

Article 58

Rural School Counselors: Using the ACA Advocacy Competencies to Meet Student Needs in the Rural Setting

Lee Edmondson Grimes, Natalie Spencer, and SaDohl Goldsmith Jones

Grimes, Lee Edmondson, PhD, LPC, NCC, is an Assistant Professor in the department of Psychology and Counseling at Valdosta State University. Her research interests include rural school counseling, social justice advocacy in school counseling, and school counseling as it relates to STEM careers.

Spencer, Natalie, PhD, LPC, NCC, is an Assistant Professor of Counselor Education at Valdosta State University. Her research interests include racial identity development, social justice, multicultural counseling, and academic achievement.

Jones, SaDohl Goldsmith, PhD, LPC, NCC, ACS is a Core Counseling Faculty member in the School of Social and Behavioral Science at Capella University. Her research interests include multiculturalism, social justice advocacy, counselor training, and gifted education

Abstract

Rural students face multiple obstacles to academic and personal success. Rural school counselors can act as social justice advocates in their work with rural students to address these obstacles at the individual student, school/community, and public arena levels. The authors explain how rural school counselors can advocate for students and communities at each of the ACA Advocacy Competency levels. Special considerations related to the rural school setting are included.

Although not widely recognized in the research literature, many rural communities suffer economically, which contributes to problems in rural schools and in rural student achievement (Budge, 2006). A variety of problems, including geographic isolation, weak community infrastructure, and outward migration (Budge, 2006), perpetuate the struggles in rural communities. At the same time, rural communities are home to some of the most diverse groups of families and students in the United States, including ethnic minorities, families suffering with generational poverty and compromised education, and single-parent or no-parent households (Flora, Flora, & Fey, 2003). In terms of region or setting, students across America face tremendous differences in the opportunities and challenges they face educationally. As an example, half of all English-language learners live in rural communities; however, the lack of funding for a multitude of school programs often leaves these students inadequately served (Johnson & Strange, 2007).

To compound the problems, attitudes toward *ruralness* are often negative, prejudicial, and erroneous. Scholars have discussed this tendency as follows: “Our students seem to have internalized those prejudices, and they exhibit an inferiority complex about their origins. Although the term rural conjures up rich images, many of those images are based on negative stereotypes... country bumpkins...” (Herzog & Pittman, 1995, p. 113). The term *ruralism* captures the prejudices often held toward rural inhabitants and refers to the perceptions of rural people as backwards and uneducated (Bassett, 2003). The term *rural* often conjures the image of White farmers, but the truth is that the rural student population is very diverse and often incredibly economically disadvantaged (Davis, 2009).

Whether in an urban, suburban, or rural setting, the school counselor serves the role of providing educational and mental health support to all students. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA; 2012) states that schools are one of the first places that mental health challenges arise for students, and school counselors are trained to respond to the challenges. The purpose of this article is to present selected issues relevant to rural students, current calls for social justice in school counseling, and ways in which school counselors can use a social justice advocacy framework to advocate in rural communities to meet the growing needs of students there.

Challenges for Rural Students and Communities

One of the many challenges that students in rural areas face is locating appropriate mental health services. All residents living in rural communities often have limited access to governmental, community, and private resources due to problems with transportation and other factors (Bradley, Werth, and Hastings, 2012). In rural areas, the school counselor is sometimes the only mental health practitioner available to community residents.

Rural Schools and Historically Underserved Student Populations

Popular thought may be that rural student numbers are small, and so if challenges exist, they do not affect many students. In truth, as The Rural School and Community Trust explains, one quarter of the nation’s students attend schools in communities of fewer than 25,000 people (Johnson & Strange, 2007). The number of minority students in these schools is significant as well. Using data from the National Council of Education Statistics, the Rural Trust reported total numbers of groups of minority students and students served with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) in rural schools. These numbers reflect the numbers of students historically underserved including students in special education. Their research using NCEs data shows that more than half of the nation’s 2 million minority students attend school in one of six states that are predominately rural (Johnson & Strange, 2007). Consequently, strategies for meeting the needs of diverse groups of students in rural areas are particularly crucial.

