

Providing Administrative and Counseling Supervision for School Counselors

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The vast majority of this diverse nation's young are in school. Today's children come to school with needs for assistance in maintaining healthy personal, social, career, and educational development and in overcoming barriers to their success. In order to facilitate their personal/social development, school counselors must be aware that there are many differences among them. Students are of different races, cultures, socioeconomic classes, family configurations and backgrounds, genders, abilities and disabilities, sexual orientations and preferences, and so on. In addition to needing help to manage their growth and development, to complete the developmental tasks appropriate to their ages, many children live in situations that may make success at school difficult to accomplish. The families or communities they live in may be impoverished, violent, separated, undereducated, or underemployed. The challenges to children and their school counselors are endless!

School Counselors' Responsibilities in Comprehensive Guidance and Counseling Programs

Children need effective school-based guidance and counseling to help them with their developmental and situational needs. That is, they need effective comprehensive guidance and counseling programs. As described in detail in *Developing and Managing Your School Guidance and Counseling Program* (Gysbers & Henderson, 2006) and outlined in *The ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs* (ASCA, 2005), a comprehensive guidance and counseling program is one in which the program's content is clearly delineated. The content domains, goals, and results that students are expected to achieve as a result of participating in the program are identified. The program's structure is established and includes descriptions of the rationale for the program, the assumptions that undergird the program, and a concise

statement of the definition—the mission—of the program itself. The program is organized around and delivered through four program components—four sets of activities with similar characteristics: guidance curriculum, individual student planning, responsive services, and system support. The characteristics that distinguish one component from another include the kinds of clients who are helped through the activities, the types of outcomes that are targeted in the activities, and the roles that professional school counselors fulfill in conducting the activities.

Comprehensive guidance and counseling programs also are supported by personnel, budgetary, and political resources. With the largest resource in school guidance and counseling programs being the time and talent of the school counselors, operational comprehensive guidance and counseling programs are designed based on allocations of percentages of school counselors' time to each of the components. Priorities are also set for the content to be addressed, the program's clients, and the use of the school counselors' competencies.

Each program component draws upon different competencies and, in some cases, similar competencies with different applications. The basis of guidance curriculum activities is instruction. The basis of individual student planning activities is guidance. Responsive services activities require competence in counseling. Counseling is the unique set of competencies that school counselors bring to a school campus. System support activities require program management knowledge and skills. The competencies included in consultation, student assessment, and coordination are used in all four program delivery components.

Thus, in comprehensive guidance and counseling programs, school counselors fulfill these multiple roles and must be competent in them to meet the needs of all of their students, and also to work with the students' teachers, other school staff members, and families. In

performing these roles, school counselors are also expected to adhere to relevant legal, ethical, and other professional standards. As described in school counseling literature, where professionally relevant administrative and counseling supervision is provided systematically by trained school counselor supervisors, school counselors flourish (Henderson & Gysbers, 1998). They need and want the support for their continued professional development.

Systematic Help for School Counselors Performance Improvement

Fair employment practices and many state statutes require school districts to provide accurate job descriptions for their employees' work, to conduct fair and meaningful evaluations of their professional staff members, and to promote their continuing professional development. Where they exist, guidance and counseling department heads—variously called head counselors, guidance directors, guidance program staff leaders—have as their primary responsibility to help counselors fulfill their multiple roles at the highest levels of professionalism. It is our recommendation that there be guidance department heads to provide such support for the professional school counselors and carry out the mandated human resources functions just mentioned and through the provision of appropriate counseling and administrative supervision.

By being trained in and applying a leadership model, built on practice, theory, and research, new and experienced head counselors fulfill their responsibilities effectively. This article describes a leadership model that has been used successfully for over 20 years in one school district and has been adapted by other school districts. Readers are invited to consider how this model could be used to enhance their school system's efforts to help school counselors to continuously improve their performance and professionalism.

In developing the model, the first step was to align the human resource activities—the activities designed to help school counselors focus on the quality of their performance—into one performance improvement system, rather than being isolated events. Implementation of the systematic approach begins at the start of the contracted school year with the counselor and the evaluator agreeing to the definition of the counselor's job responsibilities for the year. This job definition, then, becomes the basis for the supervision activities that occur throughout the year, and for a fair performance evaluation conducted toward the end of the contract year. The combination of these three activities lead to the school counselor's being assisted to establish relevant professional development goals and action plans for meeting them for the ensuing year.

