

Article 8

Victims of Downsizing: Saving School Counseling

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As corporate America downsizes, so do American schools. Counseling program budgets are among the first on the chopping block. Anyone interested in saving school counseling must be armed with an arsenal of knowledge and ideas to sell school counseling to administrators. Through this article, the authors provide the reader with information to enlighten even the most stubborn school administrators. Readers will gain resources to make their jobs invaluable and to maximize their school counseling programs even in the event of downsizing. School counselors as a whole need to continue to work to develop a stronger voice for themselves and for the valuable work that they are doing.

Downsizing

During the budget meeting in February 2004, the U.S. Executive Branch sent the 2005 fiscal year budget request to Congress. In this request, there was an indication that \$2.4 trillion be spent on nondefense, which is about equal to 1% of the total budget. One of the implications of this budget is that the president would like to eliminate the Elementary and Secondary School Counseling Program (ESSCP). This would result in 92 school districts within 32 states without school counselors. This loss of school counseling personnel would be devastating to the students and the community at large. Although the president has recommended the minimization of school counseling positions for the past 3 years, the final U.S. budget consists of \$32.5 million in fiscal year 2003 and \$33.8 million in fiscal year 2004 toward school counseling (American Counseling Association, 2004). Although the politics of governing a country such as the United States is complicated, it is obvious that school counseling is viewed as a negotiable program. Counselors must support programs so that they are viewed as nonnegotiable; emotional learning is as valuable as reading, writing, and arithmetic.

Getting By

As budgets continue to tighten, counselors are being asked to do more and more administrative tasks. There are four effective methods school counselors can use to demonstrate their effectiveness in nonadministrative tasks. These ideas include focusing on student results; showing administrators and teachers how much counselors contribute to a positive school environment; having a student advocate for the counseling program; and presenting school counseling as an asset by using a business model (American School Counseling Association [ASCA], 2004b).

Focusing on student results does not mean specifically focusing on what counselors do with individuals, but rather on shifting the focus to student results. For example, focus on dropout and graduation rates or achievement. When administration is made aware of how students who utilize school counseling programs are more likely to graduate and stay in school, administrators will see the school counseling program as indispensable.

Data speak louder than words to administration and the community. Charts, graphs, and reports represent what students have achieved as a result of what you have done. Also, counselors should keep track of the number of students seen, group counseling sessions held, career planning meetings held, and the percentage of students that have been affected as a result of the counseling program. Additionally, have a copy of the recommended allotment of time as suggested by Gysbers and Henderson (1997).

Use a student to represent counseling. Find one success story and have that student present to the principals, the school board, and the community about his or her experience with the counseling department. Have the student discuss what is important to the audience: dropout rates, postsecondary success, or social success. Follow up the student's presentation with charts and graphs with the percentage of students who have gone to college or been successful after high school.

Framing your school counseling program using a business model. Show the programs as an investment in the student. Demonstrate the return on this investment to both principals and the school board (ASCA, 2004b). Although counselors often work with students' emotional issues, it is important that outsiders see the academic and concrete benefits of counseling programs.

Importance of School Counseling

There are so many reasons that school counseling is an important part of the school system. Among those reasons are that counseling has a positive effect on students; helps connect students to the educational process; helps influence behavior and discipline problems; helps to reduce the rate of bullying and victimization; helps to reduce test anxiety; helps reduce the dropout rate; it helps decrease classroom disturbance; and helps in crisis intervention and peer mediation (ASCA, 2004a).

A recent study by Brigman and Campbell (2003) indicated that the school counselor doing group counseling and classroom guidance was associated with a positive impact on student achievement and behavior. When the school counselor is visible and touching students' lives, students are more likely to seek out counseling services. If students and teachers are unaware of the scope of the counseling program, they are not likely to utilize the invaluable services counselors provide.

The school counselor encompasses three domains: academic, career, and personal/social (Gysbers & Henderson, 1997). Within these three domains the school counselor is responsible for scheduling, career planning, and personal or family issues that come up for the student. If school counselors have made a difference in one student's life, then they have made a difference. How can school counselors be most effective given their large caseloads and administrative tasks?

How About Some Playtime?

One of the most effective ways of working with children is by using their natural language of play (Landreth, 2002). Play allows children of all ages to express themselves in a safe environment that provides struggling children a hiatus from the school day.

Play in the School Setting

Schools provide free and reduced lunch to students because research has shown that unless students' nutrition needs are met, they are not able to concentrate on academics. The same is true for emotional needs. If students' emotional needs are not met, they have

difficulty focusing in school as well. The purpose of school counseling is to prepare children for learning. Play allows children to use their natural language to work out emotional struggles. When students are able to express what is bothering them and consequently work through those issues, they are more focused and responsible in the classroom (Packman & Bratton, 2003).

Conclusion

School counselors are being given larger caseloads each year. This policy eliminates one counselor at a time until there are none. How sad for a society when there is no one to turn to at school! We counselors need to take a stand. We advocate for students all day long: now it is time to advocate for ourselves. We must make administration aware that we are just as valuable to students as the core academic areas.

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