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## DATA-DRIVEN SCHOOL COUNSELING

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### Preview

*In this chapter, we emphasize the powerful influence and impact that using data has on both school counseling practice and programs. In this age of accountability, school counselors must not be left behind. Data-driven school counseling demonstrates the powerful contributions of school counselors to the school success agenda, to successful outcomes for students, and, most important, to the goals of school improvement.*

*Without data, you don't know where you are, you don't know where you are going, and you don't know if you ever got there.*

—Jim Macgregor, High School Counselor, Kissimmee, Florida (Stone & Dahir, 2006)

Jim MacGregor has been using data to give advantage to students for over 2 decades. Jim MacGregor, steward of equity and access, persevered until all students in his high school were supported with access to algebra and safety nets to ensure their success. Jim's extraordinary personal-social consciousness skills guided him to understand and apply the tenets of equity and access in a sophisticated way. Instead of just opening the door for students to access higher level academics, Jim supported students to be successful once they entered the inner sanctum of rigorous course work. Jim not only advocated for his students to have greater opportunities, he raised their aspirations by implementing a career awareness program for every student in the school to help them see the interrelationship between postsecondary education and their future economic opportunities. Jim's strategies were numerous, and some of the more effective ones included (a) changing the systemic approach to course enrollment patterns to support more students to access higher level academics; (b) using data and anecdotal information about student success in higher level academics to change attitudes and beliefs; (c) using disaggregated test results so that teachers had better information about student weaknesses; (d) implementing large- and small-group sessions on motivation and problem solving and implementing 4-year plans using software that easily tracked every student from ninth grade so that course selections were in writing and matched students' aspirations; and (e) establishing a mentoring program (Stone & Dahir, 2007).

When Jim moved to a school system in Florida, he brought his passion for equity and advocacy with him. Four years ago, when Jim arrived at his new high school, only 129 advanced placement (AP) exams were administered. The number of low socioeconomic students represented in AP courses was minimal. In 2006, after receiving intentional, focused efforts in a school with a 56% free and reduced-price lunch population, the opportunities for these low socioeconomic students increased dramatically. Forty-seven percent of the students in AP were of low socioeconomic status, and 740 exams

were given. Jim's story is but one example of thousands of professional school counselors who are now using data to inform their practice, to the advantage of students. Data-driven school counseling improves students' opportunities for brighter futures and affects the achievement gap while demonstrating the value that professional school counselors add to improving student achievement.

Data inform and challenge one's thinking to determine the need for systemic change, confirm progress, and reveal shortcomings in student performance. Closely examining critical data elements in the areas of attendance, socioeconomic impact on class enrollment, graduation and postsecondary planning rates, and standardized testing results not only identifies the needs of students but also the school- and system-wide issues that affect success. By using data, professional school counselors can present a picture of the current situation of student needs and examine the practices that can lead to higher levels of success.

Disaggregating data by variables such as ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, or teacher assignment is important in the analysis of student performance. The disaggregation of data makes it possible to determine how policy and practices affect issues of equity. It is now possible to more closely examine which groups of students are successful and which are meeting failure. Using data enables professional school counselors to work closely with building administrators and faculty to close the achievement and opportunity gaps. Professional school counselors who focus their efforts on moving data in a positive direction demonstrate a strong commitment to sharing the responsibility and accountability for student outcomes.

In this chapter, organized around seven themes, we will address the powerful way that data can inform your comprehensive school counseling program:

1. A Data-Driven Program Initiates a Powerful Comprehensive Program
2. A Data-Driven Program Focuses Our Efforts
3. A Data-Driven Program Affects Student Achievement
4. A Data-Driven Program Supports School, System, and National Improvement Goals
5. A Data-Driven Program Shares Accountability
6. A Data-Driven Program Helps Identify Effective Strategies and Stakeholders
7. A Data-Driven Program Identifies and Rectifies Issues That Stratify Student Opportunities

## **A DATA-DRIVEN PROGRAM INITIATES A POWERFUL COMPREHENSIVE PROGRAM**

A comprehensive school counseling program can be developed in a step-by-step manner, beginning with the foundations, including a mission statement and advisory council, and eventually proceeding to data evaluation. However, for some professional school counselors, developing a comprehensive program can be overwhelming or too complicated. Another way counselors can develop a school counseling program is to start with the data. Without data, a comprehensive school counseling program will result in loosely held together components that may be unrelated. Data can be instrumental in

evaluating a comprehensive school program, but data can also be the first step in initiating a comprehensive school counseling program (Stone, 2007). The process of developing a comprehensive program begins with a piece of critical data that can be positively affected. To demonstrate this, let us work through an example using discipline referrals as the critical data element.

