

Suggested APA style reference: Agramovich, R. L., Hoskins, W. J., & Bartlett, K. A. (2010). *Rethinking the organization and delivery of counseling in schools*. [http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/vistas10/Article\\_78.pdf](http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/vistas10/Article_78.pdf)

## Article 78

# **Rethinking the Organization and Delivery of Counseling in Schools**

Randall L. Agramovich, Wendy J. Hoskins, and Kerry A. Bartlett

Agramovich, Randall L., is Associate Professor of Counselor Education at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. He has published numerous articles and a book on the topic of counseling program evaluation. His current research interests focus on counseling in schools, client self-advocacy, and advocacy evaluation methods in counseling.

Hoskins, Wendy J., is Associate Professor of Counselor Education at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. She has contributed to the counseling program evaluation literature through collaborative research. In addition, she has disseminated information through national and international presentations on counselor professional identity, counseling program evaluation, and advocacy.

Bartlett, Kerry A., is a graduate teaching assistant in the Department of Counselor Education at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

The roles and functions of school counselors have been widely discussed for many decades (Gysbers 2004; Herr, 2003). Although a few guidance and school counseling models have been developed in recent years (e.g., ASCA, 2005; Gysbers & Henderson, 2006), uncertainties about the professional functions of school counselors persist (Hoskins & Agramovich, 2007). Recent models of school counseling appear to primarily focus on the academic advising function of school counselors, perhaps as a reaction to the changing climate of school reform and accountability (Herr, 2002). As Whiston (2004) highlighted, school counseling models are moving away from a focus on direct services including individual and small group counseling for students. Consequently, the counseling function of school counselors has been minimized while the mental health needs of today's youth continue to rise (Agramovich, Hoskins, & Markos, 2007; Kaffenberger & Seligman, 2003). In order to address the lack of professional counseling services in elementary and secondary schools, the authors propose the development of comprehensive school-based counseling centers to help promote student psychosocial development in addition to supporting academic success and career readiness. This article overviews the rationale and organization of comprehensive school-based counseling centers and identifies new staff positions critical for fostering healthy student development.

## **The Devolution of School Counseling**

During the past decade, several competing organizations and interest groups have dialogued and debated the roles and functions of school counselors. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2005) and the Education Trust's (2009) National Center for Transforming School Counseling each proposed approaches to school counseling which emphasized academic performance and success of students. Likewise, the National Office for School Counselor Advocacy (NOSCA, 2009) has stressed the role of school counselors in promoting the academic rigor of school curricula. Such an emphasis on the academic function of school counselors paralleled the school reform movement of the early 2000s, which emphasized academic achievement and school accountability (Herr, 2001).

Although some school counseling organizations have emphasized advocacy for disadvantaged youth, often their primary advocacy focus has been to help students succeed on achievement tests and college readiness tests (e.g., NOSCA, 2009). These groups have therefore been criticized for minimizing the counseling function of school counselors and for narrowly focusing on academic achievement of students, rather than addressing significant psychosocial needs of today's youth (Kaffenberger & Seligman, 2003). Therefore, instead of promoting and providing direct counseling services to today's youth, the profession of school counseling appears to be *devolving* to its roots as a vocational guidance profession focused on students' academic readiness for college and future employment.

### **School Counselors' Movement Away from Providing Counseling in Schools**

A common theme among recent school counseling organizations is a movement away from school counselors providing counseling services (Whiston, 2004). Indeed, ASCA's (2005) National Model specifically emphasizes that individual counseling is not a service that school counselors offer. As a result, a significant gap exists in the provision of individual and small group counseling services to students in school settings. Some efforts have been made to reduce this gap by school administrators who have contracted with community-based mental health professionals to provide counseling services to students (Brown, Dahlbeck, & Sparkman-Barnes, 2006). Such outside contracting for counseling services appears to be necessary given the current vocational guidance focus in school counseling.

### **Current School Counselor Practice May Not Require Graduate Level Training**

With the movement away from providing direct counseling services to students, many of the duties currently recommended for school counselors may not actually require graduate level training. In a study of 109 pre-professional counselors, Astramovich, Hoskins, and Bartlett (2009) found that elements of the ASCA (2005) National Model do not appear to require master's level preparation in counseling. Specifically, the academic, career, and personal social domains of the ASCA (2005) National Model were all rated by participants as requiring no more than a bachelor's degree level of training. However, duties related specifically to the provision of counseling services, including individual and group counseling sessions, were rated by participants as requiring approximately a master's degree level of professional training. In addition, non-counseling duties,

including coordinating and administering achievement tests, were rated by participants as requiring approximately an associate's degree level of training. These findings suggest that the level of professional training required to perform the duties outlined in the ASCA (2005) National Model is a bachelor's degree (Astramovich et al., 2009).

