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Joining Forces for Students: School and Community Counselors Unite!

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Students today are faced with many challenges that hinder their educational pursuits. Mental health issues, substance use, and violence concerns make it increasingly difficult for students to remain engaged in the classroom. Academic declines are observed when young people lack the resources to overcome these obstacles. In order to meet growing student needs, school and community counselors must join together. In a new partnership, school and community counselors can work together to offer the guidance and support young people today desperately need. In order to form this alliance, we must understand the current frameworks that guide counselor interventions and the roles counselors can play to support the vision of maximizing student achievement under a unified and comprehensive system of student support.

School and community counselors are trained to assist students with behavioral, social, and emotional challenges. There are a number of models that guide counseling interventions with students. School counselors are taught to follow the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) model to deliver services (Bowers & Hatch, 2005). The Community Counseling Model is an effective framework for community counselors working in the schools (Lewis, Lewis, Daniels, & D'Andrea, 2003). This manuscript will explore both models and propose how they may complement one another through collaborative counseling efforts.

American School Counseling Association Model

The ASCA model distinguishes appropriate tasks and responsibilities for school counselors (Bowers & Hatch, 2005). The four quadrants of this framework include providing a solid counseling foundation, effective delivery, organizational management, and program accountability.

School Counseling Foundation

A school counseling program must be built on a strong foundation that incorporates the philosophy of the school district. While specific values may differ among school districts, the goal of a school counseling program is to support student achievement, career planning and personal development (American School Counselor Association, 2008).

Effective Delivery

The values and mission set forth from the school counseling foundation guide the delivery system under which school counselors operate. Following the ASCA model, school counselors provide systematic guidance curriculum through classroom and group activities (Bowers & Hatch, 2005). This direct services approach allows counselors to offer developmentally appropriate preventive education such as study skills and college preparation to the school community. In addition to classroom activities, school counselors provide direct client services to students through individual student planning. All students have the opportunity to foster goal setting and planning for their future. School counselors also offer responsive services for students with additional challenges that manifest themselves in attendance, behavior, or academic concerns (Bowers & Hatch, 2005). Finally, school counselors are responsible for coordinating an effective counseling program through counseling, consultation, information, or referral (American School Counselor Association, 2008).

Organizational Management

In addition to coordinating the counseling program, the ASCA model delineates that school counselors must effectively manage the entire system of school counseling support. High performing schools have been found to maintain organized and coordinated counseling programs (Fitch & Marshall, 2004). Sometimes school counselors do not fully operate under the ASCA guidelines (Kirchner & Setchfield, 2005). Therefore, it is imperative that school counselors and administrators create an agreement that outlines the school counselors' functions, responsibilities, and use of time. They must also agree that data drive goals and interventions and together create action plans that delineate expected student outcomes.

Program Accountability

Finally, it is vital that school counselors hold themselves and the counseling program accountable. Throughout the process, data is collected and analyzed to determine the effectiveness of interventions. Stakeholders receive regular reports including challenges, successes, and strategy changes. The data and interventions must align with the fundamental vision of the school district to support student achievement. With accountability, improvements are made to more effectively support students.

Community Counseling Model

Just as school counselors use the ASCA Model to deliver appropriate services to students, community counselors benefit from following the Community Counseling Model (Lewis et al., 2003). In this model, counselors are expected to deliver multiple services to support their clients. Direct services involve working with a client, whereas indirect services encompass supportive activities without the client.

Direct Community and Client Services

From a direct community services approach, counselors deliver effective preventive education to students in a group or classroom setting. Developmentally appropriate topics might include stress management, substance use, and suicide prevention. Some students greatly benefit from individualized therapeutic counseling and are best served by specialized professionals (Abrams, Theberge, & Karan, 2005). Community counselors provide direct client services through therapeutic counseling to individuals and groups using a clinical model. School-based services have been shown to help students effectively cope with anxiety (McLoone, Hudson, & Rapee, 2006); grief (Heath, Leavy, Hansen, Lawrence & Sonntag, 2008); and violence (Wong et al., 2007). Direct community and client services both play a critical part in serving a community or school population.

Indirect Community and Client Services

Clients do not live within a vacuum. Many of the problems they encounter deal directly with their environment. Community counselors are expected to engage in indirect community services such as influencing public policy in order to support the community and clients. Community counselors can work to diminish challenges clients face by creating systemic change in education, business, social and political systems (Lewis et al., 2003). In addition, counselors provide indirect client services through advocacy and consultation on a client's behalf. In this way, counselors create a need for greater community resources and empower individuals to more readily access these services. These indirect community and client objectives offer additional support to clients in their environment.

