# Student Success Skills: Tools and Strategies for Improved Academic and Social Outcomes

*This article is a follow-up to previously published reports of research evaluating the effectiveness of the Student Success Skills group and classroom intervention. An overview of the key skill areas is provided, supported by ongoing research in the area of social-emotional learning, along with research-based strategies and activities that have been found to improve academic and social outcomes for all students. Key tools for classroom guidance lessons are included and are accompanied by specific guidelines for how school counselors can implement them. The article concludes with a brief discussion of the need to implement research-supported programs.*

Recent studies have provided strong evidence of effectiveness for the school counselor-led Student Success Skills (SSS) intervention in positively effecting the academic achievement and social competence of students (Brigman & Campbell, 2003; Brigman, Webb, & Campbell, in press; Campbell & Brigman, 2005; Webb, Brigman, & Campbell, 2005). To date, the SSS research has involved four studies, 50 school counselors, 36 schools, two school districts, and more than 1,100 students in Grades 5, 6, 8, and 9. In each study, low to mid-range achieving students in targeted grade levels were randomly assigned to treatment and comparison groups. Treatment group students received the SSS classroom and group intervention. Achievement gains in math and reading were measured by the annual statewide achievement test used to determine adequate yearly progress in response to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Behavior gains were measured by the School Social Behavior Scale (SSBS; Merrell, 1993).

The findings of all four SSS studies were consistent. Eighty-six percent of students who participated in the SSS program improved their math Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) scores, with an average scale score improvement of 30 points. Seventy-eight percent of students improved their FCAT reading scores by an average of 25 scale score points. With the use of an analysis of covariance, with pretest scores used as the covariate, the achievement improvements were statistically significant. This suggests that improvements were the result of this school counselor-led intervention. In addition, 7 of 10 students demonstrated improved behavior as reported by classroom teachers on the SSBS.

The skill sets, tools, and strategies embedded in the SSS program were developed based on extensive reviews of the research regarding improved academic and social outcomes for students (Hattie, Biggs, & Purdie, 1996; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994). In all three reviews, certain cognitive/learning, social, and self-management skills were considered essential for academic and social success. The program is further supported by a growing body of literature tying social and emotional competence to achievement outcomes, making a strong empirical case linking social-emotional learning to improved behavioral and academic performance for students, including those at risk for academic failure (Arbona, 2000; Daly, Duhon, & Witt, 2002; Elias et al., 2003; Fad, 1990; Kamps & Kay, 2001; Marzano, Pickering, & Pollack, 2001; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004).

The SSS program also provides support for the ASCA National Model® (American School Counselor Association, 2005). While standards, competencies, and student outcomes are all clearly outlined for academic, personal/social, and career domains in the ASCA National Model, counselors are charged with finding programs that have been proven effective to help students attain these outcomes. The SSS program provides a research-based curriculum that is a direct fit with identified student outcomes outlined in the ASCA National Model, particularly

