

THE LEARNING Principal

Inside

- Get a clue — use that data, p. 2
- Lab classes build leadership, responsibility, and collaborative culture, p. 3
- Tool: Principal and counselor opportunity survey, p. 6
- Tool: Develop a new focus for counselor learning, p. 7

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EVERY EDUCATOR ENGAGES IN EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EVERY DAY SO EVERY STUDENT ACHIEVES

A FRESH PERSPECTIVE

School counselors prove valuable partners in understanding student needs

By Anthony Armstrong

Several years ago, Mobile County (Ala.) Public Schools saw a need for school counselors to take a more active role in student achievement and move away from the quasi-administrative duties they were traditionally assigned. Part of that transition process involved data analysis, which is where Valerie Johnson, the school counselor at Collier Elementary, made an important discovery.

While examining school and state testing data, attendance records, and discipline data, Johnson noticed that a small group of students in 4th and 5th grades were consistently underperforming and needed more support.

Johnson realized that with her knowledge and skills in mental health, and her close knowledge of the students and teachers in her school, she was uniquely positioned to help those students.

Johnson started meeting specific students in small groups. They discussed study and organiza-



tion skills, behavior modifications, anger management, and family issues. Eventually, she created a mentoring program for academically struggling and at-risk students.

Johnson also saw a trend within the data in low-level discipline reports, such as talking out of turn or not completing homework. She decided to work with teachers during the summer break on how to handle some of the smaller things through improved classroom management, so Johnson created professional learning sessions to help teachers with classroom management skills.

“Valerie walked into my office and said, ‘We can do better,’” said LaVeral Graf, principal for Collier Elementary and former school counselor herself. “We discussed several teachers who needed help, researched solutions, and finally

selected training for Valerie and every teacher to undertake, which was a big part of the discovery process.”

“Mrs. Graf and I talked many times over a period of several months over what action steps would truly move the data,” Johnson said. “I kept looking at all different types of

Continued on p. 4

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Continued from p. 1

data to discover where we could best align our efforts. I've really focused my efforts this year in looking at whether or not what I do is effective. Are my students making better grades? Is their behavior improving? Sometimes I don't like what the data is telling me, but the data doesn't lie. Sometimes I have to change the way I'm addressing an issue, but I just keep focusing on how successful my kids are."

As a result of Johnson's data-driven leadership and contributions to teacher professional learning, students who participated in the program saw an increase in quarterly reading and math scores and a decrease in detention.

COUNSELORS CAN BE STRONG LEADERSHIP PARTNERS

Traditionally, counselors have been asked to address students' emotional or academic planning needs. Their roles, however, are changing as they become more active contributors to schools' improvement plans and student achievement. According to a 2011 report from Education Trust, an educational nonprofit that strives to close the gap in student achievement, school counselors have a position that provides them with insight into success and failure trends, which policies have negative effects on students, and how best to improve student successes (p. 1). These findings reflect a growing trend in redefining the roles of school counselors to make fuller use of their insights and expertise.

"A school counselor can be a strong partner in helping principals facilitate and move forward with goals for the school," said Peggy Hines, director of Education Trust's National Center for Transforming School Counseling. "They have a picture of the school, parents, and local community

Learning Forward BELIEF

Schools' most complex problems are best solved by educators collaborating and learning together.

that no one else has; they know which teachers are doing well, what resources are available in the county and where to find them, and where the power is to create change; and they can help get through the different stages of a group's ability to work well together. When you put it all together, counselors are powerful partners for a principal to use as a leader."

By working with Education Trust, Mobile counselors learned to work with data, align the guidance program with the school's improvement plans, and become change leaders. "We use data from attendance, discipline, and testing all together," explained Johnson. "This helps us see where the problems lie and gear programs to meet the needs of those students."

With her increased leadership role, Johnson has been able to make valuable contributions to the school's professional learning. She encourages other counselors to do the same and to start with the data. "Sometimes it is hard to say that something needs to be done, but once I showed the data to the principal, she got it," said Johnson. "Counselors need to stand up and be leaders and share what they find."

"When I observe teachers and meet and talk with them," said Graf, "I can use Valerie as a resource. Just like I use my reading coach to teach strategies. Using her as an aide in working with teachers is a tremendous resource."

Johnson's shared leadership role includes learning about the school's improvement plan, what the goals need to be, and the action steps needed to achieve those goals. She meets with a leadership team throughout the year and helps write the improvement plan annually. "I want to make sure that I have a good understanding of what the school needs and that we are truly helping students. I look at what training will help us learn what to do to address the needs of students."

Mobile County counselors and principals worked with Education Trust to make redefining the roles of counselors a systemwide initiative. To help with vertical alignment from elementary to high school, principals at feeder schools meet on a regular basis, and the corresponding school counselors will meet quarterly to discuss relevant issues.

