

**Building on Strengths and Addressing Challenges: Enhancing External School**

**Counseling Program Evaluation**

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### **Abstract**

This conceptual paper outlines the implications associated with increasing external evaluation within school counseling programs. The authors propose that enhancing external evaluation may help to both strengthen school counseling programs and enhance their legitimacy within increasingly competitive and academically focused school systems. More specifically, the authors identify school-based evaluation (SBE) as a relevant and pragmatic tool to better support internal program evaluation strengths that already exist in the field through more intentional external program evaluation strategies. Two positive cases of external program evaluation are presented and discussed from an SBE perspective. Finally, the authors offer practitioners guidelines for building external SBE school counseling program evaluation practices and structures within their own local contexts.

*Keywords:* school counseling; program evaluation; school-based evaluation; external evaluation

## Introduction

Historically, it has been challenging to establish school counseling as vital to the work of education (Burtnett, 1993; Dimmitt, Carey, & Hatch, 2007; Hayes, 1996). The seemingly peripheral nature of the profession has proven problematic in times of tight funding or increased attention on academic achievement. Looking at the current educational landscape, the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) and the recent economic recession have both contributed to many states and school districts becoming more acutely focused on academic achievement. Dahir and Stone (2009) further explain, “In this climate of limited educational funding and the pressures of meeting adequate yearly progress, [i.e., the requirements of NCLB, 2002] school counselors continue to be at risk as ancillary to the central goals of education (i.e., teaching and learning)” (p.87). Despite the fact that school counselors were not specifically named within the legislation, NCLB is recognized as a major rationale for increasing school counselor accountability and demonstrating school counselor contributions to achievement (Dahir & Stone, 2003; 2009; Dollarhide & Lemberger, 2006; Isaacs, 2003; Myrick, 2003; Sink, 2009; Stone & Dahir, 2004).

Drawing on our work within schools and state departments of education, we argue that programs engaging in accountability and evaluation practices fare much better than programs or services that do not. They survive because they are proactive; that is, they use evaluation information to advocate their value and to make on-going improvements, thus, increasing perceived effectiveness. School counselors need to be recognized for their contributions to student success, and they need evaluation tools and practices that will hold up during times of strapped economic resources.

Fortunately, rationales for accountability are well dispersed within the school counseling literature. For example, the American School Counseling Association's (ASCA) national model states, "School counselors use this evaluation to answer the question, 'How are students different as a result of the school counseling program?' Now more than ever, school counselors are expected to demonstrate the effectiveness of their programs in measurable terms" (ASCA, 2012, p.99).

Statements like the one above are significant because the ASCA national model (first published in 2003) can be considered one the field's most unified initiatives. The national model effectively combined several established movements within the field and was largely based on the comprehensive developmental counseling and guidance CDCG movement (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000; Myrick, 1993). This movement placed emphasis on the benefits of organizing and delivering locally developed school counseling programs. These programs are curriculum-based and designed to best meet the developmental needs of all students. The national model (ASCA, 2003) also integrated ideas from the results-based movement (Johnson & Johnson, 2003), that stipulates the importance of school counselors being able to demonstrate how all students are impacted by the efforts of school counseling programs and interventions; and the calls from the Education Trust's Transforming School Counseling Initiative (1997) to better articulate school counselors' contributions to academic achievement and closing the achievement gap for poor and/or minority students.

The encouragement of accountability and evaluation within school counseling is not limited to the national model or its development. Other accountability models have also been created. These models represent more detailed work in identifying ways to

operationalize school counseling accountability and can be categorized in three ways: 1) data-based decision making models (Dahir & Stone, 2003; Issacs, 2003; Reynolds & Hines, 2001), 2) action-research oriented models (Lapan, 2001; Rowell, 2006), and 3) evidence-based models (Dimmit, Carey, & Hatch, 2007). Common themes across models are to identify effective school counseling practices, demonstrate impact on key student outcomes, and thus better position school counselors within an educational environment that stresses greater accountability.

