

MEASURE-ing Student Success: School Counselor Accountability

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The current climate of school improvement is focused on closing the achievement gap and on ensuring that every member of the faculty and staff is committed to moving key data elements in a positive direction. Principals and teachers have always worked in an accountability driven environment. Accountability requires all educators to systematically collect, analyze, and use data to understand the current achievement and success stories for students. The No Child Left Behind Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2001) has raised the accountability bar for everyone, including school counselors. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that school counselors, too, are accountable to strategize and document how the school counseling program contributes to closing the achievement gap and supporting student success.

When school counselors focus their efforts on the mission of school improvement, they widen educational opportunities for every student and can positively impact the instructional program (Stone & Dahir, 2004). School counselors who commit to improving student results contribute to raising the achievement level for every student. Accepting the responsibility to support academic achievement and share the pressures of accountability demonstrate the school counselor's leadership and advocacy skills necessary to help every student to experience success.

The Tradition of School Counselor Accountability

Time-on-task data, needs assessments, and reporting the totals for different types of activities are traditional school counselor demonstrations of accountability (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000). Merely totaling the number of student contacts made, groups sessions held, or classroom guidance lessons delivered is "so what" data in the eyes of legislators, school board members, and other critical stakeholders. Counting services as a measure of accountability is no longer acceptable for 21st century school counseling programs. Although this may be useful information, counting services is not accountability as defined by the No Child Left Behind Act. Task and time analysis does not show any relationship to impacting student achievement.

Rather, it is perceived as a defense mechanism to account for productivity.

Results-based evaluation of school counseling strategies, developed by Johnson and Johnson (1991), monitors students' acquisition of competencies that are needed to succeed in school and to transition to postsecondary education or the work force. Results-based data document outcomes but also can limit the value of the school counseling program in the eyes of legislators, school board members, principals, and other stakeholders who are pressured to show data that demonstrate improved academic success for every student.

Stakeholders may no longer be asking "What do counselors do?" but "How is teaching conflict resolution going to improve academic success?" "Were you able to reduce their absenteeism, raise their test scores, or help them improve their grades?" School counselors know that supporting a student's personal and emotional needs can help students stay focused and succeed academically. The challenge is to demonstrate how the conflict resolution program contributed to improving school climate, reducing discipline, or improving attendance – all of which contribute to academic success. As a profession, the need is to align the school counseling programs with improving student achievement. In other words when attendance for the seven students who were suspended improved by 27%, school counselors can argue that if students aren't in school, students can't learn. Drawing a direct line from the six conflict resolution lessons to a reduction in discipline referrals presents the school counseling curriculum as a valuable contribution to school climate and school improvement.

Rendering counting and results-based approaches as adequate without showing the impact on school report card data places school counselors at risk of being viewed as ancillary in this climate of limited funding. Some policy makers, school board members, and school system leaders who are held accountable for increasing student achievement have viewed the counseling program as fiscally irresponsible and as an ineffective utilization of resources (Whiston, 2002). Reporting a positive change by reducing discipline referrals is the

type of accountability data that has meaning and merit and matters most to the critical stakeholders. This kind of reporting is much more powerful than merely reporting the fact that the school counselor conducted six classroom guidance lessons on conflict resolution this year. This is the reality in accountable schools of the 21st century. School counselor accountability is a commitment to having an impact on the critical data elements that demonstrate student success.

No School Counselor Left Behind

Since *America 2000* (U.S. Department of Education, 1991) and *Goals 2000* (U.S. Department of Education, 1994), educational requirements and expectations have placed significant performance demands on all educators. Throughout the last decade, educators, policy makers, community groups, business leaders, and parents who work in boardrooms, in legislative arenas, in school districts, and at universities, and who sit at kitchen tables across the nation, have worked diligently to reform and improve K-12 education. The No Child Left Behind Act requires every educator to use school-based data to demonstrate an engagement in the school mission and student achievement. School counselors should recognize that implementing a comprehensive school counseling program contributes to reaching the goals of the No Child Left Behind Act.

