

Principals, Release These People!

Kimberly McLeod

Texas Southern University

Abstract

Counselors are pinnacle partners in addressing No Child Left Behind legislation and academic reform initiatives in urban schools. Unfortunately, many times the role and responsibility of the school counselor is misunderstood, underutilized and inappropriately administered in menial and routine tasks on campus. This article discusses the professional potential school counselors have in reducing achievement gap and working with campus administration in true leadership collaborations that address the academic needs of public school youth.

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According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 1998, 71 % of entering kindergartners from Black or Hispanic families had one or more risk factors, compared to 29% of those from White families and 61% from Asian families. The percentage of first time kindergartners with two or more risk factors was four times greater for Blacks (27%) and five times greater for Hispanics (33%) than for their White peers (6%) (Hoffman, K.; Llagas, C.; Snyder, T, 2003, p.68). Protecting the academic prosperity of all students, especially those from minority backgrounds is an issue most urban schools are facing, many without success. In order for urban schools to effectively reform and address the needs of all learners, especially those learners from disadvantaged populations, traditional views of leadership must be abandoned and the role and plight of urban educators must be elevated to realize true leadership potential.

Under No Child Left Behind, states are working to close the achievement gap and make sure all students, including those who are disadvantaged, achieve academic proficiency (U.S. Department of Education, para.1). The No Child Left Behind Act leaves no question as to the responsibility of accountability for the states to address the needs of all students regarding academic prosperity. However, achieving the reality of closing the achievement gap for urban schools is unquestionably an exigent endeavor. It is an endeavor that will shift traditional paradigms of leadership to those that pioneer inventive methods of leading and organizing schools. According to Lezotte (1991) and his work with the correlates of effective schools he states:

...that leadership is viewed as a dispersed concept that includes all adults, especially teachers. This is in keeping with the teacher empowerment concept; it

recognizes that a principal cannot be the only leader in a complex organization like a school. With the democratization of organizations, especially schools, the leadership function becomes one of creating a “community of shared values”. The role of the principal will be changed to that of a “leader of leaders,” rather than a leader of followers. Expertise is generally distributed among many, not concentrated in a single person (p.3).

School principals obviously hold the ultimate responsibility of building leadership. Pioneering into the No Child Left Behind era, a critical understanding for principals is the realization of the potential of leadership capability of teachers and additional stakeholders in the building or campus level. Of primary importance is the role of the school counselor. Most school counselors have a master’s degree and are typically the only people in the school with formal training in both mental health and education (ASCA, p3). This formal training positions counselors in a very unique, however often inappropriately utilized place on the building level.

Unfortunately school counseling has lacked a consistent identity from state to state, district to district and even school to school. This has lead to a misunderstanding of what school counseling is and what it can do for a school. As a result, school counseling programs are often viewed as ancillary programs instead of a crucial component to student achievement, and school counselors have not been used to their fullest (ASCA, p1).

Common inappropriate uses for school counselors include exhausting paperwork regarding the scheduling of ARDS, or master scheduling; duty schedules, registering students for school and performing disciplinary procedures for administrators. On the

contrary, counselors should be integral force in planning academic rigor to meet the needs of all learners, especially the needs of disadvantaged learners. Counselors are not only concerned with the academic plight of students, but their individual experiences, future aspirations and social and emotional health. Effective counselors are concerned with the holistic prosperity of all students on a campus, without neglect to the specific needs of those students that require intensive services or students from disadvantaged backgrounds. It is well within the scope of their position to offer responsive services to students that present need. The achievement gap is the difference of academic performance between different ethnic groups.

In response of the disturbing achievement gap between African-American and White students the Department of Education has acknowledged the following challenge and solution.

The challenge: even though schools are desegregated public schools have failed to deliver the promise of a quality education for African-Americans.

The solution: Attack the soft bigotry of low expectations and demand that schools close the achievement gap between African-American and White students (p.1).

