

**Meeting the Challenges Together: School Counselors Collaborating With
Students and Families With Low Income**

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Abstract

Given the disproportionately dire educational outcome data for students from families with low income, school counselors are challenged to advocate, educate, and collaborate with stakeholders to address the pernicious and prevalent achievement and access gaps. After an examination of the inequitable current conditions for these students and families, school counselor facilitation of school-family partnerships is explored. In addition, school counselor roles in challenging biases, educating stakeholders, and engaging in advocacy for these students and families are discussed.

Meeting the Challenges Together: School Counselors Collaborating With Students and Families With Low Income

Effective, culturally responsive school counselor advocacy and collaboration with low income students and their families is essential to successfully address the pernicious achievement and access gaps pervasive in U.S. schools (Chen-Hayes, Miller, Bailey, Getch, & Erford, 2011; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Currently 42% of the census in U.S. public schools and 46% of children in urban areas qualify for free and reduced lunch (Bennett, 2007; The Education Trust, 2009). This number is on the rise, increasing by 15% between 2000 and 2007 (Bailey, Getch, & Chen-Hayes, 2007; Douglas-Hall & Chau, 2009). While a multitude of cultural identities influence each student's educational experience (Robinson-Wood, 2009), the prevalence of youth from families with low income and the distressing inequities in the educational data associated with family income level merits attention. School counselors are called to address the challenges and barriers these students face while also accessing the strengths, solutions, and strategies that may enhance success.

Current Conditions

Data indicate that low income students have not been afforded equitable educational experiences (Erford, House, & Martin, 2007; Gordon 2006; Stone & Dahir, 2007). A potent host of detrimental factors adversely affects the achievement of students from families with low income. Schools with a high percentage of students from families with low income often lack the resources and teacher expertise of more affluent schools (Bailey, Getch, & Chen-Hayes, 2007; Gordon, 2006; Warren, 2002). In addition, teachers and school counselors often have lower expectations for these students

(Auwarter & Aruguete, 2008; Carter, Thompson, & Warren, 2004; Collins, 2003) and low-income families tend to be less involved in their children's academic lives than middle-class families (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). It's also important to note that a disproportionately large percentage of these students identify themselves as African American or Hispanic/Latino/a. They are likely to face cultural discontinuity, racism, and other forms of discrimination and oppression in an educational system that has traditionally operated from a White, middle class frame of reference (Cholewa & West-Olatunji, 2008; Fass & Carthen, 2008; Grothaus, Crum, & James, 2010). Students from families with low income are overrepresented among those receiving special education services and have disproportionately small numbers in gifted programs (Ford, Moore, & Whiting, 2006; Gollnick & Chinn, 2006; Ponterotto, Utsey, & Pedersen, 2006). Also troubling is the expanding digital divide between those privileged with access to computer technology and those without access outside the school setting (Del Val & Normore, 2008). Despite the data suggesting the effectiveness of school-family-community partnerships for student success, just over 40% of school counselors appear to be participating in these helpful collaborations (Griffin & Steen, 2010). Regrettably, access, quality, and resources in school counseling programs are also often stratified by socioeconomic status of students and the school as a whole (Bryan, Holcomb-McCoy, Moore-Thomas, & Day-Vines, 2009).

These inequities are also echoed in the achievement data. Students who are eligible for free lunches are about two years of learning behind the average student of the same age from non-eligible families (New American Alliance, 2009). By the time the average student from a low-income family reaches the twelfth grade, he or she is at the

reading level of an eighth grader (Kahlenberg, 2006). In addition, 56% of students from low income families scored below basic proficiency levels on an eight-grade math assessment in comparison to 25% of students from middle class and affluent families (Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005). This inequity is also evident in the higher education data, only 9% of the freshmen in the United States' 120 "Tier 1" colleges are from the lower half of the socioeconomic distribution (New American Alliance, 2009).