#### BEGINNING WITH DATA

Discipline referrals were identified by the school on the school improvement plan as an area in need of attention. The professional school counselor, along with other educators, disaggregated the discipline referrals to achieve a better understanding of the problem. The disaggregated data revealed that discipline referrals occurred in every grade level, but they were concentrated in the fourth and fifth grades, especially during lunch, and mostly on Mondays. Rather than separately gathering all the pieces of a comprehensive program to address this issue, the professional school counselor could start with the data element *discipline referrals* and the knowledge gained by looking at the disaggregated data and start to put into place components that are needed, such as responsive services, individual student planning, and system support to move the critical piece of data. In this way, the task of beginning to develop a comprehensive program is bite sized, doable, and generates a good start toward a comprehensive school counseling program. Professional school counselors can become paralyzed by the thought of having all of the pieces for a comprehensive program in place, but everyone can think about what specific interventions in the following areas might be needed for a reduction in discipline referrals.

*Foundation.* This component connects the professional school counselor's work to the school's mission by supporting a safer, more respectful school climate and by focusing efforts on reducing the discipline referrals. The foundation also facilitates student development in three broad domains—academic, career, and personal—social development—to promote and enhance the learning process. Using focused strategies to reduce discipline referrals allows work in all three domains.

*ASCA national standards and competencies.* These define the knowledge, attitudes, or skills students should obtain or demonstrate as a result of participating in a school counseling program. Developing in students the skills, attitudes, and knowledge to discontinue or to avoid discipline problems meets the competencies of the ASCA national standards (American School Counselor Association [ASCA]; 2006).

*Guidance curriculum.* The guidance curriculum can be developed as the professional school counselor starts to address a focused need. For example, as the professional school counselor works to reduce discipline referrals, he or she may deliver classroom guidance lessons in areas such as bully-proofing the school. The guidance curriculum is designed to assist students in achieving the knowledge and skills that are appropriate for the students' developmental level (ASCA; 2006).

*Individual planning with students.* The professional school counselor will work in an intentional way to help students understand the interrelationship between school and their future. This is one way the individual planning component assists individual students in establishing personal goals, developing future plans, and making better choices in school that do not include office visits for misbehavior.

*Responsive services.* With discipline issues as the data-driven focus, the professional school counselor will develop and focus responsive services to meet the immediate needs of students. These needs require counseling, consultation, referral, peer mediation, or information (ASCA; 2003, 2005).

*Use of data.* A comprehensive school counseling program is data driven. The use of data to affect change within the school system is integral to ensuring that every student receives the benefits of the school counseling program. Professional school counselors must show that each activity implemented as part of the program was developed from a careful analysis of students' needs, achievement, and related data (ASCA; 2006).

*Student monitoring.* By disaggregating the data, the professional school counselor is able to understand who the multiple discipline offenders are and the types of offenses. This helps the professional school counselor to monitor students' progress in order to ensure that each student receives what is needed to achieve success in school. Areas to be monitored can include student achievement data, achievement-related data, and standards and competency-related data. Collection, analysis, and interpretation of student achievement data may be systemic by district or be specific to a school site, grade, class, or individual (Stone & Dahir, 2007).

*Action plans.* By joining with other stakeholders, the professional school counselor can develop an action plan to achieve the desired result (Stone, 2007).

## A DATA-DRIVEN PROGRAM FOCUSES OUR EFFORTS

When professional school counselors focus their efforts on the mission of school improvement, they widen educational opportunities for every student and positively affect student achievement by

- raising student aspirations;
- helping students acquire resiliency and coping skills for school and life success;
- managing and accessing resources for student support;
- collaborating with faculty to share the responsibility for student progress;
- engaging students in educational and career planning that present students with a wide variety of quality postsecondary opportunities; and
- working intentionally toward closing the gap in student performance.

Professional school counselors who embrace a leadership mindset also act on their beliefs and advocate for the removal of institutional and environmental barriers that impede success in school. As advocates advancing a social justice agenda, professional school counselors purposely promote equitable access to quality education for all students. Counselor behaviors begin with a commitment to a programmatic approach that is systemic in impact; grounded in social justice; driven by advocacy and equity; aligned with the state, system, and building mission; and collaboratively developed and delivered.

