



## School Counseling at the Crossroads of Change

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Nationally, comprehensive school counseling programs are promoted as the way of work for the 21<sup>st</sup> century professional by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), the 50 state school counseling association affiliates, and by the associations that support and have an interest in the work of school counselors. Since the early 1990's, the majority of state school counselor associations have used elements of the comprehensive and/or developmental process as the underpinning for program design, delivery, and evaluation. The publication of the American School Counselor Association's National Model (ASCA, 2005) emphatically shifted practice from acts of service to a structured and outcome based program and integrated a new set of transformed skills as the process to promote the content. The ASCA Model and the multitude of subsequent state spin offs have the potential to have a far-reaching impact on the work of every school counselor and on every student they serve.

Although conversations around outcome and scientifically based evidence in school counseling programs are long standing, today's accountability agenda prompts the question: *What has been the impact of these national initiatives on the field, and equally importantly, on the individual practitioner?* Have counselors taken hold of their destiny and moved the unified new vision into action? Or, have the majority of practitioners shied away from challenging the status quo, caught between traditional expectations and mores?

### A Decade of Change

The ASCA National Standards for School Counseling Programs (Campbell & Dahir, 1997) were developed in response to the GOALS 2000: Educate America Act and served as the "single most legitimizing document in the [school counseling] profession" (Bowers, Hatch, Schwallie-Giddis, 2001). As a result of standards development, ASCA joined the ranks of the academic disciplines by providing a content framework to better define the role of school counseling programs. School counseling, as a discipline, took its first step forward in the age of accountability by publicly proclaiming a unified vision of what students would know and be able to do as a result of the work of school counselors.

The Education Trust, with support from the Dewitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, sought to identify how school counselors need to act to help *all* students succeed academically. The resulting Transforming School Counseling Initiative (Education Trust, 1997) challenged school counselors to commit to contribute to closing both the opportunity and achievement gaps. With its initial roots in refocusing the vision and focus of school counselor preparation at the masters' degree level, the movement intentionally spilled over to the world of the practitioner.

The ASCA National Model integrated the work of Gysbers and Henderson (2006), Johnson & Johnson (2003) and Myrick

(2003), added the content of the ASCA National Standards, and the process of the Transforming School Counseling Initiative. The ASCA National Model contemporized the comprehensive foundation, management and delivery systems, and the addition of accountability aligned the program with the expectations of 21st-century schools. The Model offered the mechanism with which school counselors and school counseling teams design, coordinate, implement, manage, and evaluate their programs for students' success. The integration of these four program components with the transformed skills of advocacy, leadership, collaboration and teaming, and use of data, in addition to the art and science of counseling, create the 21<sup>st</sup> century comprehensive school counseling program.

### Impact on the Field

Recent research has revealed that the profession has embraced the need for standards, structure, and a commitment to social justice (Foster, Young, & Hermann, 2005). However, consensus with new belief systems does not guarantee a change in school counselor behavior. Advocacy, leadership, collaboration and teaming, and use of data, in addition to the tradition three C's of counseling, consultation, and coordination are the essential skill set for practice.

Evidence has yet to be brought forth that sheds light as to the impact of these three initiatives—the National Standards, the Transforming School Counseling Initiative, and the ASCA National Model—on practice, or on the acceptance of school counselors as effective and valued educational partners. Recent studies related to components of the ASCA National Model have demonstrated that progress is in process. Foster, et al (2005) determined that school counselors are performing work activities that promote student academic, career, and personal/social development as defined by the ASCA National Standards. School counselor accountability action research plans (Stone & Dahir, 2007) revealed the contributions of school counselors to critical school improvement data, while Studer, Oberman, and Womack (2006) examined the relationship of strategic interventions to school counseling effectiveness. Brown and Trusty (2005) challenged the profession by suggesting that school counseling programs have promised more than they can deliver with regard to academic achievement. To bring further attention to the importance of evidence, 2006 editions of *The ASCA Counselor* and *Professional School Counseling* focused exclusively on research and practices that promote school counselor effectiveness in practice.

ASCA and the Education Trust have called for a shift in the role of the professional school counselor from that of service provider to one of promoting optimal achievement for all students. School counselors can "become the academic conscience of the school, insuring that the school remains focused on student achievement and accepts responsibility for

student outcomes” (Hart & Jacobi, 1992, p.49). School counselors play a pro-active role in identifying and responding to complex academic, social and personal issues on a daily basis and have an ethical obligation to ensure equity in educational access. With pressure on schools to raise academic performance, school counselors identify and rectify barriers that inhibit closing achievement and opportunity gaps.

### **Building Capacity for Action**

As role ambiguity persists, school counselors continue to face: confusion about her/his work; a lack of clarity within the job tasks or role description; a lack of understanding about peer expectations and the scope of responsibility; and a disconnect between preparation and practice. After 100 years of responsive strategies, the advent of the National Standards, the Transforming School Counseling Initiative, and the ASCA National Model, pressured the profession to fast forward to implementation. However, each of these new paradigms required a rethinking and reframing from business as usual. Change cannot come quickly without an allowance for the field to acknowledge, embrace, and move forward with a thoughtful process. Leadership among the state and national associations can agree to unify their focus, and collaborate and strategize to build capacity and bring about the essential changes and the desired results in the field. School counselors, as individuals and as a profession, can take forward steps to:

1. Align their beliefs and attitudes with their behaviors by assessing their readiness to make change, not talk about change. Instruments that offer baseline analyses of the components of comprehensive school counseling and the skills essential to changing practice are available.
2. Use the provisions of No Child Left Behind (2001) as a means to demand an entitlement to professional development.
3. Act as leaders, social justice advocates, data informed practitioners, collaborators and team players, and managers of resources at all times with all students.
4. Align school counseling program goals and objectives with the building and district school improvement plan. Data informed practice drives the school counseling bottom line.
5. Build the comprehensive program around critical data elements. Strategic interventions focused on school report card data demonstrate the effectiveness of school counseling.
6. Partner with local institutions of higher education to prepare the next generation of practitioners by sharing best practices in both the schoolhouse and on the campus.
7. Commit to a campaign to educate stakeholders as to the contributions of a data informed, evidence based school counseling program committed to closing both the opportunity and achievement gaps.

Building capacity will result in the acquisition of new attitudes, knowledge and skills to produce the desired result: helping students succeed. Counselors who do not add to the bottom line are considered superfluous (Martin, 2002). The

school counseling profession has yet to articulate and demonstrate to important stakeholders the contributions made to meeting the diverse achievement needs of K-12 students through data informed transformed, comprehensive, and collaborative practice. The ASCA National Standards, Transforming School Counseling, and the ASCA National Model are visions waiting for the school counseling community to take action and achieve their intended purpose i.e., to contribute to the goals of school improvement and improve student achievement.

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