**Linda D. Webb, Ph.D.,** *is an assistant professor and* **Greg A. Brigman, Ph.D.,** *is a professor with the Department of Counselor Education, Florida Atlantic University, Davie. E-mail: lwebb@fau.edu*
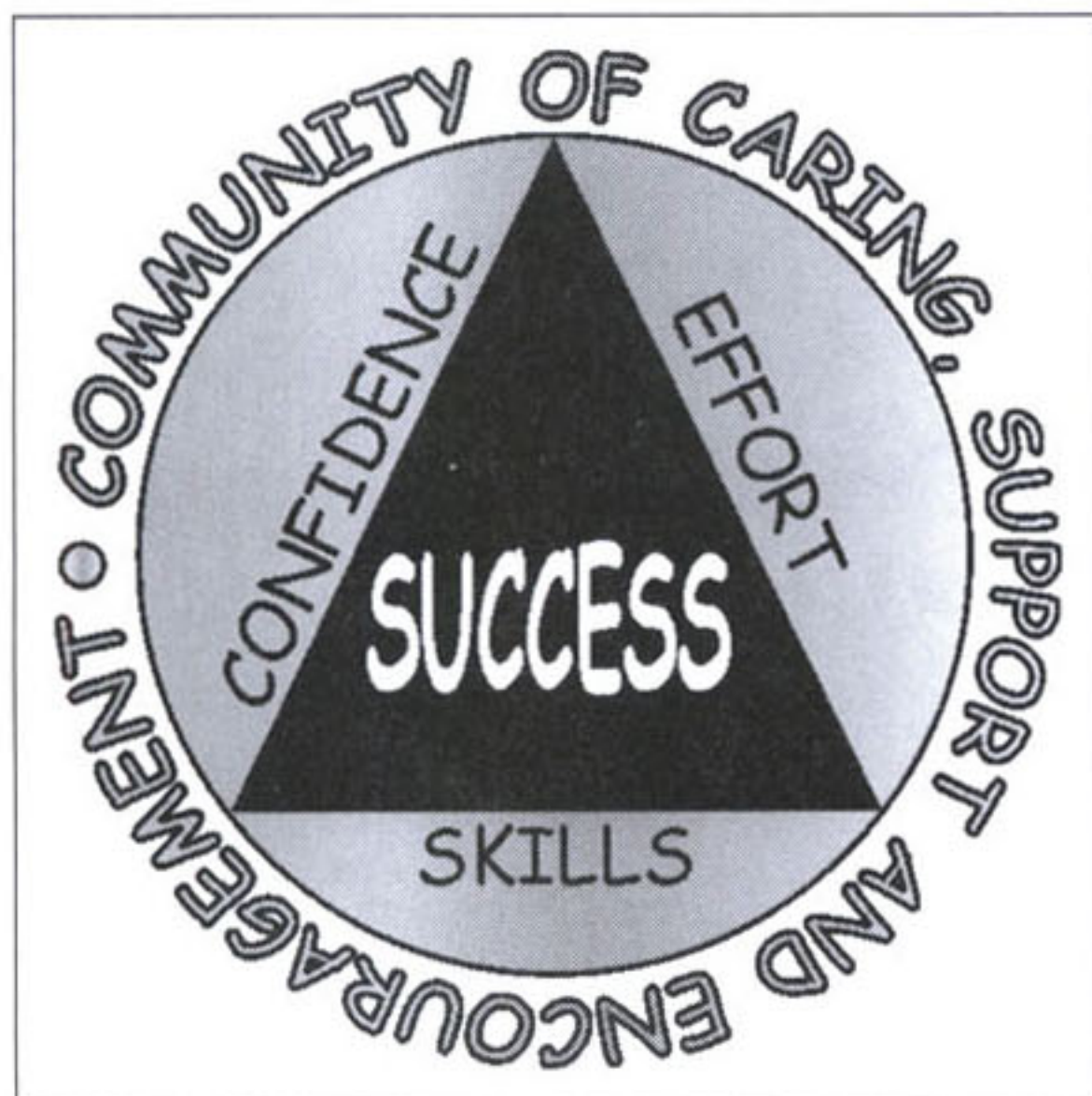
Figure 1. The Student Success Skills logo.

**Classroom Guidance Lessons**

The SSS classroom guidance program involves five classroom guidance lessons. The five lessons are spaced a week apart and begin in the fall, usually in late August or early September. Key skills and strategies are introduced using a "tell-show-do" format and are followed by booster sessions spaced about a month apart beginning in January. Booster sessions leading up to standardized tests in the spring help students tie the important test-taking and self-management skills they have learned to the specific test-taking task. However, the impact of the SSS program is designed to be more far reaching than test taking. The SSS program is directed at students' day-to-day development and the implementation and monitoring of skills and strategies aimed at improving their academic and social competence. This provides students with improved opportunities to learn and grow. Increased standardized test scores and improved behavior are two measured outcomes. Some additional outcomes linked to improvement but not documented in the SSS studies include increased motivation to learn, improved self-efficacy, and better grades and subject-area test scores. Also, as students see improvements and become more competent, teachers and students report an increase in confidence and effort, and learning becomes more enjoyable. It is hypothesized that if these skills did not improve, standardized test scores and behavior would not have consistently improved at a significant rate.

Classroom lessons follow a *beginning, middle,* and *end* format. In the *beginning,* students review previously set goals, monitor progress, and report success around five life skill areas that are tied to increased energy and mood. Students are taught to look for patterns and make connections between their daily habits (nutrition, exercise, rest, fun, social support) as related to their mood and energy (Figure 2, Appendix C). In the *middle* of each session, students learn and practice new skills and strategies they can use as they target areas for continued improvement. Activities reflecting key skills and strategies are organized into five categories: (a) goal setting, progress monitoring, and success sharing; (b) creating a caring, supportive, and encouraging classroom environment; (c) cognitive and memory skills; (d) performing under pressure and managing test anxiety; and (e) building healthy optimism (Appendix A). The *end* of each session provides an opportunity for students to reflect and share improvements they have made toward designated course mastery goals during the previous week and to target areas for improvement for the upcoming week (Figure 3, Appendix D).