### **A New Organizational Framework for Counseling in Schools**

With the continued devolution of school counseling to a vocational guidance-oriented, achievement test-focused profession, new possibilities exist for the development of counseling specific services in school settings by professional counselors. To that end, we propose the development of multifaceted counseling centers in schools which would provide comprehensive counseling and support services to students. As advocates for healthy child and adolescent development, professional counselors recognize the need to address student psychosocial concerns as a foundation for helping ensure their abilities to succeed academically. The development of comprehensive school-based counseling centers can help ensure that all aspects of child and adolescent development are appropriately addressed in the school setting. Rather than referring children and their families to community providers for counseling services, a school-based counseling center can help ensure that comprehensive counseling services are available at the school site.

#### **Organization of Comprehensive School-Based Counseling Centers**

Comprehensive school-based counseling centers (CSBCCs) are founded on providing efficient, effective, and accountable on-site counseling and support services to students and their families. Within a CSBCC, students would have access to individual and small group counseling, career counseling, academic advising, and other support services. Staff working in a CSBCC would have expertise and training specific to their specialty area in the center. Master's level professional counselors, teacher specialists, and paraprofessional positions all play key roles in offering coordinated counseling and support services for students in a CSBCC. Within this organizational framework, currently working master's level school counselors could assume new professional counseling roles within the center, such as play therapists or career counselors, thus focusing their practice on the provision of master's level counseling services. The organization of the CSBCC includes two main service delivery areas: counseling services and support services.

**Counseling services in schools.** Professional counseling staff of a CSBCC could offer a variety of counseling services to today's youth including individual and small group counseling, crisis intervention, consultation and career counseling. At the elementary level, CSBCCs would offer age appropriate counseling services including play and activity counseling, as well as filial counseling for parents. In secondary level CSBCCs, individual and group counseling services would be available for students as well as career counseling. In both elementary and secondary CSBCCs, crisis intervention counseling and consultation would be available to students. Parents, teachers, and administrators would be able to refer students, and students would be able to self-refer, for counseling services.

**Support services in schools.** A CSBCC would offer a variety of services supporting healthy student development, academic success, and college or work readiness. Support services offered to students might include academic advising, course selection and scheduling, guidance and psycho-education. In addition, support services staff of a CSBCC could offer workshops and guidance lessons to students on various academic topics including study skills, time management, test taking strategies, scholarship searches, and college applications. Support services staff would also coordinate and provide classroom and large group guidance on topics of need for students at the particular school. Overall, support services offered to students would be designed to enhance their success and further their healthy development.

### **Staffing a Comprehensive School-Based Counseling Center**

Comprehensive school-based counseling centers would be staffed by individuals with different levels of education, training, interests, and abilities. Staff positions include those trained at the associate's degree level, bachelor's degree level, and the master's degree level. The organization of a CSBCC differs from traditional school counseling programs which relied almost exclusively on master's degree level counselors who frequently were required to perform duties that did not draw upon their expertise in counseling. In a CSBCC, support staff helps manage and deliver various support services, thus allowing professional counselors to focus their efforts on the provision of direct counseling services to students. The staffing structure of a CSBCC also promotes a career ladder where individuals could begin at entry level support staff positions and, by seeking higher levels of education, move into the role of a professional counselor at the center.

#### **Associate Degree Level Staff**

**Guidance information technicians.** Guidance information technicians (GITs) may serve as the gateway to services in a CSBCC. Trained at an associate's degree level, GITs could help refer student, parent, teacher, and administrator concerns to the appropriate CSBCC professional. Additional roles and functions of a GIT could include coordinating center activities such as college fairs and financial aid nights as well as helping students manage applications for scholarships and colleges. In addition, GITs could coordinate and deliver classroom guidance lessons on topics of need at the particular school. Guidance information technicians would work closely with the other counseling center staff to make sure all non-counseling and administrative duties are managed. Depending on the size of the student body, a CSBCC might employ several GITs to help provide support services to students.

#### **Bachelor's Degree Level Staff**

**Academic advisors.** Just as higher education institutions often employ bachelor level academic advisors to help students with schedules and academic planning, a CSBCC bachelor's level staff member could provide academic advising and course selection services for K-12 students. Academic advisors roles might include reviewing academic schedules and mapping out subsequent coursework appropriate for each individual student and remediating student course deficiencies which may impede scholastic progress. In addition, academic advisors could help identify additional

educational opportunities available for students who may have special needs including technical or vocational training, alternative schools, and virtual education. Academic advisors could serve as an academic liaison between CSBCC staff and teachers and administrators. Finally, academic advisors might also be the best resource to schedule and administer school-wide achievement testing as well as college entrance exams.