Rural Schools and Socioeconomic Struggles

Nearly half, 45.9%, of rural students are eligible to receive free or reduced meals. Researchers discuss the significance of this number since

socioeconomic challenges present the most persistent threat to high levels of student achievement... the income level of families is closely related to the preparedness level of children entering school, while the educational attainment level of adults in the community is closely related to both community economic well-being and community support for education. (Johnson & Strange, 2007, p. vi)

Rural high schools often suffer from a lack of equitable funding, shrinking local tax bases, and the ability to offer rigorous coursework such as Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010). In terms of the rural economy and rural education, one needs the other in order to be successful.

The Rural School Counselor

The role of the rural school counselor is a unique one, and one must consider the impact of the rural community on the educator's role. In his study with rural school counselors, Morrissette (2000) discovered that community pressure is a struggle for those in the school counseling profession. The pressure to follow community norms with no tolerance for deviance in their professional behaviors emerged from his studies. According to Morrissette, challenges with the visibility in the community existed for many rural school counselors, and they felt a need to avoid the community spotlight. Similarly, Lonborg and Bowen (2004) studied the religious or spiritual component of school counseling in a rural community. Their work shed light on many issues, particularly becoming familiar with community norms and values so that school counselors may "thoughtfully consider the impact of their personal and professional behavior on the school community as well as the lives of their current and future students" (p. 320). Less privacy in the rural or small town community makes the counselor's participation, or lack thereof, in religious activities more noteworthy to the community (Lonborg & Bowen, 2004). Perhaps such scrutiny by the community – visibility and perhaps even judgment of their spiritual lives – makes the high place of importance and involvement in the community almost intimidating. On the other hand, the prominence within the community also holds potential if it allows the school counselor to use the social capital of visibility to make connections between the school and local businesses.

Rural Schools and Calls to Action

While challenges exist for the rural school counselor, the challenges for students there are arguably greater. Lichter and Johnson (2007) noted from their studies that "rural children – those in persistent poor counties – may be more disadvantaged than ever, if we measure disadvantaged by the lack of opportunities and community resources that can promote positive development" (p. 354). Vast changes occurring in the economy in the past decade such as the loss of pensions, health insurance, and other social supports that low-income families have depended on and lost have directly affected children and adolescents in schools (Gerstl-Pepin, 2006). Rural students' needs have increased as the nation's economic confidence has decreased. To meet the needs in rural schools, educators such as school counselors must adopt new ways to address the growing needs. The American Counseling Association Advocacy Competencies provide a framework through which rural school counselors can operate to meet these needs.

Social Justice in School Counseling

Major changes in the counseling profession began with the introduction of the multicultural competencies in 1992 (Sue, Arrendondo, & McDavis, 1992). Defining the multiculturally competent counselor, Sue et al. (1992) set forth standards they urged counselor education programs to adopt so that clients benefitted not only from the counselor's helping skills, but from a heightened perspective of respect and acceptance for the cultural influences of race, ethnicity, gender, class, age, and sexual orientation. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) encourages school counselors "to collaborate with stakeholders to create a school and community climate that embraces cultural diversity and helps to remove barriers that impede student success" (ASCA 2009).

Soon after the adoption of the multicultural competencies, other changes and growth began to occur in school counseling. Known as the Transforming School Counseling Initiative, TSCI charges counselor education programs with changing their conceptual framework so that school counseling programs prepare school counselors better able to serve elementary, middle, and high school students, particularly those from low-income areas (Martin, 2002). School counseling has expanded to include a perspective far beyond the white, middle-class worldview that dominated counseling approaches for decades. Often called the fourth force in counseling, multiculturalism paved the way for the next major force in counseling, social justice.

