

School Counselors as Leaders in School Turnaround

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School Counselors as Leaders in School Turnaround

Over the past decade, school turnaround has received significant attention from the government, educational reform leaders, policy makers, and researchers. School turnaround refers to "the rapid and significant improvement in the achievement of low-performing schools" (Peck & Reitzug, 2014, p. 9). The term "rapid" is intended to capture an approximate window of two to three years, by which time gains should become apparent and be followed by continued improvement (Calkins, et al. 2007; Herman, et al., 2008). Researchers suggests a wide-range of factors impacting low-performing schools. For example, a culture of low-expectations, limited resources, and mismatches between expertise and need all perpetuate the cycle of school failure (Stein, 2012; Travers & Christiansen, 2010). Further, low-performing schools typically enroll historically underserved student populations including students of color, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and English language learners (Manwaring, 2011; Stein, 2012; Travers & Christiansen, 2010). As such, these schools can become a prime opportunity to utilize federal and state level funding to support school turnaround.

School turnaround, allows for transformation in organizational structure (e.g., administration and other school staff) to make gains in student performance (Herman, 2012; Herman et al., 2008; Rhim, 2012). Essentially, schools are able to make substantial shifts in school culture to address systemic challenges that may be impeding student success through data-driven decision making and the implementation of evidenced-based practices (Herman et al., 2008). Through the school turnaround process, schools are permitted to drastically change staff, including the opportunity to change school leadership as well as fire and potentially rehire staff and bring in new staff members. With the implementation of school turnaround strategies, evidence must be gathered to demonstrate marked academic improvement during a designated timeline (Herman, 2012; Herman et al., 2008).

School Counselors in School Turnaround

Educational leaders have been called to contribute to educational reform and school turnaround. School districts, principals and teachers have all been part of the conversation, however, interestingly, the literature on school counselors and turnaround is lacking. It would seem as though the responsibility to improve underperforming schools is most often placed upon school principals, teachers, and other school leaders. Furthermore, low performance appears to more often be attributed to school culture rather than the cultural backgrounds of the students and community to which the school belongs (Peck & Reitzug, 2014).

School counselors may be in a unique position to contribute to turnaround efforts by providing a fresh perspective to the change process. Hines and colleagues described the role of school counselors in turnaround schools as including leadership, advocacy and systemic change, teaming and collaboration, counseling and coordination, and accountable through a lens of educational equity (2017). Further, the authors state that school counselors readily identify barriers to educational success and use the aforementioned skills to remove such. School counselors are trained to consider the impact of culture on individuals and systems and how to promote student achievement (Chen-Hayes, Ockerman, & Mason, 2014; Hines et al., 2017). The American School Counselor Association (2012) outlined a national model for comprehensive school counseling programs that focus on data-driven practices that remove those systemic barriers impeding student learning in order to promote student success. School counselors have been called upon to take leadership roles within schools and those qualities desired of leaders in turnaround efforts are interestingly those often associated with school counselors. School counselor leadership incorporates a proactive approach steeped in program assessment, results-based assessment, personnel review, and greater collaboration with all educational stakeholders including families and the community (Amatea & West-Olantuni, 2007;

Chen-Hayes et al., 2014; Bryan, Griffin, & Henry, 2013; Bryan & Henry, 2012; Dollarhide, Smith, & Lemberger, 2007; Hines et al., 2017; Sink, 2009; Young & Bryan, 2015).

In this study, we examined school counselors' role in the school turnaround process. Provided the limited literature on school counselors and school turnaround, the present study was guided by the following questions:

1. How are school counselors involved in the school turnaround process?
2. How are school counselors leaders in the school turnaround process?
3. How does school counseling practice and focus change in turnaround schools?

Methods

The purpose of this case study is to provide a first look into the lived experiences of school counselors working at turnaround schools. Given the unique nature of such schools, how will school counselors function and how will they provide leadership in the process of reconfiguring policies, processes, and procedures to improve the educational experience for students? To examine this question, the research team chose case study as the methodology, since this question requires an in-depth examination of an intrinsic case, designed to bring sharp focus to a unique application of school counseling, within the bounded experience of being in a turnaround school (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2014).

