

Counselors and Special Educators in Rural Schools Working Together to Create a Positive School Community

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Abstract

School counselors and special educators in rural areas working together can be a powerful team to help schools create a positive school community. In one rural school community, they partnered with faculty and staff to implement a School Wide Positive Behavior support program to improve student outcomes. The counselor and special educator, through intentional communication and collaboration, helped develop a positive school community, using the skills and training of their individual disciplines. This article focusses on the roles played in the process.

Keywords: Special education, School counselor, School wide positive behavior support, Rural schools, RTI, Multi-tier behavior program

Introduction

School counselors and special educators in rural areas working together can be a powerful team to help schools create a positive school community. Schools in rural areas often face different challenges than their urban counterparts, challenges of geography, poverty, and school funding can impact the quality of education that students receive. Students in rural schools often have lower educational aspirations, achievement, and attainment compared to youth in other residential areas. Lower rural educational outcomes may be due in part to certain resource deficits shared by schools located in rural communities. These resource deficits include a high number of students who are in poverty, district financial distress, and tough competition for highly qualified teachers (Demi, Coleman-Jensen & Snyder, 2010).

To help meet the challenges facing rural schools, the school counselor and the special educator are well positioned to provide guidance and support for student success and to create a healthy learning community. Together, along with all other stakeholders, they provide a full range of support for children with and without special needs. Both disciplines focus on strategies to prevent problems and to overcome obstructions to student success. Recognizing this resource in areas of behavior and school culture, the school counselor and the special education team has been specifically called upon by legislation to collaborate in supporting students (Shaw, 2014).

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004, provides for increased contribution and support of the school counselor within the IEP realm. IDEA requires counselors and special educators to work together to identify the student's needs, academically and socially,

which would help students achieve their goals (Milsom et al.).

Counselors and special educators often have long term relationships with the families and students in the community they serve. These relationships can translate into a deep understanding of what the needs and desires of families and students are (Shaw, 2016). This is especially important in rural areas where maximizing relatively fewer resources is essential to academic and social success for students with special needs. Creating a positive school climate is one outcome that counselors and special education teachers can help create. A positive school climate can be influential to the processes associated with a student's development of resilience to negative social and academic outcomes (Ungar, 2003).

One school's story

An interesting example of how counselors and special educators took place recently in a rural K-8 school in New York state. The teachers in this school recognized that while the majority of students behaved in a typical fashion, the behaviors of some students had reached problem proportions. This school had recently consolidated with another school in the same town which was closed due to declining enrollment. The school climate and culture were different at each of the schools and students were having difficulty adjusting. At the same time the school also was implementing new academic programs in reading and math. While the team was presented with these serious challenges, the staff believed this was an opportunity to create a school community based on the best interests of the students.

The school staff had attended a workshop on School Wide Positive Behavior Supports and wished to implement a behavior program based on this strategy. Positive

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Behavior Support (PBS) is a three-tiered system approach that proactively addresses behavior concerns by teaching behavioral expectations and includes strategic support for students with more severe behavior issues (Todd, Campbell, Meyer, & Horner, 2008). It is the behavioral component of Response to Intervention process, a process used to quickly identify and address student behaviors (Sugai & Simonson, 2012).

For schools using PBS, the school counselor and the special educator are key members of the implementation team. In many rural schools, they may be the only staff skilled in the assessment, implementation, and monitoring strategies PBS requires.

The PBS model corresponds with the state school counselor standards and the ASCA national model, as well as the Council for Exceptional Children standards for learning environments, and these standards uniquely qualify counselors and special educators to assist students with more intrusive behaviors.

Prior to the beginning of the school year, all staff gathered for their professional development day. When asked what the most pressing challenge to learning was, the staff suggested that behavior management was very important to them. Using the skills from the previous workshop, teachers, administrators, paraprofessionals, and others worked to develop a behavior plan for their school. The meeting was led by the counselor, as her skills lent themselves to managing this meeting by providing expert guidance on behaviors and an understanding of the overall student body, families, and community. In this process, a three-tier system was decided on, the first tier would be universal (all students), the second would be targeted (some students), and the third would be intensive (a few students).