Both the ASCA national model (2012) and aforementioned school counselor accountability models stress the importance of evaluation. We see these efforts as crucial to the advancement of school counseling and as firm foundation from which to build. In effect, the new directions proposed within this paper build from this starting point and share the same rationales and end-goals associated with investing in program evaluation (i.e., demonstration of the impacts of programming on students, and the legitimization of school counseling activities within highly scrutinized educational systems).

This starting point also necessitates highlighting several of the key factors linked to school counseling program evaluation. First in our minds is the recognition that the vast majority of the school counseling accountability literature places an emphasis upon practicing school counselors to self-evaluate their programs. This means that accessing the benefits associated with program evaluation involves balancing program evaluation activities with the myriad tasks and student needs that fill the daily life of practitioners. We speculate that creating recommendations for voluntary program evaluation may not be enough to motivate or sustain school counselors' completion of program evaluation

activities. School counselors, like most educational professionals, have been fearful of, resistant to, and/or poorly trained in evaluation (Astromovich, Coker, & Hoskin, 2005; Fairchild, 1993; Fairchild & Zins, 1986; Lombana, 1985; Lusky & Hayes, 2001; Martin, Carey, & DeCoster, 2009; Schaffer & Atkinson, 1983; Schmidt, 1995, 2003; Trevisan, 2002b). Therefore, realistically, if school counseling evaluation is to move forward, it is necessary to build upon the tradition of practitioner-based evaluation by creating an infrastructure (Trevisan, 2002b) that more holistically supports practitioner program evaluation throughout the educational system. In theory, this 'infrastructure' would better support both school counselors' access to existing self-evaluation practices (by addressing fears, resistance, and training), and (more externally) support, reinforce, and disseminate internal evaluation outcomes and products.

As researchers and evaluators who also train school counselors and other school leaders, we recognize the value of school counseling programs that allow children and youth to overcome contextual barriers to success within core educational functions. We believe they are an integral part of the system. Unfortunately, we also find that many of these programs lack fully developed evaluation policies, practices, and accountability structures. This paper proposes that, with the proper support, program evaluation can be used as a tool for program improvement, advocacy and sustainability. We present a theoretically informed practical approach to program evaluation, and then provide two school counseling case examples that illustrate a range of possible applications within practice. In later sections, we discuss the need to develop more external program evaluation practices as related to existing internal program evaluation strengths within school counseling, and map-out the possible next steps associated with this work.

## School-Based Evaluation

We see school-based evaluation (SBE) as a major building block in the construction of a school counseling program evaluation infrastructure described by Trevisan (2002b). SBE is an educator-based evaluation theory and is a growing body of discourse studied both domestically and internationally (Alvik, 1995; King, 1998, 2002; Kyriakides & Campbell, 2004; MacBeth & McGlynn, 2002; McNamara & O'Hara, 2005, 2008; Nevo, 1995, 2002; Rallis & MacMullen, 2000; Ryan, Chandler, & Samuels, 2007). SBE is best described as a formative (ongoing) evaluation approach aimed at improving schools and programs through self-initiated systemic performance measurement (Wholey, 1999) or evaluation capacity building (Preskill & Boyle, 2008). While SBE has many components, the one most salient to school counseling programs is SBE's discourse on accountability.

Accountability within SBE theory values the relationship between "internal" and "external" evaluation (Nevo, 1995, 2001; Militello, Rallis & Goldring, 2009; Rallis & MacMullen, 2000; Ryan, 2005; Simons, 2002). The crux of this literature posits that SBE needs both internal and external components to create a structure for strengthening both endeavors (Nevo, 2001). For example, each of the school counseling accountability models referenced earlier can be linked to "internal" SBE evaluation procedures, but lack articulation of the "external" side of the evaluation relationship. Table 1 outlines the mutual benefits associated with combining both external and internal SBE functions (Nevo, 2001; Vanhoof & Petegem, 2007).

