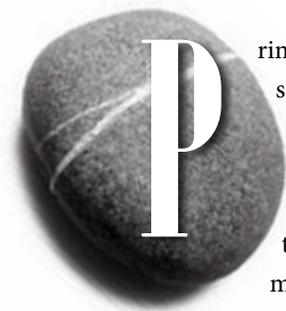


# BALANCING THE LOAD



How to  
Engage  
Counselors  
in  
School  
Improvement

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Principals can't lead the school improvement process alone. They must enlist the help of others in the school community. School counselors, whose role is often viewed as peripheral and isolated from teaching and learning, can help principals, teachers, students, and parents balance the duties and responsibilities involved in continuous student growth and performance.

In the last 10 years, school counselor education has shifted from a focus on individuals to a systemic view, partially in response to the absence of counselors' voices in the school improvement process, the lack of organization in school counseling programs, and the failure of the profession as a whole to address the issue of student achievement (Brown & Trusty, 2005). This shift was engendered by the work of the Education Trust and the development of a national model by Campbell and Dahir (1995) and the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), which defined a school counseling program as comprehensive, developmental, driven by data, and aligned to the primary mission of the school.

## Challenges

Training is one of the major challenges to partnerships between school counselors and principals. School counselors who were trained before the implementation of the ASCA standards may need ongoing training to understand their roles and responsibilities in the school improvement process. Inappropriate duties, such as testing coordination and data clerical roles, may be required of counselors who have fallen victim to an old model of counseling. Principals' training may not have made them aware of the professional competencies of school counselors. School counselors and principals must discuss their professional skills—such as data analysis, goal setting, conflict manage-

ment, and team building—and how they can be employed in the school improvement process.

The challenge of understanding the new roles often begins in university training programs, in which there has been little or no collaboration between counselor education programs and educational leadership programs. Although both programs are often housed in the same department, seldom do principal interns and counselors-in-training attend common classes and there is little focused dialogue about how to train counselors and principals to understand each others' roles and responsibilities (Fitch, Newby, Ballester, & Marshall, 2001; Kaplan, 1995; Shoffner & Williamson, 2000).

## Call to Action

In response to the lack of collaboration between training programs and an understanding of the complexities of the demands placed upon principals, we have begun experimenting with ways to create meaningful interaction between school counselor interns and principal interns at Georgia Southern University in Statesboro. During a seminar held in spring 2006, a group of school counselor interns and a group of principal interns discussed the professional competencies of school counselors and principals in an attempt to identify ways that they can work together to improve schools. The interns compared the Educational Leadership Constituent Council standards to the ASCA standards and studied a list of appropriate duties for counselors from Kathy Cox, the Georgia State Superintendent of Schools (personal communication, May 25, 2005).

As a follow-up activity, principal interns were asked to note how principals in their assigned schools were engaging school counselors. In their next class, the interns reported on the strategies being used by principals and school counselors in the school improvement process that capitalized on the professional roles of counselors. Following are brief descriptions of the appropriate practices principals are using to balance the duties of school leadership.

## PREVIEW

Recent shifts in training for school counselors have focused on their comprehensive role in the school improvement process.

Counselors should be partners who help principals and teachers foster student growth and performance.

The first step is for the principal and the school counselor to explicitly discuss appropriate roles and responsibilities.

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## Talk Walk

One busy principal found a way to exercise while building relationships with students in an after-school detention program. Students assigned detention for minor infractions of the code of conduct spent 30 minutes of the detention hour walking on the school's track (or an inside walking trail on days of inclement weather) with an assigned mentor, who was a teacher, a community volunteer, or an administrator. The principal used the time to build relationships with students by listening to them talk about their school performance.

The school counselor organized this program as part of the school improvement goal to reduce infractions that kept students out of class. The counselor, using baseline data, tracked the numbers of students who were assigned to the after-school detention program and found that the number of students who violated classroom infractions decreased by 58% over a three-year period. The counselor trained the mentors who walked with the students to focus on listening to students talk about their perceptions of their academic performance in the school. Those mentors referred students to the counselor if they needed help setting goals to improve their academic performance. Teachers in the school viewed this after-school detention program as a major contributor to the school improvement goal.

