

Advocacy and the Professional School Counselor: Practical Suggestions for Advocacy Efforts

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ABSTRACT

The role of the school counselor underwent various transformations throughout the twentieth century. In an effort to define the role of professional school counselors in the twenty-first century, the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) developed the ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs. The framework of the graphic model includes four themes, one of these being advocacy. The role of the school counselor as advocate and practical suggestions for implementing advocacy as part of a professional school counseling program are discussed.

ADVOCACY AND THE PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL COUNSELOR: PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR ADVOCACY EFFORTS

The role of the school counselor has undergone various transformations throughout the twentieth century as counselors have struggled to meet the needs of students and their families (Galassi & Akos, 2004). School counselors have grappled with the need to define the profession to create a unified identity (Allen, 1998; Baker, 2000; O' Bryant, 1992; Schmidt,

1998). The expectations and demands placed upon school counselors vary according to grade level served, administrative leadership, and district policies. In addition, the special interests and needs of parents and the local school community impact the duties of the school counselor (Campbell & Dahir, 1997; House & Hays, 2002).

Borders (2002) addressed the role of the school counselor in the twenty-first century as one which should focus on how school counseling is "being done in a wide range of contexts by a variety of practitioners" (p. 180). The new millennium brought with it an era of educational reform which began to delineate the role of professional school counselors as change agents and advocates for the profession (Allen, 1998; Tysl, 1997). School counselors who were seen solely as service providers stood on the edge of possible extinction as the new millennium approached and demanded professional reform (Lenhardt & Young, 2001). Sabella (2006) discussed the need for school counselors to be accountable for outcomes through the use of data and data driven programs which aid in developing curricular goals and plans. In an effort to clarify the evolving transformations and redefine professional school counseling, the American School Counseling Association

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(ASCA) developed the ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs (2003). The ASCA National Model includes national content standards for student development adapted from Campbell and Dahir (1997). The authors of the ASCA model state that "Advocating for the academic success of every student is a key role of school counselors and places them as leaders in school reform" (ASCA, 2003, pp 24-25). This National Model has been referred to by Davis (2005) as a landmark for school counseling programs as it outlines the necessary elements for developing effective school counseling programs. The framework of the graphic model includes four themes (1) advocacy, (b) leadership, (c) collaboration and (d) systemic change. These four themes are major elements of the Education Trust's Transforming School Counseling Initiative and these themes are positioned to focus on the importance of the school counselor's leadership role in advocacy (Education Trust, 2003).

ADVOCACY COMPETENCIES

Brown and Trusty (2005) presented three areas of advocacy competencies essential for professional school counselors. These competencies include dispositions, knowledge, and skills needed for designing successful school counseling programs. Of the three areas, Brown and Trusty viewed dispositions as the most important and stated that they are related to a counselor's personal identity and character. "Without advocacy dispositions, knowledge and skills will not translate into advocacy" (p. 282). According to Brown and Trusty, professional school counselors who embrace advocacy dispositions are those counselors who are willing to take risks in meeting the needs of students; who help families grow through empowerment; who agree to advocate for the profession on behalf of students and others; and are able to analyze ethical laws and principles which are needed for solving

problems. Advocacy dispositions are necessary for the development of advocacy skills (Baker & Gerler, 2004; Gysbers & Henderson, 2000).

Advocacy knowledge includes areas of knowledge surrounding available resources, parameters, dispute resolution mechanisms, advocacy models and systems change (Brown & Trusty, 2005). Advocacy skills described by Brown and Trusty are comprised of communication skills, collaboration skills, problem-assessment skills, problem-solving skills, organizational skills and self-care skills. Examples of advocacy activities as outlined by Brown and Trusty include providing professional development to teachers on methods to respond to child abuse; promoting enrichment opportunities for students who have are talented artistically; advocating for a student who is at risk for dropping out of school; and advocating for promoting tolerance in the school environment (p. 265).

