

Collaboration: The Critical Role of the School Counselor

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Abstract

Over the years, the school counseling profession has undergone drastic changes; the past few decades have witnessed a shift from a responsive, service-oriented approach to more comprehensive school counseling programs. This evolution has created confusion in the education field surrounding the ideal role of the profession. In order to facilitate understanding, the American School Counselor Association created the ASCA National Model, which includes four major themes: leadership, advocacy, collaboration, and systemic change. The essential role of the school counselor is to collaborate; *collaboration allows school counselors to better act as leaders and advocates for students in order to create systemic change*. This investigation examines collaboration in schools, its benefits in the context of the ASCA National Model themes, and explains why professional school counselors should prioritize collaboration above all other components.

Keywords: School Counseling, Collaboration, Community, Leadership, Advocate, Systemic Change

The responsibilities of a school counselor differ so much based on school level, geography, demographics, resources, and season that it is almost impossible to define the role of the profession. There is a link between all of a school counselor's responsibilities, however, that makes every one of them possible: collaboration. Through collaboration with school workers, family members, and the outside community, school counselors can develop more student support, and therefore greater student success, than by working alone. Collaborating with stakeholders allows school counselors to better act as leaders and advocates for students in order to create systemic change. In their article on strengths-based partnerships, Bryan and Henry argue that collaboration and partnerships use resources found in schools, families, and communities in order to create positive school environments, promote supportive adult-child relationships, foster academic success, and give children a sense of purpose (Bryan 2008).

To be an effective school counselor, one must be a leader; to be a leader, one must be a great collaborator. Professional school counselors collaborate with others in order to provide better leadership for the benefit of the students and the school counseling program. Leadership has been described as a process whereby one teaches, rather than commands, others to see the world in new ways, to achieve goals, and to share their own knowledge to teach others (Tichy, 2004). Many may think of leadership as more of a commanding role, but this definition emphasizes the importance of valuing others and working with them to achieve a common goal. As a school counselor, and a leader of a school counseling program, it is recommended that counselors build linkages with many stakeholders in order to negotiate with them for the benefit of the students (Griffin & Farris 2010).

School counselor at North Windy Ridge School Wendy Logan put this idea into practice when she led the implementation of a school-wide program, “Connections Through Clubs,” in response to undesirable student behavior and test scores. Logan’s idea stemmed from research that found links between decreases in students’ at-risk behavior, higher levels of emotional well-being, motivation, and academic success as a result of a higher number of quality interactions between adults and students and positive interpersonal relationships between teachers and students (Logan & Scarborough 2008). The program, which required the collaboration and participation of school staff in small groups with students, was hesitantly accepted following Logan’s persistent campaigning. As leader of the program, it was necessary for Logan to collaborate and create a team of school stakeholders before the program could be realized. This collaboration and leadership led to increased positive relationships between students, staff, and even parents. 90% of students felt that the program was worthwhile and that they learned something new, and 91% enjoyed having the clubs meet. Logan reported that the goals of the program had been met, and it is obvious that they may not have been realized without the collaboration of school stakeholders involved (Logan & Scarborough 2008).

As collaborative leaders of the school, school counselors are in a unique position that bridges the gap between students, teachers, administration, and the community. With this leadership position comes great responsibility, especially in times of need. In her article on “community asset mapping,” Griffin and Farris describes the problems schools are facing due to the current economic crisis; specifically, the authors cite the major budget cuts to education and the conflicting increasing needs of students as a result of the crisis. In

the article, Griffin and Farris make the argument that this evidence proves the need to look beyond the school to find resources for the benefit of the students. In other words, school counselors have the responsibility of collaboration to obtain resources that the school may no longer be able to provide. Griffin and Farris named these resources “community assets,” and suggests an approach for collaboration with these stakeholders (Griffin & Farris 2010). By leading this collaborative effort, school counselors can provide their students with much more support than could ever have been provided on a financial crisis budget.