In school counseling, Holcomb-McCoy (2007) suggested that a social justice perspective "acknowledges the role that dominant cultural values have in shaping the educational success and failure of youngsters, as evidenced by the achievement gap" (p. 18). Challenging the status quo and attempting to remove systemic barriers to success for all students at the individual, school, and community level characterizes the work of the school counselor with a social justice framework. Dahir and Stone (2009) stated that school counselors "must accept responsibility as social justice advocates, focus strategic and intentional interventions to remove barriers to learning, and raise the level of expectations for students for whom little is expected" (p. 18). Further, the authors suggested that the key to a thriving future for school counseling lies in social justice advocacy (Dahir & Stone, 2009). The question, then, might be asked, is social justice advocacy the key to a thriving future for marginalized students as well? The following section provides a brief overview of ways in which a school counselor might practice as a social justice advocate in a rural setting.

Rural School Counselors Social Justice Advocacy Competencies

Through the American Counseling Association, Lewis, Arnold, House, and Torporek (2003) developed a set of competencies known as the ACA Advocacy Competencies. Counselors have used these competencies as a guide in their work as they focus on social justice advocacy in a variety of settings. Researchers have explored these competencies in detail as they relate to social justice advocacy in community/clinical settings (Bradley, Werth, & Hastings, 2012) as well as school settings (Grimes, Haskins, & Paisley, 2013; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007). However, the unique needs of rural school counselors and rural communities in the

literature on social justice advocacy has been scarce. Therefore, using the two-tier model of the ACA Advocacy Competencies, the current authors will outline how rural school counselors can *work with students* and *work for students* as advocates using practical strategies to address the unique factors in rural schools.

Student Advocacy

According to Lewis et al. (2003), the “groundwork for self advocacy is helping students understand their lives in context” (2003, p. 1). This is significantly important for rural students as a marginalized population, often the target of negative and prejudicial attitudes. Rural school counselors must find ways to help students bring their rural lives into the school setting and make it a part of their learning environment. ASCA (2012) recommends that school counselors collaborate to present lessons that tie into the standards taught by classroom teachers. This collaborative advocacy could be in the form of classroom guidance lessons co-taught with science or math teachers on topics related to the community. In farming communities, the lesson could include information on how crops are planted and grown and the relation to the immediate community and the greater community as a whole. Such lessons empower students by referencing who they are, where they come from, and ways in which they and their community contribute to the economy. If the rural community were a coastal one, the lessons would focus on shrimping or fishing. Some rural locations might include lessons on forestry or ranching. The important commonality is the focus on the importance of the rural aspects of the students’ lives. Similar lessons from the personal/social domain might use the aspects of rural community life known to rural students, factors such as close community ties and generations of family connectedness, as examples to which rural students can relate. Classroom guidance need not be built solely around the academic, personal/social, and career examples limited to the rural context, but the simple addition of examples to which students can relate may impart that their current context and experiences are worthwhile and meaningful.

In the career domain, rural students also need extra guidance either individually or in the classroom guidance setting to teach them about advocating for themselves in terms of their futures after high school. Because college attendance is lower in rural areas, first generation college students are plentiful there, and making the leap to higher education could be especially difficult. Rural school counselors might consider the education levels of many rural families and take extra effort in guiding students to futures that might seem unattainable without their support.

Interviews with practicing rural school counselors show how selected practitioners apply social justice strategies to address rural student needs at the student advocacy level. Grimes, Haskins, and Paisley (2013) relate how one school counselor discussed her rural students. The counselor explained that students often report believing that they and their families have always lived the way that they do (with limited opportunities for careers in this example), and that it is pointless to strive for more. She believed that advocating for her students often meant teaching them that the skills and experiences gained in rural areas translated into skills they could use there or in other settings if they so desired. Rural student advocacy for this practitioner meant helping her students realize their rural life experience mattered.