**Eighty-six percent of students who participated in the Student Success Skills program improved their math Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test.**

related to personal/social and academic domains. The curriculum indirectly impacts student outcomes in the career domain, as students who are not successful academically and socially have difficulty preparing for the world of work.

SSS study results and discussions of related professional issues have been or are currently being published (Brigman & Campbell, 2003; Brigman et al., in press; Campbell & Brigman, 2005; Webb et al., 2005). Also soon to be published is a description of the eight-session SSS group counseling intervention (Webb & Brigman, in press). The current article focuses on the SSS classroom intervention. It describes key skills and strategies and provides sample activities that anchor the classroom component of the SSS intervention.

## STUDENT SUCCESS SKILLS PROGRAM

The Student Success Skills program is implemented through classroom guidance lessons followed by group counseling for students who need additional support. The underlying premise is that all students must have a core set of learning, social, and self-management skills and that these skills can be taught. Appendix A provides a list of the research-supported skill areas along with strategies to be introduced and reinforced throughout the SSS classroom and group components. If students can learn and practice these skills in a caring, supportive, encouraging environment where mistakes are part of the process and even small improvement are noticed, their confidence in their abilities will increase. Once students become more confident they are willing to put forth more effort. This leads directly to improved academic and social outcomes. We call this SUCCESS (Figure 1, Appendix B).

## LOOKING GOOD / FEELING GOOD

| | | Week 1 | Week 2 | Week 3 | Week 4 | Week 5 | Week 6 | Week 7 | Week 8 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1. Nutrition** Liquids: ▲ water & milk & juice ▼ soda; Solids: ▲ fruits & veggies ▼ sweets & chips | 1 | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ |
| **2. Fun** Little joys, big fun - it all counts, read, listen to music, play, create, hangout, explore | 2 | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ |
| **3. Exercise** Walk, run, dance, pedal, move it - 30 minutes or more a day | 3 | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ |
| **4. Social Support** Hanging out with people you like and who like you. Family and friends you can count on. | 4 | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ |
| **5. Rest** 8-9 hours - naps count. Recharge, renew, relax | 5 | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ |
| *Making even small improvements in these 5 items lead to higher energy and mood.* | | | | | | | | | |
| **6. Energy** | 6 | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ |
| **7. Mood** | 7 | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ |

*Student Success Life Skills*

Circle the up triangle (▲) if you rate the Life Skill as in a good range or showing improvement for this past week
Circle the down triangle (▼) if you rate the Life Skill as not in a good range this past week

Figure 2. The Looking Good/Feeling Good Life Skills Scale.

> The SSS program provides a research-based curriculum that is a direct fit with identified student outcomes outlined in the ASCA National Model.

**Sample Classroom Guidance Lesson**

**Beginning of each lesson.** Each lesson begins in a similar fashion to allow students the chance to share successes and strategies for improvement:

▌ Review: Welcome students. Ask students to share with a partner what they remember about the last SSS lesson. Next ask for volunteers to share with the class. Be sure they cover key skills areas previously introduced to bring them to consciousness.

▌ Life skills: Next, students share progress toward previously set life skills goals, share successful strategies, and look for patterns and connections with mood and energy before developing goals and action plans for the coming week. Students use a think, write, pair share, volunteer share format as goals and action plans are developed and shared. See Appendix C for details and directions for implementation.

**Middle (content varies for each lesson).** New skills are introduced and practiced during the middle of each lesson. Once introduced, concepts are incorporated and reinforced throughout the remaining lessons. Some sample activities are briefly described:

▌ What a caring, supportive, and encouraging classroom looks like, feels like, and sounds like: Students work in groups of three to brainstorm what it would look like, sound like, and feel like if their classroom were a caring, supportive, and encouraging place to learn. These create an even higher standard than traditional class rules.

▌ Safe place: This activity helps students to learn to relax and create a "safe place" in their imagination. It uses self-directed imagery followed up with the drawing and sharing of their safe place. Students can decide what they want to draw and/or share.

▌ Listening with eyes, ears, and heart: Students learn attending and listening skills and practice encouraging and empathic responding. Students have several opportunities during each classroom lesson to practice.

