

# THE LEARNING Principal

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Spring 2012

Vol. 7, No. 3

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

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## Get a clue — use that data!

**G**rowing up, I loved playing the game of Clue. Holding cards that contain pieces to the mystery, players gather clues to determine who committed the crime, the room in which it occurred, and the weapon of choice. In schools, I believe we often go about our work like a game of Clue. The mystery we're trying to solve: How do we increase the performance of our students?

For educators, the clues can be found in the data. However, we frequently do not share valuable data, as if the rules of the game required it. Several years ago, Chicago's Jones College Prep wanted to document how of-

ten each of the school's students engaged in dialogue in class. Staff created color-coded charts showing how often students spoke and in which classes. Equipped with these data, staff began to speculate why some students engaged more

in some classes as compared to others. Issues ranged from the number and types of opportunities students had to participate, to teacher-questioning techniques, to classroom seating. In time, staff implemented strategies and assessed the impact of their efforts. Instead of keeping the data about student engagement a secret as if holding on to a Clue card, Jones established an environment where educators shared this information and used it to

improve teaching and learning.

Another common data mistake is to keep those who hold critical clues out of important conversations. School counselors are often left out of important school leadership and grade-level team conversations. Their schedules are often structured so they don't have the opportunity to share their expertise or the data they've collected. A 2008 survey administered by the American School Counselor Association, National Association of Secondary School Principals, and College Board asked principals and counselors to rate aspects of their professional relationships (Finkelstein, 2009). A common theme that emerged was the feeling among both principals and counselors that they don't have time to communicate and share data and analyses that could ultimately benefit students. The survey highlights the importance of including the school counselor when the leadership teams discuss data and the corresponding strategies to meet the needs of all students. (See pp. 6-7 for tools to help generate and guide these types of conversations.)

At the district level, various departments responsible for managing central office resources often collect their own data and use it to inform the delivery of the programs they manage. Such an approach keeps important information out of the hands of individuals who need it most. In their 2010 study, *Central Office Transformation for District-Wide Teaching and Learning Improvement* (Honig, Copland, Rainey,

Lorton, & Newton, 2010), University of Washington researchers described how several successful districts' central office staff asked themselves questions like: What kind of resources (and data) do they need, and how can I help secure them? Are data management systems structured in ways that enable principals and school teams to easily manipulate the data to answer their specific questions?

If the rules of Clue were changed so that all players placed their cards face up, the game would take seconds to play. Everyone would have all the data they needed to solve the mystery. I'm suggesting we change the rules in our schools and turn our cards face up as we work to meet the needs of our students. Together, we have more data than we realize, and our students ultimately win the game.

### REFERENCES

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# Lab classes help build leadership, collective responsibility, and collaborative culture

*As told to Anthony Armstrong*

Our administration decided eight years ago that we wanted to have model classrooms in literacy and math at every grade level, designed to have teacher leaders leading the way in implementing instructional frameworks.

First, we looked at the curriculum and defined, as a staff, what best practices should be implemented in every classroom. We built the model classrooms around the instructional frameworks we developed for literacy and numeracy. Our instructional frameworks define what we have agreed as a staff should be happening in each classroom. Additionally, each year we analyze the student achievement data and examine the needs of students. Our professional learning was then designed around the components of the instructional frameworks and the data from student achievement.

We didn't like the word "model" for the classes, because we wanted our school to be a place where everyone learns, including every teacher and adult, not just the students. The term "lab classes" connotes that anyone can come in and learn about new practices that people are trying. The focus is on learning and improving our professional practice.

Teachers from each grade level are members of the lab classes. They are responsible for providing teacher leadership for implementing best practices and facilitating learning for their grade

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level. The lab classes are a place where colleagues can observe and peer coaching can take place. The goal is that every teacher serves as a participant in one of the lab class opportunities. The lab class members meet after school and examine student work, participate in book studies, learn at deeper levels about research-based practices, and plan ways to redeliver the learning to the other teachers.

Two instructional coaches facilitate the lab classes, one for literacy and one for math. These coaches are free to coach during the day, so they are in classrooms with teachers, where they observe, support implementation of best practices, and provide individualized professional learning.

Since we only have two instructional coaches, every staff member must take responsibility for raising everyone else up. To meet this need, we have developed peer coaching opportunities through the lab classes, and have worked to grow the number of teachers trained in coaching.

Additionally, a full-time substitute is in our building on a daily basis. She provides coverage that allows the teachers to observe their colleagues. The teachers then meet to debrief about the lesson and observation, talk about what they saw, and give each

other feedback. The focus is on professional learning, growth, and continuous improvement.

Our staff knows that the underlying premise of everything we do is equity. We have to guarantee that every student that walks in the door has a high-quality, highly effective teacher. We know as a staff that we have a collective responsibility for making this happen.

I was determined when I became a principal that I would have a building full of leaders who were going to take responsibility for instructional leadership and not go back to their team and repeat, "Here's what we have to do now." It took a change in culture to get here. Initially, some people were reluctant to change. It was year three before we had a staff that was committed to doing the right work. Five years later, we are a well-oiled machine. The teachers all feel accountable for providing a highly effective teacher for every student, so we don't have to convince people about or mandate best practices. We have grown from closed doors with staff members doing their own individualized work to an open, collaborative culture of collective responsibility.



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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

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### **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](http://www.edtrust.org/dc/tsc)**

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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](http://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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## Principal and counselor opportunity survey

Have the principal and school counselors complete their own copies of this form separately to rate the presence of the opportunities to strengthen the counselors' role.

When complete, compare the principal's results to the counselors' results to determine where gaps in perceptions exist and use those to generate dialogue.

**SCORING**

1 = Not present 2 = Occasionally present 3 = Usually present 4 = Very present

**Do you feel that opportunities are available for counselors to ...**

<b>CONTRIBUTE</b>				
Integrate the counseling program with the academic mission of the school.	1	2	3	4
Better leverage areas of specialty to contribute to the overall success of the school.	1	2	3	4
Use a wide range of data to assess student needs, establish measurable goals, and measure the results of initiatives designed to improve students' academic success.	1	2	3	4
Use data to ensure accountability for school counseling programs and shed light on policies and practices that hinder student achievement.	1	2	3	4
<b>LEAD</b>				
Advocate to remove systemic barriers that hinder student success.	1	2	3	4
Use counseling skills to assist ALL students in overcoming social, personal, and academic barriers.	1	2	3	4
Help ALL students identify potential career paths and create plans to accomplish their career goals.	1	2	3	4
Mobilize human, community, and financial resources to support high standards for ALL students.	1	2	3	4
Participate in shared leadership, such as contributing to teacher professional learning, the school's improvement plan, curriculum teams, or other ways to improve student achievement.	1	2	3	4
<b>COLLABORATE</b>				
Meet with counselors at linked feeder schools.	1	2	3	4
Collaborate with other educators in the building.	1	2	3	4

# Develop a new focus for counselor learning

To help craft new goals for your school counselor(s), use this form to record the discussions that occur after analyzing and reflecting on student and subgroup data.

What student strengths do these data highlight?

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What student needs do these data highlight?

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What are the implications of the data we examined for our counselor program?

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On what areas could we focus our collective efforts? What are the pros and cons of each?

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Which area will we select as an intensive focus for our team's work?

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What results do we want for our students by the end of the school year?

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<b>TEAM FOCUS: General area of student need we will address.</b>

Adapted from: Jolly, A. (2008). Deciding on a team focus. *Team to teach: A facilitator's guide to professional learning teams*. Oxford, OH: NSDC.

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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](http://www.metlife.com/teachersurvey).

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