
The Essence of Transforming the School Counseling Program

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The new millennium presents an unprecedented growth in America’s K-12 school population with approximately 54 million students enrolled in the year of 2000. This increase in school population provides an unprecedented opportunity for the school counseling profession to make an even more positive impact on society (Wittmer, 2000). A review of pertinent literature

confirms the significance of transforming the school counseling program (Capuzzi & Gross, 2001; Gysbers & Henderson, 2000; Mason, Nims, Hughey, & Dyal, 2002), and societal conditions reflect the need for a different approach to guidance designed to meet the challenges of our changing times (Gysbers & Henderson, 1994).

In addition to the basic roles of program management, guidance, counseling, consultation, coordination, and assessment; today, schools need guidance programs with definite plans that provide adequate time for counselors to assist the growing numbers of students with special needs. These are students who are substance abusers, teenage parents, victims of abuse or neglect, depressed, suicidal, educationally disadvantaged, disabled, or potential dropouts before high school graduation for any reason. These students need competent counselors with caring attitudes who allot a specific amount of their time each day for responsive services. School counselors often are not able to plan and implement comprehensive developmental guidance programs that provide students with the knowledge and skills they need to become well-adjusted, self-supporting citizens because of a lack of support from school administrators and community leaders. It seems that the roles counselors actually assume in schools and the roles that would most benefit students are sometimes

different (Mason, Dyal, & Meadows, 1999).

Partin (1990) conducted research to determine the percentage of time that should be spent on primary counselor functions and the greatest time consuming activities for counselors. Partin's instrument included the nine primary counselor functions which are (a) testing/student appraisal, (b) placement and follow-up activities, (c) individual counseling, (d) group counseling, (e) professional development, (f) consulting, (g) resource coordination services, (h) administrative and clerical, and (i) other non-guidance counseling activities. The findings in this study indicated that counselors would prefer to spend more time in individual counseling, group counseling, and professional development activities and less time in testing/student appraisal and administrative/clerical activities. The greatest time-consuming activities were (a) paperwork, (b) scheduling, (c) administrative tasks, (d) telephone conversations, and (e) attending meetings.

Mason, Nims, Hughey, and Dyal (2002) designed a cross-sectional study to examine school counselors' views concerning counseling functions and their importance. Surveys were mailed to school counselors in Alabama, Iowa, and Kentucky. Findings in this study indicated that most secondary

school counselors in Alabama, Iowa, and Kentucky are working in school districts that have not implemented comprehensive developmental guidance programs. This observation supports the position that the role of the school counselor should be more clearly defined. The ratings of importance attributed to counseling and consulting functions suggest that counselors in these particular states want to be better counselors. Likewise, the less than positive ratings provided for administrative and clerical functions by all three groups imply that secondary school counselors in this cross-sectional study perceive their non-guidance activities as being of little or no importance. Clearly, these findings suggest a need for 100% guidance programs that allow counselors to use their time for four program components only (guidance curriculum, individual planning, responsive services, and system support). This points to a need for structured professional development activities that will enable counselors to plan, design, and implement comprehensive developmental guidance programs K-12.

School reform efforts have failed to recognize the fact that schools have two major education delivery systems (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000). Elementary and secondary schools have instruction programs and they also have guidance programs which are different, yet interrelated. Each

program emphasizes specific student competencies. The areas of focus in the instruction program are grouped under such titles as fine arts, vocational-technical education, science, social studies, physical education, mathematics, foreign language, and English. The guidance program provides competencies for students to acquire from such domains as knowledge of self and others, career planning and exploration, and educational-vocational development. Even though the instruction programs in school settings are the largest in terms of numbers of student competencies to be achieved, they are not more important than the guidance program elements. The education delivery systems are equal in significance to student growth and development and this should be reflected in the focus and provisions of all school reform efforts. It should not be a case of either/or but one of both/and (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000).

For enhanced success, it appears that school reform efforts must acquire an expanded focus. Because of the importance of the school guidance program in the educational process which is responsible for student growth and development as well as academic achievement, it appears that the guidance delivery system should be a significant element in all school reform efforts.

Its prominence in the suggested national and local change process should be equal to that of the instruction delivery system.

The “South Carolina Education and Economic Development Act” which was signed into law on May 27, 2005 is an example of what should receive increased emphasis in school reform initiatives. The new law includes several provisions that will enhance the work of school counselors in South Carolina. Among these, the law stipulates that “School guidance counselors and career specialists shall limit their activities to guidance and counseling and may not perform administrative tasks” (“Bill Contains School,” 2005). Also, the law requires that middle and high schools in the state of South Carolina, have a student-to-guidance personnel ratio of no more than 300-to-1.