Rationale for Case Study

In case study research, the defining quality of the methodology is the selection of a situation or entity that represents a unique bounded system that is worthy of study, such that current, real-life situations can be better understood (Creswell, 2013). In this study, school counselors' experiences in turnaround schools was the real-life, bounded system to be examined. Further, multiple cases that represent unique experiences within that bounded system allow for comparisons and thematic exploration to derive a more robust understanding of the situation under study (Yin, 2014), and that is why three cases were selected for this

collective case study. These cases provide a sense of diversity within the unique experience to be studied. To arrive at these cases, purposive sampling allowed for typical cases to be the overall goal, and within the typical cases, maximum variation (Merriam, 1998) was sought in terms of geographic diversity, school level diversity, and school counselor diversity. This allowed multiple cases to highlight different perspectives on the same issue (Yin, 2014).

In-depth understanding of each case (Creswell, 2013) was also sought through examination of school characteristics derived from the School Improvement Grant website [<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/index.html>] and documents related to the grant funding for turnaround schools (U.S Department of Education, 2012). In examining these documents, data about the needs of the school and inferences about the community in which the school exists were derived in order to better understand the cases under study.

Procedure

After human subjects exemptions were obtained from all three institutions of the researchers, participants were sought. To do this, information about successful turnaround grant recipients was examined to determine recent grantees to target for invitation, so that all three levels of schools (elementary, middle and high) were represented (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). The schools that were selected were then explored online to find the name of the school counselor. Invitation emails were sent to that named counselor, along with information about the study, the informed consent, and the interview questions that would be asked.

Three participants, one from each school level, volunteered to be a part of the study. Each participant was interviewed by a member of the research team by phone; each interview lasted from 60 to 90 minutes. A semi-structured interview protocol was used to collect data on the respondent's (a) relationships with administrators, teachers, students, parents, and community; (b) leadership activities and roles; (c) school counseling program; (d) role during the turnaround process (TAP); and (e) any supports from the TAP for the school counseling

program. Two of the interviews were recorded with permission, but the third interview was not recorded due to a failure of the recording technology. In the case of the recorded interviews, the recordings were transcribed; for the third interview, extensive detailed notes were taken and the respondent was given a chance to edit the notes before they were included in the data pool. No changes were made to the notes by the respondent. Additionally, member checks were completed with respondents who participated in recorded interviews to ensure accuracy, validity, and credibility of what was transcribed.

After the interviews, additional in-depth (Yin, 2014) demographic and performance data were gathered about each of the respondent's school from the online sources on the respective State Department of Education application website. This provided the depth of information required for case study methodology.

Participants

As can be seen in Table 1, the participants varied in terms of ethnicity, gender, school level, number of counselors in the building, and region of the country, demonstrating the maximum variation sought in the purposive sample (Creswell, 2013). Their average age was 40, their average time in education was 16 years, and their average time as a school counselor was 11 years. Two respondents had considerable experience but one respondent was relatively new to the field.

As can be seen in Table 2, the schools in which the turnaround process (TAP) had been funded varied in size, demographics, and performance on standardized tests in math and English/Language Arts (ELA). They all share high poverty but vary in terms of demographic diversity. The information is provided to contextualize the diversity of the cases presented.

Researchers

The researchers on this effort are all female counselor educators, two of whom are African American and one is Caucasian. Two researchers are experienced with qualitative

methodology, and one is relatively new to qualitative inquiry while being extensively published as a quantitative researcher. All three researchers share an interest in school counselor leadership and engaged this study as an exploratory inquiry into school counseling leadership in turnaround schools. There were no a-priori assumptions about what would be discovered about school counselors in such schools.

Data Analysis

In case study analysis, the individual cases are examined in terms of the overall thematic commonalities (holistic analysis; Creswell, 2013) and uniqueness (embedded analysis; Yin, 2014). It is these thematic cross-case elements that constitute the findings of this study. In this inductive process, within-case analysis was first engaged to examine the responses to each question relative to the overall research question, which highlighted the unique experience of each case. How each case reflects the unique experience of turnaround schools is related to the context of that school, but there are transcendent commonalities from which the themes are derived. Cross-case analysis was engaged through three rounds of independent examination looking for commonalities, followed by three rounds of discussion among the researchers to arrive at consensus about the themes, each discussion examining deeper insight into thematic findings. In the case presentations below, numbers are used to indicate the themes that were found.