**Table 1***External and Internal SBE Functions*

| <b>External SBE</b>  | <b>Internal SBE</b>  |
|--|--|
| <i>Scope Broadening Function</i> - Enhances scope by providing schools and practitioners with appropriate comparisons, feedback and/or new ideas                           | <i>Scope Broadening function</i> - Expands the scope of external evaluation by providing unique data and understanding of the local context to the evaluation process          |
| <i>Stimulating Function</i> - Knowledge of external evaluation expectations provides schools and practitioners with the motivation to engage in (internal) self-evaluation | <i>Interpreting/promoting function</i> - Compliments external findings and aids in interpreting external results   |
| <i>Legitimizing Function</i> - External evaluation can legitimize (internal) self-evaluation by countering the notion that self-evaluation lacks rigor or is self-serving  | <i>Implementing function</i> - Allows practitioners & schools to better understand external evaluation and adopt a constructive attitude when responding to evaluation results |

Internationally, several countries have mandated internal SBE and use it to measure school performance against established external standards (Alvik, 1995; McNamara & O'Hara, 2005; Van Petegem, 1998; Vanhoof & Van Petegem, 2007; Vanhoof, Van Petegem & De Maeyer, 2009). In the US, there is no requirement that schools implement SBE, so individual schools or state-level jurisdictions initiate the process. In this context, Nevo's (2001) ideas have developed into the notion that schools can take ownership of external performance standards and design appropriate and related internal evaluation models (MacBeth & McGlynn, 2002; Militello, et al., 2009; Rallis & MacMullen, 2000; Ryan, 2005).

The external demand for accountability created by NCLB often provides the motivation for schools and educational systems to implement SBE, though this is not always true for school counseling programs. For example, nationally, only 10 states of the 44 with state-supported school counseling programs reported having an evaluation system linked to program implementation or school counseling outcomes (Martin et al.,



2009). The authors noted, “Few participants reported rigorous evaluation of school counseling models, programs, or common school counseling practices” (p. 384). We see this lack of external program evaluation as a major problem. School counseling leaders need to see external evaluation as an opportunity to proactively showcase school counselor work and disseminate self-evaluation products (i.e., action plan results, intervention reports, core curriculum results). Furthermore, the prospect of developing better external program evaluation practices is realistic and straightforward due to the field’s strong history and resources for internal evaluation. In our experience, school counselors that use internal program evaluation practices desire greater diffusion of their work at different organizational levels. The reciprocal relationship between internal and external SBE simply offers program implications not accessible by only focusing on one area alone.

### **Cases of Internal and External SBE**

Due to the more conceptual nature to this paper, we thought it best to present the possibilities associated with increased external program evaluation through case examples. We became knowledgeable of the following cases through our prior empirical work (Carey, et al., 2012; Martin & Carey, 2012; Martin et al., 2009) and by reviewing program-related documents that described the evaluation process. Because we wish to illuminate the external side of the SBE equation, these cases highlight the evaluation practices and strategies within state-level school counseling programs. The cases of Utah and Missouri offer two different, yet equally successful, approaches to external SBE.

## Utah

Utah school counselors and the Utah State Office of Education (USOE) have a long history of evaluating their school counseling programs. Beginning in late-1980s, voluntary pilot schools received modest funds to participate in trainings and document progress in implementing the state-supported school counseling program (the comprehensive counseling and guidance program). This pilot work was used to argue for state-level funding of school counseling programs (Utah State Office of Education, 2000).

After securing initial funding, evaluation was used to monitor the implementation process. A private educational evaluation company was contracted to investigate the implementation of career plans, student to counselor ratios, and school counseling outcomes related to levels of program implementation (Gardener, Nelson, & Fox, 1999; Kimball & Gardener, 1995; Nelson, Fox, Haslam, & Gardener, 1998; Nelson & Gardener, 2007). These large-scale evaluations convinced the state legislature of the benefits of implementing school counseling programs and ultimately helped to secure consistent state funding for all middle and high school counseling programs.

