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Making Effective Use of Counselors to Increase Student Achievement

By Nancy Protheroe

The expectation that all students will learn to high levels has never been more intense, and teachers, rightfully so, are at the center of schools' efforts to meet these high expectations. But other staff resources can support efforts to meet student needs—especially in a tight economic environment—because “in the resource-limited world of public schools, every decision about a program positively or negatively affects another area of the system” (Martin, Lopez, & Carey, 2009, p. 107). Counseling programs can make a positive difference, and Janson and Stone (2009) discussed the important link between counseling and the high-stakes environment of schools:

Comprehensive school counseling programs reallocate the foci of school counselors so that their practices

align with the educational agenda of the school.... In doing so, comprehensive school counseling programs embody the response of the school counseling profession to the accountability-focused educational landscape in our era of school reform. (p. 153)

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) explicitly addressed the issue of accountability in the ASCA National Model. The model represents a fundamental change in expectations for counselors and the counseling program, revising the role of the counselor and examining how students are different as a result of what counselors do. The model describes comprehensive school counseling programs as having a “standards-based approach arranged in a scope and developmental sequence with performance

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Just the Facts

- “In the resource-limited world of public schools, every decision about a program positively or negatively affects another area of the system” (Martin, Lopez, & Carey, 2009, p. 107).
- “Successful schools share practices that support and enhance student performance, and one of the promising strategies is effective collaboration between the principal and school counselors” (Riddile & Flanary, 2008, p. 5).
- “Counselors should be partners who help principals and teachers foster student growth and performance. The first step for the principal and the school counselor [should be] to explicitly discuss appropriate roles and responsibilities” (Mallory & Jackson, 2007, p. 35).
- “It appears that a more fully implemented comprehensive school guidance program is a largely unrecognized and underutilized vehicle through which achievement gaps . . . could be significantly reduced” (Lapan, Gysbers, & Kayson, 2007, p. 8).

benchmarks” (Janson & Stone, 2009, p. 139). When counselors use the model to organize services, it often shifts the counselors’ work from a one-to-one relationship with students that is often reactive to a program that is intentionally structured to support schoolwide goals for student learning through a more varied approach to providing services.

Moving From Reactive to Comprehensive Developmental Guidance

The shift in school counseling programs has been dramatic. The ASCA model defines the new face of school counseling services, and several bodies of work contributed to the development. These include the Transforming School Counseling Initiative of the Education Trust that focuses on the preparation of counselors as well as on the current state of practice in schools. The conceptual frameworks of several authors—Gybers and Henderson (comprehensive school counseling), Johnson and Johnson (results-based approach), and Myrick (developmental model)—were also influential.

Other shifts in the way counselors did their work paralleled the development of these new theoretical frameworks. It is often described as the “position or program” dichotomy. Martin, Lopez, and Carey (2009) found that

Up until the 1980s, counseling in schools was conceptualized as a position responsible for providing a set of services to students. Accessing these services was typically based on the immediate needs of the campus. Thus the school counselor typically operated in a reactive model. (p. 109)

Gybers and Henderson (2000) summarized the three foundational premises of what has evolved into comprehensive school counseling programs:

- **Guidance is a program.** This represents a shift from a previous focus on defining counseling by the elements of the position of counselor—what a counselor does.
- **The program is developmental and com-**

prehensive. The programs address students’ developmental needs as well as responding to students in crisis. In addition, programs include components such as assessment, provision of information, consultation, and follow-up.

- **The program follows a team approach.** Counselors work collaboratively with other school staff members and are available for consultation as well as provide services directly to students.