▌ Breathe, picture, focus: Students learn to relax by taking a few slow, deep breaths followed by picturing themselves in their "safe place." For most students, it only takes a split second for them to picture their safe place to get out of their negative self-talk loop or create a diversion from the stress or anxiety they are experiencing. At that point, students can focus on making decisions related to managing text anxiety, anger, or other stressors.

▌ "Keep Kool" tune shields: Students learn to use music to create shields to help them cope with pressure situations and to replace the negative messages they may play in their minds with positive ones.

▌ Memory pegs: Students learn several strategies to increase their ability to organize and remember important information. One activity involves helping students remember a list of "top 10 food for good health" by using parts of their body (location pegs) and visualization to quickly commit the list to memory.

## STUDENT SUCCESS SKILLS

**Seven Keys to mastering any course:**

1. I am good at picking out the most important things to study for a test.

2. I am good at boosting my memory by:
   Organizing the most important facts into an outline or concept map.
   Putting each important fact on a note card.
   Reviewing the note cards at least six times before the test.

3. I am good at handling pressure when I take a test. I use breathing, picturing a positive scene and positive self talk to help me manage my anxiety and boost my confidence.

4. I am good at knowing when assignments are due and always turn my work in on time.

5. I have at least one dependable study buddy in each class that I can call if I have a question.

6. I get along well with others when we work together in pairs or small groups in class.

7. I am good at managing my anger. I know my anger triggers and know healthy ways to handle things when I get angry.

| | Week 1 | Week 2 | Week 3 | Week 4 | Week 5 | Week 6 | Week 7 | Week 8 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ |
| 2 | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ |
| 3 | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ |
| 4 | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ |
| 5 | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ |
| 6 | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ |
| 7 | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ | ▲▼ |

Circle the up triangle (▲) if you rate the item as in a good range or showing improvement for this past week.

Circle the down triangle (▼) if you rate the item as not in a good range this past week.

Figure 3. The "Seven Keys" to course mastery.

- Story outlines and student storytelling: Students learn strategies to make understanding and remembering stories easier. Student create their own stories based on story starters reflecting typical challenges faced by students and share success stories such as "a time I started a healthy habit," "a time I helped someone with a problem," or "a time I made a new friend."

**End of each lesson.** The end of each lesson follows a similar sequence:

- The "Seven Keys" to mastering any course: In this segment of each lesson, students share progress toward previously set goals, share successful strategies, and look for patterns and connections to improve their academic performance before developing goals and action plans for the coming week. Students use a think, write, pair share, volunteer share format as goals and action plans are developed and shared. See Appendix D for details and directions for implementation.

- Optimism: The end of the lesson is always anchored with the language of optimism, picturing success and the concepts of encouragement and noticing even small improvements. Visual tools help students understand the connection between practice, mastery, and fun.

- "Kaizen": Kaizen is a recurring concept emphasizing small, continuous, never-ending improvements. Students stand and go through the Kaizen hand play—"little by little, bit by bit, I'm improving every day"—to aid them in remembering this important concept.

- Preview the next lesson.

### Preparing to Implement the SSS Intervention

School counselors frequently talk about needing "time" to implement effective programs due to increased demands to attend to non-counseling-related tasks. Even so, counselors are strongly encouraged to advocate for the needs of their students and the counselor's role in meeting those needs. This includes counselor efforts tied to improved student outcomes (ASCA, 2004). As standardized test scores and other important stakeholder assessments are being reviewed as part of a school's ongoing school improvement process, school counselors can plan to provide a SSS program overview to administration, faculty, and parents showing how they can contribute to improved academic and social outcomes for all students.

It is essential for counselors to tie to the same vision and mission that is important to each of these key stakeholders. At least some school counselor interventions need to be written into the school's

**The SSS program is directed at students' day-to-day development and the implementation and monitoring of skills and strategies aimed at improving their academic and social competence.**

improvement plan and all should be reflected in the counselor's annual plan that drives daily activities. Designating a minimum of one hour a day to research-based programs such as SSS provides an opportunity for school counselors to support their school's mission by providing a curriculum linked to stated outcomes of national initiatives such as No Child Left Behind (U.S. Department of Education, 2001) and the ASCA National Model (2005).