Findings

Case 1: Dani

“Dani” is a 46 year old, Caucasian female who has been at her current elementary school for two years, with a total of 17 years as a school counselor in her mid-west state. She has been working in the urban core for 6 years and before that, in a rural school for 11 years. She has been in education for a total of 24 years. Currently, she is in an urban turnaround school of approximately 250 students, and she is the only counselor in the building, having

joined the school after it was designated as a turnaround school. Before she came to this school, the counselor was split between 2 buildings. Currently, she is only assigned to this school, but when the grant funds are gone next year, she is concerned that she will be split between two buildings.

The turnaround process (TAP) started before Dani joined this school, but she has been instrumental in the process since she came. The school currently has provisional accreditation and attendance dramatically increased last year, so the TAP is well under way and is proving successful.

In terms of leadership in her building, the administrator considers her a leader (3), but the teachers don't necessarily consider her a leader; they see her as an equal in many discussions. She is the chair of every committee, but in her work with teachers, she has found that if they ask her for help, they relate to her as a leader. However, if she offers help before they seek her help, they relate to her more as a colleague / peer. The TAP has created more awareness of her role in the building, and her leadership role has been heightened in TAP (3). She states that if she doesn't chair the committee, the work would not get done.

The TAP has shifted the emphasis on some aspects of her school counseling program and she has a more ASCA National Model-congruent program (1). First, data is more important as the means of accounting for the improvement of students, and the use of data and evidence-based practices has enabled her to bring more ASCA-derived strategies to her program (2). Second, group counseling has become more important. Results are more apparent because she goes to teachers to get information about how students are doing, which has created more collaboration with teachers and more data (4). In addition, classroom guidance is also more important. Students come to the school who may be missing foundational skills, so she goes into the classroom more, reinforcing her collaboration with teachers (4). They let her know about topics that they would like her to address. While she has a curriculum that she delivers,

teachers respond more readily when she comes to their class when she is addressing a need they have identified (4). She sees rural and urban kids' needs as the same, but in the urban school, student needs are more intense and there is more urgency.

In terms of her relationships with stakeholders in the building, she works closely with the principal and feels she and the principal are a team (5). With teachers, she feels connected, since teachers come to her to let her know about student needs, more so than in rural schools in her experience. Teachers add their input during her lessons and clearly support her when she is in their classroom (4). In her prior schools, she had middle and high school experiences. So in this school, she asks teachers "What can I do differently?" to improve the work she does with elementary students. The teachers at this school really appreciate her (4). In terms of her relationships with students, she is in an elementary school, where kids give her hugs and high fives (4). They just want someone to notice them. The most noticeable difference has been in her relationships with parents. Last year, she was responsible for attendance and so parent relationships were strained, to the point that some parents even began to block her calls. However, she has noticed that now parents seek her out; she does not have to seek them out (4).

In terms of relationships with community members, various community partners (churches, for example) offered Thanksgiving turkeys and hams for the families (6). There are also several community partners that brought turkeys and hams for the teachers and staff. With the contributions for needy families, she provided leadership and collaborated with teachers to identify families who were in need. She then called the parents to say "We have some turkeys that have been donated to the school. Would you like one?" rather than assuming what the family needs. The community partners are great and ask "What do you need from us?" She stated that she provides "middleman leadership."

Finally, in order to bring about the turnaround, Dani stated that there were no additional professional development or extra supports offered to her because of TAP. She noted that the whole district offers mentoring, but because she was a seasoned counselor, she did not feel she needed it. However, she is mentoring another school counselor at a local charter school.

Case 2: Melvin

Melvin is a 32 year old African American male who has six years in the school counseling profession and eight years as an educator. Although his contract was not renewed for the upcoming school year, he worked at the school for two years as the only school counselor. He was not assigned to the school prior to the turnaround process, and worked under the leadership of two principals during the two years at that school. The middle school is located in an urban school setting in a southern state. At the time of this study, the population was approximately 440 students. He speculated the FARMS student population to be 99% of the total student population. He reported membership in the American School Counselor Association and state counseling association.