Helping students select courses, changing students' class schedules, and coordinating school-wide testing does not require a graduate degree in counseling. Such duties could be successfully performed by a bachelor's level teacher who had an understanding of the course scheduling system used at the school. Therefore individuals interested in a CSBCC academic advisor position might include bachelor's level teachers who are interested in moving into a different role in supporting student success.

### **Master's Degree Level Staff**

Master's level professional counselors in a CSBCC would focus on the delivery of direct counseling services to students. Professional counselors could also provide conjoint consultation with students and their teachers, administrators, and parents or legal guardians to provide potentially better support within and outside the school environment. In addition, professional counseling staff could provide psycho-educational workshops to other school staff based on specific needs. Professional counseling staff of a CSBCC includes licensed professional counselors, career counselors, and a CSBCC director. Ideally, these three professional counseling roles are offered by three or more professionals. Individuals interested in working as a professional counselor in a CSBCC would need a minimum of master's degree in counseling, preferably from a Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2009) accredited program.

**Licensed professional counselors.** Licensed professional counselors within a CSBCC would primarily focus on individual and group counseling services and crisis intervention counseling needs of students. Longer term counseling could be provided to students requiring more significant services from the school system to support their achievement as a successful learner. Although some schools have made efforts to provide mental health counseling services to students by working with outside agencies (e.g. Brown et al., 2006), students and their families often face significant barriers to accessing community-based counseling including payment for services, adequate insurance coverage, and transportation issues (Astramovich et al., 2007). With mental health needs of children and adolescents on the rise and calls for more prevention and intervention services for at-risk youth (Bemak, Chung, & Murphy, 2003), it seems imperative to have licensed professional counselors as a central part of CSBCCs, providing direct counseling services to students.

**Career counselors.** In a CSBCC, career counselors would foster student career awareness and career readiness through individual, small group, and school-wide career counseling activities. Individualized career counseling could focus on the career needs and aspirations of individual students including personal values, interests, and possible roadblocks to career aspirations. Small group career counseling could focus personal values processing that might illuminate career interests and readiness to engage in the workforce or pursue higher education. Career related workshops regarding higher

education opportunities, workforce projections, and school-to-work programs could be coordinated by the career counselor and with the support of GITs and academic advisors.

**Comprehensive school-based counseling center director.** A CSBCC director would be a professional counselor who oversees the staff providing counseling and support services to students and their families. The CSBCC director would be responsible for the professional development and performance evaluations of CSBCC staff members. In addition, a CSBCC director would implement program evaluations of counseling and support services offered to students to ensure student and stakeholder needs are being met. In the event of a school crisis, the CSBCC director could coordinate the crisis intervention team and supervise the delivery of crisis counseling services. Ultimately, the CSBCC director would serve as an advocate for the provision of counseling and support services to students and could garner community support and grant funding to help fund the operating budget of the center.

## **Recommendations**

### **Recommendations for Professional Counselors**

Transforming the way counseling services are delivered in school settings will require collaboration and advocacy among current and future professional counseling organizations and their members. Professional counselors belonging to counseling associations can help highlight the need to provide improved school-based counseling services to today's youth. Professional counselors should become actively involved in professional organizations that have a voice within the counseling field and should advocate for counseling-in-schools legislation at the local, state and national levels. Licensed professional counselors may work with local school districts to help create a new CSBCC organizational structure for delivering counseling and support services to students. Finally, currently practicing school counselors should advocate for reorganizing counseling services into a CSBCC model and should seek to obtain licensure as a professional counselor, if not already licensed. Such reorganization would ultimately promote the professional status of all counselors working in a school setting.

### **Recommendations for Counselor Educators**

The transformation of counseling in schools towards a CSBCC organizational model has significant implications for counselor education programs. With the new counseling and support staff roles of the CSBCC model, counselor educators could develop programs designed to train both professional counselors and support staff members. Master's professional counseling programs could prepare counselors for work in a CSBCC by providing practicum and internship experiences to students that focus on the use of their counseling skills. Counselor educators could collaborate with teacher education programs to develop a bachelor's level training program or a post-bachelor's certificate program designed to prepare academic advisors for work in a CSBCC. In addition, counselor educators could develop an associate's degree curriculum designed to prepare guidance information technicians for work in a CSBCC (Astramovich & Holden, 2002). Finally, counselor educators should advocate within current school systems for the development of CSBCCs which could then be used as practicum and internship

placements for graduate counseling students wanting to practice professional counseling in the school setting.

