

## Article 42

### **Collaboration Between Professional School Counselors and Special Education Teachers**

Jennifer Barrow and Nancy Mamlin

Barrow, Jennifer, is an assistant professor of Counselor Education at North Carolina Central University. Dr. Barrow is a former professional school counselor. Her research interests include working with students in gangs and school counselor professional development. Contact: [jbarrow4@nccu.edu](mailto:jbarrow4@nccu.edu)

Mamlin, Nancy, is an associate professor of Special Education at North Carolina Central University. Dr. Mamlin is a former special educator who has been a teacher educator for the last two decades. Her research interests include the areas of teacher preparation, strategies instruction, and collaboration. Contact: [nmamlin@nccu.edu](mailto:nmamlin@nccu.edu)

#### **Abstract**

Since the passage of Public Law 94-142 in 1975, professional school counselors have been serving an increasing number of students with disabilities. This article suggests best practices for improving the collaborative efforts of professional school counselors and special education teachers.

*Keywords:* school counseling, special education, collaboration, student outcomes

The role of the professional school counselor (PSC) has evolved dramatically since its inception (Burnham & Jackson, 2000). Many of these changes are due to economic, social, and legislative changes designed to better meet the challenges of an evolving society through school reform (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001; Paisley & McMahon, 2001). Baker and Gerler (2008) suggested that legislative changes designed to help marginalized students have played an important part in the role of school counselor as an agent for social justice.

#### **Role of the Professional School Counselor With Students With Disabilities**

Thomas and Woods (2003) wrote that “disability” is an umbrella term providing a common language for school counselors and teachers. There are 13 disability categories recognized by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004. The students who are most likely to be included in the general education curriculum include

students with learning disabilities, emotional and behavioral disabilities, intellectual disabilities (formerly known as mental retardation), visual impairment, hearing impairment, autism, traumatic brain injury, and other health impairments or combinations thereof (Mauro, 2014; Thomas & Woods, 2003). As of fall 2010, the largest groups of students are those with learning disabilities (37% of students with disabilities), speech language delays (22%), and other health impairment (11%; Goldberg, 2011).

PSCs are charged with addressing the developmental needs of all students through the delivery of a comprehensive school counseling program designed to encourage and enhance all students' academic, career, and personal/social development and help all students in maximizing personal development (ASCA, 2012). PSCs serve and advocate for the students on their caseload through counseling activities including, but not limited to, career planning, college planning and applications, academic counseling, course selections scheduling, developing decision-making skills, parent conferences, group counseling, and counseling for personal/social issues.

From a counselor advocacy and social justice perspective, PSCs are to stand in support of all students and create opportunities for equal access and success by serving as collaborators, consultants, and change agents to bring about positive change in the entire school (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Pelsma & Krieschok, 2003). Professional school counselors' training and their involvement with students on an individual and group level places them in a unique position to provide substantial benefit for students with disabilities (ASCA, 2012; Holcomb-McCoy, Bryan, & Rahill, 2002). However, in a national study, over 30% of professional school counselor participants indicated they were not included in working with students with disabilities (Milsom, 2002).

### **Professional School Counselors as IEP Collaborative Consultants**

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 requires that a team create an Individualized Education Program (IEP) to provide students with a free and appropriate public education (FAPE; Council for Exceptional Children [CEC], 2005b). This plan is developed through a collaborative meeting of the IEP team, which includes the parent(s) or legal guardian of the child with a disability, at least one regular general education teacher, at least one special education teacher, a representative of the local education agency (LEA; e.g., school principal), individuals invited at the discretion of the parent or the agency with special knowledge regarding the child, and the child with a disability (Gartin & Murdick, 2005). Notably absent is the mandated involvement of the school counselor in the development of an IEP.

Erford (2003) suggested that school counselors are the only individuals in the school in a position to fairly advocate on behalf of students. Further, Milsom (2007) suggested that school counselors should be considered to serve as the facilitator for such meetings. Due to the varying views of teaching staff, administrators, and parents, IEP meetings can become contentious, resulting in ill feelings and an IEP that may not be student-focused. School counselors receive training on group facilitation and consultation and this qualifies them as ideal candidates to serve as facilitators in order to minimize conflicts (Milsom, 2007).