When describing school counselor and principal leadership characteristics, he stated, "Everything depends on the principal" (5). Prior to his hiring, all staff were dismissed except for the school counselor who was eventually dismissed and Melvin was hired. During his hiring interview, he interviewed the principal to ensure that his role would encompass school counseling focused responsibilities that he learned during graduate school. "I really wanted to help students. I asked if I will be dealing with behavior." He responded, "No, research indicates that school counselors should not deal with discipline issues". However, as a concession, he was assigned as the test coordinator. During his first year, the principal took care of discipline and curriculum.

In terms of leadership Melvin served as PBIS coordinator, led the student review team committee, and chaired the student attendance review team (3). However, when the second

principal arrived, Melvin's role shifted to include disciplining students (5). He stated, "Legally, I should not do that. I stopped. But, I did not want to be insubordinate." When assigned to the in-school suspension room, he discontinued suspension responsibilities and began counseling interventions with students. He also collected data (2) and felt as if the principal was unhappy with this process (5). "There are many behavior problems in my school. This is why I believe the leadership role of a school counselor can be different depending on the principal".

He developed a mission for the school counseling program (1), but the second principal did not want it. There was a collaboration to develop the school mission and vision with the turnaround process, but "essentially the program remained the same from the [pre-TAP] principal".

When asked to describe his relationship with the school administration, he described his relationship with the administration as "rocky" (5). He was also required to teach students who were sent out of the classroom, in addition to teaching math and science. When asked about his relationship with teachers, he stated, "I always had a great relationship with the teachers" (4). He coordinated with teachers to plan and implement career programs and nutrition programs. They allowed him to do classroom guidance lessons. When asked to describe his relationship with students, he replied that he was the basketball coach and that students trusted him (4). He appeared to be a genuine advocate for the students. He was deeply concerned when asked to discipline students because of the conflict of interest.

Case 3: Theresa

Theresa is a 40 year old, Pacific Islander female who has been a professional school counselor for a total of 11 years all at the high school level and has 6 years of middle school teaching experience as well. She has worked at her current high school as a professional school counselor for 7 years. Her school, located in a large suburban city on the west coast is a turnaround school of approximately 1,228 students. At the beginning of the turnaround process

(TAP), Theresa was one of two school counselors; however, as the student population has grown, she is now one of three counselors.

Theresa views school counselor leadership as a pivotal role in student success (3). While she sees principals as dealing primarily with discipline, school counselors focus on the academic success of students in addition to some socio-emotional issues. School counselors use their leadership skills to connect students with community resources that can support their holistic development (6). Theresa considers herself as a leader in the school and as a leader in the school counseling department (3). She readily gives feedback on school improvement plans and also shares the goals and plans of the school counseling program and how it relates to other departments lessons, goals, and the mission of the school as a whole. Theresa also expressed that while she works on whole school improvement, she also works independently with the school counseling unit to develop and implement an appropriate agenda (1).

As a part of TAP, the school counseling program has shifted to be more goal driven and data focused (2). Theresa worked to develop a school counseling program grounded in accountability, to not only show what school counselors can do but also prove that school counselors have a stake in student success (1 and 2). She documented the student benchmarks, services provided, and proof that benchmarks were being met. They used this data to advocate for their role with administrators and teachers (2 and 3). Specific tasks that became the focus of the school counseling program was four year plans, counseling presentations in the classroom, one-on-one meetings, credit recovery, and career plans.

Because of the shift in focus school counseling, Theresa has fostered positive relationships with key stakeholders. For example, now that teachers see the value in what the school counselors can support student success, they have started to integrate the content of classroom guidance into assignments (4). Theresa also partners with the health center to provide training to teachers to help students with lower level socio-emotional issues in the

classroom and school as a whole (6). Teachers may also incorporate a school counseling lesson into their course content to address issues that arise (e.g., bullying, etc.) (4). This positive relationship is also seen with the administrators as well. Theresa felt that the administration respected and valued school counselors as a part of the team (5).