An ACA Task Force on Advocacy Competencies composed of Lewis, Arnold, House and Toporek (n.d.) outlined three levels of advocacy as the client/student level, the school/community level and the larger public arena. Each level has two domains consisting of advocacy competencies that include both the individual and systems approach. Lewis, Arnold, House and Toporek describe an advocacy orientation as one which embodies not only system change, but also empowerment of the client through counseling. Advocacy oriented professional school counselors are cognizant of the impact of social, political, and cultural factors which affect human development and help their clients and students to better understand their lives in the context of these factors.

Bemak and Chung (2005) discussed the emerging advocacy and leadership roles of school counselors as critical. The gap in achievement for poor and minority students as well as social, economic and political issues affecting all students alerts school

counselors of the need to promote equity for students and their families. Thirteen recommendations and guidelines to assist counselors in making the transition from a traditional counselor role to assuming an advocate role are provided by Bemak and Chung. Encompassed in these suggestions are recommendations for establishing partnerships and relationships with community and outside resources which enable a team approach to meeting the needs of all students. Bemak (2000) specified that interdisciplinary cooperation and collaboration on multiple levels should occur for school counselors to become effective advocates.

ADVOCACY EFFORTS

Field and Baker (2004), in their qualitative study, discussed how nine school counselors defined advocacy and described their advocacy efforts. Advocacy efforts by the counselors studied included supporting students, writing letters, taking a stand for students, and being a voice for students. One of the conclusions drawn by the authors was that many of the advocacy behaviors practiced were reactive to an individual student's needs or to a problem that had been in existence for some time. The authors further concluded that additional research is needed in order for the school counseling profession to shift from reactive to proactive interventions on behalf of the students to ameliorate problems.

In addition to various descriptions and definitions of advocacy, assorted descriptions of actions taken by the school counselor as advocate are presented. Galassi and Akos (2004) suggested that school counselors focus their efforts on fostering success in academic, career, and personal/social development, including educational access equity and justice for all students. House and Hayes (2002) stated that as advocates, school counselors should work proactively with students and parents

by teaching them how to access support systems within their environments to remove barriers to learning. In addition, school counselors should incorporate data locally, regionally, and nationally to foster system changes in an effort to promote high educational standards for all children. Hughey and Akos (2005) asserted that developmental advocacy, which emphasizes proactive approaches to help students build skills necessary for adolescence, can be used to foster a comprehensive middle school counseling program. Howard and Solberg (2006) affirmed that school counselors need to focus on promoting school success for all students and become agents for social justice when creating and implementing school based interventions, especially when working with students who are from diverse and low-income backgrounds.

Do professional school counselors have an obligation to serve as advocates? Baker and Gerler (2004) encouraged counselors to respond to the demands of diversity and the struggles for equality on many levels with advocacy actions. Baker and Gerler recognized that multiculturalism and numerous societal issues have the potential to prevent students from being successful in schools. According to ASCA's Ethical Standards for School Counselors (2004), a school counselor's primary obligation is to the student and "is concerned with the educational, academic, career, personal and social needs and encourages the maximum development of every student" (A.1.b). The ACA's (2005) code of ethics states "when appropriate, counselors advocate at individual, group, institutional, and societal levels to examine potential barriers and obstacles that inhibit access and/or the growth and development of clients" (A.6.a.). Davis (2005) stated that "an important guideline is to honor your commitment to being a professional school counselor and be ready to advocate for the programs and practices that you know will

sustain the students and the profession” (p. 274). Several authors believe that school counselors are best positioned to assess and promote academic success for all students (Beale, 2004; House & Hayes, 2002; Kaplan & Evans, 1999; Sears, 1999).