Youth from low-income families are also more likely to face mental, educational, and physical problems (Wadsworth, Raviv, Reinhard, Wolff, Santiago, & Einhorn, 2008). Compared to students from families that earn higher incomes, they are more likely to struggle academically in school, attend and finish college at a lower rate, and have higher high school dropout rates (Barton & Coley, 2009; Schaeffer, Akos, & Barrow, 2010). In addition, these young people may have feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and low self-esteem when facing difficult schoolwork (Brown, 2009) and have unmet health and nutrition needs due to poor healthcare and lack of nutritious meals (Wadsworth et al., 2008).

Despite these deplorable and documented inequities, classroom instruction, school counseling programming, and institutional policies often appear to be geared toward assimilating students into the existing system rather than engaging in meaningful systemic change (Bryan et al., 2009; Lim & A'Ole-Boune, 2005). In addition, adequately preparing and attracting faculty to work in schools with a high percentage of students of low income families is challenging, "current research indicates that fewer than six percent of those graduating from education programs wish to work in under-served, multicultural urban settings" (Abbate-Vaughn, 2006, pp. 2-3). Similar sentiments are

found in the school counseling literature (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2006; Holcomb-McCoy & Johnston, 2008).

However, many schools are “proving that race and poverty are not destiny” (New American Alliance, 2009, p. 6). Schools that are committed to helping all students succeed are achieving this goal (The Education Trust, 2009). For example, at Graham Road elementary school in Virginia, 80% of its students receive free or reduced lunch. The school is also one of the highest achieving schools in its county. In 2008, 100% of its students met state reading standards and 96% of its students met state math standards (The Education Trust, 2008, p. 3). One seemingly robust factor in many of the success stories is school and family collaboration (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007).

Collaboration with Families

Research over the last few decades confirms that family involvement in their children’s education enhances the potential for students’ success- specifically with higher achievement, increased rates of attendance, fewer disciplinary referrals, better homework completion, more course credits accumulated, and an increased likelihood of high school graduation and college attendance (Bryan, 2005; Bryan & Henry, 2008; Day-Vines & Terriquez, 2008; Epstein, 2005; Epstein & Sheldon, 2006; Epstein, Sanders, & Sheldon, 2007; Erford, 2007; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Yet families with lower income levels tend to be less involved than their wealthier counterparts (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Despite perceptions of school personnel that families with low income don’t care about their children’s education (Carter et al., 2004), research indicates that these parents do care (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006). Reasons for this difference in the level of involvement may include economic struggles, work obligations

(Christenson & Sheridan, 2001), lack of confidence in their own academic abilities (Van Velsor & Orozco, 2007), obligations or problems in the home life, cultural differences- including a sense of cultural discontinuity between home and school (Cholewa & West-Olatunji, 2008), and other pressing responsibilities (Davis, 2005). Also, negative past experiences with the schools or feelings of intimidation may prevent parents from actively participating in their child's schooling (Davis, 2005; Van Velsor & Orozco, 2007). Families may feel uncertain about how they should become involved or how they can help their child to succeed academically (Thompson, 2002). One powerful means of inviting school-family collaboration is to examine school personnel biases about families with low income and challenging colleagues to change their views and practices.

Challenging Biases and Promoting Equity

Negative messages in society and schools are likely to affect students from low-income families, influencing self-esteem, behavior, and academic achievement (Howard & Solberg, 2006). Studies indicate that negative bias and low expectations are prevalent among educators and counselors with regards to these students and their families (Auwarter & Aruguete, 2008; Carter et al., 2004; Collins, 2003). Citing a recent survey, Gollnick and Chinn (2006) indicated that students perceive that their peers from low income families and students of color are not treated in an equitable fashion, receiving fewer opportunities to participate in class than their White middle class peers. Giles (2005) describes these patterns of thought and behavior regarding students and their families with low-income as a deficit narrative. Schools may blame parents and guardians for their children's academic problems and difficulties and may not offer hope or support to the families. Parents are placed in inferior positions and are perceived as

looking for what they can get, not what they can give. These negative attitudes towards parents prevent positive working relations and can create formidable barriers between schools and families who usually desire to have productive relationships with teachers (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Van Velsor & Orozco, 2007).