It is worth noting that increasing work demands and disproportionate caseloads may make the role of facilitator an unrealistic expectation of the PSC (McCarthy, Kerne,

Calfa, Lambert, & Guzmán, 2010). However, schools may find it increasingly useful to involve PSCs in IEP meetings. Therefore, it is suggested PSCs be made aware of meetings by invitations to attend, and PSCs are challenged to attend as scheduling allows. Through attending IEP meetings, PSCs may stay up to date on current research, school-based interventions, and legislative issues for students with disabilities while providing information on promotion requirements and school based initiatives to assist the child with a disability obtain academic goals (Nichter & Edmonson, 2005; Roberts, Bouknight, & Karan, 2010).

As a participant in the IEP process, PSCs may provide an invaluable link to the classroom teacher. Nichter and Edmonson (2005) found that individual counseling and consultation were the two most frequently occurring services offered for students with a disability. Consultation with teachers may offer opportunities for early identification of students with a disability.

Early identification and the involvement of the school counselor will allow for the implementation of interventions designed to serve the student through the education classroom while working through the response to intervention (RTI) process before convening the IEP team. Working together, the classroom teacher and the school counselors may develop research-based and evidence-based interventions to meet the individual needs of the student who may eventually need an IEP to provide an equitable educational experience. School counselors may be used to provide behavior monitoring through classroom observations and individual or group counseling. Also, involving the general education teacher and school counselors early in the intervention process will enhance communication between school and home. A more effective IEP may be developed through the collaborative efforts to provide early identification, data-driven interventions, and improved communication between school staff and families resulting in a less contentious IEP meeting.

Apart from participation in IEP meetings, counselors in the role of consultant may need to remind teachers of their role in providing the federally mandated accommodations. This may be achieved through one-on-one conversations or through school-wide staff development. Finally, working as consultants, school counselors may offer teachers suggestions for raising their expectations for students with disabilities in order to improve student achievement, including recommending students for more rigorous coursework (Hinnant, O'Brien, & Ghazarian, 2009).

### **Preservice Training and Collaboration**

School counselors are encouraged to provide both prevention and intervention programming and to create a model of collaboration that integrates the expertise of professional school counselors and other stakeholders, including special education teachers (ASCA, 2012). To achieve such collaboration, system changes are needed in training programs and schools. In advocating for a more visible role for the school counselor on behalf of students with disabilities, we need to create opportunities for specialized training and collaboration in preservice school counselors and special education teachers.

Milsom (2002) found that feelings of competency related to working with students with disabilities were correlated with the number of courses school counselors

had taken that addressed the needs of students with disabilities. School counseling programs may need to seek out opportunities to expose students to topics related to special education services through coursework, team teaching, seminars, and bringing in special education experts for classroom lectures (Nichter & Edmonson, 2005).

Further, utilizing special education professors to support the efforts of school counseling educators will serve as a bridge between preservice school counselors and special education teachers. Nichter and Edmonson (2005) found that professional school counselors suggested that counselor educators require special education instruction in their graduate program to better equip future school counselors in their efforts to serve students with disabilities. Specifically, preservice school counselors will need training regarding special education laws and related legal issues, components of an IEP, characteristics of disabilities, and techniques for working with students with disabilities, including classroom-based interventions (Nichter & Edmonson, 2005).

Preservice exposure to the unique roles and contributions for positive student outcomes may provide the foundation for future collaboration to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Expanding the discussion for the need for collaboration into the schools and post-graduation will allow school counselors and special education teachers to deepen their understanding and thereby, develop processes for more effective collaboration.

The ASCA position statement, *The School Counselor and Students with Disabilities* (2013), provides the directive for the inclusion of special education students in the development of a comprehensive school counseling program. “Professional school counselors are committed to helping all students realize their potential and meet or exceed academic standards regardless of challenges resulting from disabilities and other special needs” (ASCA, 2013, p. 55). Due to the unique needs of students with disabilities, school counselors may need to deliver components of the comprehensive school counseling program in a more equitable manner (Baker & Gerler, 2008). Utilizing their leadership and collaboration skills are two ways in which school counselors may develop and implement programming to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities.

School counselors may need to use individualized approaches to meet the individual learning needs of each student. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is currently considered the gold standard for educators to use when planning instruction to meet every student’s needs. UDL involves providing multiple means of representation, multiple means of action and expression, and multiple means of engagement (CEC, 2005a). In other words, teachers provide a variety of ways to give students information, a variety of ways for them to interact with the information, and a variety of ways to show that they have learned the information (CEC, 2005a).