Today, all middle and high school counseling programs must demonstrate that they meet the twelve Utah State program standards in order to receive state funding. Utah State standards are similar to the Recognized ASCA Model Program (RAMP) process (<http://www.schoolcounselor.org/school-counselors-members/awards>) because they are programmatic standards rather than competencies and each standard is accompanied by scoring rubric. Programs demonstrate their compliance through a six-year performance review and are required to turn in two data projects annually to the

USOE. The six-year performance review consists of individual schools presenting the ways in which their program addressed the standards. A panel of out-of-district school counselors, district-level counseling directors, and school administrators score a scaled rubric either approving or sanctioning the program under review. Annual data projects consist of school counselors tracking specific interventions focused on student outcomes as expressed by student data. These reports are connected to needs assessments or program goals outlined within the schools' previous performance review reports. Finally, the state uploads all data project reports to the USOE website for public review (Utah State Office of Education, 2008).

Changes to the evaluation procedures over time indicate that the evaluation process developed from top-down program compliance to a process that values program improvement and high levels of practitioner participation. For example, while school counselors respond to the standards, they are also reflecting on and recognizing issues of practice. This reflective practice is demonstrated in the performance reviews when panel members ask probing questions that require counselors to express their growth and/or recognize growth that was not presented. Furthermore, because the panels consist of individuals who are skilled practitioners and/or leaders in the field, site reviews can be intentional opportunities for modeling effective strategies or problem solving.

The review process involves a great deal of coordination and work. Typically, program reviews take place in large meeting rooms or counseling centers. The program under review has control over the presentation format, with the caveat that they address all of the state standards and allow time for panel questions and/or scoring. The review

takes several hours and in some cases can take nearly a whole school day. Program teams consist of the school principal, lead counselor, and other counseling specialists (career counselor, mental health counselor, psychologist). The reviews are public events and are highly attended by counselors from other districts, students from universities, administrators from other schools, directors of counseling from other districts, classroom teachers, administrative support personnel, and students from the school under review. The rigorous atmosphere of the event creates a more localized form of accountability that involves the real tension of presenting work in front of others.

Another noteworthy aspect of Utah's evaluation system is the high level of practitioner input and participation. Since the 1980s, an advisory committee sponsored by the USOE and made up of school counselors from around the state has met regularly to make decisions regarding the implementation and oversight of the program. In the early 2000s the advisory committee was organized into six different monthly "steering committees" that report back to the larger group twice annually. These structures provide many opportunities for practicing school counselors to communicate with the state-level administrators and to participate in all evaluation decision-making.

## **Missouri**

Sink and MacDonald (1998) describe Missouri as the birthplace of modern school counseling and guidance. For over 40 years counselor educators championed counseling programs and completed some of the most cited studies on school counseling programs in the field (Lapan, Gysbers, & Petroski, 2001; Lapan, Gysbers, & Sun, 1997). Furthermore, Missouri has acted as a model for the many other states that either adopted or adapted the Missouri model during the late 1980s and 1990s

(Gysbers & Henderson, 2006), and inspired the creation of the ASCA national model (ASCA, 2012).

Despite Missouri's status as an early adopter and innovator, the state has not been free of challenges. One of the greatest contextual and structural constraints within this vignette is the element of local control. Local control can be defined as the state delegating educational decision making to local school districts. For example, and unlike Utah, Missouri could not legislate compliance with state level programming and therefore, had to find different ways to support program evaluation.

The main strategy used by state leaders was as a coordinated effort of advocacy that supported and encouraged practitioners to engage in rigorous program evaluation. Leaders in the state adopted a collaborative approach to communicating program evaluation expectations. The state department of education, the state school counseling association and counselor educators shared resources to create and disseminate evaluation tools, train practitioners, and promote clear rationales as to why practitioners should engage in program evaluation.

The state awards are excellent examples of the types of products created by this advocacy. The "Gysber's award" is a school or district-level award that is given to exemplary programs that fully implement the state model and demonstrate the positive impact of programming upon students. The "Success" award recognizes schools that have committed to fully implementing the state model and the "Professional Recognition for Individuals" award recognizes the outstanding contributions of school counselors, counseling directors and/or administrators that act as counseling advocates.

These awards, though voluntary, function on many different levels. They communicate implementation and evaluation expectations, recognize best practices and promote shared responsibility. For instance, counselor educators influenced the award criteria, the department of education administered the award process, and the state association recognized awardees at their annual conference.

