

# School Accountability and Leadership: Principal-Counselor Collaboration

By

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## **Abstract**

*The present thrust in public schools toward accountability in guaranteeing academic and self-development success for all students requires principals and counselors to provide collaborative leadership in their campuses. Through collaborative leadership, principals can tap the expertise of counselors to improve overall student success. This article discusses the importance of a collaborative format of leadership between school principals and counselors and delineates possible areas of collaboration.*

## **Introduction**

Following the enactment of the No Child Left Behind legislation act (U.S. Department of Education, 2001), there is an increasing demand for more accountability in public education (Beesley, 2004; Dahir & Stone, 2009; House & Hayes, 2002; Janson, Militello, & Kosine, 2008) and schools are presently experiencing great pressure to guarantee academic and self-development success by raising academic achievement at all levels for all students (Amatea, 2005; Davis, 2006; Johnson & Johnson, 2005; Stone & Dahir, 2007). In order to comply

with this standard, administrators, counselors, and teachers have, and continue to, reconsider and revise their roles and strategies (Amatea; Janson et al.). For instance, while the general trend for teachers is to shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered strategies (Amatea), counselors are being challenged to not only consider themselves as agents of social change and advocates of students but also as educational leaders (Schmidt, 2008).

As leaders, school counselors are expected to provide support for all students and their teachers (Webb & Myrick, 2003) and avail information to administrators and legislators (Whiston & Sexton, 1998). At the same time, they are being challenged to evaluate their school counseling programs and determine how those programs impact student success (Stone & Dahir, 2007). According to Dollarhide (2003), counselors cannot succeed in this endeavor without the collaboration of building principals.

In recognition of the importance of collaboration of counselors and principals (Niebuhr, Niebuhr, & Cleveland, 1999), the American School Counselor Association's school counselors' model (ASCA, 2005)

mandates school counselors to pursue change through collaborative leadership. Indeed, collaborative leadership between principals and counselors is inevitable as both groups are charged with some of the same responsibilities (Amatea, 2005). For instance, principals and counselors are charged with the responsibility of ensuring that all students have access to mental health services. Whereas principals are expected to provide greater access to mental health services either by establishing “school-based full-service centers” or “supporting the development of community coordinating teams of service providers” (Amatea, p. 1), counselors are required to provide direct services such as individual or group counseling to all groups of students (Balkin & Leddick, 2005) and/or facilitate referrals to outside agencies (Geltner & Leibforth, 2008).

This article is a review of literature on how school principals and counselors can adopt a collaborative form of leadership to ensure the success of all students. According to Heppner and Heppner (2004), researchers become aware of existing constructs in their respective disciplines through the review of literature. Consequently, they are better placed to produce quality writing that “adds to the literature in unique and substantive ways” (Heppner & Heppner, p. 52). This article is divided into five parts. First, the present situation on principal-counselor collaborative leadership is examined. Second, the rationale for collaborative leadership is discussed. Third, the unique position that school counselors occupy is described. Fourth, working with students with disabilities and diverse populations, crisis intervention, and organizing, analyzing, and interpreting data are briefly explained as examples of areas wherein collaborative leadership can work best. And, fifth, conditions for collaborative leadership are delineated.

### ***Present Situation***

According to Amatea (2005), school principals are not aware of school counselors’ leadership skills as “leadership role conceptions of school counselors depicted in the counseling literature are not evident in the school administration literature” (p. 2). In fact, as Beale and McCay (2001) observed, “most principals, do not fully understand the role of the school counselor in today’s schools” (p. 257). This situation could be a result of different philosophical training orientations that predispose the two groups to employ different problem solving paradigms in schools (Shoffner & Williamson, 2000).

Accordingly, since administrators and teachers do not seem to recognize the contribution school counselors can make in school leadership, general education reforms, and overall student success (House & Hayes, 2002), collaborative leadership lacks in schools across the nation (Edmonson, Fisher, Brown, Irby, & Lunenburg, 2002). Instead, a top-down authoritative structure, considered obsolete in addressing present needs, is prevalent. With such a model that propagates the concept of principals as the sole leaders in schools (Janson et al., 2008), the maximum achievement for all students (U.S. Department of Education, 2001) will be a great challenge to realize.

