

## Major matters in crafting master school counselors

**W**hat makes a master school counselor? An even better question might be how do you prepare school counseling students to be effective counseling professionals? The field is engaged in an ongoing discussion regarding the discrepancy between training environments and real-world settings. The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs Standards outline specific guidelines for counselor preparation programs to ensure high-quality graduates. Still, we recognize that standards alone cannot fully close the gap between theory and practice. Current, accurate information about professional practice in today's world needs to be incorporated into the process of educating school counselors.

Recently, CACREP brought on two doctoral students (the authors of this article) to conduct a national study on what exists from state to state in terms of school counseling practice, licensure and program accreditation. Thirty-seven states participated in the interview process by phone and/or email. In addition, information on all 50 states was gathered from Internet resources published by state authorities and school counselor associations. Amidst the large amount of data collected during a 10-month period, various school counseling trends and themes emerged, including the three vital themes that we will overview in this article. Our hope is that in informing counselor educators about current issues faced by school counselors, these educators will be enabled to better prepare students and help tighten the gap between training and professional reality.

**Principal awareness:** School counselors are typically hired and supervised by school principals. Subsequently, principal support is imperative for school counselors to successfully perform their role. One interview participant observed, "Although school counselors developed this comprehensive model, we haven't

been educating principals, administrators or other stakeholders who delegate tasks and funding." A consistent message many state school counseling directors delivered was that school administrators need a better understanding of the school counselor role. The counseling literature has discussed the topic of school counselor-principal collaboration for years, including, for example, a 2009 report by the College Board, the American School Counselor Association and the National Association of Secondary School Principals. There remains, however, a pressing need to translate professional literature into real-world collaboration between schools and principals.

One state school counseling coordinator described a successful statewide training program for approximately 2,000 school counselors and principals: "At this training, many principals were open to learning and were surprised to learn that counselors had standards, just like a math teacher does. The administrators would say 'How can I take these things off their plate [testing, scheduling, etc.] so counselors can do what they need to do?' The next step is to develop a task force of principals and counselors to discuss how to redistribute the administrative tasks that often get pushed to school counselors. ... As much as these principals wanted to redistribute these non-counseling duties, they didn't know how to do it." This state coordinator suggested a two-pronged approach for school counselor-principal collaboration:

- 1) Educate principals on the school counselor role and then
- 2) work together to make changes.

**Handling students' mental health needs:** Some readers may recall a CESNET debate in June 2010 that began with a question: Is school counseling really counseling? This debate, also commonly found in professional literature and heard in collegial conversations, inspired us to ask interview participants how schools within their states were addressing student

mental health needs. Participants were also asked whether this responsibility was placed on school counselors or if schools were contracting this responsibility out to mental health providers. Representatives from 18 of the 37 states reported the approach for addressing student mental health needs varied by district, while participants from five states suggested a collaborative approach between various school personnel. Only five states specifically identified school counselors as responsible for handling a majority of student mental health concerns.

School counselors graduating from CACREP-accredited programs are trained to be knowledgeable about potential mental health struggles (CACREP Standard G.1.) and social diversity issues (Standard E.4.) that may affect student achievement. They are also trained to provide group and individual counseling (Standard D.2.). According to our research, however, in very few states do school counselors hold the primary responsibility for handling students' mental health needs. School counselors are counselors who are trained to recognize their limitations and make referrals when appropriate (Standard D.4). School counselors can be valuable resources to schools when their skills and abilities are fully utilized. Although school counselors should not be the sole mental health service providers in a school, they should advocate for their role in addressing students' mental health needs and then follow through by providing support for personal/social student development, not just academic and career services.

**State-level school counseling leadership patterns:** Another theme to emerge from our research is that states have an incredibly diverse range of leadership models and leader experience directing school counseling at the state level. With differing educational laws, policies and governing structures between states, this may not come as a

shock, but it is an important topic to present for discussion nonetheless. For example, one state might have three staff members overseeing school counseling at the state level, while another state might not even have a state-level school counseling supervisor or director. Some state-level leaders were balancing myriad responsibilities. As one director said, "I am very busy and I supervise 15 various departments. ... I do what I can, but there isn't time to spend much energy on school guidance counseling." As we continued to examine the experience levels of state-level leaders, we found that some directors had a specialized school counseling background, while others had no training or qualifications related to school counseling whatsoever.

On the other hand, there did appear to be consistency among states regarding the useful presence of state school counselor associations. These associations were typically described as playing an integral part in state-level school counseling, often educating state officials about information related to the school counselor role as well as offering

resources to practicing school counselors. Many interview participants reported state school counselor associations to be actively engaged in providing support for state-level change in school counseling standards and regulations, making educational and training opportunities available for school counselors, and creating and lobbying for state-level comprehensive school counseling programs and frameworks. Additionally, these state-level associations often work closely with school counselor educators, collaborating with them to lead and strengthen school counseling at the state level. It's imperative for school counselors to understand the inner workings of their own state leadership so they can better advocate for themselves, for the profession and, ultimately, for students.

These topics — principal awareness, handling students' mental health needs and state-level school counseling leadership patterns — are paramount to consider in preparing effective school counselors for the future. Simply being aware that these obstacles exist in real-world settings can benefit school

counseling students as they continue learning, understanding and developing realistic expectations for their future professional role. Counselor educators can also benefit from this awareness and help close the gap between theory and practice. Information in this article can inform lessons and classroom experiences that will prepare students to enter the 21st-century school counseling profession, advocate for their role and successfully promote student development within schools. We are in great times of education reform. How are you going to transform your students into master school counselors? ♦

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