Advocating at the School and Community Level

Lewis et al. (2003) described this level as “school/community”; however, rural school counselors have to make the connection between home *and* community *and* school. This encompasses all significant stakeholders in the rural community and shows respect for the tight knit relationships between the community and the students, important in rural settings. One way to do this is by improving the communication between home and school. Due to sometimes lower levels of education found there, parents in rural settings might feel intimidated by educators and might be hesitant to speak with or initiate communication. This reality is heightened for English Language Learners students and parents in rural settings. Therefore, communicating in terms that rural parents would understand (e.g., explaining specialized educational acronyms, the use of an interpreter, etc.) helps open the door of communication between home and school.

Another way to know how to make families comfortable is to really know the community. Rural school counselors can do this by being active members of the rural community, participating in community events regularly and interacting with parents and other rural community members outside of the school day. To advocate at this level, school counselors may use their visibility in the community to develop relationships between the school and local businesses or religious organizations. Because rural schools are generally underfunded, collaboration with local business partners is critical, and rural school counselors often have the connections necessary to bring in both funds and volunteers to support students. While working with faith-based organizations must be carefully designed so as not to introduce religion into schools, school counselors utilizing the faith-based resources in the rural community is an important means for connecting school programs with community resources (Grimes et al., 2013).

As an example, practicing rural school counselors operating as social justice advocates can work at the school/community level by identifying resources available, sometimes in unique places. Grimes et al. (2013) reported that community parks and recreation departments serve as an important connection for many rural school counselors both for disseminating information to parents through coaches and for creating teams of support for students at risk. “The ball field” (Grimes et al., 2013) permeated the stories of selected rural school counselors as a central community resource and place to connect with others who may provide support to students and to build trust with families and other community members.

Rural school counselors must also use social justice advocacy to challenge the status quo, meaning they must use their influence to challenge policies that continue to marginalize students in their schools. Two such groups whose members face marginalization are students who are undocumented and students who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, or questioning. School counselors in the rural setting might help students who are undocumented find college or other post high school opportunities to enter into after graduation. Doing so may mean challenging school and state policies that limit acceptance for students who are undocumented. For students who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, or questioning, rural school counselors acting as social justice advocates may challenge school policies against safe zones within the school and work to establish gay-straight alliances in the school and community.

Advocating Through the Public Arena

While it is important for rural school counselors to advocate in their school and immediate community, it is equally important to understand and advocate on a public arena level. For rural school counselors, this may be systemic or social/political. For instance, identifying stakeholders, networks, and taskforces with established initiatives for rural schools might be difficult. Therefore a clear understanding of state and federal mandates is important in order to inform others of how those mandates impact rural schools and communities. Joining a state school board association, state leadership initiative, state or national school counseling organization, or starting a rural network taskforce within these organizations are all ways to advocate for students in rural schools and communities in the public arena. Sometimes a powerful way of communicating needs is through storytelling. Gathering the stories of rural students and the challenges they face due to lack of resources in schools, examples of their experiences of *ruralism*, and the shrinking opportunities to stay in their communities due to shrinking job opportunities could bring attention to rural community struggles. Rural school counselors can share these stories at national school counseling conferences and in appropriate state and federal education organizations to draw attention to the unmet needs in rural areas.

One rural school counselor offered as an example of working at the public arena level when she identified a challenge often faced by elementary students in their rural school (Grimes et al., 2013). Many of the parents had not completed their high school education. This school counselor realized that to help her students succeed, she first needed to work at a level beyond focusing only on her students. She worked with state and local representatives to bring GED training to her school. This rural school counselor described sharing the struggles from her rural community at a political and public information level to bring attention to the problem of low levels of education there. Her social justice advocacy efforts paid off when the GED classes were taught in the elementary school (Grimes et al., 2013).

