

# Importance of an Effective Principal-Counselor Relationship

LaWanda Edwards, *Alabama State University*

Ronald Grace, *Alabama State University*

Gwendolyn King, *Alabama State University*

*An effective relationship between the principal and school counselor is essential when improving student achievement. To have an effective relationship, there must be communication, trust and respect, leadership, and collaborative planning between the principal and school counselor (College Board, 2011). Principals and school counselors are both instrumental leaders in the schools and they are most effective when they are able to carry-out their appropriate roles. It is important that principals assign appropriate counseling duties and responsibilities and not administrative and coordination responsibilities. Allowing the school counselor to implement counseling programs will help principals to identify and address issues that contribute to academic failure.*

The relationship of the school principal and school counselor is instrumental in student success. The College Board (2011) states, “The desired outcome of an effective principal-counselor relationship is to raise achievement levels for all students and ensure equity in educational outcomes” (p.8). To develop an effective principal-counselor relationship, communication, trust and respect, leadership, and collaborative planning should all be a part of the relationship (College Board, 2011; Ponec & Brock, 2000; Vaught, 1995). As the leader of the school, the principal makes decisions about the roles and responsibilities of the school counselor and other personnel in the school. When school counselors are given roles and responsibilities that do not allow the school counselor to implement counseling programs and interventions, the relationship loses its effectiveness, due to the lack of communication and respect for the appropriate duties of a school counselor. This literature review will address how to improve the relationship between the principal and school counselor. It will also address the effectiveness of school counseling programs and how these programs can positively impact all students in the school. It is just as important to discuss the barriers to implementing these programs and identify strategies that principals can use to help overcome these barriers. The principal wants to be knowledgeable of appropriate school counseling duties and allow the school counselor to implement school counseling programs and interventions. The collaboration between the principal and school counselor may positively impact student achievement and the overall climate of the school.

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## **Principal-Counselor Relationship**

There is little doubt among researchers that improvements in the principal-counselor relationship (PCR) must begin with each professional understanding and respecting the role of the other. Though recent research has shed more light on the subject, a better understanding can be garnered if this phenomenon is viewed from an historical perspective. Furthermore, understanding how the principal-counselor relationship has developed offers insight into how it might be improved.

Over a decade ago, Stone and Clark (2001) commented on the dangers of viewing the counselor's role as peripheral to the foremost function of schooling or student achievement. Recently, educational researchers have engaged in conversations concerning methods of bringing school counselors into the mainstream of school reform through enhancing the principal-school counselor relationship. In view of their overlapping roles, it is surprising school counselors and principals have not traditionally regarded each other as being partners in leadership. Despite this, recent research suggests when their roles are properly understood, these leaders can form a very powerful alliance in academic achievement. In fact, Zalaquett (2005) described counselors and principals as being "natural partners," who should form a relationship based on a positive regard for the role of each professional. As proactive leaders, counselors can play a vital role as advocates for students and in supporting academic achievement. The role of principal, in this regard, is well documented in relevant literature, but researchers have only recently begun to investigate important aspects and hindrances of the PCR (Stone & Clark, 2001).

Dollarhide, Smith, and Lemberger (2007) suggest principals frequently assign counselors to non-counseling duties (such as registration, testing and scheduling) diminishing the school's comprehensive counseling program. This is increasingly problematic in light of recent school changes demanding more from educators overall and counselors in particular. For example, Amatea and Clark (2005) pointed to this problem in their findings how schools are expected to compensate for societal changes impacting children such as single parent homes, an increase in minority student enrollment with limited English speaking skills, growth of violence and sexually oriented behaviors depicted in the media, and the ever-increasing occurrences of family economic instability and poverty. In this light, counselors are being asked to rethink their role and view themselves more as educational leaders, student advocates, and social change agents in addition to their primary obligation to provide direct counseling services. Though it is paramount to school effectiveness that principals understand and embrace these changes, it seems many have not.

Though it is well documented in literature the counselor's role involves leadership, social change, advocacy and direct counseling services, school administrators seem not to view them in this light and continue to charge counselors with tasks that do not correlate with school effectiveness and academic achievement. In fact, Amatea and Clark (2005) found school administrator perceptions of the counselor role could be categorized into a typology of four historical roles ranging from most traditional to least traditional or most contemporary. In the most historic perspective administrators deemed counselors as an administrative team player or additional administrator who fulfills functions such as scheduling, coordinating standardized test administration, discipline, and referral for college or community services. Afterwards, administrators began

viewing the counselor as the responsive direct service provider. In this light, counselors were seen as being experts in providing psycho-educational activities helping students to resolve problems or crises. Administrators in this group typically expected counselors to continue to carry out administrative functions, but allowed to them to deviate from these tasks to help students resolve crises.