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR SCHOOL COUNSELORS

After having reviewed the most recent advocacy literature, it is apparent that no clear definition of advocacy relating to school counselors exists (Chibbaro, Cao, Jackson & Lavizzo, 2005). In addition to this unclear definition of advocacy, confusion surrounding the specific actions and competencies necessary for school counselors to serve as advocates remains (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Brown & Trusty, 2005; Field & Baker, 2004; Galassi & Akos, 2004; House & Hays, 2002; Howard & Solberg, 2006; Hughey & Akos, 2005; Kiselica & Robinson, 2001; Lewis, Arnold, House & Toporek, n.d)

Supplying the professional school counselor with specifics of how advocacy impacts their role and function and types of duties associated with this role is not viable. Perhaps specificity of this role as advocate may never be feasible due to variations in social, economic and political forces. However, providing practical suggestions for school counselors as advocates is possible.

1. Conduct a needs assessment.

ASCA's National Model (2003) incorporates the use of data collection and analysis as a part of the management system of school counseling programs. With its focus upon immediate application, Allen, Gallagher and Radd (1992) suggested that action-oriented research is appropriate for school counselors to use in the school setting. Allen (1992) stated that action-oriented assessment methods and techniques may be used to ascertain student characteristics, programs, and to measure changes resulting from a particular intervention or process. Rowell

(2006) explained that “action research has evolved both as a method of inquiry and as a means to mobilize and guide communities, classrooms, and professionals in taking action to improve social conditions and conditions of practice.” (p. 376). The first suggestion for school counselors as advocates is to conduct a needs assessment using some form of action research which include, but are not limited to behavioral observations, needs assessments and student portfolios.

2. Develop a plan of action.

Ezell (2001) stated that “a necessary condition for doing advocacy is that you have to know that action is necessary, that the unmet needs of current and future clients are not and will not be addressed without an advocacy intervention” (p. 15). Fiedler (2000) developed a five step model including problem definition, information gathering, action planning, assertive action and follow-up. Based upon the results of the needs assessment, choose two or three areas of improvement that you feel your school counseling program could positively impact. Narrow down your area of concern to the one area that you feel most passionate about. As Fiedler's model suggests, developing a plan of action is the third step. A thorough examination of who is going to have the greatest benefit from the resolution of the problem should be considered. Also, any adversarial individuals or groups should be considered.

3. Take assertive action.

Rowell (2006) discussed the power of politics as practiced by politicians at the state, local and district levels. The relationship between knowledge and power and changes that are realizable as well as beneficial must include the political distribution of power. Change can be both empowering and frightening. Knowledge of systems change may be necessary on the part of the counselor. In

taking assertive action to resolving concerns, it is helpful to consider multiple perspectives and attempt to create situations in which all parties can benefit. Of particular importance is to ensure that actions are culturally responsive to diversity within the school setting (Simcox, Nuijens, & Lee, 2006).

4. Follow-up to ensure changes or solutions are being implemented.

Monitoring on the part of the school counselor is needed to complete this step. If changes are being implemented as a result of the advocacy efforts, the school counselor should thank those individuals responsible for following through with suggested changes. If the counselor discovers that there are not any changes being implemented, the counselor should approach the situation in a professional and respectful manner.

5. Personally assess strengths and weaknesses of advocacy efforts.

Asking basic questions such as what efforts were positive and what were negative lay the foundation of this final step. Ask yourself what you learned and will repeat in the future, and what you learned not to repeat. Taking steps to eradicate and improve situations for students and their families is never a mistake on the part of the professional school counselor.

Professional school counselors must continue to strive to meet the needs of all students they serve, to adhere as closely as possible to ASCA's National Model (2003), and to do their best with what they have been given.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The role of the professional school counselor as advocate has emerged as indicated in ASCA's National Model (2003). Recently, articles about advocacy for students' development (Kuranz, 2002), and advocacy for sexual harassment victims

(Stone, 2000), have appeared in professional journals. The specificity of direction as "how to" advocate for students and their families appears to be scarce in the literature for professional school counselors. This article is an attempt to provide school counselors with practical steps to begin advocacy efforts.

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