Comprehensive School Counseling Programs and Student Achievement

A new approach to the counseling program should address a critical question: Does it improve student achievement? Emerging evidence points to a positive impact of comprehensive school counseling programs, although Dimmitt, Militello, and Janson (2009) acknowledged that

the findings are correlational rather than causal. The positive outcomes could be due to factors in addition to the implementation of the CDG [comprehensive developmental guidance] program.... For example, more complete guidance implementation and student achievement might both result from the schools’ organizational structure, leadership, and/or personnel strengths rather than being causally related to each other. In all likelihood, given the complexity of both human behavior and educational outcomes, many interacting factors are responsible for the findings, including but not limited to the school counseling programs. (p. 48)

However, a review of related research highlights the benefits of comprehensive school counseling programs. Sink and Stroh reported (as cited in Dimmitt, Militello, & Janson, 2009) that

schools with a CDG program, even if not fully implemented, were found to have higher scores on both norm-referenced

national tests of academic knowledge and on state criterion-referenced tests of academic achievement. Additionally, students who remained in the same school with a well-implemented CDG program for multiple years obtained higher achievement test scores than students who attended schools without such programs. Thus, more exposure to CDG programs was correlated with greater improvements in scores. (p. 47)

A study by Lapan, Gysbers, and Kayson (2007) found that Missouri high schools with more fully implemented comprehensive guidance programs—when compared to low-implementing schools—had higher graduation rates, higher ACT scores, fewer discipline problems, better attendance, and higher postsecondary participation rates one year after graduation. They remarked, “It appears that a more fully implemented comprehensive school guidance program is a largely unrecognized and underutilized vehicle through which achievement gaps . . . could be significantly reduced“ (p. 8).

In addition, an Education Trust (2005) study that focused on high schools’ efforts to support struggling students characterized the schools studied as having either high impact (or “produced unusually large growth among students who entered significantly behind,” 2005, p. 4) or average impact. The following findings about differences in how counselors in these two types of schools provided services were reported:

- Counselors in high-impact schools are considered members of the academic teams and are responsible for actively monitoring student performance and for arranging help when needed. Counselors in average-impact schools are more likely to get involved with students through referrals. (p. 6)
- Although counselors help with course placement at both high- and average-impact schools, counselors at most high-impact schools go a step further: They meet one-on-one with rising eighth graders to discuss goals and help with course selection and placement. At most average-impact schools, counselors forego the

individual meetings with students. (p. 17)

- Counselors at high-impact schools report that they are involved in devising four-year plans for students twice as often as counselors at average-impact schools. (p. 23)

What Should Your School's Counseling Program Look Like?

Martin, Lopez, and Carey (2009) suggested that reorganizing a school’s counseling program requires much more than simply tweaking a more traditional approach because “the little details can have a big impact on school counseling programs and, ultimately, the larger school environment” (p. 107). Begin by asking: Is school counseling organized as a program or a position within your school? (p. 135). Focusing on what counselors would do under each of the two frameworks might make it easier to address the question, because there would be a dramatic shift in a counselor’s daily work with a new mode of school counseling. Janson and Stone (2009) explained:

The growing awareness of comprehensive school counseling programs...is particularly remarkable when one considers just how differently school

Light (2005) provided specific suggestions for ways in which principals can support counselors and the counseling program:

- Find a time to communicate with your school counselor about the school counseling program every day, even if it’s only five minutes
- Give your school counselor clear guidelines and expectations for how to handle situations under your administration
- Recognize that a school counselor is a student advocate, not a disciplinarian
- Don’t brush off the school counseling program into the “other” category
- Review and research appropriate and best practices for school counseling programs. (pp. 35–37)

counselors were asked to view their work. The ASCA National Model requires a paradigm shift from working to support individual students in a reactive way, often ancillary to the educational mission of the school, to developing and coordinating a comprehensive program that involves administrators, other staff, parents, and community members who assist and guide implementation of a results-based program. (2009, p. 144)

One high school counselor characterizes the old approach to counseling as “putting out fires” (Birnbaum, 2009, p. B2). In contrast, when counselors implement a more comprehensive program, the mix of services looks quite different. Counselors are expected to teach classes, consult with other staff members, and offer group as well as individual counseling. ASCA provided this framework:

