

PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL COUNSELORS' ADVOCACY: Mandated Testing and Other Inappropriate Roles and how to advocate for change.

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Abstract

This paper examines many roles that are assigned to the professional school counselor. It examines those roles, their appropriateness and origin as related to the school counselor. It identifies appropriate professional school counselor roles and then suggest strategies for advocating for these roles. It also examines specific the counselor's role in mandated testing, suggesting testing's negative effects on the school population.

Introduction

The pilfering and misappropriation of children's and youth's best advocate and resource, the Professional School Counselor (PSC), has become a major issue in the K-12 school setting. A situation that affects the school environment and arguably society at large. The participants range from misguided school administrators, compliant and obedient educators to mandate-happy federal and state education officials. Many combined factors contribute to the improper and ineffective use of the Professional School Counselor. This article will examine

this profession's inappropriate roles, appropriate roles and strategies for advocating the effective uses of a school counselor.

A proactive model in the delivery of counseling services in our schools should be a mandated service of our school counselors. Comprehensive guidance and counseling plans and systems are in place in most American schools, recommending eighty percent of a counselor's time be devoted to student services (ASCA, 2015), although the implementation is often thwarted by administrators. Principals and coordinators, for various reasons, assign menial, administrative and time-consuming tasks to their school counselors. Students deserve the attention, assistance and benefits afforded them by the proper implementation of the professional school counselor within their schools.

MENTAL HEALTH

The multitude of societal issues from violence, suicide, social isolation, drop-out rates, learning disabilities and homelessness have besieged our society.

These challenges all have high correlations with a single factor, mental illness. Mental health issues pervade our students. Anxiety disorders amongst 13-18 year olds reach a lifetime prevalence of twenty-five percent, meaning 1 in 4 teenagers will struggle with Anxiety, with six percent reaching the "severe" level. Twenty percent of teens will experience depression before they reach adulthood, with 10 to 20% having depressive symptoms at any given time. Depression alone increases the risk of suicide by 12 times (NIMH, 2015). The prevalence of Autism, although not a mental illness, and issues surrounding its diagnosis and treatment continue to increase in the school (CDC, 2017).

These complex issues can be identified, treated and managed by a trained professional, benefitting the student, the school environment, the family and ultimately society. This trained professional, the school counselor, is housed within the population, on-call to render services, yet they are many times invariably saddled with other roles. Although school psychologists and school social workers are also trained to provide counseling services, they are employed at only a third of the rate of school counselors' nationwide (U.S. Department of Labor, 2012). Many school counselors have to work in a reactive stance to mental health issues in the school when a proactive model can identify, educate and help treat mental illnesses before they propagate and become chronic or psychotic. Some of these maladies may manifest in harmful and negative outcomes to all involved.

TESTING and the SCHOOL COUNSELOR

The professional school counselor's role as the administrator, coordinator and facilitator

of state mandated testing has become a particularly troublesome trend. A recent state survey of fifty thousand plus teachers revealed that 44% drop-out by the fifth year. It also revealed a 16% dip in teacher candidates entering preparation programs and only 2.7% said they would very likely encourage students to enter the teaching field (State of Georgia, 2015). Most revealing, respondents stated that their main reason for leaving the profession was the number of state mandated tests. The Georgia State Superintendent of Schools (2015), reflecting the opinion of many educators, further laments that "excessive testing severely limits our students' ability to learn. We are continuing to explore every possible avenue to minimize the burden of testing on our students and teachers."

A superintendent of a rural system in Georgia with forty-two years of experience laments the encumbrances that testing provokes: dictating and disrupting the school schedule and calendar for extended periods, the curriculum of test-prep, the reliance of a single test score to judge a student and the school system, and the comparisons of school systems without appropriate controls for moderating variables (A.Fort, personal communication, May 18, 2017). Comparisons that are published and graded on social media and websites are used to make business, housing and commerce decisions thus affecting the tax dollar and revenue of the system. Spencer (2017) suggests that the goal of testing should not be for rankings on Zillow and School Digger.

TESTING AND A TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE

Many teachers find state-mandated testing harmful for students and teachers

alike. Pressure, perceived and real, placed on teachers to produce higher scores, results in unfavorable practices commonly employed over more effective ones. Teachers are forced to “teach the test” rather than focusing on skills and content knowledge. Many educational “best practices” encourage team-work, collaboration, and creativity in order to produce life-long learners and yet the measure of teacher and student success is in the format of an extensive, multiple-choice, high-stakes test. Teachers and students are constantly crushed by the formidable weight of these tests for fear of failure based on a few hours’ worth of data-retrieval. Roughly 135 days of skills, content knowledge, algorithms, and facts are crammed into a few hours for several days and then used to determine the successes and--seemingly more importantly-- failures of every person in that classroom.

Scores are then evaluated to rank a school’s ability to produce college and career-ready citizens. In what way could these tests prove the college and career readiness of an individual without requiring the application of skills and content knowledge? If our “best practices” and real-world applications of content knowledge and skills require collaboration, individual contributions, and responsibilities, then our rankings should also require a similar format in the form of performance-based portfolios and long-term projects focused on college and career readiness. All of these pressures can exacerbate or trigger any existing mental illnesses within teachers and students. Advocating alternative approaches to evaluation and success from high-stakes testing and implementing practical applications is a viable solution for

what plagues the world of education: high-stakes, state-mandated testing.

