SPECIAL ISSUE
RESTRUCTURING SCHOOLS

Districts and Schools as a Context for Transformed Counseling Roles

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This article applies three perspectives—structural, cultural, and practical—to examine issues faced by district and school administrators as they attempt to change the position and practice of school counselors to one with a clear focus on improving academic achievement for all students.

This article presents a preliminary analysis from six school districts cooperating with partner universities to use school counselors for school improvement. This research is unique because references to school counselors are virtually absent in the burgeoning state and local policy initiatives related to school improvement. School counselors, with backgrounds in child development and experience in school settings, are well positioned to support the efforts of administrators and teachers who are increasingly held accountable for improved performance by all students. However, both research and policy have focused almost exclusively on curriculum, teaching, and formal school leadership as the manipulable variables that can influence student achievement.

The absence of significant attention to school counseling directed to administrative practice in journals and books is troubling, but it is also evidence of the narrow focus of education. The public thinks of schools as composed of teachers, students, and administrators. Although statistically accurate, it ignores the reality of current school design, particularly at the secondary school level. A report by Antonucci (1998), using U.S. Department of Education statistics, suggests that states spend between 14 and 30 percent of their school-level budgets on nonteaching personnel, the majority of which supports administrators and student services and instructional sup-

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port personnel. Although relevant data are not easily available, it is safe to say that even suburban schools, most of which deal with fewer social problems than their urban counterparts, employ a large number of licensed professionals to support the social and academic infrastructure of the educational enterprise. Social workers, psychologists, school-to-work coordinators, and many other ancillary personnel populate the typical secondary school. The question that has not been addressed is: How effective are these highly trained additional personnel deployed to reinforce the basic academic goal of the school, ensuring that all children will learn?

The school counselor has a nonrationalized role in a rationalized organizational setting. The absence of a clear job description uncouples the counselor role from school leadership. Explaining the counselor's role in schools requires an examination of school cultures (Handy 1993), which are composed of values, norms, and assumptions about the "right way to do things" (Schein 1992). It is often assumed that there is a singular culture in a school that determines its activities and priorities. Schools, however, also contain subcultures (Swidler 1986) that form and strengthen during times of instability and change (Chauman and Jehn 1994). When the environment is calm and supportive, it is easy for teachers, counselors, and parents to see themselves as a unified front in support of children. When there is instability and great demand for change, formerly cohesive groups may approach solutions from dramatically different cultural bases.

External environments and pressures affect school cultures but also introduce dynamics for change. Rational decision-making processes are affected by a shifting array of problems, potential solutions, and actors—all of which are partially disconnected and unpredictable (March and Olsen 1976). Consequently, the trajectory of school change is often indirect and only partially manageable (Lagerweij, Voogt, and Louis 1998).

Method

The Education Trust¹, under a grant from the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund (DWRD), developed an agenda to improve counselor education and school counseling practices to realign counselor roles with improved academic achievement. Six university-school district partners were awarded \$450,000 for a three-year implementation grant from the DWRD called the Transforming School Counseling Initiative (TSCI). The Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement at the University of Minnesota was awarded an evaluation contract to examine the planning and implementation of TSCI and provide data for other universities and dis-

¹ For more information on The Education Trust and the Transforming School Counseling Initiative, please visit The Education Trust website at: http://www.edtrust.org/main/school_counseling.asp.

tricts interested in similar reforms. The data used for this study were drawn from that larger evaluation project.

One-week site visits were conducted to the universities and districts in the late fall and winter of 1999–2000. Two- to three-member teams interviewed district-level counselor supervisors, practicing counselors, and principals in at least one elementary, middle, and high school across each site. The purpose of the interviews was to examine how the district context affects the implementation of a specific reform effort. We analyzed the case studies and then conducted cross-site analysis through summary word tables that documented similarities and differences. Subsequent to the cross-site analysis, cases were reexamined to (a) ensure that the specific attributes of each case were accurately portrayed and (b) to extract sample quotations to illustrate the conclusions drawn from the word tables.