## CONCLUSION

> **As counselors increase their implementation of research-supported programs, stakeholders will have the opportunity to experience firsthand the difference counselors can make in the lives of students and families.**

We encourage school counselors to use research-supported programs that have been linked to improved student outcomes. This focus is essential if we want to change administrators' and teachers' perceptions and behaviors related to the role of school counselors as a key contributor to improving student outcomes. Organizations that support this view include the American School Counselor Association, the Education Trust, and the Center for School Counseling Outcome Research. All three of these organizations stress the need for school counselors to use research-based programs to improve academic and social outcomes for all students and support counselors' efforts to evaluate the effectiveness of their programs and share outcomes with key stakeholders. As counselors increase their implementation of research-supported programs, stakeholders will have the opportunity to experience firsthand the difference counselors can make in the lives of students and families. It is up to professional school counselors to advocate for students by educating decision makers about how school counselors can play a greater role in ensuring that all students are successful. ∎

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# APPENDIX A

## Student Success Skills: Key Skill Areas and Supporting Strategies

*Goal Reporting, Progress Monitoring, Success Sharing, and Goal Setting*
Students share success and set goals weekly, around the following:

▌ Student Success Skills: Seven keys to mastering any course.
▌ Life skills: Five ways to ensure high energy and positive mood.
▌ Grade monitoring.
▌ Kaizen: The concept of "Kaizen" (looking for even very small improvements) is emphasized throughout.

*Creating a Caring, Supportive, and Encouraging (CSE) Classroom Community*
Students learn the importance of combining social-emotional and academic skills aimed at the following:

▌ Discovering what a CSE community looks like, sounds like, and feels like.
▌ Listening with eyes, ears, and heart: Practice with attending, listening, empathy, and encouragement.
▌ Recognizing improvements in self and others.
▌ Identifying and practicing encouraging things to say and do.

*Cognitive and Memory Skills*
Students learn and practice important academic skills:

▌ Picking out the most important ideas (expert/novice phenomena).
▌ Strategies for organizing information: Graphic organizers, outlining, concept mapping.
▌ Learning to chunk important information and put it on note cards with strategies for reviewing cards. Using a "location memory peg system" to remember key facts.
▌ Understanding "story structure" as an academic skill and social learning tool.

*Performing Under Pressure: Managing Test Anxiety*

▌ Students learn that they can be in control when stressed or under pressure through the following:
▌ Developing a "safe place" that they can quickly go to in their imaginations when stressed, anxious, or angry.
▌ Learning a "breathe, picture, focus" sequence to help them refocus their energy and/or attention.
▌ Using meta-cognitive strategies such as positive self-talk.
▌ Using "Keep Kool" tunes to distract from negative thinking, stress, or anxiety.
▌ Learning some test-taking strategies. Understanding the power of mental practice and picturing successful outcomes.

*Building Healthy Optimism*

▌ Students learn strategies for developing healthy optimism through the following:
▌ Positive student storytelling.
▌ Success stories shared weekly around goals that have been set.
▌ Noticing small improvements.
▌ Learning the language of optimism.

# APPENDIX B
## Introducing the Student Success Skills Logo to Students

Looking at Figure 1—

"How many of you think the *outer ring of this picture* is important to doing well in school or on a team or in a job? What makes it important?

"I would like to help this class make sure you have that type of community this year. With this kind of caring, supportive, and encouraging community, you all can help each other learn the skills you need to master this course and also reach other goals that are important to you.

"What about the skills at the *bottom of the triangle?* There are three types of skills that separate high and low achievers—learning skills, social skills, and self-management skills. Students who have these skills tend to do better in school.

"The good news is that these skills can be taught and once you learn them you will have more *confidence* in what you are doing and learning will become easier. As a result, most students are willing to put more *effort* into what they do at school and they become more *successful*. What is kind of neat is that when this happens, learning can even become fun!"

# APPENDIX C

## The Looking Good/Feeling Good Life Skills Scale

The "Looking Good/Feeling Good" concept is introduced and becomes one of the reoccurring activities at the "beginning" of the SSS classroom lessons. Students monitor their progress and set goals weekly around the five life skill areas. The following format for *goal reporting, progress monitoring,* and *goal setting and action planning* is suggested with an emphasis on sharing student successes and noting even small improvements:

**Goal reporting.** At the beginning of each classroom lesson, students share with a partner how they did with their goal from the previous week. Be sure to share even very small improvements and if there was no improvement, brainstorm what to do differently next time to improve. This might involve "tweaking" a previous strategy or choosing a new one. The idea is to do something different if what has been tried isn't working (pause for about 30 seconds).

