Chapter 1

Addressing the Challenges of 21st-Century Schools Through Principal-Counselor Collaboration

Mel Riddile

School leaders are under increasing pressure to ensure that each and every student in their charge receives a high-quality education and graduates not only on time, but ready to transition to college and the workplace. This is different than the way schools operated in the 20th century, when a school was successful as long as the majority of its students succeeded. Today’s 21st-century schools are asked to ensure that all students succeed.

This change in focus from some students succeeding to all students succeeding comes at the same time schools are facing tightening budgets, declining revenues, and scarce resources, and at a time when students’ needs are becoming more complex. English Language Learners (ELLs) are the fastest-growing segment of the school-aged

Mel Riddile is currently Associate Director for High School Services at the National Association of Secondary School Principals. He previously served as Principal at T.C. Williams High School in Alexandria, VA, and at J.E.B. Stuart High School in Falls Church, VA. In 2006, he was selected as the MetLife-NASSP High School Principal of the Year.
population and increasing numbers of students are identified as having disabilities. In many schools, special needs populations make up a majority of the student population. Students and their families are more mobile, which results in interrupted learning.

The readiness of students is, thus, a major concern. A recent ACT (2008) study revealed that, despite all the rhetoric relating to higher expectations for student achievement, less than 20% of all eighth-graders are on target to graduate from high school college- or workplace-ready.

This means that more than 8 of 10 eighth-grade students do not have the knowledge and skills they need to enter high school and succeed there. ...[S]tudents who are not prepared for high school are less likely than other students to be prepared for college and career when they graduate from high school. So although the gates of high school are technically open to all students, for more than 80 percent of them the door to their futures may already be closed. (ACT, 2008)

Twentieth-century schools focused on what teachers taught. Covering material was more important than mastery, and learning time was held constant. Seat time was a measure of success. Schools were, by definition, reactive, and school was essentially a weeding-out process. Students were given an opportunity. If they didn’t succeed, they had other paths that they could follow. They could go to work in factories or mills in jobs that needed little more than functional literacy.

In those 20th-century schools, demography was destiny. Even in the nation’s best school systems, poverty, ethnicity, and race accurately predicted success or failure.
In today’s 21st-century schools, the focus is on student learning and outcomes. What teachers teach takes a backseat to what students learn. Students are expected to improve continuously. The bell curve—some succeed, some don’t, so what—has given way to the J curve—continuous, incremental improvement. Seat time has given way to personal accountability. Showing up at school every day no longer guarantees success. Finally, in the era of accountability, schools today are forced to act more proactively to ensure that each student succeeds.

Today’s schools are judged by what their students know and are able to do. Local, state, and national accountability mandates send the clear message that it is no longer acceptable for significant segments of the student population to be underserved. Therefore, school leaders must redesign their schools, fundamentally alter their practice, and find different ways to proactively engage students, families, and faculties. It is no longer business as usual. Instead, schools are being tasked with finding ways to build individual plans that work for each student—mass customization.

For schools to succeed under 21st-century demands, it will be up to the people that comprise the school to adopt new styles of work. Teachers who use the same methods to teach the same lessons to students that they used 20 years ago will get the same results—some students will succeed, but many will not and, today, that is unacceptable.

School leaders who use 20th-century skills and strategies to lead today’s schools will get 20th-century results, i.e., bureaucratic-style schools that successfully sorted students but left many behind. Centralized, top-down school administration is not capable of designing
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a personalized and customized learning plan for each student. It is a system designed to have students fall through the cracks. Just as teachers are expected to differentiate their approach to meet the unique learning needs of each student, so too will school leaders need to differentiate their approach. Leading change efforts that will recreate schools to meet the rising expectations for student success will demand a variety of leadership styles and behaviors.

Personalization also demands collaboration. One person, working alone, does not have the information or expertise to design or customize a learning plan for every student. For example, designing a schedule for an ELL may require collaboration among the administrator, counselor, English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher, and ESL department chair. In the past, schools were siloed—departments acted independently and were run by senior teachers, department chairs, and team leaders, each with their own agendas, sometimes competing with other departments for scarce resources. Schools today are defined by the efforts of high-performing teams of professionals working together to meet the needs of every student.

Great teams are the foundation of great schools. Schools of the 21st century must be less hierarchical and less top-down. Their success is dependent on the collective effort of all staff organized into functional teams focused on the success of each student. A flatter school design places a premium on collaborative leadership skills that has the intent of distributing leadership throughout the school.