In terms of relationships with the students and parents, Theresa stated that there is a positive vibe of love and acceptance (4). Students come from all parts of the city, often taking a minimum of two buses to get to school. Students are treated with respect and as an important part of the school community and family. Communication with parents is weekly from the school administration. Over the course of Theresa's tenure, she has seen an increase in parents getting involved in school and reaching out to school faculty.

In terms of relationships with the community, Theresa has put in a great deal of effort in creating bridges with community resources (6). She recognizes that these resources play a big role in helping students be successful as they provide opportunities that would otherwise be unavailable. For example, the development of the health center, which includes clinical mental health counselors, was created through community partnerships. Because of the health center, students have access to long term mental health services that may otherwise be unavailable (6).

Despite the growth and shifts in the school counseling program, Theresa shared that there was no professional development or extra supports offered to her through the turnaround process. Instead, Theresa joined professional associations and conferences where she would note ideas that she wanted to bring back to her school. With each additional conference that she sought out, she developed more ideas and skills needed to create, fund, implement, and document key components of the school counseling program.

Discussion

This study occurred as a result of the authors' collective interest to study school counselors' roles and level of leadership engagement in the reconfiguration process of turnaround schools from a qualitative perspective. Cross-case analysis was used to determine the common and differing voices of the three school counselors interviewed. This study addressed three research questions that can be discussed through six integrative themes (see figure 1). Research question one, "How are school counselors involved in the school turnaround process?" and research question three, "How does school counseling practice and focus change in turnaround schools?" provide similarity in the *ASCA National Model, data, principal relationship, improved relationship with the community, and improved relationship with the school* themes. Whereas, question two, "How are school counselors leaders in the school turnaround process?" appeared evident in the *leadership* theme.

As the turnaround process focuses on big changes to organizational structure to expedite significant improvement in student achievement in low performing schools (Herman 2012; Herman et al., 2008), this study suggests that school counselor involvement in the process and use of data may evolve as a result of several factors and influences. The premise of the turnaround process is to wipe the slate clean and to rethink how students are being educated. This "clean slate" process might have removed prior roles and expectations of the school counselor, which allowed space for the counselor to create an ASCA National Model program. Both Dani and Theresa moved their programs toward greater congruence with the National Model, and while Melvin wanted to be able to implement what he learned in graduate school (ASCA National Model), he was unable to do so under the second principal. Despite the barriers of actual implementation as in Melvin's case, data were viewed as a tool to identify gaps and evaluate program effectiveness. All three school counselors saw the turnaround process as an opportunity to develop or realign their respective programs with the ASCA National Model through the integration of data-driven practices (ASCA, 2012; Hines et al.,

2017). Overall, data were instrumental for creating more accountability, resulting in two outcomes: (a) documenting the value of the National Model program, and (b) creating outcomes data for the turnaround process. Both Dani and Theresa spoke directly about data and their programs, and even Melvin collected data but felt it was not appreciated by the principal.

Further, school-community-family partnership became more salient for school counselors. These partnerships permitted school counselors to take on a community approach to bringing in critical resources and supports into the school environment for students and their families (Bryan, Griffin, & Henry, 2013; Bryan & Henry, 2012; Hines et al., 2017). The TAP seemed to bring improved relationships with key stakeholders, including teachers, families, and students. For example, the TAP seemed to highlight the role of school with the community, and 2 of 3 respondents had direct leadership in promoting greater partnerships with the community on behalf of the school. Both Dani and Theresa used the TAP to bring the community into the school on behalf of the students, so that the community would feel more invested in the success of the students and the school. All three counselors spoke of their collaborative relationships with teachers and students (Chen-Hayes et al., 2014; Hines et al., 2017). For Dani and Theresa, this collaboration extended to parents of the students also, and they both reported that the TAP resulted in better communication, involvement, and investment in the school by parents.

It was also clear from all three cases that principal expectations directly shaped the role of counselor (Dahir, Burnham, Stone, & Cobb, 2010; Dollarhide, Smith, & Lemberger, 2007). Strong relationships with administration were evident for Dani and Theresa, and for Melvin with his first principal. This seemed to further empower each counselor to strive for an ASCA National Model-congruent program, and to embody the leadership role that comes with that ASCA National Model-congruent program. Interestingly, school principal-counselor relationships heavily impacted school counselors' ability to align with the ASCA National Model. For both

Dani and Theresa, their school principals had a general understanding of professional school counseling, but were also open to that definition being shaped by what they were doing (Dollarhide, Smith, & Lemberger, 2007).