Social advocacy implies questioning the status quo and challenging the rules and regulations that decrease opportunities for the underrepresented (Osbourne et al., 1998). "Research has helped school people realize not only that equity is a moral obligation of schools, but that student learning and achievement are highly related to equitable prac-

tices" (Shakeshaft, 1990, p. 213). The American free public school system is a mechanism that should guarantee an open society in which students from all segments of society and from all social classes have an equal chance to develop their talents and achieve success.

Professional school counselors can collect and analyze student data to inform and guide the development of a comprehensive school counseling program based upon school-wide issues. Critical data elements can usually be found on the school's district or building report card. School systems routinely collect and store academic and demographic data in a retrievable form, and professional school counselors have ready access to data in areas that contribute to achievement such as course enrollment patterns and attendance. For example, if a counselor learns that the ninth-grade retention rate is 40%, this is information that can be used to inform and influence this area as an identified need for attention and strategies.

Data help professional school counselors identify the institutional or environmental barriers that may be adversely influencing the data elements and impeding student achievement. Professional school counselors can initially determine which elements to tackle first and which elements the school counseling program can move in a positive direction. A quick look at data alone does not tell the whole story. It is important to disaggregate the critical data elements on which you are focusing in a variety of ways to ensure that the system addresses access and equity issues. When the school-based data is disaggregated by ethnicity, gender, race, socioeconomic status, or teacher assignment, it is possible to identify institutional and environmental barriers impeding student success. Disaggregated data also identifies specific groups of students that professional school counselors can target to ensure that no one is barred from any opportunity (Stone & Turba, 1999).

## A DATA-DRIVEN PROGRAM AFFECTS STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

The American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) national standards for school counseling programs (Dahir, Sheldon, & Valiga, 1998) and the national model (ASCA, 2003, 2005) emphasize the importance of professional school counselors delivering accountable school counseling programs that carefully consider local demographic needs and the political climate of the community. The four main components of the model follow:

The *foundation* of the program requires the implementation of the belief and mission that every student will benefit from the school counseling program.

The *delivery system* defines the implementation process and the components of the comprehensive model (i.e., guidance curriculum, individual planning with students, responsive services, and system support).

The *management system* presents the organizational processes and tools needed to deliver a comprehensive school counseling program, including agreements of responsibility, use of data, action plans for guidance curriculum and closing the gap, and time and task analysis.

The *accountability system* helps professional school counselors demonstrate the effectiveness of their work in measurable terms, such as impact over time, performance evaluation, and a program audit.

The national model (ASCA; 2003, 2005) speaks to the importance of having an accountability system and an organizational framework that documents and demonstrates how students are different as a result of the school counseling program. A commitment to accountability shifts public perception from questions such as *What do professional school counselors really do?* to demonstrating that professional school counselors are key players in the academic success story for students and partners in student achievement.

When counselors work with data, they are contributing to each of these critical elements and to bringing attention to student progress and results. Professional school counselors can positively affect student achievement by

- working with students to increase their desire to access rigorous academic work;
- motivating students and raising aspirations;
- managing and accessing resources to help students succeed;
- ensuring every student had an educational and career plan;
- encouraging students to achieve good attendance; and
- presenting students with a wide array of postsecondary opportunities.

Professional school counselors who address improving student results will contribute to raising the achievement level for every student. By examining their practice and looking carefully at their way of working, professional school counselors can articulate and communicate how their contributions positively affect student achievement and thus share accountability for school improvement with other members of the faculty. Partnership with education professionals demonstrates a willingness to improve results and to help to close the achievement gap that exists among students of color and students of poverty. Measurable success resulting from a concerted effort on the part of professional school counselors to expand educational opportunities can be documented by an increased number of students completing school with the academic preparation, career awareness, and the personal-social growth that is essential when choosing from a wide range of substantial postsecondary options, including college (The Education Trust, 1997). Aligning the purpose of the school counseling program with the school improvement plan presents professional school counselors as champions and collaborators who encourage high aspirations and create opportunities for students to realize their dreams.

The school counseling program, aligned with the educational enterprise, is data driven, proactive, and preventive in focus and assists students in acquiring and applying lifelong learning skills. Professional school counselors can advocate for the academic success for every student while delivering the content of the school counseling program in a comprehensive and accountable manner.