The Plan

The first tier was to have several components, focusing on defining what are the school wide behavior expectations, and once these were decided upon, how those expectations would be explicitly taught, along with a system to reward desired behavior, and a system to log and monitor behaviors in order to prevent and addressing problem behaviors (Ennis & Swoszowski, 2011).

The second tier was designed to support students who are unresponsive to the prevention strategies of the first tier. This tier serves 10-15% of the school population, the group decided that the tier two interventions should be easily implemented and require minimal assessment prior to implementation for students (McIntosh et al., 2009; Mitchell, Stormont, & Gage, 2011).

The team recognized that the third tier is the most intensive, supporting students do not respond to the interventions of previous two tiers. The interventions at this level are individualized and designed to support the needs of a small percentage of the student body. When data indicate that the intervention is not effective, the team then may decide to progress to a special education assessment (Gruman & Hoelzen, 2011; McIntosh et al.,

The First Tier

The team recognized that both the school counselor and the special education teacher, have the training, experience, and skills required to make the program successful. While it was important to the team that communication and collaboration was to happen on all three tiers, they decided that first tier work was within the scope of the general educators, administrators, and staff. Therefore, the team decided that general education classroom teachers would take the lead in the first tier structure, implementation, and monitoring. The special education teacher and the counselor would manage and monitor tiers two and three with input and assistance from school administration.

Effective practices of universal supports have been described in detail for behavior supports. Key features of the practices within a core program include 1) clear goals and expected outcomes, 2) appropriate instruction, 3) monitoring, 4) feedback and encouragement, and 5) error correction (Horner, Todd, Lewis-Palmer, Irvin, Sugai, & Boland, 2004).

The team agreed to meet bi-weekly to examine the data and update their plan. The counselor would monitor for fidelity, giving feedback so that staff would be more comfortable with sustaining the effort. The steps for sharing data include 1) summarizing data, looking for trends and patterns; 2) investigating the validity of the data; 3) reinforcing staff behavior for collecting accurate and timely data; and 4) sharing a plan for acting on the data (Flannery, Sugai, & Anderson, 2009).

Since the team suggested that since the counselor and special educator be primary shareholders in tier two interventions, they would examine the preliminary referral data and determine first if the student behavior is a manifestation of the student's disability. If so, the next step would be to investigate whether the behavior improvement plan present in the student's IEP is adequate to address the observed behavior. The counselor and special educator are best qualified in this rural school, to decide whether this is an issue requiring further action by the IEP team. In cases where the behavior was not as result of the student's disability, evidence of disability or the observed behavior is not simply corrected, for instance by changing the environment, the team may then suggest the second tier intervention.

The Second Tier

For simplicity and to form a good baseline across the largest group of students, the team decided that for those students without an IEP, they would use a Check-in/Check-out (CICO) process as the primary tier two intervention. This process is simple to implement and would provide a good tracking measure to begin gathering data. Research has shown the effectiveness of the intervention and more importantly student acceptance of the process (Filter et al., 2007).

Check-in/Check-out provides structure to the student's day by explicitly teaching behavioral expectations and a daily routine. While participating, students begin their school

day by checking in form of points and/or positive comments at designated time intervals. At the end of the

day, each student checks out with an adult. At the check-out, they graph the results of their day, receive praise (tangible and/or verbal), and obtain a copy of their daily behavior report card to take home.

Student Point Card

Name: _____ Date: _____

	Math	Reading	Writing	Lunch	PE	Block	Bus
Goal One							
Goal Two							
Goal Three							

Points
 2=Great! 1= Good with a warning 0= Required a time out

Today's Goal **Today's Total**

Today's Goal Met?

YES! Goal not met today

Parent's signature _____

Comments welcome on back

Figure 1. An example of a student point card used in CICO

The cycle begins again the next school day when the student returns a signed copy of their previous daily behavior report card at the morning check-in. The data collected from the report cards are then used to make decisions about continuing, modifying, or discontinuing the intervention.