Collaboration in building high-performing teams and creating a learning community that supports student success is an important
by-product of principal and counselor interactions. It is the school counselor who puts the school plan into action. The moment of truth in putting lofty academic goals and aspirations for student success into practice occurs when the school counselor sits down with a student to develop an individual learning plan. Unless there is a close working relationship between the principal and counselor—a partnership, with effective communication and buy-in from all sides—the school’s hopes and dreams for each student will never be realized.

In today’s schools, the principal is no longer just a manager. He or she is the instructional leader of the school. The role of the school counselor has changed as well, and counselors are critical members of the school leadership team. More than ever before, counselors are actively engaged with students, parents, and faculty. Students need multiple paths to success; this need for a customized approach for each student, as well as the need to monitor testing data, a much more complicated curriculum, and a myriad of state graduation requirements, have combined to increase the complexity of the school counselor’s task. This complexity increases the specialized knowledge needed by counselors and also increases the likelihood of confusion and misalignment between what the counselor does and the focus of the school.

But such confusion or misalignment doesn’t have to happen. Just as teachers and departments within a school can no longer act as silos, neither can school counseling programs. Counselors must now be directly involved across all departments, disciplines, and school initiatives. They must understand the what, how, and why of literacy initiatives, technology integration efforts, and ELL and special education programs and priorities. Counselors must also understand
new course sequences for at-risk students, mentoring and advisory programs, after-school tutoring opportunities, and the myriad of family and social services available to their students. The list goes on and on.

This ever-increasing complexity makes alignment of mission and function difficult for everyone, including principals and counselors. Counselors and principals must work collaboratively in a partnership to ensure consistency between the plan designed for each student and the overall mission of the school.

Personalizing the school environment creates a sense of belonging and provides students with opportunities to assume ownership over their learning. Counselors play a critical role in ensuring that the school is an inviting place that engages families as partners and aids in eliminating student anonymity. Monitoring student progress and sharing in the development of tiered intervention strategies in a timely manner allows teachers to adjust their approach and students to alter their practice collectively. It also results in less teacher frustration and greater student success.

Curriculum, instruction, and assessment are about the relationship between students and learning. Today, school leaders must redesign their schools to align instruction, school initiatives, and scarce resources in order to prepare students for success. School leaders must create schools that make it easy for students, teachers, and counselors to succeed.
One aspect of the needed redesign is a focus on the working relationship between principals and counselors. Principals and counselors must engage in a continuing dialogue that ensures a continuous loop of free-flowing information. Counselors hear from both students and teachers on the successes and failures of the curriculum. Counselors work in a data-rich environment, and using counselor-generated data for planning purposes—instead of solely for reporting—makes a difference in how schools reduce student failure. They are in a unique position to help inform instruction and assist in targeting review and remediation efforts.

A close working relationship between the principal and the counselor ensures that there is alignment between the stated desires for student academic success and actual practice. Working as a team, counselors and principals can ensure that the school is responsive to student, parent, and teacher needs and that the school has the capacity to link students’ current academic preparation to their future goals.

**Changing School Operations to Meet the Challenges—Some Practical Examples**

Every principal already knows about the challenges schools face and has been exposed to a multitude of articles, presentations, etc., that discuss the importance of increasing staff collaboration to better address these challenges. But what are some specific ways that such collaboration—energized by a closer working relationship between the principal and counselors—might look like in a 21st-century school? In the remainder of this chapter, I offer brief descriptions of approaches a high school serving a highly diverse student body—a high school of which I was principal—used to effectively address student needs.
Moving Toward a Team Approach

When touring a 20th-century school, you might ask the staff members, “What department are you in?” In today’s schools, we ask, “What teams are you on?”

In the past, schools were organized hierarchically. Decisions and information flowed in a bureaucratic, top-down manner. Hierarchies and the resultant bureaucracies are effective at making rules and procedures and standardizing practices. They are designed to control, not to get things done. These 20th-century schools were also set up to sort students for success.

The paradigm has shifted dramatically. Twenty-first-century schools must be organized to help every student graduate and to ensure every graduate is college- and workplace-ready. To do this, schools must develop a plan for each student, an approach that demands more collaboration and more specialized input from more professionals. To do this effectively, schools will need to become less hierarchical and flatter—shifting to using functional and cross-functional teams as the cornerstone of school operations. In functional teams, members share a common base of expertise. Functional teams include subject-area teams like algebra or biology as well as departmental and intradepartmental teams. The guidance and counseling team, math department, and English department are all functional teams.