However, as previously mentioned, school counselors are lacking the training and competency needed to provide programming to meet the unique needs of students with a disability. As a result of inadequate training, school counselors hand over special education questions or concerns to special education case managers. This reliance on the expertise of special education case managers does not absolve counselors of the need to be continually provided professional development around the issues, laws, and needs of students with disabilities (Skovholt & McCarthy, 1988; Studer & Quigney, 2004).

These gaps in training and professional practice require collaboration with the special education teacher to modify counseling-based material appropriately. Resources

and accommodations for learning must also be available for developmental school counseling lesson plans delivered through classroom guidance (Hall, 2015). For example, if the use of assistive technology will help the student better access the learning material and is listed as an accommodation in the IEP, the school counselor must ensure that this is available with the appropriate supports.

### **The Use of Professional Learning Communities to Support Collaboration**

The widespread use of professional learning communities (PLCs) provides many opportunities for school counselors and special education teachers to collaborate. PLC members are committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve (DuFour, Eaker, DuFour, & Karhanek, 2004). Research suggests the presence of mutual trust and respect and openness in partnerships are necessary for effective PLC performance (Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, & Wallace, 2005). Utilizing the PLC approach provides an opportunity for two formerly separate departments to openly collaborate and develop common goals, identify essential information, and to share and create strategies to improve student learning outcomes through the implementation of the comprehensive school counseling program (Schmoker, 2005).

The use of PLCs to generate collaborative solutions offers an opportunity for school counselors and special education teachers to work more effectively in meeting the needs of special education students. These group meetings can provide occasions to share master calendars and discuss shared concerns. These interactions also provide the means to gather and share best practices for meeting the needs of students with disabilities, especially when the invitation to participate is extended to other schools. The two sets of professionals can use this time to collaboratively solve issues related to individual students as well as groups of students (Hoaglund, Birkenfeld, & Box, 2014; Tam, 2015).

Based on a variety of issues, the recommendation to involve school counselors in IEP meetings is challenging. IEP meetings are typically scheduled to allow for parent participation and may not easily be fit into the counselor's schedule in all cases (Studer & Quigney, 2003). Utilizing the school counselor's master calendar to review the timing of IEP meetings may improve school counselor participation (Hall, 2015). Increasing counselor participation, and using the team approach to addressing student concerns would enhance communication among involved parties by increasing awareness of recent developments, including conversations with the student's family (Studer & Quigney, 2003).

Finally, with a quickly evolving society impacting the practice of school counseling, it is essential for school counselors and special education teachers to communicate changes to promotion, graduation, and testing in order to ensure all parties are meeting the needs of students and their academic goals. In this way, not only are parents and students informed, but the special education teachers can be brought up to date on the changes as well. Introducing preservice professional school counselors to special education concepts and the use of PLCs will prepare them to collaborate within existing school-based structures. In summary, more communication and collaboration between these two groups of professionals will serve to enhance all students' and families' involvement in the IEP and in the student's education in general.

