

It Takes a Village: Counselor Participation with Students, Families, and Other School Personnel in Serving Students with Special Needs

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Abstract

Students with disabilities often struggle to meet rigorous academic and social demands. School counselors can play an integral role in serving students with special needs and the student's

family through participation in the Individualized Education Process (IEP). This article explains the IEP process and provides practical strategies that can be utilized to assist counselors in their work.

Keywords: School Counselor, Special Education, Individualized Education Plan

School counselors play a significant role in supporting the academic, social, and emotional needs of all students and their families. Counselors are called upon to support parents, teachers, including special education teachers, school nurses and school administrators to understand and manage these needs in a school setting (Dunn & Baker, 2002; Frye, 2005; Roberts-Dobie & Donatelle, 2007). Through their knowledge of mental health issues, the counselor is in a position to support students in pursuit of academic success and, through their resource information and linkages, they are able to make referrals to outside mental health professionals and agencies, as necessary (Roberts-Dobie & Donatelle, 2007).

Practical Strategies for Participating in the IEP Process

The process of special education includes many areas where the counselor is integral to student decision-making. First, as a part of the IEP process, supports, accommodations, and modifications necessary for student success are determined. These supports may be provided short term or may be lifelong. It is not unusual for families to have many questions and concerns about accommodations and modifications, including such questions as how to ensure supports are available and implemented as sanctioned by the team and the best way for carry-over to be accomplished in all environments frequented by the student, including in the home. Counselors need to be diligent to ensure the questions of the family are answered and their concerns addressed.

Another responsibility of the special education process is to determine the student's participation in federally mandated achievement testing (No Child Left Behind Act, 2002). All students, including students with disabilities, are to be included in general assessment programs with appropriate accommodations as determined by each student's IEP team. Counselors need knowledge of allowable accommodations as well as the ability to help prepare the student and the family to understand testing requirements and ease any anxiety inherent with the process (Clark, 2000). The following evidenced-based tips and strategies support counselors in their work with students who have special needs.

Participate in IEP Development

School counselors can be directly involved with students receiving special education by serving as members of their multi-disciplinary team. This team, called the IEP team, is charged with the responsibility to design each student's individualized educational program (IEP). The

purpose of the team and the resulting team meeting, therefore, is to collaboratively determine the instruction and services unique to each child (Clark, 2000).

The IEP, developed by the team, documents that a free and appropriate public education (FAPE), as mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004) is provided to each student receiving special education. The IEP should be clear, useful, and legally defensible. While IDEA prescribes certain elements that must be included, the format and degree of detail may vary among states or school districts.

The IEP team must include specific members. Members should include (a) a general education teacher, (b) a special education teacher, (c) a representative of the local education agency (school district), and (d) someone with expertise to interpret the educational assessment (Hallahan, Kauffman, & Pullen, 2015, p. 26). Parents must be included in the team process and attempts should be made to accommodate their schedules and needs. Per IDEA, additional team members include other individuals who have knowledge or special expertise regarding the child, including related services personnel and, whenever appropriate, the student. The counselor is a valuable member of the team, as, frequently, the counselor possesses expert knowledge of the student and family, is knowledgeable of the curriculum, and is well-informed about community resources. In addition, the counselor can play an influential role by preparing families and students for these meetings and by supporting administrators and other professionals in this process (Milsom, Goodnough, & Akos, 2007).

Too frequently, families have reported feeling that their participation is unwelcome or report being passive receivers of information from the IEP team with services designed *for* the student rather than *with* student and family input (Bryan & Henry, 2012). Families report feeling as if they have limited power in decision making, believe they lack sufficient opportunity to fully participate in their child's education, and report feeling alienated when the IEP team emphasizes student needs rather than strengths (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004; Garriott, Wandry, & Snyder, 2000; Xu & Filler, 2008). These feelings are particularly true for families from traditionally marginalized or non-majority families (Harry, 2008; Xu & Filler, 2008). Counselors can provide families with needed information specific to special education services and processes as well as support them to take a leadership role, ownership and personal responsibility for the collaborative team process. Most state educational agencies have resource materials available appropriate for related service professionals and for families. In addition, there are many currently available on-line resources and applications for cellular and web-based devices, such as phones and tablets, which are useful tools for counselors to walk families and professionals through development of the IEP. Many participants thrust into the role of IEP team member may feel unprepared to fulfill these responsibilities. Counselors who have a commitment to the team process can provide both information and leadership to lessen these fears and ensure open and welcome family participation.

During the IEP planning process, counselors and special educators are in a position of mutual support. Counselors can seek advice from special educators on the instructional processes. To be an effective member of the IEP team, it is necessary for the counselor to be knowledgeable of interventions available to address children's special learning needs such as: (a) differentiated instruction, (b) universal design for learning, (c) assistive technology, and (d) needed accommodations and modifications (Clark, 2000). Special educators, on the other hand, can rely on the counselor to support the student and family through the process, facilitate family

involvement as mandated by IDEIA, support open and forthright communication with the family, and promote follow-through of the educational plan (Bryan & Henry, 2012).