In particular, school principals view counselors as ancillary to the mission of the school and often exclude them from fully participating in the ongoing standards-based school reforms (Amatea, 2005; Dahir & Stone, 2009; House & Hayes, 2002). Since the ultimate responsibility of effective utilization of all school-based personnel is vested with the principals (Dollarhide, Smith, & Lemberger, 2007; Lieberman), their attitude would either promote or jeopardize the utility of leadership density. Yet, it is often the school principal who

determines the tasks and responsibilities of a counselor in the school (Lieberman, 2004). Consequently, many school counselors are often assigned duties and responsibilities unrelated to their expertise (Schmidt, 2008).

The practice of assigning counselors duties and responsibilities unrelated to their expertise has promoted the perception that counselors are just extra pairs of hands to be used for miscellaneous duties (Amatea, 2005). As a result, they are assigned roles such as hall and/or lunchroom supervisors, bus duty, disciplinarian, front office receptionist, or substitute teaching. Worse still, many have been relegated as overpaid clerks with primary responsibilities of changing schedules and administering tests (Beale & McCay, 2001). Such use of counselors is not only uneconomical, inefficient, and ineffective (Lieberman, 2004) but also causes counselors to feel left out. Unfortunately, when left out, “school counselors can literally undo the effects of efforts to meet higher academic standards” (House & Hayes, 2002, p. 261).

#### *Rationale for Collaborative Leadership*

For all students to achieve optimal success in today’s dynamic school environments (Dimmitt, 2003; House & Hayes, 2002), all stakeholders must adopt a collaborative leadership format (Amatea, 2005; House & Hayes). As Beesley (2004) recommended, counselors of the 21<sup>st</sup> century should not only serve as student advocates, team members, and advisors to students, teachers, parents and the community but also as leaders in collaboration with principals and their assistants. For that reason, administrators can no longer continue to omit school counselors from their leadership teams as they greatly influence students’ dreams and aspirations (House & Hayes). Furthermore, their responsibilities are intricately linked to student courses of study with direct impact to overall student success (Dimmitt). Indeed,

as Shoffner & Williamson (2000) suggested, efficient and effective academic, personal, and social programs for all students can only be realized when counselors and principals espouse collaborative leadership. Indeed, school principals who have adopted this form of leadership have noticed positive outcomes (Amatea, 2005).

In a qualitative study on school administrators’ expectations of counselors serving in their schools, Amatea (2005) reported that 12% of the respondents strongly believed that counselors should play an active leadership role with staff and in the school as a whole. An even higher number, 34%, of participating school principals indicated that they preferred a collaborative leadership approach with counselors assuming consulting roles with parents, students, other professionals such as psychologists, and the community. In addition, one of the principals noted that “as a result of her counselor’s influence and leadership, she and her staff had changed how they thought about students’ academic problems and the role students could have in assessing their own problems” (p. 7). Obviously, collaborative leadership positively impacts schools.

According to Janson et al. (2008), counselors and principals could effectively function interdependently with mutual support, understanding, and advice. In view of that, administrators should solicit and rely on the school counselors to assist “in helping all students gain access to rigorous academic preparation that will lead to greater opportunity for all students” (House & Hayes, p. 250). For this to be accomplished, administrators should be willing to tap and utilize skills and knowledge of other professionals in their campuses (Janson et al.) such as the unique group facilitation and mediation skills that counselors possess (Beale & McCay, 2001). By employing these skills, counselors can be

instrumental in rallying and fostering supportive relationships among students, faculty, and staff thereby creating a sense of community in schools (House & Hayes). Furthermore, by including counselors in their administrative teams, principals would be expanding the quantity and quality of leadership density in their schools and exploiting available expertise to promote student success (Lieberman, 2004). Moreover, collaborative leadership between principals and counselors could enhance cooperative relationships and promote the realization of a shared vision and excellence (Edmonson et al., 2002; Shofnner & Williamson, 2000). Shared visions provide motivation and energy for any organization (Amatea 2005; Lieberman).