No Child Left Behind (2001) (Elementary and Secondary Education Act)

<i>ESEA Goal 1</i>	By 2013-2014, all students will reach high standards, at a minimum attaining proficiency or better in reading/language arts and mathematics.
<i>ESEA Goal 2</i>	All limited English proficient students will become proficient in English and reach high academic standards, at a minimum attaining proficiency or better in reading/ language arts and mathematics.
<i>ESEA Goal 3</i>	By 2005-2006, all students will be taught by highly qualified teachers.
<i>ESEA Goal 4</i>	All students will be educated in learning environments that are safe, drug free, and conducive to learning.
<i>ESEA Goal 5</i>	All students will graduate from high school.

School counselors impact the instructional program every day by motivating students to achieve academic success through raising student aspirations, and collaborating with teachers. School counselors, partnering with all school personnel, ensure that schools are safe, drug-free learning communities. Counselors also focus their efforts on creating a climate of respect among students, faculty, and community.

Accountability, as defined in the No Child Left Behind Act, offers an opportunity for school counselors to significantly affect school improvement through targeted interventions that impact important school-based data. School counselors are in a unique position to review data in schools and can identify the gaps that exist in student success. School counselors, using their leadership and advocacy skills, ensure that appropriate resources and programs are in place to offer each student equitable access to challenging curriculum and all options to access postsecondary opportunities.

Student achievement data can be collected and analyzed systematically to inform and guide the development and construction of a school counseling program based upon schoolwide issues. Annual school report cards publicize critical data elements such as attendance, demographics, graduation, postsecondary planning rates, and standardized testing results. These can be monitored and analyzed over a period of time. When school counselors use these same school-based data, they demonstrate support for the mission of the school, student success, and a desire to effect school improvement. School counselors can initiate, develop, and coordinate prevention and intervention systems that are designed to improve the learning success for every student who is experiencing difficulty with challenging academic coursework. Using data provides a solid foundation for school counselors to act on their belief system and assume a leadership role to identify and rectify issues that impact every student's ability to achieve at expected levels. Thus school counselor accountability is the commitment to contribute to each of these critical data elements and to bring attention to student progress and results.

Developing partnerships with education professionals demonstrates a willingness to improve results and to help to close the achievement gap that exists among students of color and students of poverty. The comprehensive school counseling program, now aligned with the educational enterprise, is data driven, proactive, and preventive in focus; assists students in acquiring and applying lifelong learning skills; and is delivered in a comprehensive and accountable manner. School counselors are now front and center in the school improvement movement and are viewed as indispensable in the success story of students.

MEASURE- ing Success

MEASURE, a six-step accountability process, demonstrates the impact of the school counseling program on critical data, those components of the school report card that are the backbone of the accountability movement. MEASURE requires school counselors to collaborate and team with administrators, faculty, and stakeholders to identify and have a positive impact on the critical data elements that are important barometers of student success (Dahir & Stone, 2003). MEASURE also supports the accountability component of the American School Counselor Association (2003) National Model by helping school counselors move from a “counting tasks” system to aligning the school counseling program with standards-based reform and the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act. MEASURE enables school counselors to demonstrate how they are accountable for results and contribute to student achievement. MEASURE is a way of using information such as retention rates, test scores, and postsecondary going rates to develop specific strategies for connecting school counseling to the accountability agenda of today’s schools.

MEASURE is an acronym for

Mission: connect the comprehensive K-12 school counseling program to the mission of the school and to the goals of the annual school improvement plan

Elements: identify the critical data elements that are important to the internal and external stakeholders

Analyze: discuss carefully which elements need to be aggregated or disaggregated and why

Stakeholders - Unite: determine which stakeholders need to be involved in addressing these school-improvement issues and unite to develop strategies

Reanalyze: rethink and refine the strategies, refocus efforts as needed, and reflect on success

Educate: show the positive impact the school counseling program has had on student achievement and on the goals of the school improvement plan.

A detailed summary of the MEASURE process follows:

Mission

Student achievement and success in rigorous academics are at the heart of every school’s mission statement. School counselors need to ask how every aspect of their program supports the mission of the school and contributes to student achievement. Preparing students to choose from a wide array of options after high school is part of every school district’s mission for every student’s academic success and is congruent with the goals of the school board.