A cross-functional team contains members from various functional areas and with a range of specialized expertise who come together for a common purpose. Examples of cross-functional teams include: literacy councils, school improvement teams, leadership councils,
attendance committees, and grade-level teams. The members of these teams are all focused on a specific objective—working together to improve coordination and innovation across departments.

Effective teams will produce innovation and improved outcomes (e.g., higher levels of student achievement). However, establishing teams is only the first step. These teams need effective leaders. In this flatter environment, developing leaders becomes a major priority of the school principal. A flatter school design places a premium on collaborative leadership skills. Thus, school leaders must intentionally cultivate new leaders and distribute leadership throughout the school.

In the short run, the success of these teams depends on the collective effort of all staff organized into cross-functional teams who are focused on the success of each student. These teams must have the authority to act in a semi-autonomous manner and share responsibility for promoting student outcomes.

In the long run, distributed leadership is the key to sustaining changes in the school culture and organization. The fewer people who share the vision, the shorter its life. In contrast, shared leadership and a shared vision spread throughout the school will result in long-term, lasting change.

Just as the principal’s role has changed from manager to instructional leader, so too has the school counselor’s role changed. Counselors are now prominent members of the school leadership team and play a critical role in the success of each student and the overall success of the school. They are members of a functional team—counseling—and they lead cross-functional teams that serve to focus school and
community resources on meeting student needs in both academic and nonacademic areas. Such a team is typically composed of classroom teachers, teacher-advisors, and learning specialists in developing personal learning plans.

Counselors also lead a student services team—comprised of administrators, counselors, social workers, attendance officers, a psychologist, and teacher-advisors—that focuses on the nonacademic needs of students. The primary role of the student services team is to address academic, medical, behavioral, and emotional problems, as well as other concerns, such as attendance, that interfere with a student’s academic success.

The specialized knowledge and expertise needed to help every student succeed shifts the role of the counselor away from a direct service provider to that of a facilitator and coordinator of interventions. Counselors work with other team members to jointly identify conditions that interfere with learning by coordinating services to help the student become successful. One of the team members assumes “next step” responsibilities and reports to the team at the next meeting.

Student Services Team meetings in my school worked as follows:

1. As team leader, the counselor presents a student for consideration by the team.

2. Information is presented on student academic performance, discipline and attendance, behavior, health, family history, etc.

3. The student services team discusses the presenting problem and outlines possible approaches.
4. One member of the team leaves the meeting with responsibility for the “next step.”

5. The counselor works with the team member to ensure continuity of service.

6. The counselor continues to introduce the student at subsequent meetings until the problem is successfully resolved.

Significant improvement in the quality of our schools demands that school leaders maximize the use of the collective knowledge and expertise of the entire school staff. One person—one counselor—cannot possibly meet the specialized needs of every student without input and support from other staff members. In this team-oriented environment, counselors must take on an important leadership role.

**Developing the Master Schedule Collaboratively**

If you want to know what makes a teacher tick, have a conversation with that teacher about grading and examine the teacher’s grading practices. Often, the way teachers grade students reveals more about them—their beliefs and attitudes, as well as what motivates them—than it says about student achievement.

Grading practices also impact student behaviors. Teachers who believe that students are motivated by fear of punishment use grades as a threat to scare students. Conversely, teachers who believe that students thrive on encouragement use grades as feedback and as a form of recognition. Thus, grading practices can serve to either encourage or damage student motivation.
Turning from the classroom to the school level, the master schedule is to a school what grading practices are to teachers and classrooms. It reveals the true values and priorities of the school community. Examining the school’s master schedule is like looking at an MRI of the inner workings of a school. It is the window to the school’s soul.

How the master schedule is constructed may be as important as what the master schedule contains. For example, it provides insight into how professionals interact and how key decisions are made in the school. In addition, the process for developing the master schedule can either encourage or discourage staff members from providing input into scheduling decisions about individual students.