Findings

The districts in our study ranged from large, urban centers to medium-sized communities.² All included a substantial population of low-income students. In spite of their differences, substantive common themes emerged across the different settings. Overall the responses revealed clear patterns that suggest that the redeployment of the school counselor to support student achievement remains contentious.

Our analysis focuses on factors in the normal life of schools that present significant challenges to changing school counselor roles. These include: (a) weak or nonexistent definitions of the counselor's job; (b) the role of principals in defining the actual work of counselors; (c) the predominance of paperwork and administration in counselor's daily activities; and (d) competing organizational crises and reform agendas that distract district administrators from focusing on counseling.

Ambiguity of Counselor Roles

Data collected from district and school administrators as well as practicing counselors reveal dynamic differences in the perspectives of what a counselor can and should do during the course of the day, largely due to the absence of a clear job description. The counselor role could become one of advocacy for academic achievement. However, in most districts there is no written document that outlines the role of guidance counselors, much less one that includes elements of the counselor as a student achievement advocate. For example, one respondent stated, "One of the things you asked about...was the status of the district's guidance plan.... There isn't any."

² The schools and districts were located in Georgia, Florida, California, Ohio, and Illinois.

Even when a plan exists, it is often rather vague. One district's mission, for example, states that the counselor bears some responsibilities for academic achievement. However, the daily operations of the schools encourage principals to use counselors in multiple ways that do not necessarily support this mission statement.

A practical consequence of poorly defined roles is that counselors' actual jobs vary enormously from district to district and from school to school. Counselors have little recourse to promote a different set of activities from those that are locally assigned. One administrator said that a problem with the current perception of counselor roles is that counselors often work alone, isolated from the core academic team. This isolated counselor's role is often passive: "You can't ask to be the advocate. You have to step in and be the advocate.... That's going to be a challenge because of the people we're talking about."

Administrators in other districts support the perception of counselors as largely behind-the-scenes actors in unclear roles. There is a strong sense across districts that many counselors have not tried to define a professional role based on their training, but have accepted the common definition that they will do whatever is needed in the school to support students and administrators. In some cases this diminishes the potential for counselors as partners in school improvement.

Principals as Interpreters of the Counselor Role

The districts' ambiguous role definitions force principals to determine what counselors actually do. School principals usually have had little exposure to counselors' work, and administrator preparation programs rarely address how principals should use school counselors. Thus, each principal must invent a counseling department and function with the most minimal guidance and expertise—often limited to experience gained during an internship or in a previous position. Some counselor respondents in this study indicated that assertive and experienced counselors are often able to educate their principals about and shape principals' definitions of counseling. However, this situation creates uncertainty. When a school gets a new principal, the counselor's job needs to be renegotiated; the less experienced the principal, the less likely they are to know how counselors might help improve students' academic achievement. Instead, counselors become gofers who facilitate other school functions and managers who handle unpredictable student crises. Principals assign counselors tasks on the basis of the perception that because they do not teach classes, they have the flexibility to perform multiple duties. What is valued generally within the school is teaching; if one is not teaching, then one's job and time are often viewed as less important and more flexible. One middle school counselor delivers paperwork to payroll stating, "I'm the person who is likely asked to go [because] I do not have a class."

Principals often assign to counselors tasks that lack clear relationships to other staff members' job descriptions. For example, one counselor became the school's truant coordinator. Another principal assigned to the school counselor the role of attendance program coordinator. This counselor provides unexcused absence data to the state. Neither of these tasks demands the professional preparation required of a school counselor, which typically includes several years of teaching experience and a master's degree.