## References

- American School Counselor Association (ASCA). (2012). *The ASCA National Model: A framework for school counseling programs* (3rd ed.). Alexandria, VA: Author.
- American School Counselor Association (ASCA). (2013). Position statement: The professional school counselor and students with disabilities. Retrieved from [https://www.schoolcounselor.org/asca/media/asca/PositionStatements/PS\\_Disabilities.pdf](https://www.schoolcounselor.org/asca/media/asca/PositionStatements/PS_Disabilities.pdf).
- Baker, S. B., & Gerler, E. R., Jr. (2008). *School counseling for the twenty-first century* (5th ed.) Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Merrill/Prentice Hall.
- Bolam, R., McMahon, A., Stoll, L., Thomas, S. & Wallace, M. (2005). *Creating and sustaining effective professional learning communities* (No. RR637). London, UK: Department for Education and Skills.
- Burnham, J. J., & Jackson, C. M. (2000). School counselor roles: Discrepancies between actual practice and existing models. *Professional School Counseling*, 4, 41–49.
- Council for Exceptional Children (CEC). (2005a). *Universal design for learning: A guide for teachers and educational professionals*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- Council for Exceptional Children (CEC). (2005b). *What's new in the new IDEA 2004: Frequently asked questions and answers*. Arlington, VA: Author.
- DuFour, R., Eaker, R., DuFour, R., & Karhanek, G. (2004). *Whatever it takes: How professional learning communities respond when kids don't learn*. Bloomington, IN: National Education Service.
- Erford, B. T. (2003). *Transforming the school counseling profession*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Gartin, B. C., & Murdick, N. L. (2005). IDEA 2004: The IEP. *Remedial and Special Education*, 26(6), 327–331.
- Goldberg, D. (2011, January 10). *Disability categories under IDEA*. Retrieved from <http://specialeducationadvisor.com/disability-categories-under-idea/>
- Gysbers, N., & Henderson, P. (2001). Comprehensive guidance and counseling programs: A rich history and bright future. *Professional School Counseling*, 4, 246–257.
- Hall, J. G. (2015). The school counselor and special education: Aligning training with practice. *The Professional Counselor*, 5(2), 217–224. doi: 10.15241/jgh.5.2.217
- Hinnant, J., O'Brien, M., & Ghazarian, S. (2009). The longitudinal relations of teacher expectations to achievement in the early school years. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 101(3), 662–670.
- Hoaglund, A. E., Birkenfeld, K., & Box, J. A. (2014). Professional learning communities: Creating a foundation for collaboration skills in pre-service teachers. *Education*, 134(4), 521–528.
- Holcomb-McCoy, C. (2007). *School counseling to close the achievement gap*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Holcomb-McCoy, C., Bryan, J., & Rahill, S. (2002). Importance of the CACREP school counseling standards: School counselors' perceptions. *Professional School Counseling*, 6(2), 112-119.

- Mauro, T. (2014, June 1). Court throws out 'mental retardation'. *USA TODAY*. Retrieved from <http://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2014/06/01/hall-florida-mental-retardation-intellectual-disability-supreme-court-column/9848687/>
- McCarthy, C., Kerne, V. V., Calfa, N. A., Lambert, R. G., & Guzmán, M. (2010). An exploration of school counselors' demands and resources: Relationship to stress, biographic, and caseload characteristics. *Journal of Professional School Counseling, 13*(3), 146–158.
- Milsom, A. (2002). Students with disabilities: School counselor involvement and preparation. *Professional School Counseling, 5*, 331–338.
- Milsom, A. (2007). Interventions to assist students with disabilities through school transitions. *Professional School Counseling Journal, 10*(3), 273–278.
- Nichter, M., & Edmonson, S. L. (2005). Counseling services for special education students. *Journal of Professional Counseling, Practice, Theory, & Research, 33*(2), 50–62.
- Paisley, P., O., & McMahon, H. G. (2001). School counseling for the 21st century: Challenges and opportunities. *Professional School Counseling, 5*, 106–110.
- Pelsma, D., & Krieshok, T. (2003). School counseling. In M. A. Richard & W. G. Emener (Eds.), *I'm a people person: A guide to human service professions* (pp. 187–197). Springfield, IL: C. C. Thomas.
- Roberts, L. A., Bouknight, T. M., & Karan, O. C. (2010). The school counselor's role on behalf of college bound special education students. In *Ideas and research you can use: VISTAS 2010*. Available from <http://www.counseling.org/knowledge-center/vistas>
- Schmoker, M. (2005, September). Learning communities at the crossroads: Toward the best schools we've ever had. *Phi Delta Kappan, 86*(1), 88–88.
- Skovholt, T. M., & McCarthy, P. R. (1988). Critical incidents: Catalysts for counselor development. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 67*, 69–72.
- Studer, J. R., & Quigney, T. A. (2003). An analysis of the time spent with students with special needs by professional school counselors. *American Secondary Education, 31*(2), 71–83.
- Studer, J. R., & Quigney, T. A. (2004). The need to integrate more special education content into pre-service preparation program for school counselors. *Guidance and Counseling, 20*(1), 56–63.
- Tam, A. F. (2015). Exploring teachers' beliefs about teacher learning in professional learning communities and their influence on collegial activities in two departments. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative & International Education, 45*(3), 422–444. doi:10.1080/03057925.2013.872025
- Thomas, D., & Woods, H. (2003). *Working with people with learning disabilities*. New York, NY: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

*Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: <http://www.counseling.org/knowledge-center/vistas>*