have reported that requiring school administrators to attend grant trainings reinforces the principal/counselor relationship and the value of sustainability of positions and programs made possible through the grant funding. The first training for grantees focuses on the knowledge of grant specifics to guide administrators in the planning process. Technical assistance and support resources continue to evolve and are posted on the CDE website.

## Reporting Topics

- » Performance Goals and Evaluation
- » Intended Outcomes
- » Implementation of ASCA Model
- » Program Data
- » Professional Development
- » Staffing
- » Sustainability Plan

## Monitoring

First-year grantees submit electronic reports to CDE, with narrative and budget sections. The narrative includes the needs assessment, environmental scan, root-cause analysis, SMART goals, interventions, and documentation of licensed school counselor participation rates. Grantees provide three prioritized budget options to cover contingencies, as a way to develop the capacity to effectively revise budgets in future years.

During years two through four, district-level grantees complete a different monitoring process from the process for school-level grantees. District-level staff members (typically grant managers or project directors) respond to detailed electronic surveys that collect information about progress toward SMART goals, areas impacted by pursuit of the goals, program strategies and services, implementation, program data, professional development, counselors hired, and ICAP implementation and goals for the coming year. Plans for sustainability and strategies for addressing unmet needs in the future are also addressed.

School-level grant personnel (typically lead district counselors or grant managers) report on items related to staffing, performance goals and evaluation, and intended outcomes. They also report on

the presence and/or creation of a mission statement, access to services for all students, plans for closing achievement gaps, characteristics of student learning objectives and goals, needs assessment activity, use of data, and whether counselors spend their time in ways that directly benefit students. Grantees provide information on annual reviews, resources for professional development, representation on curriculum and education committees, communications with parents, and use of pre-collegiate programming.

Reporting requirements are meant to be aligned, to present a coherent picture of grantee activity that not only meets compliance requirements but informs future project improvements. CDE staff review grantee reports to identify issues worthy of further exploration during site visits, which serve primarily to provide support, professional development, and technical assistance. CDE intends these visits to enhance capacity building at the local level to implement projects with high fidelity and ensure sustainability over time.

## Lessons Learned

Program designers, state leaders, grantees, and participants have addressed challenges throughout implementation, learning many lessons over the years. The intent of documenting these lessons is to inform the work of other states considering similar initiatives.

### Outcome-driven vision

Although the SCCGP is a grant program and is funded by the legislature, state leaders and program designers have envisioned the program as a systemic change strategy designed to enhance the way schools operate, while improving practice and policy along the way. They consider successful sites to be those that envision a future in which every student pursues some avenue of post-secondary studies, and where a schoolwide culture provides counselors and other educators with the time and space required to foster postsecondary

readiness and success. The program is intended to infuse the entire school culture, including students' daily interactions.

### State leadership and support

Stakeholders in Colorado have indicated that clear, consistent, and meaningful guidance and assistance are essential if sites are to reach their annual objectives. Grantees who provided information for this report agree that the leadership provided by CDE and the SCCGP advisory board members has been reliable, noteworthy, and exceptional, and that CDE's support to sites across the state has been indispensable. Interviewees and focus-group participants indicated that CDE's frequent, face-to-face training and technical assistance have helped grantees reach their goals in a timely manner. Respondents also appreciated the mix of training — which included in-person sessions as well as webinars and email communications — noting that complex technical issues that vary from site to site are best handled during face-to-face conversations.

### Champions, advocates, and partners

According to interview and focus-group respondents, the Colorado School Counselor Association played a strong role in promoting the program to districts and schools, catalyzing effective practices, and communicating to the legislature about program effectiveness. Respondents also indicated that members of the SCCGP advisory board are key advocates who employ a range of strategies to publicize the program and communicate with policymakers about results. Legislators regularly hear program stories told through data from students, parents, and educators. Interviewees and focus-group participants indicated that representation of different stakeholder groups on the advisory board has ensured continuity and maintained forward momentum. Respondents also pointed to other key partners, including site-based administrators who are involved during the planning year, as well as community-based organizations, colleges, and universities.

### Readiness and commitment

CDE staff indicated that they identify and assist highly motivated applicants for SCCGP grants, even though the initial applications may not be well conceived. CDE respondents said they had learned that rather than deny a prospective grantee, they could work with the applicant during the planning year to prepare a meaningful and actionable application. Interviewees and focus-group respondents indicated that moving from a three-year grant cycle to a four-year grant cycle that included a full 12 months for planning and preparation had increased commitment to the program, resulted in better outcomes for students, and increased sustainability of counseling positions. The program documents and communications convey the expectations that applicants must devote time and energy to effective planning, engage fully in the process, and carefully consider results from the needs assessment and the environmental scan. Applicants are consistently prompted to leverage the program for schoolwide change, and CDE uses the initial application to measure applicants' readiness for this change in systems and culture. Additionally, school districts along with their high schools and middle school feeders are encouraged to apply together, to establish cohesive, consistent links among schools. Some grantees have commented that going through the application process was the first time they had met with their counterparts at feeder schools.

### Accountability and sustainability

Both CDE staff and grantees indicated that they continuously monitor the use of SCCGP funds, and that monitoring provides essential status checks to help sites stay on track, fulfill obligations, use funds appropriately, and make timely adjustments. Respondents also indicated that effective monitoring assists with progress documentation and accountability. A comparative approach is used to document progress. CDE staff indicated that they compare grantees' outcomes to those of peer districts with similar student characteristics, and that this comparison provides compelling evidence of

### Jason's Story Continues . . .

"Now I am a senior, and I even like coming to school," Jason told me with great pride. "I will be the first one in my family to graduate from high school!" He was excited and emotional. "Plus, I will be going to college and have plans for my life. If it were not for this lady right here, I would be out looking for a job that wouldn't even pay my gas to get there." Later, Jason added, "We have an assignment in English to write this paper. It was easy for me to pick my topic — it is about my school counselor who singlehandedly kept me in school, provided a career goal, and probably saved my life. I will never forget the impact she has had on my life and I can pass this on to others and my kids one day."

program effectiveness. District-level respondents indicated, in interviews and focus groups, that programming and staffing added value to the school sites, and that evidence of this value helped grow the SCCGP and ensure sustainability. CDE staff have indicated that school counseling positions can have a positive return on investment by keeping students engaged in school and preventing dropouts, which can maintain enough per-pupil revenue to match the funding needed for the school counselor.

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