Elements

Critical data elements can usually be found on the school’s district or building report card. School systems routinely collect and store both academic and demographic data in a retrievable form, and school counselors have ready access to data in areas such as course enrollment patterns and attendance that contribute to achievement. Disaggregating data into separate elements in a variety of ways ensures that the system addresses access and equity issues. This approach to looking at data guarantees that no group of students is ignored.

Analyze

Analysis will determine the institutional or environmental barriers that may be impeding student achievement and adversely influencing the data elements. School counselors can initially determine which elements to address first as well as which elements the school counseling program can specifically target so as to move in a positive direction. Because data alone do not tell the whole story, it is important to disaggregate the critical data elements and to look at them in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and perhaps by teacher to shed light on areas of success or areas in need. The data elements that have an impact on the school improvement plan then become more apparent.

Stakeholders-Unite

These individuals will become part of a team to create an action plan of the critical data elements, and all concerned members of the internal and external school community should be included. How to secure their commitment and who will bring them together are key elements, and an existing school action committee or advisory board is a good starting point. By collaborating with other stakeholders, school counselors avoid tackling issues in isolation. Creating and implementing an action plan that contains

strategies, a timeline, and responsibilities will begin to move the data in a positive direction.

Reanalyze, Reflect, and Revise

When the targeted results are met, there is still reflection and refining to do. Did the results of everyone's efforts show that the interventions and strategies successfully moved the critical data elements in a positive direction? If so, the next steps toward continuous school improvement may also include changes in the school counseling program.

If the targeted results were not met, then reanalyzing and refocusing to determine why the interventions were unsuccessful in moving the data in a positive manner is necessary. Replicating what is working and then developing new or different strategies for what did not work is essential. Based on the analysis, the question, "What changes need to be made to the school counseling program to keep the focus on student needs?" must be answered. By examining what worked well, and what strategies need to be modified, adjusted, or perhaps changed altogether, the action plan can be revised for the following year in order to continue to move the critical data elements in a positive direction.

Educate

Publicizing the results of an effective school counseling program is a vital step in the accountability process, and as a result, both internal and external stakeholders will have a deeper understanding about the contributions of the program that focus on student achievement. As partners in school improvement, school counselors have demonstrated a willingness to be accountable for changing critical data elements and are thereby viewed as essential to the school's mission.

Conclusion

MEASURE requires school counselors to collaborate and team with administrators, faculty, and stakeholders to identify and have a positive impact on the critical data elements that are important barometers of student success (Dahir & Stone, 2003). School counselors can form partnerships with principals and key stakeholders to embrace accountability and to promote systemic change with the expressed purpose of furthering the academic success of every student (Stone & Clark, 2001). With an accountable data-driven school counseling program, school counselors are seen as partners and collaborators in school improvement and essential to fulfilling the mission of every school.

Methods traditionally used for assessing and evaluating school counseling programs no longer hold the same value in the eyes of administrators and faculty

who are enveloped in accountability. The concept of identifying areas of need for focused attention by surveying stakeholders is a positive step but far from sufficient and essential to increasing success for every student. MEASURE supports the accountability component of the ASCA National Model (2003) by helping school counselors move from a counting-tasks system to aligning the school counseling program with standards-based reform and the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act. MEASURE enables school counselors to demonstrate how they are accountable for results and contribute to student achievement. Most importantly, the process of using MEASURE supports school counselors in their efforts to garner more support for their programs, to have an impact on significant data, and to widen their spheres of influence in helping all students to become successful learners.

School counselors working within an accountability framework can challenge the pervasive belief that socioeconomic status and color determine a young person's ability to learn. Beliefs alone will not move critical data elements. Counselors can take a leadership approach, proactively determining the level of accountability they can commit to, and focus on results. Accepting this challenge propels school counselors to accept the responsibility of removing barriers to learning and achievement and raise the level of expectations for those students for whom little is expected.

Acting as agents of school and community change, school counselors can create a climate in which access and support for quality and rigor is the norm for every student. Accountability for school counselors is the key to school counseling success and survival in the 21st century and links their work to the accountability requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act.

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