THE FIRST STEP IS LEARNING ABOUT THE POSSIBILITIES

"School counselors are actually educators whose primary focus is academic achievement, just as classroom teachers focus on academic achievement," said Kwok-Sze Wong, executive director of the American School Counselor Association. "While teachers help students learn the actual

Continued on p. 5

ABOUT THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR TRANSFORMING SCHOOL COUNSELING

The National Center for Transforming School Counseling works with a network of organizations, state departments of education, school counselor professional associations, higher education institutions, and school districts dedicated to transforming school counselors into powerful agents of change in their schools and in the lives of students.

By equipping school counselors with the data and knowledge to help schools raise achievement and close gaps, the center takes school counselors from the margins to the mainstream of the mission of schools—preparing all students for access and success in a wide array of postsecondary options.

For more information: www.edtrust.org/dc/tsc

Continued from p. 4

subjects, school counselors help students address other factors that could present obstacles to learning.”

Wong recommends that teachers and administrators learn about the changing roles of school counselors and how they can work together more effectively. “With the pressure to demonstrate academic achievement, primarily through standardized test scores, many teachers don’t realize that working with their school counselors can enhance academic achievement, not detract from it.”

At the same time, Wong recommends that teachers and administrators engage in professional learning in areas such as human development, abnormal behavior and development, and other counseling-related topics to be more effective. “Of course, we don’t think teachers and other educators should be school counselors,” he said, “but if everyone had a knowledge of some counseling principles, they could incorporate those ideas into their own practice as well as work more effectively together for the benefit of the students.”

Counselors, on the other hand, will need to learn how to take the knowledge and skill sets they already have and apply them to leadership positions. According to Hines, “Principals can show them how to use data to create urgency for change. Transcripts, test scores, attendance records, and disciplinary reports are all pieces of data the counselor has that are critical in finding choke points in the school.”


Hines suggests that counselors start with a transcript analysis to see where students may be struggling, and then conduct an analysis of the master schedule to look at how resources are deployed within the school to see if they are deployed equitably. “Counselors are the eyes and ears of where schools need to improve,” said Hines. “But where to use that information effectively is not always included in their preservice education.”


According to Hines, principals are often not educated in how counselors can be a valuable partner in spotting problems and guiding agendas for preparing students for college and career readiness. “There needs to be professional learning for principals to understand what counselors learn in preservice and what they bring to the position,” said Hines. “Principals need this to be able to hire people and know what kinds of questions to ask.”


Hines suggests principals start with having conversations with counseling staff about the needs of the school. “Talk with them about how the counseling program is or is not aligned with the actual goals of the school,” said Hines. “How are the counselors working with kids and with staff and administrators to ensure that all of the children are college and career ready?”


If a district does not have elementary counselors, Hines said, middle and high school counselors could collaborate

Demand for health and social services increases as their availability decreases

 **64%** of teachers report that, in the last year, the number of students and families needing health and social support services has increased.

 **35%** of teachers report that the number of students coming to school hungry has increased.

 **28%** of teachers (including **34%** of high school teachers) have seen reductions or eliminations of health or social services.

 **29%** of teachers (including **32%** of high school teachers) have seen reductions or eliminations of after-school programs.

Source: MetLife. (2011). *The MetLife survey of the American teacher: Teachers, parents and the economy.* New York: Author. Available at www.metlife.com/teachersurvey.

with principals on identifying and addressing elementary-level issues.

“If principals are inappropriately handing off tasks to school counselors that should be done by someone else, they are impeding the counselor’s role,” said Hines. “There are lots of counselors who spend a lot of time counting tests, filling in scantrons, and setting up testing. Principals can help by recognizing the value of a school counselor’s time, acknowledging the potential of their unique contributions and powerful partnerships, and figuring out how to clear their plate to allow them to do the work.”

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Budget decreases and layoffs highlight need for redefining counselor roles

Large numbers of teachers are reporting budget decreases, layoffs, increases in class size, and reductions in programs and services at the same time that student and family needs are increasing. Schools may be faced with redefining their counselors' roles by necessity, and in the process may find better ways to leverage the counselor's contributions to teachers and to student achievement.

Teachers in schools where there have been budget decreases are more than twice as likely as others to report that their school has experienced layoffs of classroom teachers and teacher reassignments.

 **76%** of teachers reported that their school's budget has decreased during the past 12 months.

 **66%** of teachers reported that their school has had layoffs of teachers, parent/community liaisons or other school staff in the past year.

 **44%** of teachers reported that their school has had layoffs of classroom teachers.

Source: MetLife. (2011). *The MetLife survey of the American teacher: Teachers, parents and the economy.* New York: Author. Available at www.metlife.com/teachersurvey.

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