In a more recent perspective, administrators viewed counselors as collaborative case consultants who were expected to have expertise about the psychological, social, and educational needs of students and, at the same time, keep parents and teachers informed about intervention strategies that could be used in response to individual students. Most recently administrators have begun to view counselors as innovative school leaders tasked with assuming an active leadership role with the entire faculty and staff in improving the functioning of the school as a whole. These administrators feel because counselors often seek out the perspectives of faculty, students, parents, and community members, they are in a unique position to see the needs of the school from a holistic point of view. Counselors viewed in this way, are also expected to inform teachers of skills to help them improve how they work with students (Amatea & Clark, 2005).

The various aforementioned conceptions not only provide an overview of how administrators have perceived counselors over time, but is useful in helping them to better understand the counselor's role as being essential to school improvement efforts. Mallory and Jackson (2007) offered confirming evidence in their findings in order for school principals to engage counselors in the school improvement process, both must understand the responsibilities, roles, and perspectives of their professions. Lack of proper training has presented a significant barrier to this understanding. Along these lines, principal training programs typically have not included information concerning the professional competencies of counselors. Likewise, counselor preparation programs have not made counselors aware of the role of principals and, in some cases, even the counselor's role in the school improvement process has been omitted. Discussions between the principal and the counselors and arming university training programs with strategies designed to improve the PCR will, in turn, increase the understanding of each role and help resolve this issue.

### **Counselor Impact on Academics, Behavior, and Attendance**

With the changing roles of the school counselor, it has become important for school counselors to implement and evaluate counseling programs. The implementation of these programs help principals and teachers address the many issues students face daily. The authors focus on the impact that counseling programs have on student test scores, behavior, and attendance.

Research has shown school counseling interventions positively impact student GPA and achievement tests (Whiston, Tai, Rahardja, & Eder, 2011). Not only did the meta-analysis conducted by Whiston, Tai, Rahardja, and Eder (2011) conclude that counselor implemented interventions impacted student GPA and achievement tests, but it also found school counselor implemented interventions were effective in decreasing discipline referrals and increasing student problem solving skills. Other studies have identified a comprehensive school counseling program as positively impacting student test scores. Brigman and Campbell (2003) observed students who participated in the

counselor implemented classroom guidance and small group interventions performed better on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) in the areas of Mathematics and Reading and improved their behavior, when compared to their counterparts, who did not participate in the counseling interventions. When Campbell and Brigman (2005) examined the impact of group counseling alone, they found the students who participated in the group counseling intervention showed gains on the FCAT in both Reading and Mathematics and improved their behavior when compared with the previous school year. Other researchers found elementary students who attended schools in which there was a high usage of comprehensive school counseling programs, for multiple years, scored higher in Reading and Mathematics, when compared to students who attended school in which there was not a high usage of comprehensive school counseling programs (Sink & Stroh, 2003).

Student attendance is an important factor to consider when addressing student success. Poor attendance negatively impacts a student's academic success and contributes to low achievement (Gottfried, 2009). With attendance impacting academic success, it is important for school counselors to identify students at-risk due to poor attendance and implement individual and school-wide interventions to improve attendance. Studies have shown school counselors used counseling, incentives, and a check-in system to help improve school attendance. Combining counseling and incentives have been effective in elementary, middle, and high schools. Bickelhaupt (2011) used small group counseling and incentives at an elementary school to increase attendance by 12% for the students who participated in the program. Edwards (2013) used individual counseling and incentives to address attendance at a middle school. At the conclusion of the interventions, the school non-attendance rate dropped from 26% to 19%. Similar to Bickelhaupt's and Edwards studies, with the exception of the incentives, Enea and Dafinoiu (2009) used individual counseling to help decrease truancy rates for high school aged students. The students who were in the experimental group had a 61% decrease in their truancy rate, while there was not a decrease in truancy rate for the control group.

