

## THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL COUNSELOR

### The Need for School Counseling

As students develop from childhood through adolescence, they face unique sets of challenges. Mastery of these academic, cognitive, social, emotional, and cultural challenges will, in turn, prepare students for success in the next phase of their development, including post-secondary education. School counselors play a key role within the schools' support services by facilitating the proactive development of many competencies needed by students in the areas of school success, personal decision making, career exploration, goal setting, self esteem, and interpersonal relationship skills. Additionally, during the course of their development, a number of students experience problems which call for the remediating interventions of school counselors to prevent negative perceptions and inappropriate coping behaviors from becoming patterns which affect current academic performance and future growth. School counseling is an integral aspect of the total school plan. It is planned, sequential, developmental, and designed for delivery to all students at all levels of education as a regular component of their school experience. School counseling services are essential for presenting students with options for post-secondary study and helping students recognize their potential for rigorous academic study.

Additionally, the professional school counselor has another critical role within the school: that of student advocate. It falls to the school counselor to be a voice for student needs and an agent for change as well as a creator of services to meet these needs. As an advocate the school counselor serves to encourage school staff to consider all students for rigorous educational programs. Employing current data the school counselor encourages students, parents, and school staff to raise academic expectations and helps them recognize the potential in all students. The role of the counselor as change agent includes conducting student needs assessments, interpreting data, collaborating in site-based improvement teams, monitoring changing demographics, building alliances with post-secondary institutions, transiency concerns, community issues, addressing parental concerns, meeting school system goals for student achievement and safe and orderly school environments, and coordinating the development of a school counseling program plan which organizes and assesses these services.

School counselors of the twenty-first century assume the following roles as student advocates:

- **Facilitator of Cooperative Interpersonal Relationships**
  - Coordinating school counseling advisory councils to involve the community in school programs
  - Working on school committees to maintain focus on school system goals and initiatives
  - Serving on Strategic Planning teams to implement school system goals
  - Consulting as an instructional team member to enhance communication
  
- **Facilitator of an Invitational School Climate**
  - Promoting community cohesiveness to help all schools be inviting and welcoming to parents and community members
  - Monitoring the quality of messages to parents/students to ensure open communication
  - Creating school wide climate initiatives to promote a safe and orderly learning environment
  - Modeling effective communication skills

- Advocating for multicultural sensitivity and awareness of the needs of special populations so that all students experience academic success
- **Promoter of Positive Student Outcomes**
  - Working on behalf of student achievement to raise academic expectations
  - Using guidance to promote successful school behaviors
  - Consulting on effective classroom management to create effective and engaging learning environments
  - Sharing information and data related to positive student outcomes
- **Resource Broker of Services**
  - Referring students and parents to private and community agency resources in order to reduce barriers to academic success
  - Collaborating in transition programs (e.g., school-to-work) so that students can meet with success as they transition from grade to grade
  - Providing access to career and post secondary education so that all students have the option to attend college if they so choose
  - Advising parents/students of career and financial aid opportunities so that all students may pursue a post-secondary education
- **Change Agent**
  - Advocating for students so no student goes unnoticed or underserved
  - Advising on issues of equity so that equity of opportunity exists for all students
  - Participating as team member to inform others of student potential
  - Developing the school counseling program plan to deliver a comprehensive program for all students so they can meet with school success
  - Consulting with parents/guardians and teachers to raise expectations and pursue academic rigor for all students
- **Specialist in Human Behavior and Relationships**
  - Identifying the developmental needs of students to anticipate barriers to school success
  - Consulting about the social and personal needs of students to remove potential barriers to school attendance and graduation
  - Recommending conflict resolution strategies (e.g., peer mediation program development) to help maintain safe and orderly schools so all students can learn
  - Modeling effective human relations and problem solving skills for faculty, staff and students
  - Coordinating services to address a variety of personal and interpersonal student needs in order to reach all students and assist all students to make academic progress at the highest level possible

### **The Foundation for the School Counselor's Program**

School counselors have demonstrated through the impact of their programs that they are a positive force in the lives of students and in the climate of schools. Recent research into the effectiveness of school counseling programs has generated two significant findings:

- School counselors' interventions have a substantive impact on student achievement and personal development
- Specific counselor initiated interventions such as individual and small group counseling, classroom guidance, and professional consultations contribute directly to student success in the classroom (Border & Drury, 1992)

It is apparent that school counseling programs support the school system's mission and enhance student learning.

The goals upon which the Baltimore County Public Schools counseling program is based are set forth in *The Essential School Counseling Program, PreK-12 (2004)*. This document identifies the three core goals for school counseling program in the state of Maryland. These goals are:

- School success for all students
- Competency in decision-making, career development, and post-secondary educational planning
- Effective interpersonal relationships and positive self-appraisals

These goals are then expressed in terms of student indicators which identify student skills, attitudes, learnings, and behaviors required to gain mastery of these goals. Student indicators are organized into a scope and sequence outlining a comprehensive, sequential, developmental program of school counseling experiences, PreK-12. Counselors are required to develop a site-specific program plan to assist students in developing these indicators. *The Essential School Counseling Program, PreK-12* also contains a large number of counseling, small group, and classroom guidance strategies designed to attain the aforementioned indicators.

Serving as the foundation of the school counselors' program and defining the unique role of the school counselor are the three essential functions of counseling, consultation, and coordination.

- **Counseling:** Effective counseling is developmental. School counseling programs recognize that all students need help as they routinely pass through childhood and adolescence. School counselors help young people with issues related to their personal, social, career, and educational development. They assist students to cope with crises and developmental losses in their lives so they can attend school regularly, be engaged in learning, act in a safe and orderly manner, and experience academic success.