Paperwork Dominates Counselors' Work

Paperwork assigned to counselors is at best loosely related to a school's academic goals. State accountability legislation has increased the need for schools to monitor individual students and has produced a mountain of test results that must be handled carefully because they are high-stakes measures of student achievement. Thus, principals justify expanded counselor involvement in testing programs as supporting schools' academic goals:

The proficiency tests drive the role and work of school counselors. We're doing sorting of tests and it's time-consuming for counselors.... Those activities are critical for students, but is it a counselor who needs to unbox tests and make sure each teacher gets them?

Principals use counselors for administrative tasks because the schools lack necessary staff members. Counselors often complain that principals use them as highly paid clerks, because much of their time is taken up with manual scheduling and review of student records. High schools counselors maintain minimum caseloads of 300 to 400 students. Scheduling and reviewing are undeniably important but time-consuming. Administrators tend to view these tasks as critical to student success and a legitimate part of the counselor role. However, one consequence is that the types of services counselors are trained to provide for students are actually provided by others in the school because this type of administrative duty has become their de facto job: "Counselors are viewed primarily as schedulers doing all the paperwork.... [W]e have a career options specialist...who does more career counseling than we do as counselors.... We don't do career counseling."

The counselor's potential contribution to student achievement includes his or her ability to go beyond tracking and recording student results to interpreting student performance data to develop academic success strategies. However, the counselor is not viewed as central to the analysis process. Instead, counselors continue to act as clerks while other professionals in the school interpret the data.

We have described the attitudes about the counselors' roles from the perspective of the administrators. However, it is also important to consider how

teachers view the counselors' roles and how counselors believe they should interact with teachers.³ We found some agreement among counselors that, in general, teachers do not understand how counselors could aid them in student success. One high school counselor stated, "They don't believe guidance does anything for student achievement. At the high school level, they don't understand anything about counseling...."

Getting the Attention of District Administrators

The six school districts studied are large, complicated enterprises with many moving parts and many difficult problems to solve, of which improved deployment of counselors is only one. The standard operating procedures and major priorities of urban and small-city districts often distract from the creation of new counselor roles, not because of a lack of good intentions but because of the pull of other events and distractions. Lack of district leadership is particularly problematic for counselors because of the variable definition of what counselors do and how important they are: "The leadership actually has come from the field counselors. That's exactly right; it's actually coming from them with no interference from the administration."

The persistence of tradition rather than policy is compounded by turnover at the district level, which often means that an administrator who finally understands the importance of counseling to school improvement is replaced by one who does not. In one district, the director of counseling accepted a job at the state level. Rather than hire a new person to replace her, the superintendent gave the counseling oversight duties to the director of instructional services. Overburdened with other duties, the administrator provides only minimal oversight of counselors.

New district administrators often have to be brought along in their understanding of how a counselor can contribute to school improvement, particularly if they are focused on raising student test scores through changes in the curriculum. As a result, counselors are overlooked rather than excluded. A counselor at one site expressed this frustration:

I feel it's disappointing that we're not involved at the level we could be. We could be, and we want to be, but we're not.... As far as being on those school improvement committees, I'm sure we have representation [at the district level], but is [it] being used as a real active member? I don't think so.

Where Do Counselors' Needs Fit in a Complex Reform Picture?

Site-based management—a key element of school reform in many of the districts—impedes changing counselor roles. For example, in two of the districts

³ These comments reflect counselors' perspectives on how they are treated by teachers, and are not based on interviews with teachers.

studied, principals must remain on campus except under unusual circumstances and are therefore unable to attend meetings to learn about the changing counselor role. In other districts, poor attendance at meetings to discuss counseling was also the norm because of the perception that "more important" work (for which they had increased responsibility) was going on in the building. Therefore, school principals rarely attend training that targets the professionalization of school counselors. District insistence on (or preference for) principals staying in schools reinforces the use of counselors as adjunct administrators, because their absence from the building is less noticeable.