Members of the IEP team are charged with participating in decisions about what the child is taught, how they are taught, where they are taught, what aids and services they receive and for how long. Interventions, related services, accommodations and modifications determined necessary by the team to ensure that each student benefits from their educational plan are enumerated in the IEP. Therefore, the team decisions can have untold effects over the life of the child. Will the student learn the strategies or content intended by the IEP team and progress on to successful educational and lifetime experiences? Conversely, will the determination of special education eligibility or the placement decision cause the student to lose self-esteem and motivation to try, thereby, compromising chances for future success? The understanding of the counselor based on pre-established rapport with the student and family can support decisions resulting in optimal long-term outcomes for the student.

Support High Academic Achievement

Students with disabilities present a unique set of challenges for educators, researchers, and policy makers as, frequently, they experience academic and social challenges that significantly impact achievement, particularly at the secondary level (Scheuermann & Hall, 2008). The importance of increasing achievement for all students has been emphasized over the last decade with increased focus on rigorous standards. Federal mandates (e.g., NCLB, 2002; IDEIA, 2004) indicate that all students must be provided access to the general curriculum, regardless of designated special education service category or placement. The school counselor can play a critical role in ensuring that students have access to the general curriculum by ensuring accommodations and modifications are provided as scheduled in the IEP, facilitating co-teaching between the special and general educator, and counseling with the students on the stresses involved with the social and emotional aspects of inclusion. Counselors can work with school administrators to ensure opportunities are available for all students to be included with the extra curricula or social aspects of the general education classroom and that other stigmas of special education classification are removed. Counselors should work with the student, the teacher and family, and the administrator to assess for and ensure any extra support, such as tutoring, is available.

Facilitate Community Access

To ensure student with disabilities develop skills and abilities to have a quality life and meaningfully participate in their chosen community after leaving school, the 1990 Reauthorization of IDEIA included the responsibility of schools for transition planning. Transition is defined as a coordinated set of outcome-oriented activities intended to promote movement from school to such post-school activities as postsecondary education, employment, independent living, and community participation (Wehman & Revell, 2008). Transition services allow students to leave school with the necessary skills, abilities and coordinated services already in place to be successful (Clark, 2000). As counselors hold information about post-secondary options, they are in a distinctive position to be a key participant in this process.

During transition planning, which according to IDEIA must begin by age 16, the counselor can support assessment of and advocate for the student's expression of interests, preferences, goals and dreams as these become the basis for the transition plan (Clark, 2000). Counselors should support the family through the process. For example, family support may include information on such legal topics as guardianship.

The counselor possesses knowledge of community resources, including university, vocational and adult education opportunities, religious support organizations, mental health, social and rehabilitation organizations and, therefore, can facilitate collaboration with other agencies as required by IDEIA. In addition, counselors have advanced knowledge of and can develop liaisons with community stakeholders, such as faith-based organizations, to support parenting workshops, mentoring programs and identification of pro-social, personal, and safety skills necessary for success in school and beyond (Bryan & Henry, 2012; Studer & Quigney, 2005). Collaboration among all stakeholders, including first and foremost, the student, is essential for effective transition planning.

Support School Personnel

Competencies of counselors acquired via the nature of their training and experiences, can be particularly helpful in supporting teachers and developing relationships in today's diverse classrooms (Beaty-O'Ferrall, Green, & Hanna, 2010). The ability to relate to students and their families, regardless of the student's cultural, language, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, has been shown to significantly enhance educational outcomes, reduce symptomology, increase treatment compliance, and support higher attendance and engagement in school (Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009). Therefore, it is critical that teachers find ways to build relationships with all students and their families. This is particularly important for those difficult to motivate students, including students with EBD (Hott, Thomas, Aslinia, Abbassi, & Hendricks, 2014). The background and cultural competencies of school counselor can support all school professionals in raising awareness of cultural attitudes and beliefs (Beaty-O'Ferrall et al., 2010) and developing relationships that can promote positive educational outcomes for all students.

Bryan and Henry called for counselors to be aware of how factors such as race, gender, and teacher expectations may generate referrals to the counselor, assess why students are disruptive or are having difficulty in class, and provide both individual and systemic interventions. Counselor-based response systems can include such student interventions as assessment and teaching of pro-social skills or teacher interventions such as development of professional development on such topics as cultural sensitivity and family-school relationship building (2012). Counselors can become proponents of school-wide positive intervention strategies whereby collaborative approaches become systematized and the counselor is no longer the sole provider of a circumscribed response system (Sink, 2011).

In addition, Response to Intervention (RTI) is a currently evolving system used in an attempt to respond to a child's learning problem *before* making a referral to special education. RTI is a multi-tiered intervention system, whereby all children receive universal screening so that each child can receive evidenced based instruction matched to the level of his or her need (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2012). Progress is monitored regularly to enable data-based decisions about the heightened (or lesser) need for intervention. Support is provided to the

general education teacher by special educators, as needed, to ensure specialized instruction is provided appropriate for each child. Only after a child receives the highest level of intervention is a referral made for determination of special education eligibility.