The job definition for each counselor is unique. While all school counselors use their professional competencies, each counselor's responsibilities within the program are different. For example, they serve different students in their caseload, may have different content specialties, and may have different responsibilities in ensuring the effectiveness of the program. Supervision is the provision of feedback to an individual about his or her professionalism in a specific incident. To be appropriate, the feedback must be based on freshly gathered data, preferably at first hand by the supervisor. Counseling supervision targets counseling performance. Administrative supervision targets everything else, e.g., professional skills, knowledge and attitude development, standards compliance, applications of professional judgment, inter- and intraprofessional relationships, work habits, the counselor's own mental and physical health. Performance evaluation is also based on data, but its focus is on a counselor's patterns of behavior, cognition, and attitudes—the accumulation of observations and judgments made by the evaluator. Further, in this day and age, the primary purpose of all these activities is to facilitate a school counselor's professional development. A well-accepted means for doing this is through a process that helps school counselors set professional development goals and develop action plans for achieving them. Their individual progress toward their goals is supported by their supervisors through ongoing monitoring and ultimate assessment of their levels of goal attainment. It is evident that this process is individualized for each counselor.

Training School Counselor Supervisors

In developing the school district's model, the second step was to train guidance and counseling department heads to implement their responsibilities within these activities effectively. In addition to learning the rationale for the systemic approach just described, and the operational definitions of each of the activities, the supervision dimension of the performance improvement system is highlighted. It is the centerpiece of the system. It is the most productive in helping counselors grow. It happens daily. It spans the entire year. In providing feedback to a counselor—or any employee for that matter—the hardest part is knowing what to say and how to say it. The supervision model used in the school district begins with a method for assessing the professional development need(s) of individual counselors. The supervisors are then trained in methods for responding to those needs in what research, theory, and practice have shown to be effective. The leadership training includes learning a recommended supervision process and developing a full

set of standards for professionalism that form the basis for professional development,

The supervision process they are trained to use consists of the following steps:

1. Establish the supervision agreement (e.g., determining the logistics of when, where, and how supervision will take place; what aspect of professionalism the counselor would like assistance with; what aspect of professionalism the supervisor would like to assist with).
2. The supervisor gathers data by observing the counselor in action, and then analyzes these data in light of the established standards for professionalism and selects key pieces of data to use as the basis of both the supports and challenges to be discussed in the feedback conference.
3. The supervisor conceptualizes the counselor's needs and wants by assessing the individual's level of professionalism.
4. The supervisor plans an appropriate supervisory response (i.e., decides on the most relevant one or two goals for the supervision feedback in light of the supervisee's strengths and weaknesses, needs and motivations; selects an approach that is most likely to be helpful to the supervisee, a role and a power base that seem to best fit the situation; and plans how he or she will act in the feedback session).
5. The supervisor and the counselor meet together in the feedback conference, which is typically a two-way conversation conducted in the spirit of mutual inquiry. The supervisor provides the feedback, and supports and challenges the counselor. The conference ends with discussion of the counselor's goals and plans for continuing improvement, and the supervisor and counselor make plans for their next supervision event.
6. After the conference, each individual reflects on the accomplishments of the supervision, and implements the established plans.

Key to the success of this model lies in the in-depth and mutual understanding of the definition of professionalism. In this system, professionalism is defined as having two factors: competence and commitment. Professionalism assessments are based on currently accepted professional standards, and are based on actual data gathered by supervisors through observation, dialogue, collaboration, and so on. The

standards that describe competence are those established for each of the multiple school counselors' roles: counseling, guidance, consultation, student assessment, coordination, and program management. The standards that describe professional commitment are those expressing the profession's value system, such as the codes of ethics and practice and professional identity, and such specific standards as the multicultural competencies and student assessment competencies. They also include the district's standards for professional work habits.

It is the combination of these two factors that indicates a counselor's level of professionalism in any given activity at any given time. It is important to bear in mind that supervision is incident specific—individuals have different levels of professionalism in different competency areas. They have different levels of professionalism in the implementation of different activities or on different days of the year. An individual may be reasonably competent in conducting guidance instruction, but on some days may not feel like facing 20 to 30 students at a time. An individual may be highly committed to providing small group counseling, but may be unskilled at orchestrating effective group interaction.

In this process, the data gathered during an activity informs *what* the supervisor has to say. The assessment of the school counselors' levels of competence and commitment in light of the respective standards in carrying out the activity suggests *how* the supervisor might best approach the counselor. It is also imperative to remember that, like counseling, effective staff leadership is best provided through a meaningful relationship between the supervisor and the counselor supervisee.

Summary

In the 21st century, students have myriad needs for help from their school counselors. School counselors are expected to fulfill many roles in comprehensive guidance and counseling programs. Helping them fulfill these roles at the highest levels of professionalism is the responsibility of guidance department heads. These staff leaders benefit from implementing a systematic approach to performance improvement activities and basing supervision on in-depth understanding of the professionalism factors.

References

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