Despite the lack of formal legislated external evaluation requirements, practitioners in Missouri are flooded from every angle with rationales, tools and resources for conducting program evaluation. The state's active encouragement of program evaluation played a crucial role in legitimizing school counseling as a core educational function within Missouri.

### **Discussion and Implications**

Within the following section we discuss the differing approaches presented by the cases through an SBE lens provided by Nevo (2001). Furthermore, because the cases developed in very different ways, we highlight the role local context played in establishing external SBE and discuss implications for developing similar strategies in differing contexts. Finally, we map out the next steps associated with enhancing external program evaluation more generally within the school counseling field.

Utah created external expectations that require high quality internal evaluation practices; Missouri created an external system that supports internal program advocacy. Both approaches, though different, helped to promote a balanced implementation of SBE. Utah's collective history of positive evaluation results created conditions where school counselors were not resistant to external evaluation expectations. Missouri's shared messages and broad ranging resources encouraged voluntary practitioner

participation in program evaluation. Both stories provide informative examples of how external SBE can support practitioner program evaluation.

The rigor of the external SBE expectations did not overpower or intimidate practitioners because of strong practitioner involvement in both cases. According to Nevo (2001), external structures help to promote SBE by providing opportunities for practitioner perspectives to be represented within the creation and execution of the evaluation system. Standardizing, building evaluation capacity, and including high levels of practitioner involvement in the evaluation decision making process effectively diffused much of the practitioner push-back that is present within the school counseling literature. Furthermore, when school counselors saw the results of their evaluative work (as evidenced by increased funding and/or legitimacy), the fear of evaluation greatly decreased. Ultimately, these cases strongly reinforce the notions established by Nevo (2001) and speak to the value of investing in developing external program evaluation approaches.

Another layer of discussion speaks to the role SBE can play in building a local infrastructure for school counseling program evaluation. Trevisan (2002) reviewed the entire school counseling program evaluation literature from 1972-2001 and had some very pointed criticisms regarding the lack of national evaluation capacity building. While we speculate there have been some advances nationally since Trevisan's review, we feel that both cases represent positive examples of infrastructure building at a more local level. More specifically, Table 2 represents Trevisan's capacity building categories compared with case program evaluation examples. We feel that these more localized approaches to external program evaluation allowed for responsive evaluation practices

to develop naturally. We also argue that local adaptations combined with SBE (that valued practitioner voice/participation) played major roles in being able to actually realize an evaluation infrastructure for each state. These cases also make us wonder about what a national external infrastructure for supporting school counseling program evaluation may look like? While we may be a long way from realizing a national infrastructure for program evaluation, we would hope that it would be flexible enough to allow for states to take differing approaches and respond to local contexts.

**Table 2**

*Trevisan's Critique vs. Case Examples*

| <b>Trevisan (2002) Critique</b>   | <b>External Case Examples</b>  |
|---|--|
| <b>Forces:</b>  |  |
| Relevant incentive policies to conduct evaluations have yet to be developed | Both cases contained incentives (e.g., funding, awards)  |
| Directive policies that require evaluation are not prevalent                | UT had evaluation requirements; MO had requirements, but focused on voluntary support/advocacy   |
| Standards for evaluation have not been adopted                              | Both cases adopted standards for program evaluation that were communicated to practitioners  |
| <b>Organizational Environment:</b>  |  |
| Many organizations do not value evaluation as a priority                    | Both organizations valued evaluation   |
| The presence of full-time district level evaluators is not uniform          | Fulltime evaluators were not present in either case, though there were opportunities to consult or collaborate with evaluation experts |
| Many leaders do not advocate/support evaluations                            | In both cases leaders explicitly advocated and supported program evaluation  |
| <b>Workforce and Professional Development:</b>                              |  |
| Clearly deficient in this area (local, district & state)                    | Both cases provided extensive opportunities for professional development and practitioner participation                                |



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**Resources and Supports:**

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| Literature does not identify any viable funding sources available for program evaluation | Both cases invested heavily in funding evaluation activities (e.g., professional evaluation, training, disseminating evaluation materials, implementing reviews, awards) |
| Limited tools for evaluation efficiency have been created                                | Both cases created and/or provided comprehensive program evaluation tools  |
| Current evaluation models may be too complex   | Both cases created simple practitioner-based SBE systems   |
| Reference materials are not connected to evaluating CDSC programs                        | Both cases were strongly connected to evaluating CDSC/ASCA programs  |