The CICO intervention provides excellent opportunities for counselors to bring their relationship skills to bear. The goals of CICO are to increase the opportunities adults have for prompting students to engage in positive behavior, provide behavioral feedback to the student at predictable times throughout the day, developing a meaningful adult-student relationship through positive interaction, and communicate behavioral challenges and successes with families daily (Filter et al., 2007; McIntosh et al., 2009). School counselors and special educators may have more flexibility built into their schedules when compared to classroom teachers and administrators making them more able to counsel students during classroom hours (McIntosh et al., 2009). Given these connections to the roles of a school counselor, taking a strong role in the second tier intervention seemed both reasonable and practical.

The Third Tier

The third tier provides a highly individualized intervention for students who require more support. While much more detailed information on these intensive interventions can

be found elsewhere, in this tier, the special educator takes a larger role in assessing and planning, while the counselor now provides greater support to the family and other outside agencies. In this rural school, the team understood that resources for implementing an effective third tier intervention may be lacking, so they depend on the counselor and special educator to bring their skills to bear.

Students in the third tier may be assessed for special education services, if this is the case, the team, based on their data, may ask for a more formal special education referral assessment. However, the counselor and special educator may move forward in the third tier interventions either while awaiting the outcome of the evaluation, or while gathering more data to ensure the evaluation assessment is necessary. In this third tier, collaboration between general educators, counselor, and special educator are essential to make sure the support services are in place to help the student succeed. The special educator and counselor ensure all service providers are able to assess the student and family adequately to ensure the student receives the support services required for success.

Another positive aspect of the school counselor and the special educator working together in this tier, is their training working with students diagnosed with behavioral or emotional disabilities. These students require specialized interventions which should be administered only by highly trained persons. (Simonsen, Sugai, Freeman,

Kern, & Hampton, 2014). This is an area where consultation and collaboration with special educators and counselors can help others on staff develop a more holistic understanding of the needs and nature of these students.

The focus for the team is now individualized, assessment-based intervention strategies, including a wide range of options such as: (1) guidance or instruction for the student to use new skills as a replacement for problem behaviors, (2) some rearrangement of the antecedent environment so that problems can be prevented and desirable behaviors can be encouraged, and (3) procedures for monitoring, evaluating, and reassessing of the plan as necessary (Ennis & Swoszowski, 2011). The counselor, special educator, and administrators, may need to in some situations, develop emergency procedures to ensure safety and rapid de-escalation of severe episodes, this is required when the target behavior is dangerous to the student or others (Simonsen, Sugai, Freeman, Kern, & Hampton, 2014)

An area where the counselor skills come to the forefront is in assisting the special educator in developing a student-centered plan that involves the family and other natural supports, focusing on the student's and family strengths and needs, and developing an action plan to support improved outcomes. This plan typically includes formal services, research-based interventions, including school-based and community services and more informal supports provided by friends, family, and other people drawn from the family's social networks. The counselor focuses on the outside support network, while the special educator focuses on the needs of the student in the school. Third tier interventions are intended designed to focus on the needs of individuals who exhibit patterns of intense problem behavior that may disrupt quality of life across multiple domains such as in school, the home, or the community.

Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of PBIS in addressing the challenges of behaviors that are dangerous, highly disruptive, and/or impede learning and result in social or educational exclusion (Simonsen, Sugai, Freeman, Kern, & Hampton, 2014). Staff in this rural school report that PBIS has become a highly effective system in reducing problem behaviors and ensuring a smooth transition for the integration of the two schools into one, and now a key element in the school culture. The staff also noted that the school counselor and the special education teacher's particular specialized skills and reach within the school and with the outside community have been vital to this program's success.

In Conclusion

Student misbehavior adversely affects instruction, the learning environment, and the overall school climate for all learners within the school. Behavior issues interrupt and displace classroom instruction when teachers are forced to redirect and consequence the misbehaving student. In rural schools, a paucity of resources can complicate a school's ability to effectively deal with these issues. However, specialized talents and community resources can and frequently are leveraged by a key relationship within the school, that of the special education and the counseling staff.

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