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Special Education Roles

Special education is a multi-disciplinary effort, involving many professionals completing independent and overlapping tasks. As can be seen in Chapter 4, a gamut of team members and sites may communicate and collaborate in order to best identify and meet the needs of students with disabilities. At the infant and toddler stage, the pediatrician may have the crucial role in being the first to identify a possible disability and to refer the family for outside evaluation and services. Medical specialists, physical therapists, speech and language therapists, social workers, regular and special educators, local education agencies (LEAs), rehabilitation agencies, and psychologists may play a part in servicing students with disabilities from infancy to high school graduation. School psychologists, special educators, and counselors become involved once the child with a disability starts school. The role of the school psychologist is primarily that of assessment and their role is addressed further in Chapter 5. The role of the school counselor is more extensive and more generally stated. While many of the team members may have overlapping roles, it is the purpose of this chapter to further clarify that of the school counselor.

Activity

Interview several school counselors working with students with special needs. Develop a master calendar in relation to monthly special education tasks.

Recently, an entire publication of the *School Counselor Journal* (ASCA, 2005) was devoted to the issue of working with students with special needs. In the president's address in this journal, the issue addressed was that of expanding the notion of who constitutes children and youth with special needs to include children who are challenged physically, emotionally, and cognitively, including those uprooted by natural disasters. School counselors in general are seeing not only an increase in the size of their student caseloads and in those students with mental health issues, but are also servicing more students with *individualized education plans*

(IEPs) and 504 plans. Coupled with this increase in students with special needs on school counselors' caseloads is increasing academic standards, such as those dictated by NCLB. Few graduate-level academic programs require school counseling trainees to take a course in special education, thereby leaving entry-level counselors in need of developing skills and abilities to work with students in special education programs (Allen & LaTorre, 1998; Bowen & Glen, 1998; Frantz & Prillaman, 1993; Gillam, Hendricks, George, & Baltimore, 2003; Greer, Greer, & Woody, 1995; Korinek & Prillaman, 1992; Scarborough & Deck, 1998; Studer & Quigny as cited in Studer, 2005). For school counselors, the question becomes, "How do I help students with special needs, while at the same time attend to my large number of 'regular' students assigned to me?"

The first step in defining the role of the school counselor is to review the American School Counselor's (ASCA) Position Statement on this topic, which is presented in Table 1.1.

Activity

Review and collate position statements of state school counselor professional organizations (<http://www.schoolcounselor.org/content.asp?pl=325&sl=127&contentid=179>) in relation to working with students with special needs.

As can be seen in review of the statements presented in this table, the majority of roles defined, such as individual and group counselor, collaborator, advocate, consultant, team member, and referral agent, are similar to those one would expect in regard to working with children and youth without disabilities. While these roles are important, they are generic, with specific tasks in regard to students with special needs left open to definition. Adding to the complexity of this issue is the fact that the role of the school counselor in general still varies greatly, influenced by factors such as district policy, number and type of professionals within the district, level of school served, geographical location, public versus private nature of the school, number of students, and funding resources. There is clearly a need for further delineation and specification of how school counselors can best meet the needs of students with special needs.

The roles and duties of both general education and special education teachers often work in isolation of one another. Each educator's daily routines, methods of instruction, and responsibilities are quite different from the other. When a student becomes eligible for special education classification, general and special educators can become more independent in their approach to educating and supporting the child. Interventions, modifications, and accommodations that are the responsibility of both educators may create conflict when determining with whom the responsibility lies. Furthermore, the role of the school counselor, as defined by ASCA, also does not provide much mention of the support to students with disabilities.

Activity

Review an educational film on disability and children such as *A Video Guide to (Dis) ability* (<http://www.disabilitytraining.com/avgd.html>) or *Special People, Special Needs* (<http://www.cevmultimedia.com/fcs/parenting.php>). Write a bulleted list of appropriate school counselor tasks in regard to one of the children with special needs identified in the film.

The June 2004 "Role of the School Counselor," provided by ASCA, recommends a counselor to student ratio of 1:250 with little mention of the related services provided to students whose IEPs indicate group or individual counseling. It is the responsibility of the school counselor to provide individual and group counseling to students whose lives and

Table 1.1 ASCA Position Statement

<p>ASCA Position Statement: Special-Needs Students</p> <p>http://www.schoolcounselor.org/content.asp?contentid=218</p> <p>The Professional School Counselor and Students with Special Needs (Adopted 1999; revised 2004)</p> <p>American School Counselor Association (ASCA) Position</p> <p>Professional school counselors encourage and support all students' academic, personal/ social, and career development through comprehensive school counseling programs. Professional school counselors are committed to helping all students realize their potential and make adequate yearly progress despite challenges that may result from identified disabilities and other special needs.</p> <p>Rationale</p> <p>Professional school counselors have increasingly important roles in working with students who have special needs. State and federal laws require schools to provide an equitable education for all students, including those with special needs. Components of federal laws such as due process, individual educational programs, least restrictive environment, and other plans for students with accommodations and modifications provide opportunities to use the professional school counselor's skills to benefit students with special needs. Professional school counselors work with students with special needs both in special class settings and in the regular classroom, and are a key component in assisting with transitions to post-secondary options. It is particularly important that the professional school counselor's role in these procedures is clearly defined and is in compliance with laws and local policies.</p> <p>The Professional School Counselor's Role</p> <p>When appropriate, interventions in which the professional school counselor participates may include but are not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • leading school counseling activities as a part of the comprehensive school counseling program • providing collaborative services consistent with those services provided to students through the comprehensive school counseling program • serving on the school's multidisciplinary team that identifies students who may need assessments to determine special needs within the scope and practice of the professional school counselor • collaborating with other student support specialists in the delivery of services • providing group and individual counseling • advocating for students with special needs in the school and in the community • assisting with the establishment and implementation of plans for accommodations and modifications • providing assistance with transitions from grade to grade as well as post-secondary options • consulting and collaborating with staff and parents to understand the special needs of these students • making referrals to appropriate specialists within the school system and within the community