- School guidance curriculum. Structured lessons designed to help students achieve desired competencies and that are delivered throughout the school’s overall curriculum and systematically presented by counselors in collaboration with teachers in classroom and other group activities.
- Individual student planning. Ongoing activities designed to help students establish personal goals and develop future plans.
- Responsive services. Prevention and/or intervention activities to meet students’ immediate and future needs; may include individual or group counseling, consultation with parents or teachers, referrals to other school support services or community resources, peer helping, etc.
- System support. Activities to support and enhance the total school counseling program. These activities include professional development, consultation, collaboration, etc. (ASCA, n.d.b., “Delivery System”)

ASCA (n.d.b.) has even developed guidelines for the amount of time that should be allocated to

each of these functions by a high school’s counseling program. For a guidance curriculum, 15–25%; individual student planning, 25–35%; responsive services, 25–35%; and system support, 15–20%.

Julie Hartline, an ASCA school counselor of the year, talked about her school’s efforts to transform its counseling program: “Our program did not address the needs of our student body. We had no time for groups or classroom guidance” (Conrad, 2009, p. 18). Recognizing that counselors were being assigned so many administrative tasks, such as registration and testing, that they had too little time to focus on the real work of counseling was the school’s first step. Counselors worked with the principal and other school leaders to address the problem, and they now have the time to develop and support such initiatives as a credit recovery program for seniors in danger of not graduating (Conrad, 2009).

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Roles and Responsibilities of Counselors

As Hatch (as cited in ASCA, 2005) described, a crucial additional element in establishing a CDG program is focusing on a “job description” for the school’s counselors because

Without a clearly defined role and function, school counselors often find themselves in the position of “utility” players. Anyone who has coached sports knows the role of utility players who “play wherever the coach tells them—for the good of the team.” (p. 184)

Mallory and Jackson (2007) suggested that “The first step is for the principal and the school counselor to explicitly discuss appropriate roles and responsibilities” (p. 35). Janson, Militello, and Kosine (2008) pointed to the “appropriate roles and responsibilities of school counselors described by the ASCA National Model” (p. 6) as an important topic for discussion. For example, “interpreting cognitive,

aptitude and achievement tests” is considered an appropriate activity, but “coordinating or administering cognitive, aptitude and achievement tests” is considered inappropriate (n.d.a., “Inappropriate Activities for School,” column 2). Although it is reasonable for counselors to be assigned “‘fair share responsibilities,’ such as bus duty or other tasks that rotate between staff members” (Johnson, et al., 2005, p. 13), these should not detract from their ability to do the real work of counseling.

Mel Riddile (2009), a former principal who considered a strong principal-counselor partnership to be an important school asset, discussed other ways counselors’ roles may need to change:

Just as teachers and departments within a school can no longer act as silos, neither can school counseling programs. Counselors must now be directly involved across all departments, all disciplines, and all school initiatives. They must understand the what, how, and why of literacy initiatives, technology integration efforts, and ELL and special education programs and priorities. Counselors must also understand new course sequences for at-risk students, mentoring and advisory programs, after-school tutoring opportunities, and the myriad of family and social services available to their students. The list goes on and on.

This ever-increasing complexity makes alignment of mission and function difficult for everyone, including principals and counselors. Counselors and principals must work collaboratively in a partnership to ensure consistency between the plan designed for each student and the overall mission of the school. (pp. 5–6)

Principal-Counselor Collaboration

Collaboration is important to a more comprehensive approach to counseling. “Successful schools share practices that support and enhance student performance, and one of the promising strategies is effec-

What Works

Impacting the instructional program is just what Bernadette Willette, a counselor in rural Maine, was able to accomplish through data analysis and advocacy. Her high school, a low-socioeconomic school, did not have any AP courses. Bernadette reached out to College Board for help, and they provided her with evidence showing a correlation between the PSAT scores of students and students’ predicted success in AP courses. Armed with hard evidence that the students of the school could be successful in AP courses and, therefore, have greater opportunities to take those courses, the teachers made the commitment to offer AP courses in the future. Bernadette wrote a grant to support the teacher training needed, and now five AP courses are offered at this tiny high school at the end of the Interstate 95 system. Bernadette, with the support and collaboration of the administration of her school, changed the instructional program and widened opportunities for many students.