In addition to their developmental role, school counselors have an important remediating role which calls upon them to intervene to address areas of student needs which affect school safety and order. These issues include self-defeating perceptions students may have about themselves and others, concerns related to academic success, and self-destructive patterns of behavior (e.g., acting out behaviors and substance abuse). This critical role demands an ability to identify and directly assist "at risk" students in a timely manner despite a large case load, to consult with others, to participate in the coordination of educational and community resources, and to make appropriate referrals for additional therapeutic intervention. This remediation role helps maintain a safe and orderly environment for learning as well as helping remove social and emotional barriers to student academic success.

- **Consultation:** School counselors offer consultation to parents/guardians, teachers, administrators, and service providers. They identify students' needs and assist in the development of strategies to address students' academic, personal, developmental, and social-emotional concerns. Counseling consultations based on data serve to help educators determine the potential of all students. As advocates, school counselors consult with others to help them be more aware of the potential of all students. Additionally, counseling consultations serve to help schools identify and provide services for underrepresented groups of students.

School counselors serve an essential consultative role on Student Support Team. Counselors may be involved as consultants to IEP teams when students' social, emotional, or behavioral needs have an impact on the educational disability. In addition, counselors consult to site-based teams, teaching teams, Student Assistance teams, and school committees. Counseling consultations serve to help remove barriers to student success related to attendance, graduation rate, and performance.

- **Coordination:** School counselors serve a coordinating role by making their services known to all potential users, establishing linkages within the school curriculum to counseling goals, and creating networks of related services and referral resources, such as the services of community agencies. This coordinating role could include, for example, the counselor working with the school staff on school safety issues such as conflict resolution. Additionally, school counselors play a leadership role in coordinating school wide initiatives such as the development of a peer mediation or peer helper program. These varied services are organized, coordinated, communicated to the school community, implemented, and evaluated through a needs-based school counseling program plan. Coordination of programs such as College Readiness creates linkages to higher education and paves the path for student success beyond high school.

## The Process of School Counseling

The ultimate impact of effective counseling is student success. The counseling process encompasses unique interventions designed by counselors to assist students in the development of skills to bring about changes in relation to achievement, decision-making, behavioral modification, personal development, and interpersonal relationships. This process can be best understood through four counseling approaches which should be the central components of any school counseling program plan.

- **Individual Counseling** - is a one-to-one, personal interaction between a counselor and a student to resolve problems, undertake new tasks, or explore concerns. In school settings, this counseling interaction is typically based upon a brief, action-oriented counseling model although some student concerns may require multiple counseling sessions. The counseling relationship is founded upon trust and rapport which result from the unconditional positive regard the counselor demonstrates to the student. Supportive data is often employed in counseling sessions to help students assess their strengths and understand their own potential.
- **Small Group Counseling** - involves the counselor working with a number of students at the same time on issues of mutual interest or concern. The purposes of a small counseling group vary according to the central action to be undertaken by the group, (e.g., task oriented,

problem-centered, support, or remedial groups). Under the leadership of the school counselor, group members share experiences, explore thoughts and feelings, receive feedback, gain new information, role play new skills, and identify goals and actions necessary for improved functioning. Task groups such as test-anxiety groups serve to help students be prepared for academic challenges as they learn to understand their own behavior and employ strategies for change. Personal growth groups assist students in developing effective coping skills so that they can maintain focus in the classroom, attend school regularly, and manage their behavior so they can be effective and active participants in learning.

- **Developmental Classroom Guidance** - operates on an instructional approach and involves all students at respective grade levels. These sessions are based upon developmental tasks, assessed needs, and emerging situational concerns. A variety of teaching strategies are employed including the creative use of cooperative learning methods, multimodal learning approaches, mixed media, well-constructed activities to address the affective domain, and matches between guidance indicators and those of the essential curricula from other subject areas. Topics such as learning styles, notebook organization, and decision-making helps students learn how to be successful learners. Anti-bullying and harassment lessons serve to ensure the safe and orderly learning environment necessary for learning.
- **Large Group Guidance** - reflects a strategy which counselors typically use to present information to a large group of students regarding topics such as school planning, career development, test results, program options such as parallel enrollment, and college informational sessions. Large group work can address a variety of counseling objectives in the realm of the affective domain, personal safety, and informational concerns.

## **THE SCHOOL COUNSELOR'S PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY**

All school counselors in Baltimore County Public Schools are fully certified. School counselors are specialists in human development, interpersonal skills, effective communication strategies, decision-making, and personal life management. To this end, counselors commit themselves to the ongoing development of professional competencies through professional growth activities including advanced work in graduate level training, conference attendance, in service training and workshops to update their training in contemporary counseling issues and counseling trends, memberships in professional organizations and certification programs, and professional reading.

School counselors are solidly grounded in the ethical practices of their profession, as outlined in the *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practices of the American Counseling Association* (1995) and the *Ethical Standards for School Counselors of the American School Counselors' Association* (1996). They are required to advise their counselees of the purposes of counseling, the extent and limits of privacy of information obtained through counseling, and their professional responsibility to report what was learned through counseling when a child's welfare or the welfare of others may be in danger.

Above all, school counselors commit themselves to their own growth as self-actualized individuals. They develop an understanding of self and monitor how their personal characteristics, recent life experiences, and individual values may affect their counseling with others.

**References:**

Borders, D. L. and R. D. Drury (1992). Comprehensive school counseling programs: A review for policy makers and practitioners. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 70 (4), 487-498.

*The Essential School Counseling Program, PreK-12* (2004). Towson, MD: Baltimore County Public Schools.

*The National Standards for School Counseling Program* (1997), Alexandria, VA: American School Counselor Association.