As noted in the ASCA National Framework (ASCA, 2012) leadership is needed for systemic change and present in collaboration, advocacy, and use of data. Such was the case in this study, leadership emerged during the TAP process and was evident in all three cases. Initiative and drive for excellent school counseling programs were demanded in the TAP, and all three school counselors rose to the challenge (Young & Miller-Kneale, 2013). In fact, their roles became more solidified as they were able to use leadership skills that impacted program effectiveness (Chen-Hayes et al., 2014; Dollarhide, 2003; Hines et al., 2017). These school counselors were able to see themselves as change agents, and they saw that the focus on student success increased the importance of collaboration for leadership (Young & Miller-Kneale, 2013). Even though Melvin's efforts in leadership were not successful with the second principal, he continued to advocate for students.

Limitations and Future Directions

As with any study, there are limitations that should be noted. Case studies allow opportunities to broach topics and collect an array of rich information that often cannot be not easily gathered. The cross case analysis approach used in this study was intended to highlight the commonalities and differences of participants' engagement in the turnaround process. There was representation of ethnicity, gender, school level, and from varying geographic regions. Yet, the sample size was small and the participants in this study cannot represent the voices of all school counselors employed in turnaround schools at different levels or regions of the country. Thus, the findings may not be generalizable.

Careful consideration was given to the development of a semi-structured protocol and consistency of the phone interview process. Two of the interviews were recorded and one was

not due to technical difficulties. Because qualitative analysis of data may be subject to researcher bias or interpretation and it is not known how other researchers may have interpreted the data of this study. To address this limitation of interviewer interpretive bias and to increase authenticity, member checks were conducted to confirm participant intent. However, bias could be possible. Further research and replication of this study can strengthen the triangulation of the findings and how school counselors are trained to work in urban schools settings.

Further research and replication of this study can strengthen the triangulation of the findings and how school counselors are trained to work in urban schools settings. The findings of this study and related research can also inform the training of graduate students and practicing school counselors. Intentional training about how to use data to identify barriers and implement accountability strategies that align with the needs of students in urban school settings will enhance their preparatory skills and confidence to address challenges that may be presented in low performing school environments.

Conclusion

The emergent themes of this study indicate that school counselors do indeed have a role in turning around a failing school. Similar to school principals and teachers, school counselors use their leadership skills to implement data-driven, comprehensive school counseling programs in line with the ASCA National Model. They use a collaborative approach by building stronger relationships with all educational stakeholders including school principals, teachers, parents, and community members to foster positive academic, socio-emotional, and career development for all students. In all their efforts, school counselors use data to not only document their impact in student success, but also as a way to show others just what school counselors can do to contribute to the success of all students.

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Table 1

Demographic Variables of Case Study Respondents

	DANI	MELVIN	THERESA
Ethnicity	Caucasian	African American	Pacific Islander
Gender	F	M	F
Age	46	32	40
School level	Elementary	Middle	High
Region of Country	Midwest	South	West Coast
Community type	Urban	Urban – Rural (school was moved into county district after TAP)	Suburban-Urban (Industrial)
Years as School Counselor	17	6	11
Years in Education	24	8	17
Teacher?	Yes	Yes	Yes
Number of counselors in building	1	1	3

Table 2

Demographic Variables of Case Study TAP Schools

STUDENT POPULATION 2013-2014	ELEMENTARY (Dani)	MIDDLE (Melvin)	HIGH (Theresa)
Number of Students	261	472	1124
% Asian students	0	0	11
% Black students	76	99	25
% Latino/a students	14	0	44
% Native American students	0	0	0
% White students	9	1	10
% Low SES students	94	95	73
% Low SES Passing Math 2011-2012	29	8	** 69
% Low SES Passing ELA* 2011-2012	25	10	** 72
% Low SES Passing Math 2013-2014	8	38	** 71
% Low SES Passing ELA 2013-2014	12	23	** 70
% Low SES Passing Math 2014-2015	18	NA	NA
% Low SES Passing ELA 2014-2015	22	NA	NA

*ELA = English Language Arts

** Numbers provided by the school were not disaggregated by SES. These numbers represent the overall percentage who passed each test in the 10th grade.