Having high expectations for all students and creating school climates where success for all can become a reality are essential elements of a multiculturally responsive school atmosphere (Madsen & Mabokela, 2005; Stone & Dahir, 2007). Despite evidence linking larger societal conditions and educational outcomes, research suggests a lack of commitment among educational leaders to challenge societal inequities (Brooks & Getane, 2007). Instead of condoning a stereotypical view that “focuses on the student and the student’s family as the source of his or her problems, a socially responsive professional... (also) recognizes external oppressive forces built into the social, economic and political framework of the school and community” (Bailey et al., 2007, p. 103), school counselors have a responsibility to confront teachers and administrators’ negative attitudes towards and stereotypes of students to make sure that each student in their schools is treated equitably (Bemak & Chung, 2008; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007).

To be effective however, school counselors must think through their actions, considering the repercussions and costs (Ratts, DeKryuf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007). Unnecessarily alienating school personnel through strident advocacy may be less effective than respectfully but firmly challenging biases and building coalitions for change based on shared principles. In order to promote such advocacy, school counselors might hold professional development seminars on equity and equality and

provide teachers, administrators, staff members and families with communication and advocacy techniques. A key factor in this process is for all school personnel to enhance awareness of their own ethnocentrism and to promote the development of critical consciousness (McAuliffe et al., 2008). As Dimmock and Walker (2005) note, “it is important for teachers to come to realize that their own practices are cultural in origin, rather than the ‘only right way to do things’” (p. 190).

When educators learn about their students’ lives, it is likely they will increase their socio-cultural consciousness and gain affirming views about diversity (Villegas & Lucas, 2007). Information about students’ cultural backgrounds can assist educators to recognize the impact of these cultural experiences in the school setting. Ideally this may invite a paradigm shift in attitudes, policies, and procedures. Teachers are more successful with diverse learners when they have high levels of awareness and understanding about the cultural factors that influence academic achievement. In contrast, teachers who do not embrace cultural differences may experience frustration when students perform poorly in school (Boykin, Tyler, & Miller, 2005). These teachers feel unprepared to successfully navigate students of color and students from families with low income through the maze of American education (DeCastro & Ambrosetti, 2005; Meyer & Rhoades, 2006; Villegas & Lucas, 2007).

School counselors can invite the empowerment of teachers and families to become leaders in the school and community, working on behalf of their students to promote systemic change (Bailey, Getch, & Chen-Hayes, 2007). Lindsey, Roberts, & Campbell-Jones (2005) point out that “schools begin to change when their leaders recognize the disparities that exist in our schools and then intentionally raise issues of

bias, preference, legitimization, privilege, and equity” (p. xviii). As part of the efforts to address the notion of equity and success for every child, school counselors are challenged to collaborate with community stakeholders to address societal and school “policies that create structures of opportunity for some but not others” (Marshall & Young, 2006, p. 316). Advocacy is one vital role among many for school counselors as they seek to ensure equity for students from families with low income.

School Counselor Roles and Practices

School counselors are responsible to involve parents/guardians “from multiple cultural groups as active collaborators in school/district decision making” (Lindsey et al., 2005, p. 98). This entails proactively pursuing relationships and partnerships with parents and guardians (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007; Bryan & Henry, 2008; Davis & Lambie, 2005; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007) and inviting them to become a part of the school community (Erford, 2007). Not only is a strong school-family alliance crucial for a student’s academic success (Bryan, 2005), it is critical for “successful family environments” as well (Dauber & Epstein, 1993, p. 53). In turn, academic programs that have parent and guardian involvement and support are more successful than those without parental participation (Davis, 2005; Epstein, Sanders, & Sheldon, 2007; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007).

School-family partnerships benefit schools and families in a variety of ways, including families feelings of acceptance into the school community (Bryan, 2005; Davis & Lambie, 2005) and becoming empowered and equipped with the resources they need to support their children (Bryan & Henry, 2008). When professional school counselors adopt this empowerment attitude, they can demonstrate a belief that “many

competencies are already present or at least possible within families” (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001, p. 71).

