



## Accountability for School Counseling

Larry C. Loesch, Ph.D., NCC

The American School Counselor Association's *ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs* (2005) includes the statement that, "The ASCA National Model promises to direct us [i.e., school counseling professionals] away from inconsistent program implementation toward a united, focused professional school counseling program with one vision in mind" (p. 11). The ASCA National Model does, in fact, provide a better role statement for school counselors, a set of widely-endorsed components for a school program, a coherent conceptual model for school counseling programs, and a strong emphasis on facilitating students' academic, career, and personal/social developments. However, its success in delivering on its promise is more likely to occur because it *requires* that school counselors be accountable for whatever it is they are doing in their school counseling programs. In other words, it lessens emphasis on promotion of *what should be* and places it squarely on *what happens* in school counseling programs.

### Focal Points

Historically, approaches to school counseling accountability have been couched in the context of the methodology used. That is, accountability was viewed as the application of what might be called traditional research paradigms (including quantitative, qualitative, or mixed models) to generate data which were presumed to be indicative of school counseling success and/or effectiveness. Unfortunately, application of the *validity* requirements for use of such models often prohibited their use because the realities of school counseling do not fit easily into those requirements. Although such approaches are still advocated (e.g., Brown & Trusty, 2005), contemporary approaches are focused much more on *what* data are derived as opposed to *how* the data are derived.

This subtle but fundamental shift in perspective on school counseling accountability is reflected in the statement, "School counseling programs are data driven" (ASCA, 2005, p. 16). It is noteworthy that in the context of the ASCA National Model, "data" is used to mean any of a wide variety of types of evidence, not just numbers. Thus, the ASCA emphasis is on generating school counseling effectiveness information through whatever means and in whatever form is best suited to the activity, program, or situation.

The ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2005) indicates that accountability data should be gathered in two broad domains: *school counselor performance* and *program effectiveness*. Evaluation of school counselor performance, particularly in regard to program implementation and management, is

important because appropriate functioning is foundational for school counseling program activities to have any chance to be successful. Evaluation of the school counseling program is essential because it determines whether the activities are benefiting students.

Erford (2007), among others, adds and emphasizes *needs assessment* as a third essential domain for school counseling accountability. Presumably, needs assessment data are used to determine programmatic goals and objectives, which in turn guide and shape school counselor functioning and performance, and point to the criteria against which the school counseling program is evaluated.

### Approaches

Although there has been widely varying attention given to it, accountability has long been addressed in the school counseling literature. Therefore, many different approaches to school counseling accountability have been proffered or recommended. However, four approaches appear to have received the most attention.

The Missouri Comprehensive Guidance Program (MCGP) model was first developed by Gysbers in the late 1970s and is delineated in Gysbers and Henderson (2006). The MCGP has been accepted widely in the school counseling profession, and many elements of it are evident in the ASCA National Model.

Implementation of the MCGP necessitates adoption (e.g., from Gysbers and Henderson, 2006) and/or development and then prioritization of student competencies in three school guidance curriculum content areas: Knowledge of Self and Others, Career Planning and Exploration, and Educational and Vocational Development. After student competencies have been identified, performance indicators that are usually observable and measurable behaviors associated with each competency are developed. Level-specific content and student competencies for each of the three areas have been presented for the elementary, middle, and secondary school levels (Gysbers & Henderson, 2006).

What did, and still does, differentiate the MCGP from many other school counseling program models is its requirement that generation of accountability data is integral to effective implementation of the MCGP model. In general, the accountability data required are evidence of the extent to which students have achieved each of the competencies in the specific MCGP program being implemented, that is, of the extent to which students are engaging in desired behaviors. Student self-ratings and checklists, and rating scales and checklists completed by others such as school counselors, teachers, and/or

parents often are the primary means to obtain accountability data. Although ratings and checklists have been criticized as being relatively weak evaluative approaches, they are functionally efficient (Brown & Trusty, 2005).

Stone and Dahir (2007) developed the MEASURE program as a six-step accountability process. The first step is determination of the **Mission**, which involves aligning school counseling activities with the school's and program's goals. **Element(s)** is the next step. It involves determining which data are relevant and to be gathered. The third step is **Analyze**, which involves examining the data in different ways, including disaggregating the data across elements and by student characteristics and/or situations. The fourth step is **Stakeholders-Unite**, which involves engaging various (school counseling program) stakeholders to influence the students, and therefore the data, toward desired goals. **Result(s)**, the fifth step, involves reflection upon the data to determine appropriate future activities in the program. The last step is **Educate**, which involves informing stakeholders, including students, of what was found and what will be done subsequently in the program.

The MEASURE model provides little specificity about which and how accountability data are to be generated, however numerous examples of application of the model to actual school counseling programs are provided (Stone & Dahir, 2007). This approach maximizes adaptability across school counseling programs. The effective use of the MEASURE model is to a large extent contingent upon a school counselor's creativity in determining which data to collect. However, that contingency makes it a personally engaging model for many school counselors.

In the 1990s, C.D. and S.K. Johnson began to advocate for a shift from a school counseling perspective focused upon which services should be provided to one focused on the actual impacts of whichever services are provided (Johnson, Johnson, & Downs, 2006). The "results-based" model they developed to reflect this perspective contains 12 elements: (a) mission, (b) philosophy, (c) glossary, (d) goals, (e) [student] competencies, (f) management system, (g) results agreements, (h) needs data, (i) results plans, (j) monitoring system, (k) master calendar of events, and (l) advisory council. Components of this model also are reflected in the ASCA National Model.

Much like in the MEASURE model, determination of the specific accountability data to be generated is left to the discretion of the school counselor to allow for adaptation across settings and situations. However, Johnson, Johnson, and Downs (2006) provide numerous forms and guidelines for the types of accountability evidence to be associated with each element of their results-based model.

Loesch and Ritchie (2007) did not present a model for school counseling, but rather addressed the broad context and

many possible methodologies for school counseling accountability. They emphasized that two themes underlie effective accountability activities. The first is that school counseling programs have numerous stakeholder groups and that those groups have varying degrees of association with and/or influence on the programs. Therefore, accountability evidence must be both generated and presented differentially for various stakeholder groups. The second is that, although any of a variety of types of evidence can be used for accountability purposes, the strongest evidence is clear indication of student behavior change.

Loesch and Ritchie (2007) provided a wide variety of guidelines, resources, and examples for school counselor accountability organized around the major systems of the ASCA National Model, but did not prescribe which methods should be used for any specific school counseling program. They, too, viewed school counselor determination of which accountability activities to use as facilitating engagement in and ownership of accountability processes.

### Conclusion

The long standing desire for school counselors to solidify and enhance their professional identity by being accountable for their work has great opportunity to achieve fruition primarily because of the availability of new models and better resources for accountability in the school counseling profession. The ASCA promise will be delivered exactly to the extent that school counselors embrace and engage in worthwhile accountability activities.

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**Larry C. Loesch, Ph.D., NCC, is a professor in the Department of Counselor Education at the University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida.**

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