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**Learning from Experience:**

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| Few examples of actual evaluations exist | Both cases provided opportunities for practitioners and leaders to learn from evaluation experiences |
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Through this analysis we can see the play that exists between internal and external SBE. The added rigor and close coordination of program evaluation in these cases resulted in better insulation from economic and political trends. Leaders from each state confirmed that the current recession was felt, but counseling programs were not cut to the same degree as in many other states due to their investment in external SBE. For example, in 2011, the School Board of one of the largest school districts in Utah designated reducing the student-to-counselor ratio as their top priority (D. Stevenson, personal communication, February, 2014). Missouri reports that job outlook and general health of the profession is as strong as ever (M. Maras, personal communication, February 2014).

Similarly, both cases illustrated that becoming more valued and legitimate within imperfect and tumultuous educational systems is challenging work. Both cases thoughtfully balanced the strengths and weaknesses of their larger state systems with the needs of their practitioners. Because of these contextual responses, it would also seem that there are multiple paths for programs to becoming more valued and

legitimate. While we are aware these cases do not represent an exhaustive list of external evaluation options, they are different enough to allow other states to adopt or adapt similar strategies based on their local political and/or organizational resources. We believe that the positive outcomes provided by these cases are not out-of-reach of other school counseling programs. Assessing and understanding the contextual complexities involved in building external SBE structures can be crucial to the survival of school counseling programs during times of economic stress. Therefore, we encourage other programs to investigate the resources and challenges associated with strategically building external SBE capacity.

More specifically, we encourage other programs to investigate: a) their local history regarding program evaluation training; b) the attitudes and/or beliefs held by practitioners about program evaluation; c) the degree to which practitioners use internal evaluation within their programs; d) the general capacity of the educational system's ability to support internal program evaluation practices; and e) finally, special attention should be paid to the degree in which the system can advocate for (i.e., local control) or require (i.e., centralized administrative authority) SBE. We posit that such investigations offer the potential to identify and adapt external SBE activities that are responsive to local strengths and challenges.

These case examples are of programs managed at the state level and this paper is most relevant for school counseling leaders housed within state departments of education. Though, our experience tells us that many of the leadership perspectives and practices at the state level are often directly transferrable to the district level (even in some rare cases, district and state leaders work within similar organizational sizes).

In fact, the idea of evaluation capacity building in school counseling (a prerequisite for external SBE in both cases) has been applied to both districts and state educational systems (Martin & Carey, 2012; Trevisan & Hubert, 2001; Trevisan, 2002b). Therefore, we speculate that district level leaders may also find enhancing external SBE structures as an important program outcome.

This paper has focused on a fairly narrow component of program evaluation within school counseling. Enhancing external evaluation practices on a larger scale must involve future research on the more general evaluation topic of evaluation capacity building. In particular, we see a need to investigate the relationships between inputs (e.g. program resources, practitioner evaluation training) and the quality of evaluation products that could be used for program improvement or program advocacy. Because our field stresses the delivery and implementation of programs (i.e., ASCA National Model), it is crucial that we invest more heavily in understanding, improving and promoting both practitioner and administrative program evaluation.

### **Conclusion**

The school counseling field's peripheral nature, historical practitioner resistance, and emphasis on internal program evaluation warrant a greater emphasis on identifying external evaluation practices. Two state-level examples (Utah and Missouri) implemented external SBE practices that reinforced internal evaluation and better-positioned school counseling programs within their respective educational systems. These examples suggest that investing in external SBE helped to overcome contextual challenges. Utah built an evaluation system that could legitimately respond to the needs of the legislature, and Missouri built worked within the constraints of localized

educational decision making to support the work of school counselors. Given our current era of increased fiscal scrutiny and calls for greater educational accountability, learning from and implementing similar SBE strategies has the potential to improve program evaluation practices and elevate the standing of school counseling within our educational systems.

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