By this time, most schools have figured out what they want students to know and be able to do, and they have aligned their curriculum with state standards. In addition, most schools are either developing or have developed common formative assessments that help them decide if students are on track to learn these standards. However, the real test for the school comes when students are not learning. How does the school respond to students who are not succeeding or who need extra help? It is how the school responds to this question that determines whether it is focused on the needs and desires of the adults who work there or on the needs of the students who attend. The master schedule provides an important gauge of this staff vs. student balance.

In adult-focused schools, the master schedule reflects a world designed to address adult needs. There are few or no interventions, since offering these might make it more difficult to schedule students for required courses. All students are expected to complete courses
in the same time frame. There are no double-block classes or flexible time frames for students to complete courses. The best, most experienced teachers are teaching the top students in AP or advanced classes, and the student-teacher ratio is often the lowest in these classes. Finally, in adult-focused schools, teachers with seniority are teaching only higher-level courses, no standard courses.

In student- or learning-focused schools, the master schedule reflects the needs of the students. There are multiple, tiered interventions. For example, instead of one reading intervention, there may be three or more. There are flexible time slots that allow students to progress at their own rates. Accommodations are built into the schedule for students who need math every day or who need three semesters to complete a science course. The best, most experienced teachers are teaching the neediest students. Teachers of higher-level courses also teach standard-level courses. Finally, the neediest students are in the smallest classes.

The process used to build the schedule is also different. The development of the master schedule in an adult-focused school is a closed process, often built by one person behind closed doors. Teachers and other staff members are asked to submit requests, but final decisions rest in the hands of one or a few people. It may be that staff members with an in get what they want. The others get the leftovers. In schools that are adult-focused, students are batch scheduled. All the individual requests are entered into the computer, and every student has the same chance as every other student to obtain their desired courses.

Conversely, the development of the master schedule in student-focused schools is an open process. Schools that are focused on student needs are set up to develop a customized learning plan for each
student. Because mass customization is expensive in terms of time, effort, knowledge, expertise, and resources, the staff works collaboratively in teams specifically established to best meet the needs of each student and in ways that make effective use of school resources. The development of the master schedule is the result of the work of several teams throughout the school.

Teachers are most concerned with what they teach, then with where they teach, and, finally, when they teach. Therefore, instructional teams have the final say about who teaches what subjects. The where can be decided collaboratively across teams or departments. And the when—which involves putting the puzzle together—can be a team effort among the counselor, instructional leaders, and teachers or team leaders. Changes in any one of the inputs are only made with the consent of all involved parties.

In student- or learning-focused schools, individual schedules are constructed collaboratively. Math, science, world language, and social studies teachers meet with their colleagues in their respective disciplines and make course recommendations for specific students that are compiled and shared with counselors. The teachers of students with special needs—including students with disabilities and ELLs—act in an advisory capacity and work in concert with the counselor to hand-schedule these students.

**Individual Learning Plan: Personalization Demands Collaboration**

To ensure that we continue to have a significant number of students who fail, fall through the cracks, and drop out, all we have to do is
do what we did in the past—teach the same lessons using the same methods in the same time frame. We can also perpetuate the same sorting and weeding-out process by scheduling all students in the same manner that we have always scheduled them. We fill out a form, put the form into the computer, and let the chips fall where they may. On the other hand, if we want each student to succeed, every student will need a customized, personal learning plan.

While expectations have risen sharply, schools and school counselors, at best, must do more with the same resources. The question then is how do we raise both the quantity and quality of what we do for students? How do we personalize the school and provide a customized plan for each student with no added resources?

As schools seek to meet student needs, the course offerings and master schedules of schools set up for student success have become more and more complex. There may be multiple reading interventions, several forms of algebra, and various recommended course sequences within various disciplines based on the readiness of the students. Students with weak literacy skills may be better off in certain science courses, while students with weak math skills but stronger literacy skills may be best placed in another science course.

Teachers often complain that students are improperly placed, and the first part of every school year is spent correcting scheduling problems. Unfortunately, the students most in need lose valuable learning time in this scenario and many never catch up. Thus, in reality, schools pay a steep price for correcting problems after the fact. If more time was devoted to scheduling up front, there would be no need to make corrections.
The solution to the problem of properly scheduling students and providing personalized learning plans for each student is to make better use of the resources that we already have. Instead of the math, science, or world language teachers complaining, they need to be directly involved in scheduling every student. This is more than passing on individual recommendations on a form. Subject-area teachers need to take the time to meet, collaborate, and decide on the best recommendation for each student.