A Unified Approach: School and Community Counselors Together

When the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) Model and Community Counseling Model are implemented together, counselors produce strong results for students. In a unified system, school and community counselors each have specific roles. The school counselors follow the ASCA model. Their fundamental roles will include guidance, individual planning, and counseling to students. In addition, they will provide leadership, management, and accountability of the comprehensive counseling system. School counselors would likely counsel students with excessive tardiness, absenteeism, discipline, and other concerns. Under the ASCA model, school counselors are not encouraged to work with individual students in a clinical model

(Bowers & Hatch, 2005). In a school and community counseling partnership, students experiencing significant mental health concerns, substance abuse problems, or other debilitating difficulties would be referred to community counselors. Their role, under the Community Counseling model, would be to support the efforts of school counselors by providing therapeutic counseling to students. While each counselor has a unique role in the comprehensive system, all counselors will engage in some similar activities to engage and educate students.

All counselors maintain data and demonstrate outcomes directly related to academic achievement. It is vital that stakeholders recognize the additional support given to students is impacting success in the classroom. In addition, school and community counselors work together to provide direct and indirect community and client services. Together, they reach far more students and offer a greater variety of preventive education topics. In addition, all students have access to school-based counseling under their respective frameworks. Finally, counselors continue to advocate for systemic changes within the school system to appropriately support student needs.

When school and community counselors work together, student needs are more effectively addressed and academic achievement is supported. Wehlage and Smith (1989) advocated several years ago that establishing school-community partnerships would assist at-risk youth to be more successful in school. Many communities would benefit from such collaboration, however, and it is important to take necessary steps to form a clear vision and lasting partnerships. Seven steps must occur to create a comprehensive counseling model that incorporates both school and community counselors. These steps are explored in the following section and can be replicated by other communities and school districts.

Seven Steps for Integrating School and Community Counselors

School and community counselors can work with administrators to influence systemic change to effectively support student needs. In order to provide collaborative, holistic support to students within an educational setting, seven essential steps must be taken. These steps include:

1. Desire for community collaboration from school administration
2. Assess student needs using a SWOT analysis
3. Align community partners to fulfill needs
4. Determine if the school culture is ready to support additional interventions
5. Educate teachers and parents/guardians about the benefits of counseling
6. Integrate community agencies into the culture of the school to connect with students
7. Data collection, program evaluation, and benchmarks

Step 1: Does School Administration Want Community Collaboration?

Prior to introducing additional services into a school setting, school administration must understand the importance of counseling interventions and welcome community collaboration. The school board, superintendents, principals, and other key

stakeholders in the schools may benefit from education on the socio-emotional needs of students and the direct effect on student achievement. It is vital to have executive sponsorship from school administration before any further action occurs.

Step 2: Assess Student Needs

Once the school administration is committed to offering comprehensive support to students, the unmet student needs must be determined. School counselors are likely already meeting many student needs and it is unproductive to duplicate services. Thus, it will be important to determine what additional services should be provided in the school setting. In order to complete this task, a team must administer assessments to students, parents/guardians, and school personnel. Once these assessments have been analyzed, the team could use the data to perform a SWOT analysis where they examine the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats of the situation. This tool provides a strategic framework to align community partners. Figure 1 provides an example of a SWOT analysis.

Step 3: Align Community Partners to Fulfill Needs

Once the SWOT analysis is completed and unmet student needs defined, the team must determine which areas to combat and who is responsible for the delivery of additional services. Using the data, the team should assess the local community agencies that could work within the school system. Example agencies might include community mental health centers, crisis counseling centers, and substance abuse clinics. It is important to note that due to limited funding and resources, community agencies may historically see themselves as competitors rather than partners. It will be important for agencies to understand the collaborative vision and learn to work together as a unified team.

Step 4: Is the School Culture Ready?

A school culture must be ready to support outside agency staff providing services to students. It is important that all school staff understand the importance of offering additional services to students during the school day. All staff in the school must find ways to collaborate to encourage academic success and emotional stability. School counselors can facilitate this process by influencing systemic change that embraces a culture of student support.