Family involvement improves the quality of schools as well (Bryan & Henry, 2008). Through school-family partnerships, school counselors can encourage parents and guardians to become leaders in the school and community and to take on an active role in their children’s education (Bryan, 2005; Lindsey, Roberts, & Campbell-Jones, 2005). School counselors exhibit leadership by facilitating these partnerships and also providing staff development and education to ensure that members of the school “appreciate the expertise and diverse perspectives that poor and minority parents bring to the problem-solving process” (Bryan, 2005, p. 223). As a result of these partnerships, students benefit from the extra support and resources provided (Bryan, 2005; Davis & Lambie, 2005; Grant & Gillette, 2006; Madsen & Mabokela, 2005). Parents and guardians can be a resource to educators in solving students’ problems and encouraging their learning. Parents and guardians may also provide assistance in helping the school reach its educational goals and discovering best practices for teachers within the school (Amatea, Daniels, Bringman, & Vandiver, 2004).

School counselors can help construct these collaborative partnerships by increasing their visibility inside and outside of the school building and being active in the school’s community (Vera, Buhin, & Shin, 2006) as well as being accessible and having a flexible schedule for phone calls and meetings (Davis, 2005; McAuliffe, Grothaus, Pare, & Wininger, 2008). In addition, providing childcare and transportation for families to attend school functions as well as having social events for families and school personnel may contribute to diminishing any negative perceptions or feelings that may

exist (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Providing refreshments and nametags at meetings (Erford, 2007), engaging in home visits, positive phone calls, use of church or community centers for meetings and conferences, meeting outside of school hours, and use of translators are additional strategies for building positive connections with families (Erford, 2007; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; McAuliffe et al., 2008; Thompson, 2002). As parents feel welcomed into the school, they may be more likely to make the decision to become involved in their child's education (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). In addition to helpful interventions such as tutoring programs (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007), school counselors can also coordinate educational programs to provide parents and guardians with new resources and ideas for raising successful children. As families are invited and involved, the school gains from their talents and expertise as well as helping to meet the families' needs. Families are likely to feel valued and to appreciate the school's efforts to build relationships with them (Schmidt, 2003).

In addition to their own advocacy (e.g., for access to rigorous coursework for all students accompanied by the resources needed for students to be successful in these courses), school counselors are called to facilitate these families' ability to advocate for themselves so that they may more effectively work towards equitable opportunities for their children (Bailey, Getch, & Chen-Hayes, 2007). School counselors can also help parents/guardians to navigate the school system and provide them with the information and the political resources they need to gain a voice in the local and state governments (Bailey, Getch, & Chen-Hayes, 2007; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Ratts, DeKruvf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007). As a result of a team effort between parent and guardians, school

counselors, and all school stakeholders, advocacy efforts for equity in our schools can be stronger, more active and efficient (Bailey, Getch, & Chen-Hayes, 2007).

Conclusion

The inequitable status quo in U.S. schools features a bevy of barriers to success for students from families with low income. School counselors are called to be part of the solution (ASCA, 2005). They can do so through advocating for their schools to have clear expectations and guidelines regarding school-family collaboration in order to promote enhanced success for all students (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). The school counselor can function as a liaison between the family and the school, becoming an intermediary resource for both stakeholders (McKenna, Roberts, & Woodfin, 2003). School counselors can also enhance these partnerships by promoting positive and egalitarian collaboration and effective and culturally competent communication between schools and families (Davis & Lambie, 2005). On the one hand, schools provide valuable information about the educational curriculum and best practices for continuing a child's education at home (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). The school informs parents about supporting their children and building connections with them in the home (Schmidt, 2003). Conversely, families provide equally valuable information to the schools about the child's past experiences, learning styles, and character and behavior traits (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). School counselors can advocate for these partnerships via challenging bias, training school personnel, engaging in outreach to families, conducting research to ascertain effective practices, and promoting the benefits involved in collaborative problem solving and accessing student and family strengths (Amatea, Daniels, Bringman, & Vandiver, 2004).

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