Personalization demands such collaboration. The same people working with the same number of students in the same allotted time in the same way will get the same results. It is unrealistic to expect that one person (the counselor) will have the knowledge, expertise, and sophistication needed to provide a customized plan for every student in an increasingly complicated and complex instructional setting.

The old silos must come down. School staff members need to give up the notion that this is my job and that is your job (i.e., teaching is my job and scheduling students is your job). Student success is the shared responsibility of every staff member. The need to provide both access and excellence for every student and the complexity of the curriculum needed to do so means that we need input from professionals with specialized expertise in their field. School counselors can no longer rely on checklists to schedule students, and teachers can no longer afford to remain detached from the scheduling and planning process.

The construction of a personalized learning plan must begin with the person who is the best qualified person to make specific recommendations—the classroom teacher. Subject-area teachers should
analyze the performance of each student in their respective subjects and make recommendations for the next most appropriate course in the sequence. In other words, the specialists in each field should recommend a treatment plan in their area of expertise. Math teachers recommend math courses, science teachers recommend science courses, and so on. These recommendations are then passed on to the counselor and adviser.

A Differentiated, Multi-Tiered Approach to Personalized Planning

The following multi-tiered approach to constructing personal learning plans follows a simple but logical approach. More staff members are involved in the construction of the personalized learning plan of those students most in need, and the counselor assumes the role of a team leader who facilitates the development of each student plan.

Level I Plan—Most secondary schools today help students develop an overall graduation plan that contains a sequence of math, science, social studies, English, world language, and career and technical education elective courses. This plan is sufficient for a significant portion of a school’s population. The Level I Plan is constructed by the counselor after the following:

1. Diagnostic data are collected and analyzed.

2. Performance data, including grades and state and national test results, are collected.

3. Teachers in each department meet, collaborate, and make placement recommendations.
4. Counselor meets with each student and finalizes the personal learning plan.

Level II Plan—Certain students are known to have specific learning needs. ELLs, students with disabilities, and others with specific, identified learning needs should have staff advisers who work with the student and counselor to form a plan. This ensures that these students are placed in courses that provide flexible time allotments, appropriate settings, and required resources. The Level II plan requires that the following steps take place:

1. Diagnostic data are collected and analyzed.

2. Performance data, including grades and state and national test results, are collected.

3. Teachers in each department meet, collaborate, and make recommendations.

4. Teacher-advisor reviews recommendations, compares the recommendations with existing plans (e.g., IEP), and makes recommendations.

5. Counselor meets with teacher-advisor, reviews recommendations, and finalizes the plan.

6. Counselor and teacher-advisor meet with the student and finalize the personal learning plan.
Level III Plan—Some students will need targeted interventions, which will require a high level of specific knowledge and additional inputs from experts in specific academic areas. For example, a student’s diagnostic reading assessment indicates that the student is sufficiently below target that he may need a reading intervention. In this case, the literacy coach or reading specialist should make the placement recommendation. The Level III Plan is constructed as follows:

1. Diagnostic data are collected and analyzed.

2. Performance data, including grades and state and national test results, are collected.

3. Teachers in each department meet, collaborate, and make recommendations.

4. Specialist reviews diagnostic data and makes recommendation.

5. Teacher-advisor reviews recommendations, compares the recommendations with already existing plans (e.g., IEP), and makes recommendation.

6. Counselor meets with teacher-advisor and learning specialist to review recommendations and finalize the plan.

7. Counselor and teacher-advisor meet with the student and finalize the personal learning plan.
The current reality is such that any young adult who does not possess the skills that make them college-, career-, and workplace-ready will effectively be sentenced to a lifetime of marginal employment and second-class citizenship. We must create schools in which every student graduates and where every graduate is college-, career-, and workplace-ready.

This daunting task will require that schools transform themselves from a 20th-century, teacher-focused, factory model that sorts students for success to a 21st-century, student-focused, customized model in which every student receives an individualized approach. Not only must we adapt and change the “old school” structures and processes, we must change the way we work. The old, top-down, centralized school will give way to a flatter, less hierarchical, more collaborative learning environment where leadership is shared and distributed throughout.

The complexity of today’s schools demands that we work closely together to ensure that we leave no stone unturned in our efforts to educate our students. Principals and counselors must work in a collaborative partnership with the entire staff focusing all available resources toward providing each and every student a customized place that offers the best possible chance of success.

Reference