Resistance to Advocacy

Despite its potential for success, obstacles to taking on the role of social justice advocacy may lead to resistance. Choosing the role of challenging the status quo and change agent no doubt comes with challenges. Obstacles for school counselors include the following: professional paralysis, resistance based on turf considerations, dealing with administrative edicts, perpetrating a culture of fear, and even professional and character assassination efforts (Bemak & Chung, 2008). Bemak and Chung (2008) make the following suggestion for counselors facing resistance: "Counselors must be aware of their personal and professional obstacles to redefining their roles [and think] in ways that are aligned with the overall mission and goals of the school" (p. 380). Another consideration the authors suggested for overcoming these personal and professional obstacles is aligning with like-minded allies so that together, school counselors may confront challenging the status quo.

Bradley et al. (2012) expressed the importance for practitioners to consider the multiple ways in which social justice advocacy can affect clients and communities. Issues related to confidentiality and dual relationships are especially present in rural communities because of the small and overlapping relationships in the setting.

Additionally, advocacy and challenging the status quo can present greater obstacles for rural practitioners because of the high visibility of the role and the possibility that the entire school community could be affected by advocacy interventions.

Rural students face multiple and often misunderstood challenges in their schools. School counselors adopting a social justice advocacy framework position themselves to empower members of rural communities by confronting the unique challenges there in ways thoughtfully designed to respond to rural challenges. The opportunities for rural students can be expanded; their educational worlds and futures can be improved; all students can strive for their potential—promises such as these form a social justice framework that school counselors can adopt to respond to student needs in rural schools.

Conclusion

Using the ACA Advocacy Competencies to meet the needs of students in rural settings has implications for rural school counselors, system student support personnel, state school counseling organizations, and school counselor educators. Rural school counselors can integrate the advocacy competencies into their comprehensive school counseling plans to meet the academic, career, and personal/social needs of their students beyond employing traditional strategies. Professional development opportunities that detail how the ACA advocacy competencies can be added to comprehensive school counseling plans could be provided to rural school counselors through workshops developed by their school system student support director. Since smaller districts in rural areas do not always have a student support department or director, state school counseling organizations could offer sessions and workshops at state conferences that show rural school counselors how using the ACA advocacy competencies can strengthen their efforts in rural areas. Because rural school counselors can be isolated professionally in their settings (Morrissette, 2000), extra efforts to provide gatherings for them to share advocacy strategies should be considered by state school counseling organizations. The use of technology to broadcast professional development on social justice advocacy is another consideration both school districts and school counseling organizations might consider to share advocacy strategies with rural school counselors.

In structuring topics for courses on multiculturalism and advocacy, counselor educators should include a focus on addressing social justice concerns specific to the rural setting. Breen and Drew (2012) suggest requiring school counselors-in-training to participate in activities in rural settings such as fieldwork experiences. They suggest, too, that counselor educators attend town meetings and even structure sabbatical time doing research or providing support to get an understanding of the student, family, and community concerns in rural areas (Breen & Drew, 2012). Finally, further research is needed on the lived experiences of students and school counselors in rural settings. Of particular importance in this research is exploration of the impact of implementing the ACA advocacy competencies to address social justice issues in rural school settings, since doing so can cause a ripple of changes in the community both positive and potentially negative (Bradley, Werth, & Hastings, 2012). Preparing school counseling candidates to meet the needs of every unique setting could be a challenge for counselor educators as community factors differ greatly from one setting to another. With its

challenges and rewards, these authors believe that rural settings need school counselors able to address needs with the broad perspective and courage of social justice advocates.