#### **Counselors' Unique Position**

Counselors are in a unique position whereby they personally interact with students, teachers, parents, and other members of the community (Amatea, 2005; House & Hayes, 2002). As such, they are better able to “view the school from a broader perspective than many of their teaching peers” (Beale & McCay, 2001, p. 258). In this unique leadership position, counselors are “eyes and ears” of the school as they not only hear but also understand and know more about parents, students, teacher, and the community (House & Hayes). In fact, they are more of “ears” than “eyes” as they are trained to effectively listen and, discretely and carefully, maintain confidentiality (Lommen, 2007).

Indeed, school counseling is a key position with “a sizable role in creating and supporting systemic changes that benefit all students” (Janson et al., 2008, p. 353). Therefore, there is a high likelihood for students, parents, and teachers to share important information that could affect overall student success. Because of this unique position that counselors occupy, they can collaboratively provide leadership in

working with children with disabilities and diverse populations, crisis intervention efforts, and in organizing, analyzing and interpreting data among other areas.

#### ***Working with Children with Disabilities and Diverse Populations***

School counselors are developmental specialists and student advocates (Beale & McCay, 2001). Hence, they, as part of the leadership team (Clark & Breman, 2009), can advice principals in the “creation of a cohesive and inclusive plan of study that ensures educational equity, access, and academic success for all students” (Beale & McCay, p. 257). Their input in working with children with disabilities and those form diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds is invaluable.

Since school counselors are trained to serve and improve education outcomes for all students (Clark & Breman, 2009; Schmidt, 2008), they are conversant with the special education process and could be instrumental in discussing and formulating social, academic, and emotional needs for children with special needs (Beale & McCay, 2001; Klotz, Canter, & Silver, 2006). In addition, they can assist in creating suitable plans for service for children with severe emotional and behavioral needs (Beale & McCay, 2001) as well as establishing contacts and facilitating referrals to outside mental health agencies (Geltner & Leibforth, 2008).

With their training in effective communication (Dollarhide et al., 2007), counselors can model positive communication to guide all stakeholders involved in formulating Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) in identifying student strengths and environmental resources (Geltner & Leibforth, 2008). Positive communication is focused on simplifying language to enhance comprehension while encouraging group/committee participants to share their

perspectives. In particular, this helps parents, who sometimes feel alienated when educational jargon is used, to understand and follow proceedings in IEP meetings and share their opinions (Childre & Chambers, 2005). Perhaps the biggest role for counselors in the IEP meetings is to provide leadership in ensuring a two way communication between parents and school staff (Childre & Chambers, 2005; Geltner & Leibforth, 2008).

With regards to working with diverse populations, school counselors are trained in multicultural issues (Schmidt, 2008) and equipped with culturally competent practices (Sue & Sue, 2008) that are highly required to serve the increasingly diverse student populations in U.S. schools (Clark & Breman, 2009). According to Clark and Breman, student diverse needs inform their social-behavioral adjustment, career choice and development, and overall educational success. With their skills, school counselors can provide consultation and assessment for services and placement thereby improving outcomes for all students (Klotz et al., 2006). Further, they can be instrumental in training the school community on multicultural sensitivity and appropriate practices (Sue & Sue, 2008) so as to integrate necessary knowledge and skills to meet the educational needs of each student (Klotz et al.).

#### ***Crisis Intervention***

Owing to their training and expertise in crisis intervention and management, school counselors assume leadership roles in times of crisis (Everly, 2000). When disasters such as recent campus shootings in Virginiaian Tech and Columbine High School occur (Everly), school counselors are called upon to respond to the needs of students, staff, and administrators (Fein, Carlisle, & Isaacson, 2008). In such times, swift and organized response would depend on how intervention and crisis response

plans had been formulated and practiced prior to the event (Everly). Unsurprisingly, formulation of such elaborate plans must occur at the leadership level with counselors and principals working together (Fein et al., 2008). In such times, “school counselors were asked to perform duties that included executive decision-making about issues of student safety or security, or triage needs following the shootings” (Fein et al., p. 247).

