

## ALIGNING STUDENT SUPPORT WITH ACHIEVEMENT GOALS

With states and districts watching to make sure all schools meet federal standards for student achievement, the bar has been set high for people who influence learning. Such expectations fall most squarely on teachers and principals. But improving student performance across the board is so challenging that two-thirds of principals reported in a recent study<sup>1</sup> that they don't have the staff they need to do it. And in today's environment of tighter spending, their appeals for additional resources are likely to go unmet.

These principals may be overlooking a resource they already have on hand: guidance counselors and other student support staff that include social workers, home-school coordinators and health workers. Education researchers Karen Seashore Louis and Molly F. Gordon examine these professionals' often untapped potential to contribute to school improvement in their new book, *Aligning Student Support with Achievement Goals: The Secondary Principal's Guide*, published this year by Corwin Press and commissioned by The Wallace Foundation. (See note at the end for ordering information.)

By no means idle hands, counselors have as much on their plates as teachers and administrators. But the focus of their work is rarely on raising student achievement. Seashore Louis and Gordon argue that it is up to principals to redefine counselors' roles and make them active participants in improving learning.

"Counselors and social workers are rarely linked to the significant agendas of school administration," the authors write. When it comes to school reform, "the function of student support professionals in the larger scheme of things has been largely ignored."

Seashore Louis and Gordon argue that counselors are a critical part of the student-learning equation. Students do not exist in the vacuums of classrooms; they face pressures from their families, peers and society that can shape their ability to perform well in school. "A student's behavior and performance is deeply affected by invisible forces that exist outside the school and the school's formal culture," they write.

In addition, students benefit when a particular adult is intent on making sure they learn. As the authors attest: "We know from research that students who take more rigorous courses, who

work harder and smarter in school, who have at least one adult who cares about them personally and supports their academic success, and who have access to the social services that permit them to attend school regularly, will do better.”

These are all things that counselors can provide.

To do so, however, counselors need principals to take the lead in reframing their work and integrating them into the leadership teams that guide student achievement. Seashore Louis and Gordon offer principals recommendations on how to accomplish this.

Understanding this role-shift first requires a grasp of what counselors currently do. Seashore Louis and Gordon argue that counselors’ work is often poorly defined, lacking clear descriptions that match their strengths and skills. They are also too often con-

What’s missing, Seashore Louis and Gordon write, is work that is firmly tied to academic learning. Now, with achievement so imperative, and with schools’ focused so strongly on ensuring that all students meet basic standards, counselors must increase their relevance by taking on work that will contribute to these goals, the authors say. They quote Patricia Martin, who argues that “professionals who do not add to this bottom line are considered superfluous to schools.”<sup>2</sup>

Several professional organizations and nonprofits, including The Wallace Foundation, have tried to catalyze this role shift. For six years, concluding in 2004, Wallace supported the *Transforming School Counseling Initiative* to put counselors back in the business of academic achievement. Wallace helped six universities to overhaul their graduate-level counselor preparation programs, in particular adding a practical-experience or internship

universities” that attended meetings, received information and reworked their programs on their own. The Education Trust has since added an initiative to expand training to counselors who are already working in the field, sending trainers to about 20 school districts nationwide. Its recent study, *Gaining Traction, Gaining Ground*, which aimed to identify school practices and characteristics that help low-performing students to improve, reported that high schools that made counselors a part of the school’s academic culture saw greater improvement in learning than schools that didn’t.

“In those schools that saw better academic growth in their students, the counselors were part of the academic team,” Robinson said. “They used data to develop early-warning systems. They closed the cracks before kids fell through, identifying students who were in need of some intervention. Counselors in these schools have taken on these issues.”

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## *It is up to principals to redefine counselors’ roles and make them active participants in improving learning.*

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sidered “free agents” who can take on various tasks as they come up. According to the authors’ research, counselors’ work commonly includes:

- Planning and organizing student schedules
- Managing unexpected student crises
- Working with students on mental health issues
- Completing paperwork and maintaining student records
- Performing tasks that are unrelated to their professional skills, such as proctoring tests and delivering documents between departments

component that had been lacking. Each university, in turn, worked with a district that was committed to rethinking how counselors could be used in schools and that offered job placements to program participants.

*Transforming School Counseling* met with success and is still underway, said Stephanie Robinson of The Education Trust, the nonprofit group that oversaw the initiative’s design and execution. It also had wider reach than expected, because 20 universities beyond the six schools that received funding elected to participate without grants as “companion uni-

Such work in counseling also reflects a trend in the field put forth by the American School Counseling Association (ASCA), which has advocated for a “new model” for the profession that puts academic achievement at its core:

“The purpose of a counseling program in a school setting is to promote and enhance the learning process,” ASCA states, summarizing the model. “This programmatic approach helps school counselors to continuously assess their students’ needs, identify the barriers and obstacles that may be hindering success, and advocate programmatic efforts to eliminate those barriers.”

Based on the new model, which aims to have a greater impact on student performance, counselors’ job responsibilities might look like this:

- Helping students develop the attitudes, knowledge and skills that help them learn more efficiently
- Investigating career options with students and helping them devise plans to achieve their career goals
- Teaching students to set goals, make decisions and understand and respect themselves and others
- Giving students needed access to the community-based social services that can ensure they are safe, housed, healthy and ready to learn

What has kept school counselors from taking on such roles until now? Seashore Louis and Gordon's research turned up several barriers. One is tradition: counselors have historically lacked influence over curriculum development and other kinds of school decision-making. Another is the need for counselors themselves, and the teachers and leaders they work with, to change deeply entrenched attitudes that have denied counselors a place at the table. Counselors have also historically lacked the same accountability that teachers and administrators confront for raising student achievement.

If change is to happen, the principal must be the catalyst, the authors argue. Principals can design structures that make counselors major players, such as deploying them on school leadership teams and pairing them closely with teachers. Principals can ask counselors to make decisions informed by data, in the way that teachers and school leaders do. In fact, counselors can look specifically at student-outcome data that go beyond individual classrooms and encompass the whole school. Principals can also work with counselors to develop strategies that remove students' barriers to learning, which simultaneously supports the work of both students and teachers.

This work will not be easy. Once counselors begin to assume these academically oriented tasks, principals will have to find other people to take on the crisis-management and bureaucratic roles that counselors will leave behind, perhaps finding aides to proctor exams or relying on junior administrators to pick up some paperwork. Principals will also have to work diligently, over time, to counterbalance their staff's deep-seated assumptions that counselors work outside the realm of student improvement.

But, Seashore Louis and Gordon argue, it will be worthwhile. "You will have a cadre of leaders that includes both teachers and student support personnel, a team that is proactive in problem recognition and in crafting solutions," they advise principals. "Your students will have multiple resources to meet their more predictable needs as well as those unexpected life disruptions that keep them from learning."

<sup>1</sup> Michael DiPaola & Megan Tschannen-Moran, "The Principal at a Crossroads: A Study of the Conditions and Concerns of Principals," 2003, NASSP Bulletin, Vol. 87, No. 634, 43-65.

<sup>2</sup> Martin, Patricia, "Transforming School Counseling: A National Perspective" Theory into Practice, 2002, Vol 41, No. 3, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 148-153.

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