**Progress monitoring.** Next, have students look at the first item on their Life Skills sheet and circle the "up" arrow if they have improved or stayed at a good level for the previous week and a "down" arrow if they have not done very well with this item.

Ask a volunteer to read the first item, then ask, "Who has improved even a little during the past week, or stayed at a good level?"

Get examples from one to two students and prompt, "Tell us what you did to improve or stay at a good level."

"Who else has tried this or something similar?"

Another volunteer reads the next item followed by the same prompts. Continue the pattern for the rest of the items, then move on to goal setting.

**Goal setting and action planning.** "Look back at your Life Skills sheet and pick one area you most want to improve this coming week and one thing you could do to show improvement. Here is an example" (provide an example).

"I will give you a few seconds of quiet time now to think of your *goal and action plan*. When you have your goal and plan in mind, I want you to write it down and give me the thumbs-up sign" (pause for 15–30 seconds).

"Now, I will ask you to share your goal and action plan with a partner. When you share your goal, I want you to listen with *eyes, ears, and heart.*"

Ask for a few volunteers to share their plans and collect the Life Skills sheets for next week.

# APPENDIX D
## Introducing the Seven Keys to Mastering Any Course

The "Seven Keys" is introduced to students in the second classroom lesson and is part of the end of each classroom lesson. It includes research-supported learning, social, and self-management skill areas that contribute to increased academic success. Goals are set, progress is monitored, and successful strategies are shared weekly at the end of each classroom and group session.

**Introducing the Seven Keys:** "It is possible for every student in this class to master the key concepts in any course. Other students just like you have used these seven keys to improve not only in their school work but also in their social skills and self-management skills."

Have students look at the first of the Seven Keys—picking out the most important information—and ask for a volunteer to read. Next, have students circle the "up" arrow if this is something they are pretty good at or a skill they have recently improved, and to circle the "down" arrow if this is difficult for them.

Then ask, "How many of you have made an A or B on a quiz or test recently?" "Then you must be pretty good at picking out the most important things to study."

Ask volunteers how they knew the most important things to focus upon as they prepared for their test or quiz. "Who else has tried this or something similar?"

Go to item 2, memory. Ask for a volunteer to read and for students to circle the "up" or "down" arrows. Ask for examples from students who have circled the "up" arrow of what strategies they used to boost their memory.

For each answer ask, "Who else has tried this or something similar?" "Who used one of the memory boosting ideas this week? How did it go?" "What are some other strategies you use to improve memory?"

Be sure to review the strategy of organizing the most important ideas into an outline or concept map, then breaking it into small chunks for note cards, and then reviewing the cards six times as one of the best ways to make sure students really know the material. Review the strategy of using memory pegs, mnemonics, or other strategies contributed by teachers or students.

Have a volunteer read item 3, performing under pressure, and have students circle the "up" or "down" arrows.

Then ask, "How many of you are pretty good at staying calm under pressure? How do you do it? Who else uses a similar pattern? How many of you have used a safe place or deep breathing to calm yourself?"

"If you did not make an A or B on one of your quizzes or tests this last week, then you can use one or more of these first three keys to improve next time."

Ask for a volunteer to read the next item and have students use arrows for self-rating. "Who improved even slightly? What did you do? Who else has tried that strategy or something similar?"

Continue to ask for a volunteer to read the next item and use the same question pattern for the rest of the items.

**Goal setting and action planning:** "Look back at your Seven Keys sheet and pick one area you most want to improve this coming week and one thing you could do to show improvement. Here is an example" (provide an example).

"I will give you a few seconds of quiet time now to think of your goal and action plan. When you have your goal and plan in mind, I want you to write it down and give me the thumbs-up sign" (pause for 15-30 seconds).

"Next, I would like you to relax, take a deep breath, and run a video in your imagination of you carrying out your action plan and successfully accomplishing your goal. Notice the feelings you have as you accomplish your goal.

"Now, I will ask you to share your goal and action plan with a partner. When you share your goal, I want you to listen with *eyes, ears, and heart*" (allow 60 seconds for pair shares).

Ask for a few volunteers to share their goals and plans with the class or group. This volunteer sharing allows the counselor several opportunities to briefly reinforce or coach students in this process. Collect the Seven Keys sheets for the next lesson.