#### ***Data Organization, Analysis, and Interpretation***

One of the components of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) is the requirement for schools to utilize numeric data to measure and document improvement of all student subgroups (Clark & Breman, 2009). Data-based assessment is intended to improve overall academic performance for all students by closing the achievement gap between high and low performing student groups (Clark & Breman; Dahir & Stone, 2009). Student subgroups include students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, those from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, those with limited knowledge and proficiency of the English language, and those with disabilities (Clark & Beman).

With full implementation of NCLB expected by the end of the 2013-2014 school year (Clark & Breman, 2009), it is hoped that all education stakeholders will align “data-informed practice and accountability with equity and improving student achievement” (Dahir & Stone, 2009, p. 13). Since counselors have access to student records and data (Johnson, 2004) and possess assessment and test interpretation skills (Schmidt, 2008), they can be in charge of compiling data and presenting them to the school leadership team to be collaboratively used in making data-driven decisions. Indeed as Dimmitt (2003) observed, “cutting edge models of school counseling practice

emphasize the importance of using both collaboration and data to efficiently and effectively create such educational contexts” (p. 340). Thus, collaboration of stakeholders in education and use of data are not only intricately intertwined they are also great predictors of student success.

### ***Conditions for Success***

For collaborative leadership between counselors and principals to succeed, principals must begin to appreciate counselors’ specialized knowledge and expertise (Amatea, 2005). They should recognize and value counselor capabilities, respect their contributions, and promote open communication (Dollarhide et al., 2007; Edmonson et al., 2002). In addition, they should cultivate and encourage mutual respect and trust to permeate their relationship (Klotz et al., 2006) and yield a complimentary partnership (Dollarhide et al.). Such a complimentary form of collaborative leadership, would, for instance, be utilized in situations such as when a principal focuses on creating an orderly and safe school environment while the counselor concentrates on promoting a positive classroom climate; or, while the principal analyses the effects of inappropriate behavior leading to indiscipline, the counselor would examine the causes and issues of the same. Although the responsibility of disciplining students is largely the duty of principals and their assistants (Lieberman, 2004; Schmidt, 2008; Shoffner & Williamson, 2000), school counselors, through individual, classroom guidance, and small-group work, can help students learn the benefits of discipline, be obedient, and behave appropriately (Beale & McCay, 2001). We recommended that counselors let their principals know that they can utilize their skills to promote student discipline and bolster their general success.

Since many principals have never been counselors before nor taken any

graduate classes in counseling (Beale & McCay, 2001), they do not understand or appreciate what counselors are capable of. Consequently, they may be apprehensive in entrusting them with leadership responsibilities. Counselors should take the initiative of educating their principals on and demonstrating the leadership skills they possess. In fact, this education process should start during hiring interviews. Because the hiring and selection of a school counselor largely determines the quality of the counseling department (Beale & McCay, 2001), principals should select and hire counselors who have hitherto demonstrated leadership with the wider school community, or are willing to do so. They should select and hire counselors who are focused on fostering student success. During the interview process, principals should seek to know how prospective counselors plan to collaboratively apply their leadership knowledge and skills.

### **Conclusion**

It is important for counselors to realize that before they are embraced and trusted to participate in the overall leadership of the school, they must demonstrate their leadership abilities by sound management of their school counseling programs. It should be evident that they are competent in discharging duties pertaining to individual student counseling, group work, positive interactions with parents, and student advocacy among others. Moreover, they must demonstrate leadership skills. It is imperative, therefore, that principals and counselors work collaboratively to provide effective campus leadership if meaningful systemic change is to be realized. Through this teaming arrangement, the organizational destiny must be steered to produce a culture of success and excellence for diverse groups of students, staff, and community.

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