There are many steps in the RTI process where the support of the counselor is needed. First, as RTI is a newer way of determining special education eligibility and, as it potentially affects all students, it is important for the counselor to have an understanding of the process as it is applied by each school in order to ensure families have understanding of RTI and the benefits of the process. Additionally, as teachers and other professionals design individualized interventions, knowledge of the child's background, culture, family situation, and interests can provide valuable information. For some families, understanding charting of the child's response to the learning outcomes of the intervention may be a new experience. Counselors can help families understand how data is accumulated during progress monitoring and support decision-making based on the monitoring data. Counselors can positively influence the ability of an RTI approach to improve academic outcomes for students at risk (Sink, 2011).

Foster Emotional and Behavioral Development

School counselors can play a significant role in development of appropriate behavior for all students—an especially important role in preventing typical adolescent behaviors from escalating to the “severe and chronic” level required to meet the threshold of the definition of Emotional and Behavioral Disability (EBD) of the IDEIA (Hott et al., 2013). Counselors are skilled at structuring developmental lessons needed to provide all students with the knowledge and skills appropriate for their developmental level (American School Counselor Association, 2005), with identifying inappropriate and risk-taking behaviors (Moyer & Sullivan, 2008), and with developing programs responsive to assist students with immediate needs, issues and concerns (ASCA, 2005). Working with students to develop skills in peer mediation and conflict resolution can have a positive impact on student behavior, grades, and academic achievement (Whiston & Quinby, 2009).

Furthermore, counselors can be influential in designing activities to enhance student self-esteem, teaching self-control and helping students deal with their feelings and emotions (Stringer, Reynolds, & Simpson, 2003). Programs and activities that reinforce the goals of self-determination such as goal setting, problem solving and decision making are other areas where the expertise of the counselor should be utilized (Deemer & Ostrowski, 2010).

Counselors can play an important role in supporting teachers and administrators to understand the cumulative effect of repeated disciplinary action on student's school success. Specifically, repeated disciplinary referrals, suspensions and expulsions have been shown to result in not only lost time from class but also disengagement by the student, academic failure and high potential for the student dropping out (Wehman & Revelle, 2008). In addition, counselors can support administrators to track and present data to investigate disproportional disparities in disciplinary procedures.

Through these efforts, counselors can work with teachers, families, and other educational professionals to develop behavior intervention plans and modify behavioral strategies so that the most effective strategies are implemented for each student. Counselors can bring their training to bear to demonstrate to all stakeholders that holding high expectations and providing real-world

work that matches student goals and interests can lead to increased motivation, sustained effort, gains in academic achievement, and higher future aspirations (Deemer & Ostrowski, 2010).

Explain Graduation Options

School counselors can be a critical link to both support individual students as well as collaborate with families and other education professionals to explore options for individual students, support the understanding of post-school options, and promote the ability to exercise choice. To gain career and post-secondary information, access to the school counselor is essential (Bryan & Henry, 2012). All students receiving special education, but especially those who have been historically marginalized, have heightened needs for establishing post-secondary relationships and for this flow of information to be facilitated (Brigham & Hott, 2011). Counselors should develop early, comprehensive and on-going graduation alternatives for students at-risk for high school dropout. Counselors can help the student and family analyze current course offerings supporting informed choice of courses and graduation options, promoting high-achievement for all students (Sciarra & Whitson, 2007).

Provide Direct Services

As reflected by the ASCA, the school counselor may be involved with students with disabilities in a variety of ways as direct providers of services to the student and family. As noted, the IEP team is charged with the responsibility to determine the instructional and related services support needed by each child. One of the related services that should be considered is the need for counseling. For example, counselor-related activities with students receiving special education may include individual and group counseling to address social and emotional issues through assessment and teaching of social, interpersonal and coping skills, and advocacy for students and families (Frye, 2005; Milsom, et al., 2007). Through these services, counselors may collaborate with teachers to integrate and interpret information relevant about the child into the learning process (Clark, 2000) and support appropriate prevention and intervention programs.

In addition, counselors play a pivotal role in facilitating family-school partnerships, the home-school linkages that have been found to foster academic, personal, social, and career success (Bryan & Henry, 2012). One goal of the family-school partnership should always be to promote the family as central to this process. The counselor has a two-fold responsibility in this process. First, the training and expertise of the counselor can ensure smooth functioning of the partnership. A second responsibility of the counselor, however, is to not only promote team functioning but also ensure the understanding of all team members of the family's position as life-long advocates for the student. As such, it is imperative for each participant to promote evolution of the partnership. By being involved in the student's specialized program, the counselor can promote consistency and generalizability across school to home settings (Studer & Quigney, 2005).

Conclusion

Collaboration amongst service providers is critical for the success of all students, particularly to those students receiving special education and their families. The school counselor may hold the key to the successful completion of each student's journey through the educational system and beyond. The aforementioned strategies promoted in this article are considered evidenced-based. However, it is important that continued evaluation of the demands on school counselors, the effectiveness of the strategies, and perceptions of students and their families be explored.

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