

# COMMUNICATING PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL COUNSELOR ROLES TO PRINCIPALS

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## ABSTRACT

Professional school counselors (PSC) are constantly given responsibilities that are nonguidance duties. When given these duties, PSC are not able to implement and maintain effective guidance programs. Often school principals assign these duties because they are unaware of the impact school counselors have on the goals of the school. Therefore, it is important that school counselors promote the profession and inform school principals of their roles and how they affect the school. This article offers school counselors suggestions on how to communicate more effectively with principals.



Professional school counselors (PSC) are being held accountable to various stakeholders. By using the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) National Model (ASCA, 2005), and other accountability tools, such as M.E.A.S.U.R.E. (Dahir & Stone, 2007) PSC are demonstrating the connection school counseling programs have to their school's mission and goals. Accountability is essential for the school counseling profession to continue to flourish, but it is not enough. While school counselor roles are being promoted and published across the nation through various channels including many websites and discussions at school counseling conferences, the reality is that PSC are still being asked to complete nonguidance duties. These nonguidance duties include such activities as: handling records, scheduling, enrolling students, completing

special education referrals, working with testing materials, grades and report cards, and serving as nurse/medical coordinators (Burnham & Jackson, 2000). It is all too evident that the message is still not reaching many professionals who are instrumental in making the decisions about school counselor roles.

Principals often make the decisions about the roles of the counselors in their individual schools (Ribak-Rosenthal, 1994) and PSC must advocate for themselves by communicating their roles and the needs of their programs to principals. Research studies suggest that PSC want to communicate with principals on a regular basis (O'Conner, 2002), but the question is, "How do school counselors communicate effectively with school principals?" The purpose of this article is to provide PSC with clear suggestions on how to communicate more effectively with their principals.

### *Strategies for Communicating More Effectively with Principals*

School principals are task-oriented (Shoffner & Williamson, 2000) and focus on accomplishments and results. It may be advantageous to keep this in mind as school counselors advocate for their profession because communicating with principals in a language they understand and focusing on program results may bring greater success. The American Counseling Association (ACA, 2006) recommends several strategies for effective advocacy which may help when communicating roles to principals. These are:

- Ask for what you want
- Be specific
- Think of the other person's perspective
- Be credible

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- Anticipate opposition
- Be organized and
- Keep it simple.

ASCA (2007) also proposes several approaches for working with administration and Boards of Education. ASCA suggests that PSC focus on student results and use charts and graphs to demonstrate data when dealing with administrators because data demonstrate accountability.

Johnson (2000) endorses several examples of how PSC can promote the profession:

- Represent the guidance department on school and community boards
- Publish a newsletter for the school community
- Develop a brochure that promotes the counseling program
- Hold “accountability” conferences with principals at least once a year and provide accountability data
- Invite principals to sit in on classroom guidance sessions
- Develop a professional portfolio
- Give the administrator an agenda for department meetings
- Prepare and publish an Annual Report for stakeholders
- Offer in-service workshops and consultation services to instructional staff
- Distribute a quarterly calendar of events and highlight activities that focus on academics.

These tactics for promoting the school counseling profession can be used to inform school principals of what PSC are doing and how they are making a direct impact on school goals.

#### *Using Management Agreements*

ASCA (2005) suggests that PSC develop a management agreement when communicating with principals about counseling duties and responsibilities. The management agreement is between the school counseling staff and the administrator(s) and is based on the school's needs and goals. This document is discussed, agreed upon, and signed by the counseling staff and administrator(s) at the beginning of each school year. Information should include 1) how students are assigned to PSC, 2) the amount of time counselors will devote to individual student planning, guidance lessons, managing system support, and responsive services, 3) how the available budget will be used to implement the program, 4) the program development that is needed, 5) how often the school counseling department will meet as

a team, with principals, teachers and their advisory councils, and 6) how support services for the school counseling department will be provided. This meeting with administrators is the perfect opportunity for PSC to demonstrate how their time is spent on guidance activities and how these activities impact the school while connecting to the mission of the school.

### **Implications for Counselor Educators**

Counselor educators play an important role in helping future professional school counselors promote the profession. Ballerster, Fitch, Marshall, and Newby (2001) recommend that counselor educators teach students to start promoting the nature of counseling programs beginning at the job interview. This fosters understanding and collaboration from the initiation of the relationship. PSC should be encouraged to publish a newsletter informing the administration, staff, parents, and students of the counselors' roles. It is also important that counselors-in-training (CIT) be taught how to be assertive and “choose their battles”.

Ballerster et al. (2001) also suggest that counselor educators consult with the educational leadership department faculty at their college/university to help future administrators understand the roles of the professional school counselor. Shoffner and Williamson (2000) recommend seminars for school counselors and administrators in a cross-discipline group to allow them to share experiences and thoughts about each profession. This collaboration is essential to effectively address the needs of the students in the schools. Other suggestions by Ballerster et al. include conducting region-focused research with principals which can help CIT effectively prepare for potential obstacles. Acknowledging administrators who support high quality school counseling programs is another supportive measure.

### **Implications for Professional School Counselors**

It is important for PSC and principals to form trusting, understanding, sensitive, and nurturing relationships with one another in order to meet the needs of students (Wesley, 2001). If PSC continue to advocate for the school counseling profession to principals and work toward teaming and collaboration with them, they can reach their school's goals together. Professional school counselors can advocate for the profession by writing articles about school counselor roles for peer reviewed journals that principals read and by presenting at conferences that principals attend. PSC also need to become more knowledgeable about what duties are

considered nonguidance duties and advocate for removal of these duties from their job descriptions.

Johnson (2000) suggests that veteran counselors maintain membership in professional organizations and actively participate in professional development to stay current on developments in the profession. This is equally important for new inductees to the profession. The support of school principals for appropriate school counselor roles is vital to the development, implementation, maintenance, and success of school counseling programs (Brock & Ponec, 1998). It is the responsibility of PSC to inform school principals of counseling roles and ensure that they are knowledgeable about the effectiveness of their programs. School counselors and principals who commit to communicating with each other, developing trust and support for the school's programs and who demonstrate sensitivity to each other increase their effectiveness in schools (Wesley, 2001). Collaboration will improve school climate, increase knowledge and respect for both professions, and ultimately improve student achievement.

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