Discretionary resources are, of course, always a problem for schools, because 85 percent or more of the budget is allocated to relatively inflexible personnel costs. The six districts studied, like many in the United States, lack the resources for counselors to use information systematically to develop academic programs for students. The allocation of funds across districts directly affects whether or not counselors are able to participate in professional development that trains them to use data. Frequently, schools and counselors must absorb the costs of conferences and other training activities themselves.

Equally important, however, is the limited investment that most districts have been able to make in upgraded technology and data systems. Antiquated databases have not caught up with recent requirements for tracking students. One counselor, for example, reported that it was not possible to merge student information systems that contained grades, attendance, standardized test results, and health records—except manually. Targeting potentially at-risk students was simply not possible. This situation is reflected elsewhere:

We have a lot of information that our counselors don't know how to access. In a lot of ways it's not activated, it's all bunched together. Because, right now [the data is] in a great big vat, and you can't pull it out in a form that's usable.... Basically, as a counselor in [our district's] schools, we are working on a system that is 1970s. It's an old DOS system.

The changing demographics of many of the six school districts demand additional teaching services for students in need of second language support or special education. However, school districts do not allocate resources to involve counselors in meeting district needs:

[W]e need continual training and inservices. Every day in our school system, there are girls who get pregnant. That's just one problem.... We have a huge international contingent, in the past primarily African Americans. Now, we're getting lots of Somali kids, so it's starting over again. People say counselors need to be

involved in this, but we haven't had the training we need to meet the challenge. We always have to teach people more and more.

The way in which districts conduct their daily business deeply affects the deployment of school counselor responsibilities. Administrator turnover creates a policy vacuum that deprives counselors of a centralized role in school improvement efforts. Counselors get sucked into the black hole of "other duties as assigned" because of limited central support. Districts lack resources, such as sophisticated databases that enable counselors to perform their duties. Moreover, changes in education funding formulas force districts to set fiscal priorities that do not necessarily include professional development funds for counselors to retrain themselves to adapt to districts' changing demographics and social tensions.

Competing State-Level Reform Agendas

On the national level, the trend is toward systemic reform in which state policymakers take more control over school improvement efforts. School districts must target their fiscal and human resources to satisfy state requirements for documentation. School counselors still attend to basic clerical tasks associated with assessment rather than develop plans to encourage and assist students in academic achievement. Therefore, counselors are largely ignored in the state accountability reforms. One respondent suggested that it is crucial that counselors become players in student achievement if state goals are to be met: "For 20 to 25 years, counselors have had the skills and training. Now the focus is on accountability—defined as how students perform. If we don't all focus on achievement, then the urban schools will fail."

At the same time, however, educators are reluctant to discuss the counselor's role in accountability because they often perceive counseling reform and increased accountability as competing rather than complementary goals: "We can't go in to talk about reforming the counselor role given the crises being faced by the school community." Demands for improved achievement on standardized tests create tensions without providing additional resources because counselors play a clerical role in accountability.

In addition to increasing counselors' workloads, assessment appears to interfere with other activities that counselors believe could benefit the school community:

Five students died in the school system (last year). Four from violent deaths and one death resulted from a student being hit by a school bus. We need school counselors to be involved in this. Even if we were doing proficiency tests, we could address these crises. But we get bogged down with other things, like assessment. I believe in assessment but right now, it is too heavy a load for the guidance counselors.

At another site, the narrow focus on assessment detracts from the other indicators of academic achievement. For example, in one state, consistent school attendance is not considered at all, whereas in another state, counselors are responsible for reporting all state attendance data. Counselors' efforts to become involved in career planning and education may be sidetracked by efforts to improve specific test scores. All of the districts have a local priority of enabling students to develop reasonable postsecondary plans—but student success after high school is not considered in any of the states' accountability plans.