### **Barriers to Implementing Interventions**

It is evident school counselors can implement programs to positively impact student achievement. This does not seem to be true among all school counseling programs due to multiple barriers experienced by school counselors. These barriers include the following: the school counselor not being allowed to use 100% of their time to implement counseling programs and interventions, lack of administrative support, student-to-school counselor ratio too high, resistance from other groups, classroom involvement interferes with immediate response to crises, lack of resources, special services programs that take away from guidance and counseling duties, and lack of communication (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2011).

These barriers are not only detrimental to the school counseling program, but are also preventing the school counselor from counseling students to improve academics, behavior, and attendance. The one barrier identified more than others is the inability to use 100% of the time to implement counseling programs and interventions. Instead of counseling students, many school counselors are given administrative duties to include

serving as the testing coordinator or building the master schedule. Along with the administrative duties, school counselors are given other duties such as 504 coordinator, RTI coordinator, LEA representative, new student registrar, substitute teacher, and elective or connection teacher. There is not enough time in the workday to effectively implement counseling interventions and also complete the multiple non-guidance duties placed on school counselors.

Another barrier is the student-to-school counselor ratio. When school systems do not follow the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2003) suggestion for the student-to-school counselor ratio in schools, it hinders the school counselor from implementing effective programs. ASCA (n.d.) suggests a student-to-school counselor ratio of 250:1, but the national average is 471:1. This is almost double the recommended ratio. Following this ratio guideline will help improve dropout rate and discipline issues in school to positively impact student achievement. According to Utphall (2006), lower dropout rates were associated with lower student-to-school counselor ratios. Carrell and Carrell (2006) concluded a low student-to-school counselor ratio decreases student discipline problems. Lapan, Gysbers, Stanley, and Pierce (2012) also found lower student-to-school counselor ratios were statistically associated with lower discipline incidents and higher graduation rates. It is evident a lower student-to-school counselor relationship can improve the dropout rate and discipline problems.

### **Addressing Barriers**

Given compelling empirical evidence pointing to barriers hindering school counselors from implementing programs that positively impact achievement, it is incumbent upon principals to employ strategies will remove such hindrances. The most significant hindrances involve principals utilizing school counselors in non-counseling duties, lack of support, high student ratios, resistance from other staff, classroom interferences, and lack of communication. The College Board (2011) in conjunction with the American Counseling Association and the National Association of Secondary School Principals identified four elements (communication, collaboration, respect, and shared vision) that will, in general, address barriers to a successful principal-counselor relationship. Beyond these, the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2011) has put forth more specific remedies to address the aforementioned barriers to coincide with those put forth by the College Board et.al. (2011).

As it relates to principals assigning school counselors to non-counseling duties and lack of communication, in general, effective communication will help alleviate this problem because it stems, at least in part, from an ambiguous perception of the school counselor's role. More specifically, principals may work with school counselors or central office personnel to develop a job description for the school counselor position adequately coincides with the American School Counselor Association National Model and also generates a guidance program newsletter to make the program visible throughout the community. Another possible solution is for principals and school counselors to identify priorities and benchmarks school counselors must obtain in reaching program goals (Missouri Department of Secondary and Elementary Education, 2011). A basis for the Missouri Department of Secondary and Elementary Education finding was put forth by Mallory and Jackson (2007) who suggested it is of utmost important for principals and

school counselors to clearly discuss the explicit roles and responsibilities of each position. Janson, Militello, and Kosine (2008) put forth an example of such specificity by clarifying the role of the school counselor as it relates to testing. Jansen, et al. (2008) indicated interpreting the achievement test results is considered an appropriate activity for school counselors while administering such tests is not. When a proper understanding of roles and responsibilities is communicated between school counselors and principals, it enhances the relationship in a manner that will have a positive impact on learning. Communication should be open and provide opportunities for input in shared decision making, which, by its very nature, involves collaboration.

Pertaining to lack of support, generally, collaboration is useful to enhance understanding and support and to impact the administrator's perception of the school counselor's role and vice versa (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2011). Furthermore, a key element in collaboration between the principal and school counselor is shared participation in decisions impacting school-wide improvement efforts. The American School Counselor Association National Model (2003) calls for school counselors to provide leadership in managing the school's comprehensive counseling program and for principals to provide continuous support, facilities, resources, and time for its implementation. When principals and school counselors form an alliance or cooperative relationship around this objective, it will serve to eliminate barriers and improve student achievement. A proper understanding of the specific roles and responsibilities facilitates a shared vision, which in turn, yields mutual respect.

