So What Does a School Counselor Really Do?

School counselors offer a comprehensive school counseling program driven by data and aligned to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) national standards. Counselors focus on ALL students’ academic, career and personal/social development.

Professional school counselors provide culturally competent services to students, parents/guardians, school staff and the community in the following areas:

School Counseling Curriculum
The curriculum consists of structured lessons designed to help students achieve the desired competencies and to provide all students with the knowledge and skills appropriate for their developmental level. Examples of the school counseling curriculum can be in the form of anti-bullying lessons co-taught with a classroom teacher at the elementary level, character education in middle school, and college planning lessons at the high school.

Individual Student Planning
Professional school counselors coordinate ongoing systemic activities designed to help students establish personal goals and develop future plans. Examples can include individualized student four- or six-year plans, post-secondary planning meetings, or even dropout prevention meetings.

Responsive Services
Responsive services consist of prevention and/or intervention activities to meet students’ immediate and future needs. These needs can be necessitated by events and conditions in students’ lives and the school climate and culture, and may require any of the following:
- individual or group counseling
- consultation with parents, teachers and other educators
- referrals to other school support services or community resources
- peer helping
- psycho-education
- intervention and advocacy at the systemic level

System Support
System support consists of professional development, consultation, collaboration, supervision, program management and operations.

In an ever-growing economy of fewer resources, boards of education and administrators in New Jersey often consider eliminating school counselors (formerly called guidance counselors), deeming them as an “extra” or “add-on” service for scheduling students and coordinating standardized testing. This could not be further from the truth.
Examples of “Inappropriate Activities for School Counselors”:
- coordinating paperwork and data entry of all new students
- coordinating cognitive, aptitude and achievement testing programs
- performing disciplinary actions or assigning discipline consequences
- supervising classrooms or common areas
- coordinating schoolwide individual education plans, student study teams and school attendance review boards

It Sounds Good on Paper, but Can School Counselors Really Help?

In a Principals Research Review article from July 2011, an important citation exclaimed “focus on preventing the development and occurrence of problem behavior, which is more effective, cost-effective, and productive” (Horner, Sugai, and Vincent, 2005, p.4). School counselors can help improve the academic, behavioral, attendance and school climate within your schools.

A comprehensive school counseling program is both preventative and responsive to the needs within your school.

Below are examples to give you a picture of how school counselors can help improve your school.

- Increased promotion and graduation rates
- Decreased discipline or suspension rates
- Increased attendance at school
- Increased attendance in educational opportunities
- Increased numbers of students completing high school college and career ready

To provide you a relevant real example, at Lakeland Regional High School, the School Counseling Department’s goal in 2009-2010 was to reduce the number of students who dropped out of school by 10% by the end of the school year. By the end of that year, we were able to reduce the number of dropouts by 33%. Please note that the 2012-2013 school year data is data through the end of January (8 dropouts), and is in comparison to data through the same time period from last year (12 dropouts). (Figure 1)

Another example can be seen in the post-secondary planning data at Lakeland Regional High School over the past four years. In the 2009-2010 school year, another goal was set to increase the percentage of students moving on to post-secondary education from the graduating class by 5% and increase the 2 and 4 year college going rate by 5% by the end of the school year. In the first year, we were able to increase the percentage of students moving on to post-secondary education by 10% and the 2 and 4 year college going rate by 8%. The
systematic, proactive programs that were put in place have remained in place, and we continue to see gains year over year. (Figure 2)

**Evaluate and Hold School Counselors Accountable**

“To demonstrate the effectiveness of the school counseling program in measurable terms, school counselors analyze school and school counseling program data to determine how students are different as a result of the school counseling program. School counselors use data to show the impact of the school counseling program on student achievement, attendance, behavior and school safety and analyze school counseling program assessments to guide future action and improve future results for all students. The performance of the school counselor is evaluated on basic standards of practice expected of school counselors implementing a comprehensive school counseling program.”

School counselors will be a part of the non-tested certified personnel who will be evaluated next school year. The student growth objectives (SGOs) that will be used in their evaluations can be based off of the SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Rigorous, Time Driven) design recommended by American School Counselor Association (ASCA). School counselors will need to answer the question “how are students different because of what school counselors do?”.

Sample SGOs could be:

- By the end of the school year, the number of discipline referrals will decrease by 10%.
- By the end of the school year, reduce the number of dropouts by 5%.
- By the end of the school year, reduce the number of HIB incidents by 7%.

Sample artifacts could include:

- Pre/post analysis of bullying prevention lessons
- Perceptual survey given after “Financial Aid Night”

**What Next?**

The Principal-Counselor Relationship is a critical component needed to elicit change. Allow school counselors to the table and discuss your goals and vision. Provide your school counselors with the tools, resources and student-to-counselor ratio (ASCA recommends 250:1) that will allow them to create a comprehensive school counseling program that is data driven, developmentally appropriate, and preventative in design. Review your school’s disaggregated data profile to gain a better understanding of where your school or district has achievement gaps or issues of equity. Examples include, but are not limited to:

- Drop-out rates
- At or above grade/achievement level in reading, math, etc.
- Discipline referrals
- Suspension rates

School counselors have the ability to have a tremendous impact within your schools. In this day and age of finite resources and accountability, I challenge you to use school counselors at all levels (elementary, middle and high school) to their maximum potential.

![Figure 1: 5-Year Dropout Trend](image)

![Figure 2: College Completion Rate](image)
About the Author

Tim Conway is currently president elect of the New Jersey School Counseling Association (NJSCA), and has served as a school counselor, supervisor and director. His current position is Director of School Counseling at Lakeland Regional High School in Wanaque, NJ, and in addition to overseeing the School Counseling Department, he manages curriculum and technology. Tim is also working with NJSCA, NJDOE and NJPSA in crafting an evaluation tool for school counselors in the state of New Jersey. The School Counseling Department recently received the “Recognized ASCA Model Program” (RAMP) designation, and is the first and only school in New Jersey to receive this award. The RAMP designation is awarded to schools whose counseling programs align with the criteria set in the ASCA National Model and recognizes schools that are committed to delivering a comprehensive, data-driven school counseling program and creating an exemplary educational environment.

References