## Supporting Hispanic Students

Recognizing that the graduation rate for Hispanic students in Georgia was 56.3% (Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004), a counselor worked with the school improvement team to develop strategies to address the needs the school's Hispanic students. The counselor coordinated tutorial services for students and organized a meeting of Hispanic parents in the community to explain the accountability system and testing requirements in high school courses. The counselor also worked with the Spanish teacher to develop a Hispanic counseling center within the school, in which students in advanced Spanish classes serve as peer tutors for Hispanic students. At the suggestion of several students in tutoring program, the counselor created a student handbook in Spanish that addressed questions often asked by students and parents about such things as college application procedures, admissions requirements, and career training needs.

The reduction of the number of dropouts—a school improvement goal—is largely attributed to the counseling program goals that aligned with the school improvement plan. The principal views the counselor as a “lifesaver” and collaborates

with the counselor often in sustaining school improvement goals.

## Training Student Leaders

As student council sponsors, the school counselor and the social studies teacher used the student council election as experiential learning in governmental processes. The school counselor provided training in leadership skills to the newly elected council.

To further the learning process, the counselor and the teacher approached the principal about forming an executive committee of student council members to involve student leaders and enhance communication between administrators and students. The executive committee met with the principal biweekly and used the time to convey ideas and concerns from the student body to the principal. The principal, in turn, shared concerns, discussed upcoming events, and enlisted the support of students during their meetings. Several projects came out of this alliance, such as an anti-bullying effort. By the end of the school year, the number of reported incidents dropped by more than half. Behavior referrals in general had also dropped by about 30%.

## Implications

Principals who work with counselors to sustain school improvement create partnerships that can greatly affect the quality of life for everyone within the school community. First, however, principals must understand the potential that school counselors have to effect change. This requires an open dialogue between the principal and the school counselor.

School counselors must become self-advocates for their professional skills, adherence to professional standards, and contributions to the school environment. Given the current emphasis on standards and accountability, school counselors must also learn how to discuss students' development and use data to support their assertions (Hardesty & Dillard, 1994).

University training programs must emphasize the contributions that principal-school counselor partnerships can make to teaching and learning. Partnerships between educational leadership and school counseling training programs are models that can be repeated at the elementary, middle level, and high school levels. Principals must tap the resources that incoming school counselors offer, and new principals should expect that school counselors have more to offer than merely fulfilling their traditional roles of testing administrators and record clerks.

## Reflection and Summary

For a principal to engage a school counselor in the school improvement process, both must understand the roles, responsibilities, and perspectives of their professions. Their dialogue may begin by agreeing on the counselor's roles and responsibilities. They need to address differences that may lead to conflict and the ineffective use of energy, time, and skills, and they must discuss confidentiality issues and student advocacy. The school counselor should have counseling plans and goals that are aligned with the school improvement plan, and the principal and the school counselor should agree on how those goals contribute to student achievement and progress.

During the spring seminar, principal interns reflected on the practices they had described and realized that principals who recognized the knowledge and skills of school counselors and who engaged them in the school improvement process helped distribute leadership. Not only were the leadership responsibilities shared but also the synergy that comes from collaborative efforts energized stakeholders. Principals can alleviate the professional isolation inherent in their roles by

engaging counselors in appropriate roles to improve conditions for teaching and learning within the school. By doing so, principals are building capacity within the school to sustain school renewal. **PL**

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# Appropriate-Inappropriate Activities for School Counselors

## Appropriate Activities for School Counselors

- Individual student academic program planning
- Interpreting cognitive, aptitude, and achievement tests
- Counseling students who have discipline problems
- Collaborating with teachers to present guidance curriculum lessons
- Helping the school principal identify and resolve student issues, needs, and problems
- Analyzing disaggregated data for goal setting
- Advocating for students at IEP meetings

## Inappropriate Activities for School Counselors

- Registration and scheduling of all new students
- Coordinating or administering cognitive, aptitude, and achievement tests
- Performing disciplinary actions
- Teaching classes when teachers are absent
- Helping perform clerical duties in the principal's office
- Data entry
- Preparing IEPs

Source: Adapted from Kathy Cox memo, personal communication, May 25, 2005.

