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Setting ELLs Up for Success

Not Your Mother's School Counselor

Glenn Cook

Now key academic partners, school counselors are increasingly tying their work to schoolwide student achievement goals. Yet many schools still lack a full-time counselor, leaving a gap in much-needed services and programs.

Lesli Myers has served as a school counselor, assistant principal, central office administrator, and superintendent over the course of her 21-year education career in New York. Not bad, considering her guidance counselor urged her to attend a community college.

"My high school counselor was horrible," says Myers, who grew up around Rochester, New York. "I graduated near the top of my class, and I wanted to be a musician or go to medical school, but my counselor told me I should go to a community college instead. My counselor didn't know who I was."

Thirty years after that unnerving meeting, Myers and others look back with pride at how the profession has evolved. Today, school counselors view their roles from a different perspective, one that is much broader than providing guidance to individual students.

Over the past 15 years, three major changes have altered the course of the profession: the development of a national model that aligns the work of counselors with school improvement efforts, a movement toward aligning direct services with comprehensive schoolwide programs, and the acknowledgement of the counselor's role in expanding college access for all students.

Norm Gysbers, distinguished professor at the University of Missouri and the de facto historian for the profession, says counselors lacked a road map for their work until the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) released the ASCA National Model in 2003. The model, which was updated in 2012, focuses on ways to measure students' academic, career, and social and emotional development, and gives counselors tools and tips to make their role integral to the school's academic mission.

Counselors who use the model analyze data on student attendance, free and reduced-price lunch, office referrals, and test scores, among other things. They then use this information to develop annual goals, as well as small-group and classroom guidance lessons. Throughout the year, the counselors watch to see if their program helps improve achievement, attendance, and behavior. If something is not working, the counselors tweak the guidance program or replace it altogether.



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Despite this enormous leap, school counselors are "even today ... seen as office people who do management and clerical tasks in addition to providing some direct services to students," says Gysbers, an advocate for comprehensive school counseling programs since the 1970s. "It needs to change so that we are seen as program people who meet the academic and personal needs of all students."

Counseling's "Shot in the Arm"

One person who has a vested interest in seeing that change in perception carried out is First Lady Michelle Obama, who spoke to ASCA members at their annual conference in June. The First Lady, who was promoting her Reach Higher initiative to help low-income and minority students gain access to postsecondary education, said K–12 school counselors are often "the deciding factor in whether young people attend college." Correspondingly, "school counseling should not be an extra or a luxury just for school systems that can afford it."

She also announced that for the first time, the national school counselor of the year would receive recognition at a White House ceremony. The day before the First Lady's speech, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan released a letter urging districts to invest in professional development for school counselors and to provide training for principals and teachers "so they understand how to most appropriately utilize and build on the capacities of school counselors."

Those announcements are seen as a much-needed "shot in the arm" for a profession that has spent much of the past decade fighting cuts in positions, especially in low-income and urban districts. According to the Civil Rights Data Collection, students at 1 in 5 high schools don't have access to a school counselor. Although ASCA recommends ratios of 1 counselor per 250 students, the national average is 1 to 471, according to data from the National Center for Education Statistics. In low-income schools, ASCA officials say the number can approach 1 counselor per 1,000 students.

Richard Wong, ASCA's executive director, says that because of confusion around their role, school counselors are typically "seen as ancillary to the preK–12 curriculum and are often left out of efforts to improve education."

So, given the lack of knowledge about their work, what can the education community do to change the perception of school counseling? It comes down to three things: advocacy, communication, and data.

Demonstrating a Common Goal

Counselors must help administrators, parents, and community members "understand what best practices are in the field," Myers says, even when this level of advocacy is not part of their natural makeup or training.

Tammi Mackeben, director of counseling for the Socorro Independent School District outside El Paso, Texas, says her district holds a leadership academy for its counselors, showing them how to analyze and communicate their data to principals, parents, and staff members.

"There's a lot of history behind us that we have to change," Mackeben says. "I tell my counselors, 'You are a leader. You can make a difference and change someone's mind' " about the profession.

Joni Shook, a school counseling specialist for Florida's Duval County Schools, saw her district lose elementary counseling positions as it tried to meet state-mandated class size requirements several years ago. This meant counselors had to cover more than one school, which diminished their effectiveness.