References

- Alliance for Excellent Education. (2010). *Current challenges and opportunities in preparing rural high school students for success in college and careers: What federal policymakers need to know*. Washington, DC: Author.
- American School Counselor Association. (2009). *The Professional School Counselor and Cultural Diversity* (ASCA Position Statement). Retrieved from http://www.schoolcounselor.org/asca/media/asca/home/position_statements/PS_CulturalDiversity.pdf
- American School Counselor Association. (2012). *The ASCA national model: A framework for school counseling programs* (3rd ed.). Alexandria, VA: Author.
- Bassett, D. L. (2003). Ruralism. *The University of Alabama School of Law*. Retrieved from <http://ssrn.com/abstract=443120>
- Bemak, F., & Chung, R. C. (2008). New professional roles and advocacy strategies for school counselors: A multicultural/social justice perspective to move beyond the nice counselor syndrome. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 86, 372-382. doi:10.1002/j.1556-6678.2008.tb00522.x
- Bradley, J. M., Werth, J. L., & Hastings, S. L. (2012). Social justice advocacy in rural communities: Practical issues and implications. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 40(3), 363-384. doi: 10.1177/0011000011415697
- Breen, D. J., & Drew, D. L. (2012). Voices of rural counselors: Implications for counselor education and supervision. In *Ideas and research you can use: Vistas 2012*. Retrieved from <http://www.counseling.org/knowledge-center/vistas/vistas-2012/page/2>
- Budge, K. M. (2006). Rural leaders, rural places: Problem, privilege, and possibility. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 21(13), 1-10. Retrieved from <http://jrre.vmhost.psu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/21-13.pdf>
- Dahir, C. A., & Stone, C. B. (2009). School counselor accountability: The path to social justice and systemic change. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 87, 12-20. doi:10.1002/j.1556-6678.2009.tb00544.x
- Davis, M. R. (2009). Study urges regional policy focus on issues facing rural schools. *Education Week*, 29(10), 8.
- Flora, C. B., Flora, J. L., & Fey, S. (2003). *Rural communities: Legacy and change* (2nd ed.). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Gerstl-Pepin, C. (2006). The paradox of poverty narratives: Educators struggling with children left behind. *Educational Policy*, 20, 143-162. doi: 10.1177/0895904805285285
- Grimes, L. E., Haskins, N., & Paisley, P. O. (2013). "So I went out there": A phenomenological study on the experiences of rural school counselor social justice advocates. *Professional School Counseling*, 17, 40-51. doi:10.5330/PSC.n.2013-17.40
- Herzog, M. J. R., & Pittman, R. B. (1995). Home, family, and community: Ingredients in the rural education equation. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 77(2), 113-118.

- Holcomb-McCoy, C. (2007). *School counseling to close the achievement gap: A social justice framework for success*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Johnson, J., & Strange, M. (2007). *Why rural matters 2007: The realities of rural education growth*. Rural School and Community Trust. Retrieved from <http://files.ruraledu.org/wrm07/WRM07.pdf>
- Lewis, J. A., Arnold, M. S., House, R., & Toporek, R.L. (2003). *ACA advocacy competencies*. Alexandria, VA: Advocacy Task Force, American Counseling Association. Retrieved from http://www.counseling.org/docs/competencies/advocacy_competencies.pdf?sfvrsn=3
- Lichter, D. T., & Johnson, K. M. (2007). The changing spatial concentration of America's rural poor population. *Rural Sociology*, 72, 331-358. doi:10.1526/003601107781799290
- Lonborg, S. D., & Bowen, N. (2004). Counselors, communities, and spirituality: Ethical and Multicultural considerations. *Professional School Counseling*, 7(5), 318-323.
- Martin, P. J. (2002). Transforming school counseling: A national perspective. *Theory into Practice*, 41, 148-153.
- Morrisette, P. J. (2000). The experiences of the rural school counselor. *Professional School Counseling*, 3, 197-207.
- Ratts, M. J., DeKruyf, L., & Chen-Hayes, S. (2007). The ACA advocacy competencies: A social justice advocacy framework for professional school counselors. *Professional School Counseling*, 11, 90-97. doi:10.5330/PSC.n.2010-11.90
- Sue, D. W., Arredondo, P., & McDavis, R. (1992). Multicultural counseling competencies and standards: A call to the profession. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 70, 477-486.

Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/VISTAS_Home.htm