Step 5: Educate Teachers and Parents/Guardians About the Benefits of Counseling

After the culture of the school is assessed, teachers and parents/guardians must be educated about the benefits of counseling. The link between counseling and academic success can be explained to staff and parents/guardians. As well, adults can be taught to identify behaviors associated with mental health, substance abuse, and violence issues. When youth do not believe that their parents/guardians understand their concerns or care very much about them, they report high rates of depression, suicide attempts, and lower self esteem than their peers (Ackard, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Perry, 2006). When adults are more aware of how such concerns manifest themselves in students and how

counseling can help, they will be more likely to encourage student participation.

Step 6: Integrate Community Agencies Into the Schools

Just as school staff recognize the benefits of counseling, community counselors must realize the main function of the school is to educate students. Community counselors should follow the school counselor's lead and embrace the culture of the school. The referral process guides staff members to collaborate and support the educational and emotional needs of students.

Step 7: Evaluation of the Process – Is This System Effective?

Data must drive the entire systemic change process. The assessments will determine which prevention and intervention efforts are implemented and the students who would benefit from such services. Effective data tracking, benchmarks, and dissemination is important to ensure students are experiencing desired changes.

These seven steps are essential to effectively collaborate school and community counseling efforts. School counselors are leaders throughout the process and must ensure that the services provided are properly managed, data is collected, and the program maintains accountability. The following example discusses a school district that embodies effective school-community collaborations with school counselors as central actors throughout the process.

Case Study: The PACES Model of Student Support

A school district was alarmed by the overwhelming prevalence of mental health, substance abuse, and violence issues across all grade levels. Office referral rates were high, many parents/guardians were uninvolved in their child's education, and student achievement was down. Many schools were not meeting annual yearly progress and it was imperative change needed to occur. The PACES model was created to facilitate this change.

Through the PACES model, community mental health, substance abuse, and violence prevention services became available to students in their schools. Counselors in the PACES model understood the vision and their role to increase student achievement and socio-emotional wellness. School counselors performed many functions according to the ASCA model, including offering guidance, individual student planning, and counseling to students. The school counselors also coordinated and managed the comprehensive counseling model and oversaw the referral process based on data from office referrals and school leadership teams. The referrals were based off a three tier comprehensive system of student support, which is outlined in Figure 2. Those students who needed additional counseling were referred to community counselors, who followed the Community Counseling model.

Community Counseling Model

Barriers that normally exist when connecting students to mental health, substance abuse, and violence prevention services have been eliminated through the PACES model. Often students suffer silently because the adults in their lives are not educated about symptoms of distress. In the PACES model, community counselors offered direct community services through substance abuse, mental health, and violence prevention classes provided to students, faculty, parents/guardians, and community members. Through this education, adults were better equipped to recognize adolescent mental health, substance abuse, and signs of an unhealthy relationship. After the sessions, teacher and parent/guardian referrals to the counseling office increased dramatically. More students have been connected to needed services through this model and have seen increases in academic achievement and overall well-being.

The PACES model has provided a successful integration of community professional services into the school setting. This process took a number of years, and providers and educators continue to learn ways to maintain effective school-community collaboration.

Joining Together for Student Success: Implications and Outcomes

School-community collaborations can and do work. In particular, the school district that implemented the PACES model of student support has seen tremendous success. Office referral rates are down 96% for students participating in groups that support healthy, violence-free relationships. Additionally, 77% of students identified with a substance use concern have successfully remained in school and no longer use illegal substances. Parents/guardians are increasingly more aware and active in their students' lives. These factors helped contribute to higher overall grades and successful grade completion for the majority of students receiving additional services. Without the interventions of community counselors, many of these students may still be silently suffering. Instead, students are thriving and achieving success in the classroom and in their lives. When school and community counselors join together for student success, young people can access the services they need to become healthy, happy, and contributing members of their school and community.

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Figure 1: Example SWOT Analysis

Strengths	<p>The majority of students (79%) report having an adult at home who they can talk with about concerns.</p> <p>Many high school students (87%) do not report bullying to be a problem in their school.</p>
Weaknesses	<p>Over half (55%) of students report contemplating suicide over the past 12 months.</p> <p>Only about a third (34%) of students believe school provides a caring, supportive environment in which to learn.</p>
Opportunities	<p>Many teachers (80%) indicated they would be willing to work with service providers who took students out of their class once a week to provide counseling.</p> <p>There are rooms available in every school that service providers could use to set up an office.</p>
Threats	<p>Some teachers (20%) indicated they would not be willing to work with service providers who took students out of their class once a week to provide counseling.</p> <p>About a quarter (24%) of the parents/guardians report they would not want their student to receive counseling for a mental health or substance abuse concern.</p>

Figure 2: PACES Comprehensive System of Student Support