Already stressed about their workloads, Shook says a number of counselors balked when the district required each school to have a counselor advisory council, which is designed to help counselors inform key administrators, teachers, and parents about their work. Duval's counselors, even those who were slow to come on board, started realizing "how powerful it could be if you had the right people at the table listening to what you do," Shook says. Through the councils, school counselors now receive feedback and then report on their progress either via written communication or at the next council meeting.

Shook believes the councils, which are recommended in the ASCA National Model, helped pressure administrators and the school board to restore the lost positions. Today, every elementary school in Duval has its own counselor.

In Virginia's Fairfax County Public Schools, Marcy Miller Kneale, coordinator of school counseling and college success, says counselors are advocating just as hard for their programs. Counselors regularly meet with their principals and teachers as well as hold twice-annual advisory council sessions.

"Where we see a lot of success is when we have a good counselor-principal relationship, when the counselor[s] can articulate how their work can improve the principal's work," Kneale says. "There's constant education within our department because we're sitting with our teacher colleagues and talking with them about how our work connects within the instructional program."

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One of Kneale's schools, Lake Braddock Secondary, was honored by ASCA for its exemplary counseling program. At its most recent counselor advisory council meeting—attended by about 30 parents, students, and school staff—counselors discussed their work on a sexual harassment and bullying unit, a college and career night for 11th graders, a community college transition program, a depression screening week, and a student and teacher needs assessment.

Students and parents were asked to comment on counselors' reports, which included data on attendance at each event as well as plans for follow-up, and the counselors were candid about what worked and what didn't. That candor, Kneale says, is crucial.

"Our community is unwilling to see counselors cut, and that's a good place to be," she says. "We have so much data about our students and their needs, and we need to share our work. Without community buy-in or understanding, when budget cuts come, you won't have that support and you'll lose your program."

In every case, Mackeben says, demonstrating a common goal—helping students succeed academically—is key to being a good advocate. Besides sharing evidence of success, such as increased attendance and participation in school activities, "you get a chance to show the principal that other things matter as well."

The Proof Is in the Data

So how is the profession different today from what it was in the earlier era of the guidance counselor? Talk to veteran counselors, and then spend some time with Nicole Weber and Mindy Willard. Both were in graduate school when the ASCA National Model was released, and their work is steeped in it.

Willard has been the lone counselor at Sunset Ridge Elementary since the 700-student, K–8 school opened in Phoenix, Arizona, 10 years ago. Her caseload is one of the smallest in the district, which averages 1 counselor for 860 students.

"My priority is to be in every single classroom every three weeks," Willard says, "and I am always gathering data. Data is huge in evaluating my program and in evaluating what students are learning."

In Cobb County, the suburban Georgia district where Weber has been working for eight years, counselors are expected to collect, analyze, and share data about students and their work with them. Evaluations are based on the data and how it fits into school improvement efforts.

The information gathered is "not something you turn in and no one reads," Weber is quick to clarify. "Our district supervisors give us feedback. They ask us about next steps. There's a purpose to what we're doing."

Weber meets regularly with school administrators and teachers to "add, cut, and tweak things" so that she can make sure her work is tied into Nickajack Elementary's overall goals. Those meetings, she says, have gone a long way in shifting views about her role and her work.

By "putting in the time necessary to meet the school's goals," Weber says, she is viewed as a valuable resource, "not just as someone who has a box of Kleenex."

Willard says the way the profession has evolved "is uncomfortable for many school counselors." But, she notes, it's a necessary evolution.

"Data is hard for counselors. Showing off is hard for counselors," she says. "We like to help kids feel good. We are doing these things and we know it's necessary to continue doing them, but we want to help kids succeed, too. That's always our biggest goal." 

Too Few Counselors

The U.S. student-to-counselor ratio is nearly double the American School Counselor Association's recommended ratio, especially in high-needs schools where the ratio can approach 1,000 students per counselor.

250 : 1 Recommended student-to-counselor ratio¹

471 : 1 National average student-to-counselor ratio²

Sources:

¹ American School Counselor Association. (n.d.). Student-to-school-counselor ratio 2010–2011. Retrieved from <http://www.schoolcounselor.org/asca/media/asca/home/Ratios10-11.pdf>

² National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). Public elementary and secondary school student enrollment and staff counts from the common core of data: School year 2010–11. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2012/2012327.pdf>

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