Counselors in partnership with administrators are a crucial force responding to the No Child Left Behind challenge. However, due to administrator unawareness as to what a counselor's true role and responsibility is counselors are pulled in many different inappropriate directions. As a result, their time in delivering direct services to students is compromised. It is a counselor's responsibility to build a guidance curriculum centered on the specific needs of a campus that will improve the academic achievement of all students. For those students with multiple risk factors many of which, as mentioned

earlier come, from minority backgrounds the counselor will integrate services that address the individual needs of that student through individual planning or responsive services, in addition to the guidance curriculum. In order for students to achieve academic proficiency, delivery of academic content cannot be the only driving force in orchestrating academic success. Students must have the social and emotionally stability to focus and concentrate on academic content without mental interruptions of circumstantial life, social and community conflict. Needless to say, the school counselor cannot resolve student life issues. However, the school counselor can teach appropriate coping skills to address life issues so they do not interfere with the attainment of goals – such as student academic prosperity.

Counselors are the vigor in schools that establishes connections with parents, community stakeholders, staff, administration and students. Counselors are a mitigating force, when they are able to work efficiently without inappropriate intrusions on time. It is time that the true value and leadership potential of the school counselor be realized. It is time for their appropriate use of time is released from inapt functions. For true school reform to take place, counselors must be adequately trained and equipped to address the specific needs unique to minority populations across the state. Although it is the responsibility of the counselor to address all student needs on a campus through the guidance curriculum, the counselor must, in collaborative leadership with administrators address the pinnacle points that are set forth in the No Child Left Behind legislation which calls for greater parental opportunity and academic accountability. All of which involve the true nature and work that is within the scope of the school counselor.

Reforming schools will require that counselors receive additional professional development in the areas of urban reform and minority populations. Although university training equips counselors to perform basic job responsibilities and functions, the specific training necessary to meet initiatives of accountability may require additional training specifically related to a multicultural understanding of minority populations, and populations from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. In addition, the learning styles and specific academic needs of these populations are also topics of interest for additional professional development for school counselors. However, for counselors to unleash their full professional potential for the learning community, principals must release them to perform to the true nature and scope of their position. Principals must view the counseling program not as an ancillary addition to the academic program, but rather a crucial force that works to achieve the campus academic goals. In this way, counselors work in partnership with leadership. Professional school counselors have pertinent roles in addressing many factors that contribute to closing the achievement gap. The role of the counselor should encompass the professional freedom to address No Child Left Behind initiatives. This can only be achieved by an understanding of administrators of the counselor's full professional potential and appropriate contribution. In addition, it requires administrators properly utilize the function of the school counselor in efficient and effective ways. In an effort to reform schools to improve the academic prosperity of all children it is imperative that no counselor be left behind in leadership collaborations.

Suggestions for School Counselors

Be Proactive!

Facilitate leadership partnerships by forecasting future academic and social emotional needs of the student population by a careful review of demographics, community partnerships, family structures and local and state assessment results. Prepare a plan for success that includes the role of the school guidance counselor and present the plan to the principal to consider the integration of the plan or aspects of the plan in the school improvement plan or campus action plan. Counselors can also prepare a pamphlet that can be distributed to community stakeholders that describe the anticipated role the school counselor serves in the public school system. However, before distribution, this should be reviewed with campus leadership to ensure that it is in accordance with the campus goals, vision and mission statements.

Be Visible!

Walk the campus daily – every classroom! Be the person children, teachers and parents turn to and trust. These stakeholders trust your advisement, guidance and investment in their particular situation. They are already looking to you for leadership. Represent them well. Consistently communicate the learning community needs with your suggestions for resolution. In addition, plan programs and professional development aimed at achieving your guidance goals in the community. If parents don't actively come to you, that's ok, go to them. Set up professional development or learning opportunities in the community (community space in apartments or clubhouses in the neighborhood, etc.). The goal is visibility on and off campus for the school counselor

Speak Up!

In the words of Edmund Burke, “All that is necessary for injustice to succeed is that good men do nothing”. For many children you are their only voice. Speak up and advocate on behalf of those who are unable or not knowledgeable enough to do this for themselves. Have the courage to make not the popular choice, but the choice that is in the best interest of children. Your professional integrity will speak in a voice that will command the listening ear of your stakeholders, including building leadership. Make sure building leadership is aware of the specific and unique training and professional development needs are necessary for the role of the school counselor to function effectively and efficiently. Your presence and position should be known on the campus...make it happen.

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