Source: Stone, C. B., & Dahir, C. (2009) Principal-counselor alliance for accountability and data use. In F. Connolly and N. Protheroe (Eds.), *Principals and counselors: Partnering for success* (21–35). Arlington, VA: Educational Research and Naviance, Inc.

tive collaboration between the principal and school counselors” (Riddile & Flanary, 2008, p. 5). In 2001, Stone and Clark examined the principal-counselor relationship and its possibilities:

Although the school counselor and principal may have separate and specific roles and responsibilities to carry out, there is overlap with regard to accomplishing common goals for the school and its students. New attitudes about school counselors and principals joining forces for leadership and advocacy can positively affect a school’s mission, its climate, and its students’ ability to achieve academic success. (p. 46)

They also suggested concrete reasons why a partnership focused on leadership for advocacy can be important to schools and students. For example, a principal and counselor could analyze data to identify school practices that may be acting as barriers for students.

Recent research on principal-counselor collaboration provided helpful information about the relationship and about barriers to making it stronger. Three organizations—the College Board’s National Office for School Counselor Advocacy, the American School Counselor Association, and the National Association of Secondary School Principals—took a closer look at the counselor-principal relationship. According to Finkelstein (2009), a survey that asked both principals and counselors to identify important elements of and the biggest barriers to a successful relationship showed that

Both principals and counselors ranked communication and respect as the two most important elements in the principal-counselor relationship. Principals most frequently gave communication the highest ranking while counselors most frequently gave respect the highest ranking.

When giving examples of what they meant by good communication and high levels of respect...principals and counselors tended to focus on different things. Principals more often mentioned the quality of the communication while counselors more often mentioned the frequency of the communication. Principals more often mentioned respect for their vision and goals while counselors more often mentioned personal respect for themselves and their expertise. (p. 4)

Time was mentioned by both principals and counselors as the biggest barrier to collaboration, with both groups indicating that more time without interruption was needed but difficult to find in their busy days.

Dimmitt, Militello, and Janson (2009) described

characteristics of effective principal-counselor relationships:

One important component of principal-school counselor collaboration is the importance of each having a firm understanding of the others’ skills, capabilities, and training....Another characteristic of effective partnering of principals and school counselors is a common belief in their interdependency. Principals and counselors must be in agreement that they each can perform with greater effectiveness when they share support, advice, and understanding. (pp. 58–59)

Dimmitt, Militello, and Janson (2009) also suggested that explicit attention be given to building the relationship around addressing school goals. For example

regular meetings between principals and school counselors might shift in purpose from reacting to individual student issues to discussions as to how each will contribute to broader systemic solutions to school problems. In this way, collaboration can begin to address more complex issues. (p. 60)

In Summary

An effective school counseling program—as well as strong principal-counselor relationships—most likely will come about through intentional efforts. Principals should take the lead in identifying ways to make this happen. Making a thoughtful assessment of the school’s current counseling program is the first step. [PRR](#)

About the Author

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Resources

Two resources reporting findings about principal-counselor relationships from a project sponsored by The College Board, ASCA, and NASSP are available online:

- *A Closer Look at the Principal-Counselor Relationship: A Survey of Principals and Counselors* (www.schoolcounselor.org/files/CloserLook.pdf)
 - *Finding a Way: Practical Examples of How an Effective Principal-Counselor Relationship Can Lead to Success for All Students* (www.schoolcounselor.org/files/FindWay.pdf).
- Read about the ASCA National Model at www.ascanationalmodel.org.
 - ASCA has posted Year at a Glance—a sample year-long calendar of counseling activities and events for a high school implementing a comprehensive school counseling program. Go to ascamodel.timberlakepublishing.com/files/Yearlycalendar.pdf.

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