

## **The Role of the School Counselor**

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### **Abstract**

School counselor roles and responsibilities continue to evolve and grow. This article provides an overview of the school counselor's role in the special education process. A summary of recommendations from the American School Counselors Association (ASCA), applicable federal

legislation, and best practices for working with students with disabilities are shared. Limitations and implications for future research are provided.

*Key Words:* School Counselor, Special Education, Collaboration

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### **Introduction**

School counseling as a profession has facilitated a strong voice of advocacy for children in our schools, across our nation, and abroad. However, the job description of the counselor is continuously evolving and, for the most part, is not standardized (Nichter & Edmonson, 2005). Despite efforts of the counseling community and attempts by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), counselors are charged with providing a myriad of supports that have yet to be clearly defined. Common practices of professional school counselors change from state to state, school district to school district, and at times from school to school within the same district. These challenges can prove frustrating and make service delivery challenging. Further, complicating the issue is an increasing number of students with a high level of support needs.

School counselors are certified and/or licensed professionals with a minimum of a Master's degree in school counseling. They are qualified to address students' academic, personal, social, and career development needs by designing, implementing, evaluating and enhancing a comprehensive school counseling program (ASCA, 2005). Professional school counselors serve a vital role in maximizing students' success, and it is recommended by the ASCA for each campus to have a ratio of one counselor to every 250 students. The ASCA school counseling model includes the following standards of practice for professional counselors when implementing a comprehensive school counseling program:

- (1) foundation, which holds professional school counselor responsible to identify a philosophy based on school counseling theory and evidenced-based practice that recognizes the need for all students to benefit from the school counseling program.
- (2) delivery, meaning that professional school counselors provide culturally competent services to all students, their parents/guardians, school staff and community in areas of school guidance curriculum, individual student planning, responsive services consist of prevention and/or intervention to meet students' needs.
- (3) management, which defines management of the policy, procedures and organizational needs of school districts where the professional school counselor services are delivered, in order to insure that needs of all school children are considered.
- (4) accountability, which assure the performance of the professional school counselor is evaluated using an instrument based on the School Counselor Performance Standards found in the ASCA National Model and the ASCA School Counselor Competencies. (ASCA, 2005, pp. 22-24)

### **Special Education**

Schools are charged with meeting the needs of diverse learners. According to the U.S. Department of Education, about 10% of all school aged children are identified as in need of

special education services (Hallahan, Kauffman, & Pullen, 2012, p. 9). In order to support all students and their families, it is important that counselors are knowledgeable of special education.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004), is the landmark legislation regulating special education. According to IDEIA (2004), the purpose of special education is to ensure that all students, between ages 3 and 21 with disabilities, are provided specially designed instruction and related services necessary to access to a free and appropriate public education. Special education services are provided under one of the following IDEIA service categories: (a) specific learning disabilities, (b) communication disorders including speech and language disorders, (c) intellectual disabilities (formerly termed mental retardation), (d) autism, (e) emotional and behavior disorders, (f) visual impairments, (g) hearing impairments, (h) other health impaired, (i) orthopedic impairments, (j) multiple disabilities, (k) deaf-blindness, and (l) traumatic brain injury (p. 118).

Related services, as defined by IDEIA, include support services and supplementary aids the student will receive. Counseling services are one of the most needed related services for many students (Studer & Quigney, 2005). According to the ASCA (2005) position statement, services provided by the counselor are multifaceted with some services directed toward individual students and others toward the school and community. Examples of community services directed toward families and schools may include (a) serving as part of the school multidisciplinary team, (b) providing parental training, (c) referrals to community resources, and (d) advocacy. Individual student services could include: (a) transition planning, (b) behavior modification, and (c) self-management, social skills, and study skill instruction (ASCA, p. 4). All services, whether individual or community, are intended to ensure that each child, including students with a disability, has access to an educational program that builds upon his or her strengths and addresses individual needs. Related counseling services are one of the most critical components of the educational program for many students with disabilities.

### **Implications for School Counselors**

Many of the steps in the special education process are defined by law (e.g., IDEIA, 2004). According to ASCA, multiple opportunities exist for counselors to play an integral role of throughout the process. For example, parent permission must be received before an evaluation is begun, the evaluation must be completed within the prescribed time lines, the evaluation instrument cannot be biased, more than one instrument must be used, and the assessment must be administered by a person familiar with and licensed to do so (Overton, 2012). While, typically, formalized assessment for special education will not be performed by the school counselor, the counselor can play an integral role in communicating assessment results in a way that is meaningful and applicable to the family. The counselor should have an understanding of the purpose of testing and how to interpret the results of testing reports as well as being a resource of information for the student and/or family.

Multiple other junctures in the special education process exists where the counselor can further support the student with disabilities and the family. As required by law, parents of students receiving special education must be informed of the student's progress at least as often as parents of students without disabilities (IDEIA, 2004). These regularly scheduled monitoring

reviews, whether accomplished through report cards, progress reports, or parent conferences can instill mutual responsibility for goal attainment, provide opportunities to recognize and celebrate progress, and help cement the family-teacher-school partnerships (Bryan & Henry, 2012; Clark, 2000).

Evidence suggests that although the school counselor should play an integral role in the education of students with disabilities, counselors may lack sufficient training to do so (Dunn & Baker, 2002; Nichter & Edmonson, 2005; Studer & Quigney, 2005) and the teacher – counselor relationship may be inadequate to address all student concerns (Sink, 2011). For example, teacher referral for determination of special education eligibility must be free from by various known educational risk factors such as poverty, race, culture, or language biases brought into the referral process (Abedi, 2006; Wilkinson, Ortiz, Roberson, & Kushner, 2006). For some children, the counselor may have knowledge of how the family’s cultural expectations are a differential component in interpreting the learning and behavior needs for that particular child (Sink, 2011). Nonetheless, disparities continue to exist in special education placement, suspension, and expulsion rates across all learning environments (Bryan, Day-Vines, Griffin, & Moore-Thomas, 2012). Counselors have a compelling interest to promote the academic, career, and social development of all children including those who need intervention to secure equal educational opportunity (ASCA, 2005; Nichter & Edmonson, 2005). Armed with expertise in recognizing demographic and cultural influences to the referral process, counselors need to be aware of how historically gender, racial, and socioeconomic differences have influenced the make-up of several special education service categories (Rudy & Levinson, 2008).

### **Limitations and Future Research**

There is a limited research base evaluating the effects of school counseling services on students with disabilities’ academic and social progress. Further, additional evaluation of school counselors’ comfort level in working with students with disabilities and their families is clearly warranted. Perhaps a starting point is to begin determining if school counselors receive adequate preparation to meet the aforementioned increasing and evolving needs of students, their families, and school personnel.

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