Changes of this magnitude will require strong school and community support. Program planning is extremely important. First, someone must be in charge of the entire process. The district’s guidance program leader should assume this responsibility. The proposal for change and the anticipated time frame for the change must be developed by the guidance program leader. The next step is to form committees and work groups. Only two committees are recommended – the steering committee and the school-community advisory committee (Gysbers & Henderson, 1988,

1994, 2000). Actually, the superintendent of schools or a designee should appoint both committees.

The steering committee should be composed of guidance personnel from each grade level, building administrators, the superintendent or a representative, and the director of vocational education and special education in the district, as well. Sometimes teachers, parents, school board members, or students may serve. This is a decision-making body and the guidance program leader is the chair.

The school-community advisory committee is composed of representatives from the school and the community; this includes administrators, the guidance program leader, and representatives from the teaching staff, the student body, the parent-teacher organization, the mental health community, the business industry, and the media. This committee acts as a liaison between the school and the community. It advises those involved in the improvement effort of the needs of the students and the community. This is not a policy-making body. A member of the community should chair this committee.

Work groups are small groups of individuals who are assigned specific

tasks that need to be completed as a part of the transition process. Work groups form and disband as needed. The steering committee should use as many work groups as possible to prevent an overload on individuals.

Professional development activities should be planned for all school employees – administrators, counselors, faculty, and staff. This is vital. The entire guidance program, specific goals for student growth, and overall expectations for employee participation must be shared.

The organization framework of the guidance program should include structural components and program components. The structural components are definition, rationale, and assumptions – these provide the ideological underpinnings for the program. The program components are guidance curriculum, individual planning, responsive services, and system support. These are the organizers for the guidance program activities K-12 and will be briefly discussed in the paragraphs that follow.

The guidance curriculum is the backbone of the comprehensive developmental guidance program. It should be organized, sequential, and specified by grade levels. School counselors teach, team teach, or support the teaching of guidance curriculum activities in the classroom, guidance center, or other school facilities. Guidance lessons that focus on the areas

of relationships, self-esteem, self-discipline, goal setting, decision-making skills, anger management, study skills, careers and the importance of acquiring a quality education support and enhance the school instruction system.

Individual planning activities help students to understand and monitor their growth and development and to take the appropriate steps to enhance their education as they prepare for future careers. Personal, social, educational, and career plans are discussed periodically in individual counseling sessions.

The responsive services component provides special help to students who have problems that interfere with their healthy personal, social, educational, or career development. It includes preventive responses for students who are considering unhealthy solutions to their problems, and remedial interventions for students who have already made unwise choices. This component involves individual and small group counseling, consulting with staff and parents, and referring students and families to outside programs.

The system support component is basically concerned with activities that

support the total educational program – consultation with teachers, efforts to enhance parental involvement in school, input to curriculum development, community relations and professional development.

The allocation of total counselor time is important. Gysbers and Henderson (2000) recommend more time for guidance curriculum and responsive services than for individual planning in the elementary school and a larger percentage of time for individual planning and responsive services than for guidance curriculum in the high school. The system support component provides only indirect services to students and should receive less time than the other 3 components. The steering committee should be involved with making decisions about the allocation of counselor time. The most important factor is to make sure that the percentages for all four program components equal 100% of the school counselor's day.

Today, schools must compensate for the shortcomings of the homes by helping students to understand themselves and others, by providing character training, and by preparing students for the world of work. Now, in the 21st Century, some students do well in school, academically and socially, while many do not. The primary focus of national school reform initiatives from the late 19th Century to the present has clearly been on

academic achievement. The U.S. spends more money on education than most industrialized nations but lags behind them in areas ranging from high school graduation rates to test scores in mathematics, science and reading (Feller, 2003). These data are indicative of a need for a transformed perspective, perhaps one that includes a focus on school counseling programs equal to that of school instruction programs.

Sink and MacDonald (1998) conducted a study of all 50 State Departments of Education in an attempt to determine the status of comprehensive developmental guidance programs in America. They concluded that the movement from traditional organizational counseling models to the implementation of developmental comprehensive programs is growing rapidly; and, that at the beginning of the new millennium some 35 states will have implemented developmental comprehensive school guidance programs. This is positive; however, it is not sufficient. Effective school counseling programs are proactive and preventive in their focus. They employ strategies to enhance the academic, career, and personal/social development of all students (Wittmer, 2000). Certainly there is a need for the implementation of comprehensive developmental school counseling programs in all 50 states at this time.

In summary, the American School Counselor Association supports the implementation of comprehensive developmental school counseling programs at all levels (Wittmer, 2000). Those in the school counseling profession must work diligently to change the perceptions and attitudes of school administrators, faculty, parents, community leaders and elected officials. Somehow, the message must be gotten across that the school counseling program at all levels helps students develop knowledge and skills that are needed in today's and tomorrow's world; and, is an integral part of the academic mission of the school (Dahir, Sheldon, & Valiga, 1998).

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