## **A DATA-DRIVEN PROGRAM SUPPORTS SCHOOL, SYSTEM, AND NATIONAL IMPROVEMENT GOALS**

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) is a clear imperative for professional school counselors to accept the responsibility to support academic achievement, share

the pressures of school accountability, and demonstrate advocacy for every student to experience success. Traditionally, professional school counselors were not held to the same accountability standards as other educators. They were rarely included in conversations about contributions that affect the critical data elements that are publicly displayed on school report cards. In a climate of school improvement, it has become increasingly important for professional school counselors to play a proactive role in identifying and responding to the issues, policies, and practices that stratify student opportunity and inhibit access to equitable educational opportunities.

Accountability, as defined in NCLB, offers an opportunity for professional school counselors to significantly affect school improvement through targeted interventions that affect important school-based data. Professional school counselors are in a unique position to review data in schools and can identify the gaps that exist in student success. Professional school counselors, using their leadership and advocacy skills, ensure that appropriate resources and programs are in place to offer each student equitable access to challenging curriculum and all options to access postsecondary opportunities. Professional school counselors can influence the school climate to ensure that high standards are the norm in a safe and respectful environment. Professional school counselors, working together with the principal, can bring to the faculty's attention the importance of creating safe and drug-free communities.

At the district and building level, stakeholders may no longer be asking *What do counselors do?* but rather *How did the conflict resolution program reduce bullying incidents?* and *Have the chronic offenders who are frequently suspended benefited from weekly group counseling?* Professional school counselors have always supported a student's personal and emotional needs and helped students acquire coping and resiliency skills to stay focused and succeed academically. The greater opportunity is to demonstrate how the conflict resolution program contributed to improved school climate, reduced discipline, or improved attendance—all of which contribute to academic success. When a professional school counselor delivers targeted interventions in collaboration with classroom teachers for seven chronic offenders who were frequently suspended, and the suspension rate is reduced, the work of the professional school counselor contributes to the goals of school improvement. When monthly conflict resolution lessons are delivered in collaboration with the seventh-grade teacher teams and a documented reduction in fighting is noted, the data show the contribution to school climate and school improvement.

Professional school counselors are at risk of being viewed as ancillary in the climate of high property tax assessments that support school funding and high stakes testing that is the current barometer of adequate yearly progress. School counseling programs have been perceived to be a fiscally irresponsible and an ineffective use of resources by some policy makers, school boards, and school-system leaders who are held accountable for increasing student achievement (Whiston, 2002). Professional school counselor accountability is a commitment to affecting the key data elements that publicly demonstrate a school's success and the achievement of its students.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 challenges the beliefs and attitudes of every educator to support all students to achieve high standards. Professional school counselors who purposely promote equitable access to quality education for all students

and use data to advance a social justice agenda are key contributors to advancing the national, state, and system goals to improve our schools and close the opportunity gap.

## **A DATA-DRIVEN PROGRAM SHARES ACCOUNTABILITY**

Professional school counselors have traditionally offered time-on-task data (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000) or a numerical summary of the types of activities they have delivered as a means of assessing and evaluating the impact of a school counseling program. Merely presenting the numbers of students seen individually, in groups, or in classrooms is no longer enough; time and task analysis does not show any relationship to affecting student achievement—rather, it is perceived as a defense mechanism to document productivity by those who are most concerned with the accountability measures that are necessary to improve student achievement. Sharing accountability for school improvement requires professional school counselors—as it does all educators—to systematically collect, analyze, and use critical data elements to understand, contribute to, and eliminate the achievement gap. When the school counseling program is aligned with the educational enterprise, it is data informed, proactive and preventive in focus, it assists students in acquiring and applying lifelong learning skills, and is delivered in a comprehensive and accountable manner (Stone & Dahir, 2007). Professional school counselor accountability involves collaboration with all education professionals to ensure that every student has the opportunity and access to a quality education.

Accountability offers the opportunity for professional school counselors to demonstrate how they can effectively identify and rectify issues that impede student achievement, contribute to each of these critical data elements, and bring attention to student progress and results. Sharing accountability for student success has become a driving force for transforming and reframing the work of school counselors (ASCA; 2003, 2005; Gysbers & Henderson, 2000; Lapan, 2001; Stone & Dahir, 2004).