APPROPRIATE ROLES FOR THE PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL COUNSELOR

School administrators, for various limiting reasons, have commandeered and minimized the effectiveness and mission of this highly-trained and educated professional. All professional school counselors attain a Master’s Degree with specific and required curricula. Most curricula includes the study and practice of career counseling, lifespan development, psychological assessment, counseling theories, counseling skills, social and cultural diversity, psychological diagnosing, psychopharmacology, group procedures and processes and many other relevant courses.

The American School Counselors Association (ASCA) recommends school counselors should spend most of their time in direct service to students, which is primarily a face-to-face format. School counselors’ duties are focused on the overall delivery of a program that includes a guidance curriculum, individual student planning and responsive services (2015). The ASCA model also advocates for indirect services to a student, including referrals, consultation and collaborations beneficial to the student, parent and community. In order to accomplish these goals, ASCA suggests that professional school counselors should not be engaged in activities that include:

- coordinating paperwork and data entry of all new students
- coordinating cognitive, aptitude and achievement testing programs
- signing excuses for students who are tardy or absent

- performing disciplinary actions or assigning discipline consequences
- sending students home who are not appropriately dressed
- teaching classes when teachers are absent
- computing grade-point averages
- maintaining student records
- providing therapy or long-term counseling in schools to address psychological disorders
- coordinating schoolwide individual education plans, student study teams and school attendance review boards
- serving as a data entry clerk

SOLUTIONS AND STRATEGIES

Solutions, strategies and advocacy within the systems seem to be limited, nationally, state-wide and locally as state and local administrators, along with teachers, are forced into compliance with their employers. Solutions from the outside, which means parents and the public, must provide advocacy and leadership. Spencer (2017) states that “parents must help stop the compliance culture that is hurting our schools and the wasting of tax dollars.” The following are some suggested strategies for ensuring a successful and effective application of the professional school counselor in the local school:

Target Testing:

As mentioned previously, this task seems to burden many schools. Most tests are mandated by the federal or state government, yet personnel to execute the mandates are usually not provided or funded. Although most states require an administrator to be the test coordinator, it is in title only as no enforcement or direct oversight is usually provided by the state. This leaves delegate-prone school administrators, mainly principals

and assistant principals, assigning the facilitation, administration and organization to usually the only other subordinate certified professional not in the classroom – the school counselor.

Many counselor education programs currently instill the objectives of advocacy, leadership and social justice in their graduates. Unfortunately applying these concepts can be challenging when a counselor is saddled with the responsibility of school testing. They can become labeled as “complainers” and not “playing for the team.” Advocating for boundaries to your boss, the principal, may be intimidating as many school counselors may fear retribution, and the possible loss of renewal of an annual contract. Counselors may attempt to maintain their boundaries and identity through careful education and promotion of the importance of direct contact with students, presenting a comprehensive plan that incorporates the assignment of various tasks to other school personnel (e.g., administrative assistants, volunteers, teachers). Teachers could be provided an extra planning period for test coordination to accommodate the additional roles and responsibilities.

Utilize the Public, Parent/Teacher Organizations, Leadership Teams and Advisory Councils:

Parents, guardians and the public, as challenged previously, maintain the power for change within their local and state schools. An educated public about the importance of an effective professional school counselor is paramount. This can be achieved through a strong collaboration with a school’s Parent Teachers Organization (PTO), as they can advocate for change without fear of conflict or compromise. They can also appeal to

their state and federal legislatures through direct contact or petitions. Many citizens have active online petitions targeting these issues. School counselors should plan to be actively involved with their school's parent organization and provide accurate, non-biased and objective information to these organizations while balancing the motivation for a successful common goal.

Some states have recently enacted legislation, so called anti-testing bills that have reduced the number of tests required or have allowed parents to "opt-out" their children from testing. In one southern state (2016), the legislature reduced the number of required tests, and deferred participation decisions to the local systems (Tagami, 2016). State education departments have begun to reduce redundancy in testing, allowing one of numerous tests to qualify a student, for example in an admission to higher education or a joint enrollment program.

Partnering with professional organizations that have experience lobbying legislators can also be beneficial; a state or national counseling or teacher organization may be beneficial. They have experience lobbying legislatures and rallying members and affected individuals, bringing a sizable contingency to the debate. Also educating local board members through proper channels can be beneficial as principals and administrators are hired and fired mostly by local school boards. School board members, mainly elected by the school district's public, and not necessarily in the education profession may be unsure of the role of school counselors.

Most schools form Leadership Teams, which usually include administrators, department heads, teachers and other

specialists within the school. Hopefully a school's counselor is also a member of the team, as suggested by ASCA (2015) standards. These teams usually address issues within the school. This is a platform that should allow a counselor to advocate for their appropriate roles, although caution should be taken against advancing their own agenda. They should also avoid any dual relationship or a conflict of interest dilemmas, especially if they are a member of the team. An additional resource for advocacy is Advisory Councils, these usually contain similar goals and objectives as a Leadership Team but are comprised of parents, community representatives, students and several school officials.

Summary

The increasing importance of having an effective, proactive and professional school counseling program is vital for the success of students, the main goal of every educator. Allowing the school counselor the appropriate tools, resources and commitment to accomplish their portion of the overall student's success is necessary. One of the main proponents and issue affecting students and society is mental illness. In today's society this issue needs to be addressed and can be implemented and facilitated by a professional school counselor. A prominent barrier across the states, even nationally, is the increase in mandated student testing. The facilitation and administration of this increase has predominately been placed on the school counselor, reducing direct and indirect student contact hours that could be utilized to address issues such as increasing mental health in the student population. Hopefully in the near future strategies and solutions suggested will be implemented to reach this goal.

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