### **Addressing Counseling Professional Association Barriers to Change**

Shifting from a vocational guidance, achievement test-focused approach in school counseling and towards a comprehensive school-based counseling center paradigm for the delivery of school-based counseling services has some challenges. The very associations which in the past have promoted the idea of confronting the status-quo in education (e.g., ASCA, 2005; Education Trust, 2009) may be the most reluctant to make a significant shift in the way they promote the roles of counselors in schools. Yet for several years, researchers have supported the reorganization of counseling in schools so that the needs of at-risk youth and student mental health issues are appropriately addressed (Astramovich et al., 2007; Keys, Bemak, & Lockhart, 1998; Lockhart & Keys, 1998). Professional counselors and counselor educators must help address barriers to change by advocating for the appropriate professional roles of counselors in school settings. One avenue for promoting the appropriate professional roles of counselors in school settings is the American Counseling Association's (2009) *20/20: Vision for the Future of Counseling* initiative which supports the professional identity of counselors across various specialties.

### **Conclusions**

Transforming the way counseling services are provided in school settings would be one of the most significant developments in professional counseling in many years. Considering the recent devolution of school counseling to a vocational guidance profession, a new paradigm for delivering counseling services in schools is clearly needed. Comprehensive school-based counseling centers offer an approach to the delivery of counseling services that could potentially elevate the professional status of counselors working in school settings and ultimately help today's youth, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, receive counseling services they may need.

### **References**

- American Counseling Association. (2009). *20/20 statement of principles advances the profession*. Retrieved from <http://www.counseling.org/PressRoom/NewsReleases.aspx>
- American School Counselor Association. (2005). *The ASCA national model: A framework for school counseling programs* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Alexandria, VA: Author.
- Astramovich, R. L., & Holden, J. M. (2002). Attitudes of American School Counselor Association members towards utilizing paraprofessionals in school counseling. *Professional School Counseling*, 5, 203-210.
- Astramovich, R. L., Hoskins, W. J., & Bartlett, K. A. (2009, October). Examining the need for graduate level training of school counselors. Paper presented at the biennial conference of the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision. San Diego, CA.

- Astramovich, R. L., Hoskins, W. J., & Markos, P. A. (2007, December). Advancing school mental health counseling. *Counseling Today*, 7, 27.
- Bemak, F., Chung, R. C.-Y., & Murphy, C. S. (2003). A new perspective on counseling at-risk youth. In B. T. Erford (Ed.), *Transforming the school counseling profession* (pp. 285-296). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Brown, C., Dahlbeck, D., & Sparkman-Barnes, L. (2006). Collaborative relationships: School counselors and non-school mental health professionals working together to improve the mental health needs of students. *Professional School Counseling*, 9, 332-335.
- Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs. (2009). *CACREP 2009 standards*. Retrieved from <http://www.cacrep.org/2009standards.html>
- Education Trust. (2009). *The new vision for school counseling*. Retrieved from <http://www.edtrust.org/dc/tsc/vision>
- Gysbers, N. C. (2004). Comprehensive guidance and counseling programs: The evolution of accountability. *Professional School Counseling*, 8, 1-14.
- Gysbers, N. C., & Henderson, P. (2006). *Developing and managing your school guidance and counseling program* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.
- Herr, E. L. (2001). The impact of national policies, economics, and school reform on comprehensive guidance programs. *Professional School Counseling*, 4, 236-245.
- Herr, E. L. (2002). School reform and perspectives on the role of school counselors: A century of proposals for change. *Professional School Counseling*, 4, 220-234.
- Herr, E. L. (2003). Historical roots and future issues. In B. T. Erford (Ed.), *Transforming the school counseling profession* (pp. 21-38). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Hoskins, W. J., & Astramovich, R. L. (2007). The future of school counseling: Asking some difficult questions. *ACES Spectrum*, 68(1), 9-11.
- Kaffenberger, C. J., & Seligman, L. (2003). Helping students with mental and emotional disorders. In B. T. Erford (Ed.), *Transforming the school counseling profession* (pp. 249-283). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Keys, S., Bemak, F., & Lockhart, E. J. (1998). Transforming school counseling to serve the mental health needs of at-risk youth. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 76, 381-388.
- Lockhart, E. J., & Keys, S. (1998). The mental health counseling role of school counselors. *Professional School Counseling*, 1, 3-6.
- National Office for School Counselor Advocacy. (2009). *Connecting counselors with the tools to help students enroll and succeed in college*. Retrieved from <http://professionals.collegeboard.com/policy-advocacy/educators/nosca>
- Whiston, S. C. (2002). Response to the past, present, and future of school counseling: Raising some issues. *Professional School Counseling*, 5, 148-156.
- Whiston, S. C. (2004). Counseling psychology and school counseling: Can a stronger relationship be forged? *The Counseling Psychologist*, 32, 270-277.

*Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: [http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/VISTAS\\_Home.htm](http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/VISTAS_Home.htm)*