NA: Not available

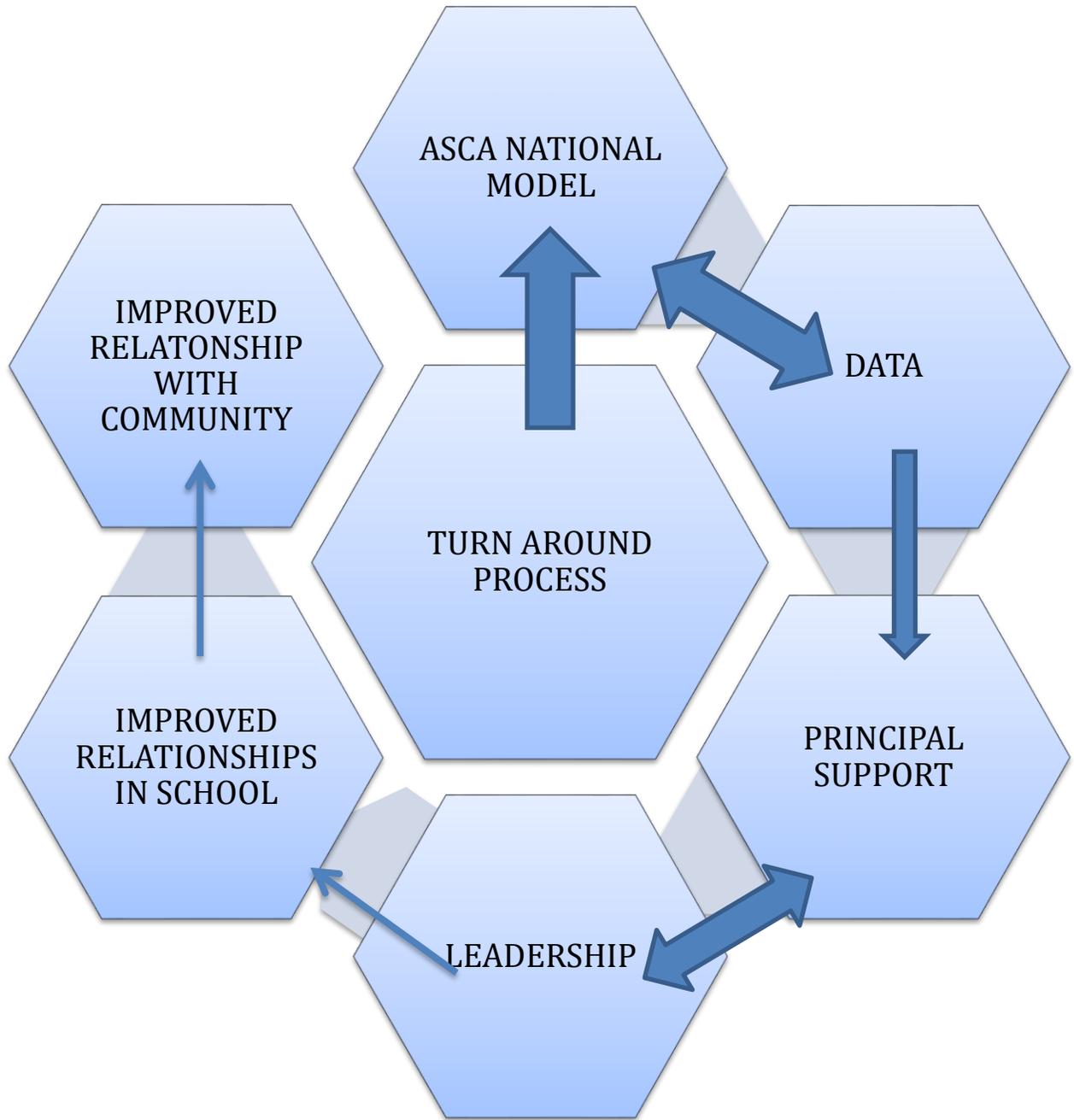


Figure 1

Themes: School Counseling in Turnaround Schools