## **A DATA-DRIVEN PROGRAM HELPS IDENTIFY EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES AND STAKEHOLDERS**

Professional school counselors, as managers of resources, join existing groups of stakeholders (such as the school improvement team) or use their leadership skills to bring other stakeholders and resources together to create and implement an action plan. Professional school counselors identify stakeholders to become part of a team to address the movement of the critical data elements. Counselors should include all concerned members of the internal and external school community, secure their commitment, and determine who will bring them together. If possible, an existing school action committee can be used. Accountability for professional school counselors involves teaming and collaborating with other stakeholders and avoiding tackling issues in isolation, which can be accomplished by

- identifying the additional stakeholders from the internal and external school community,
- securing their commitment,

- working with the school leadership team to facilitate this process, and
- involving any existing committees to address the concerns around the critical data elements.

Strategies are developed by the counselor individually and in collaboration with others that will change systems as well as affect individual students and targeted groups of students. *Impacting systems* means (a) replicating successful programs and interventions; (b) identifying barriers that adversely stratify students' opportunities to be successful learners; and (c) developing strategies to

- change policies, practices, and procedures;
- strengthen curriculum offerings;
- maximize the instructional program;
- enhance the school and classroom culture and climate;
- provide student academic support systems (e.g., safety nets);
- influence course enrollment patterns to widen access to rigorous academics;
- involve parents and other critical stakeholders (internal and external to the school);
- raise aspirations in students, parents, teachers, the community, and
- change attitudes and beliefs about students and their abilities to learn.

Publicizing to critical stakeholders the results of an effective school counseling program is a vital step in the accountability model, and it is important to success because stakeholders will have a deeper understanding about the contributions of the school counseling program to student achievement. Professional school counselors will thus be seen as partners in school improvement and will have demonstrated a willingness to be accountable for changing critical data elements. Because of these efforts, professional school counselors are viewed as essential to the mission of the school.

At Ribault High School, in Jacksonville, Florida, using and monitoring data has focused professional school counselor efforts, and, in collaboration with all stakeholders in the middle feeder school and high school, they shared responsibility for improving postsecondary admissions. Using and monitoring data clearly demonstrated the intentional focus of the school counseling program on improving the postsecondary admission rate. In 2006, fifty-three percent of the graduating class went on to enroll in college—a huge leap from the less than 15% who even applied to college just 5 years prior. This collaborative effort made the change happen, and the professional school counselors' commitment as key players in school improvement was well established and acknowledged. As the strategies delivered in K–12 positively moved this data forward, the measurable results showed how the school counseling program can work to increase the postsecondary admission rate through a system-wide, focused effort.

## **A DATA-DRIVEN PROGRAM IDENTIFIES AND RECTIFIES ISSUES THAT STRATIFY STUDENT OPPORTUNITIES**

Accountability shows that all educators, especially professional school counselors, intentionally and purposely act to close the achievement gap. If administrators, faculty, and all stakeholders truly believe that all children can learn and achieve, then profes-

sional school counselors, by their beliefs and behaviors, demonstrate their willingness to work side by side with colleagues. Professional school counselors form partnerships with principals and key stakeholders to embrace accountability and promote systemic change with the expressed purpose of furthering the academic success of every student (Stone & Clark, 2001). With an accountable, data-driven school counseling program, professional school counselors are seen as powerful partners and collaborators in school improvement and essential to fulfilling the mission of every school. Accepting the challenge of accountability propels professional school counselors to accept the responsibility of removing barriers to learning and achievement and raise the level of expectations for students for whom little is expected.

Professional school counselors who work within an accountability framework can challenge the pervasive belief that socioeconomic status and color determine a young person's ability to learn. By acting as agents of school and community change, professional school counselors can create a climate in which access and support for quality and rigor is the norm. In doing so, underserved and underrepresented students have a chance at acquiring the education skills necessary to fully participate in the 21st-century economy.

## **SUMMARY/CONCLUSION**

Closing the gap in student performance is central to affecting systemic change. The use of demographic and performance data makes it possible for counselors to determine how policies and practices are effecting issues of equity. Student achievement data can be collected and analyzed systematically to inform and guide the development and construction of a school counseling program, based upon school-wide issues. Professional school counselors can initiate, develop, and coordinate prevention and intervention systems that are designed to improve the learning success for every student who is experiencing difficulty with challenging academic coursework. Viewing the world of schools through a data-driven perspective helps professional school counselors to act on their belief system and assume a leadership role in identifying and rectifying issues that affect every student's ability to achieve at expected levels.

*(Note: See the CD-ROM for a list of references.)*