Moving Toward Success: Stories of Change

The analysis suggests that the use of counselors as extensions of the school administrator's functions predominates. Despite the contextual elements that discount the role of the school counselor in school reform, sites have developed creative ways to redeploy counselors. These sites modified the recommendations of The Education Trust to fit their local context. For example, one site bypassed the bureaucratic, cumbersome district office and directed its efforts at a "family" of feeder schools interested in integrating counselors in school improvement. School counselors now deliver career modules to students in classes. Another site established a counselor-of-the-day responsible for daily front-office duties, including discipline, parent concerns, and social services. The remaining counselors work directly with teachers, parent centers, and student groups on efforts to improve student achievement. At a third site, the university-initiated professional development program encouraged the design of formal protocols to assess counselor job performance. Student outcome measures established by the American School Counseling Association are now integrated into the school counselors' annual performance review. Finally, one site aligned counselors' jobs with federally funded school improvement initiatives. These are focused on the connection between counseling and academic preparation through such programs as Gear Up, Title VI, and the National Science Foundation Urban Systemic Initiative Grant.

Implications

The above discourse leads to several conclusions that have implications for changing the roles that counselors play in the lives of schools and students. Each of these conclusions stems from the basic premise outlined at the beginning of the article that the role of school counselors remains an anomaly in today's educational system. Though they are members of a professional group that is regulated, licensed, and well respected in contemporary society, school counselors occupy an indistinct area in the educational bureaucracy.

Although school counselors are acknowledged as experts, their particular expertise is poorly understood and ill defined inside their organizational settings. This finding is uniform across the districts and schools that were examined in this study. This article offers several examples of how school counselors' roles fall into an administrative gray area. Until districts and schools pay closer attention to the factors detracting from effective integration of counselors into school improvement efforts, the counselor will remain an underutilized resource in raising student achievement.

District and School Context Matters

Any attempt to change the role of school counselors will occur within a district and school context that presents specific challenges. Some of these challenges include the varying interpretations of the counselor's role at the school level; district operations that shift priorities away from the counselor; and high-priority reform agendas that redirect resources to accountability. Although the constraints that we have outlined are common across settings, the specific opportunities to address the barriers vary widely. Changing the role at the ground level can progress depending on the ability of administrators to scan their local settings and align specific issues with school counseling.

Counselor Roles Need More Definition Within Districts

Our analysis suggests that efforts to reduce the invisibility of counselor roles are circumscribed by the largely undefined role of counselors in the district bureaucracy. A clear role description at the district level could guide and encourage principals to legitimize the role of the school counselor as central to academic achievement. The ability of individual counselors to attach themselves to a school's academic agenda is not legitimized by district policy and thus depends on the particular characteristics—and immediate crises—of the schools in which they work. Under ideal circumstances, an influential district administrator can help to promote the agenda, but the organizational turbulence in many district offices means that yesterday's critical ally may be gone tomorrow, leaving a thin paper trail of decisions and agreement.

Principals Necessary for Change

Regardless of district policies and initiatives, principals retain the core responsibility of redistributing the workload and making decisions about immediate school priorities. The university and district partners who have attempted to involve principals in redeploying counselors have concluded that principals who understand the potential of counselors are rare. Principals can have a tremendous influence if they work to reduce the isolation of counselors within the schools and if they imagine how a unique school counselor role could help them in their own work. Principals who have

become involved after the fact have been largely ineffective because they did not have a vision for realizing school counselor potential and because of the persistent tendency of districts to ignore principals' professional development needs. Bridges must be built between counseling and teaching professionals. However, for this to occur, principals must understand and advocate for this fundamental change.

Conclusions

We draw three substantive conclusions from this study. First, district-level administrators could realign the school counselor role with improved student achievement, which is central to school reform efforts. Second, absent systemic district change, the principal plays a crucial role in redirecting school counselors from clerical tasks to those duties that capitalize on school counselor training to enhance student academic performance. Finally, principals may explore school counselor training and evaluate how to use counselors' skills fully within the context of accountability pressures. With careful attention to these findings, school counselors can serve as an additional professional resource for school administrators, contribute tangibly to the goals of the larger school community, and simultaneously enhance their own job satisfaction. ■

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