Regarding the resistance from other staff, it would be beneficial for the principals to communicate the school counselor's role, the benefits of the program, and the expectations of the staff on a consistent and persistent basis will specifically address the problems created by such resistance (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2011). More generally, in a study conducted by the College Board (2009), principals and school counselors identified respect as one of the most important elements in the principal-counselor relationship. Trust is also a key factor in building a relationship based on mutual respect. In the study, school counselors expressed fear in trusting the principal with certain ideas may be looked upon as contrary to what principals think, because the school counselors serve at the pleasure of the principal. In the same study, principals acknowledged school counselors are often looked upon as "glorified record keepers" as opposed to leaders or change agents. Despite this, it is encouraging to note some principals in the study also believe school counselors can and should serve as the link between academic success and applying knowledge to real-life situations. Viewing school counselors in this way will also help facilitate a shared vision.

As it relates to high student ratios and classroom interferences, administrators can address this problem by communicating the school's (shared) vision, becoming politically active in reducing ratios, and convincing community leaders responsive services to schools should be a top community priority. Shared vision is simply a mutually agreed upon ideal or direction for student achievement which is the key element and main goal of school success. Along these lines, principals and school counselors should come to consensus on specific criteria for school success and equity. Communicating such a vision can be quite effective in implementing programs to solicit teacher involvement in conducting activities in the class supporting the comprehensive counseling program. A shared vision can also be helpful in developing and

communicating a school policy describing the school counselor as a partner in leading school improvement efforts and not just as a person who is only relied on for crisis response (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2011).

### **Suggestions for Principals and Professors of Instructional Leaders**

First, the literature concludes improving the principal-counselor relationship is essential in helping all students with academic achievement. As the leader of the school, the principal wants to take the initiative to build an effective relationship with the school counselor. This can be accomplished by increasing communication and collaboration with the counselor. Communication can be increased by meeting with the counselor on a regular basis to discuss program needs and accomplishments. Collaboration is increased by appointing the school counselor to the school improvement team and other school committees to assist with leadership and decision-making in the school. There also needs to be mutual respect between the principal and counselor to build an effective relationship. The principal can show respect by knowing the roles and responsibilities of the counselor and allowing the counselor to carry-out these roles. These responsibilities and roles are instrumental in helping to close the achievement gap and can be found in the American School Counselor Association National Model (2003).

Secondly, the principal wants to support the counselor by addressing barriers that might prevent the counselor from counseling duties. These barriers include the student-to-counselor ratio and coordination of testing and other programs. The principal can advocate to the school superintendent and school board for a lower student-to-school counselor ratio to help with this barrier. The principal can also request to add a counselor at the school when the ratio is higher than 250:1. This is much easier to request when the principal and counselor can show how counselor implemented programs positively impact student achievement. The coordination of testing, 504, ELP, and other programs can also be a barrier for school counselors to implement programs. These duties can be assigned to other school personnel. Principals who see the importance of school counselors implementing counseling programs have assigned these duties to other personnel, such as math coaches, reading coaches, teachers, or assistant principals to name a few. When school counselors are allowed to implement counseling programs and interventions, with the support of the principal, student academics, behavior, and attendance improve. The impact of the counseling programs will help to close the achievement gap.

Professors of educational leadership can also help with improving the relationships of principals and school counselors. Professors of instructional leaders can incorporate the literature on the importance of building this relationship throughout the instructional leadership program. Collaboration with school counselor educators to develop projects and assignments focused on building effective relationships with school counselors, can be instrumental in helping future instructional leaders learn the knowledge and skills needed to effectively build a relationship with school counselors. Lastly, professors can develop workshops to help current principals effectively collaborate and build relationships with current school counselors.

The College Board, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, and the American School Counselor Association (2009) have started research in the area of

principal-counselor relationships, but there is still much research that needs to be conducted in this area. It would be beneficial to principals and school counselors if further research was conducted on improving the principal-counselor relationship. Building trust and collaboration between these two school leaders would positively impact student achievement. Research on the principal's knowledge of the roles and responsibilities of the school counselor would also be beneficial. Identifying the most effective ways to inform principals of these roles and the effectiveness of school counselor implemented interventions would not only contribute to both professions, but it would also become a vital component of school leadership. The collaboration and teamwork of the principal and school counselor are essential when working with students at-risk for failure, poor behavior, poor attendance, or dropping out of school.

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