Collaboration is also important when acting as an advocate. School counselors are at the forefront of efforts for reform in schools as activists for all students. Without the help of others that share a common vision for student support, however, these efforts would fall short. In their article on collaboration Thompson and Moffett argue, “A shared vision leads to mutual understanding and commitment. All stakeholders share responsibility in advocating for educational quality for all students. That is, inclusion rather than exclusion, a dialog of open problem-solving and the promotion of systemic and long-term versus symptomatic and short- term change,” (Thompson & Moffett 2008). Professional school counselors collaborate with others in order to provide as much support to students as possible. One example of this can be found when considering transitions between schools; transitions are vulnerable times for students and collaboration between school counselors on both sides of the transition (as well as teachers and parents) can make a tough situation a lot easier. Research indicates a need for school transition programs in schools in order to advocate for their proper adjustment. In a study by Dixon, researchers examined the transition programs in place for students in 112 schools at the elementary,

middle, and high school levels. Their results indicated that 81.2% of schools reported having such a program in place, 20% of which had been implemented within the past 6 years (Dixon et al. 2008). The results also suggested that middle school counselors are most concerned with transitions as they receive elementary school students and assist with the transition from middle to high school. Such collaboration has been shown to foster students' academic and social success (Dixon et al. 2008).

Collaborating to advocate for students can also be seen on a more micro-level. A study by Webb discusses the collaboration of school counselors and physical educators in order to include students with disabilities. By pooling their knowledge, both stakeholders are able to make practical programmatic decisions regarding groups, appropriate activities, and functional skill development. This type of collaboration “improves the overall quality of the inclusion experience with disabilities... and still meets the needs of disabled students,” (Webb et al. 2011).

As advocates for students, school counselors must also collaborate with language interpreters to fully understand and meet the needs of students that are new to the English language. The foreign-born population has tripled in the past 30 years in the United States, and there are approximately 5 million students enrolled in K-12 settings; therefore, this type of collaboration is increasingly important. Miscommunication can have very harmful effects; for instance, a student that knows few words may misrepresent an issue that a school counselor has a legal duty to report, when there is not actually a problem. Therefore, as an advocate for students, a school counselor should collaborate with an

interpreter in order to avoid any possible misunderstandings. In a survey by Paone, many counselors perceived a need for more collaboration with language interpreters in order to better advocate for their success (Paone et al. 2010).

Professional school counselors also use collaboration in an effort to bring about systemic change. School counselors have access to data that helps them identify systemic barriers that are keeping students from reaching their full potential. School-wide achievement, attendance, and behavioral data are compiled and analyzed in order to inform the school counseling program of problem areas. Systemic change is a large undertaking; this change is said to occur once inequitable policies, procedures, and attitudes are altered (ASCA 2012). Such a large task is impossible to do on one's own; once a school counselor has analyzed the data and has found a trend to address, he/she collaborates to increase awareness of the issue so that the process of systemic change may begin.

In a study by Dahir and Stone regarding school counselors and systemic change, an action research plan was designed in order to evaluate the participation of a sizeable group of school counselors with significant school improvement problems and observe the results as a consequence of their chosen goals and action plans. According to Dahir and Stone, "Each action research plan required the school counselors to identify a specific school improvement goal, gather data, engage school faculty and personnel in the planning of strategies, establish a baseline, examine the aggregated and disaggregated data related to this goal, implement collaborative targeted strategies, and analyze and present results," (Dahir & Stone 2009). This study's methods, meant to mimic every school's approach to

action planning, rely heavily on the participation and collaboration of others within the school. School counselors teamed up to determine what the school needed and to decide what they could all work together to do about the problem. 85% of the high schools in the study targeted 9th grade failures, which has been named a national crisis and is said to be connected to rising dropout rates. After collaborating and implementing their action plan, these schools were able to decrease 9th grade failures and successfully increase the number of students moving on to 10th grade (Dahir & Stone 2009). This systemic change was largely due to the collaboration of the school counselor and his/her action team.

Though the tasks of a professional school counselor are diverse and ever evolving, it is clear that their common ground lies with collaboration. Collaboration helps school counselors connect, negotiate, plan, and take action as leaders of programs, allows school counselors to advocate for their students so that every need is met, and, with lots of teamwork, makes systemic change possible.

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