(Continued)

Table 1.1 (Continued)

The professional school counselor advocates for students with special needs and is one of many school staff members who may be responsible for providing information as written plans are prepared for students with special needs. The professional school counselor has a responsibility to be a part of designing portions of these plans related to the comprehensive school counseling program, but it is inappropriate for the professional school counselor to serve in supervisory or administrative roles such as:

- making decisions regarding placement or retention
- serving in any supervisory capacity related to the implementation of IDEA
- serving as the LEA representative for the team writing the IEP
- coordinating the 504 planning team
- supervising of the implementation of the 504 plan

The professional school counselor continues to seek opportunities for professional development to better understand special needs in regard to assessment, research, and legislation. The professional school counselor also collaborates with members of the community who are providing services to students with special needs.

Summary

The professional school counselor takes an active role in providing a comprehensive school counseling program to students with special needs. Professional school counselors advocate for all students and provide collaborative services to students with special needs consistent with those services provided to students through the comprehensive school counseling program.

personal circumstances necessitate emotional support. School counselors are to provide all students with a comprehensive school counseling program, which often includes education on topics including bullying and anger management, in addition to topics of age-appropriate levels for elementary, middle, and high school students. Unfortunately, the 1:250 recommended ratio is often not the case as the 2005–2006 school year national average was 1:476 (NCES Common Core Data (CCD), “State Nonfiscal Survey of Public Elementary/Secondary Education: 2005–2006 School Year”). Those school counselors who are the sole counselor of a school must not only fulfill the expectations of administrators and district mission statements and philosophies, but also the state and federal obligations to students who are classified as having a disability and who have counseling as a related service on their IEP. School counselors are becoming more and more present at child study team meetings, parent conferences, and special education committee meetings; however, their role is not specifically defined by state or federal guidelines. It then becomes the responsibility of the local education agency to provide all educators with specific roles and responsibilities of school counselors in the special education arena.

Dawson is a ten year old male in fifth grade. He is classified as other health impaired. Dawson has been diagnosed by a psychologist as having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. His family is currently trying to change his diet, examine research on allergies, and incorporate holistic approaches for treatment. In school, Dawson is rapidly falling behind. Parents have called the counselor complaining about him disrupting their children in class. Group counseling has been attempted in an effort to promote appropriate social skills and build relationships. Recently, Dawson has been acting out and getting into trouble. He has been sent to the principal for the third time in one day. You are the school counselor, and have just been contacted by the principal.

She asks for your help in dealing with this situation. You explain the interventions that have been attempted. She asks you to call the parents in for a meeting.

- What discussion will you have with the parents regarding Dawson?
- Is it appropriate to share information with other parents regarding a disruptive student in the classroom?
- At what point does this situation become an issue for administration to pursue rather than the role of the school counselor?
- Are there other steps that can be taken to help Dawson in the educational setting?

The coordination of general education, special education, and school counseling is not something that can easily be fixed after a day of inservice or conference. Communication is the key to unlocking the barrier. A sharing of duties and responsibilities so that all are aware of one another's roles and strengths begins the dialogue necessary to create a system of educators that work together, not against one another. Providing school counselors with the tools necessary to communicate with a common language is a beginning.

In addition, Erford (2003) described a number of specific tasks that school counselors might undertake, including provision of multiculturally sensitive education about disabilities; education and civil rights information; assistance of families in negotiating educational systems; consultation in terms of medical management; monitoring of progress.

Additional specific tasks that school counselors might undertake include:

At the start of the school year:

- A clear explanation to colleagues such as special education and regular teachers, and school psychologists, as well as parents of students with special needs, as to the role of the school counselor
- Meeting with regular teachers to address referral process
- Distribution of related forms to teachers regarding classroom assessment, intervention documentation, counseling referrals
- Introduction to/meeting with Committee on Special Education (CSE) Chair to develop rapport, address roles and expectations
- Introduction to/meeting with school psychologist to develop rapport, identify assessment tools utilized, education regarding psychologist reports; understanding of possible test accommodations for various standardized tests
- Identification of students coming with IEPs and 504 plans that are part of the school counselors' caseload

Ongoing throughout the school year:

- Teacher assistance with identification and documentation of intervention strategies tried; suggestion of alternative interventions
- Assistance in writing specific behavioral counseling goals
- Regular team review of students with IEPs and 504 plans to specifically define needs and counseling expectations; progress
- Education of parents as to the CSE process
- Development of continuing education presentations on topics such as organizational skills, study skills for students, parents, and staff
- Partnership in development of workshops for staff and parents related to specific education topics such as attention deficit disorders and pervasive developmental disorders
- Periodic visits to the resource room, self-contained classes; visits with the Special Education Itinerant Teachers (SEIT)
- Periodic contacts with physical and occupational therapists; speech pathologists
- Attendance at professional conferences on special education

Even when tasks are spelled out, problems can arise when school counselors try to collaborate with others in terms of special education:

- Waste of school counselors' time due to ineffectiveness of team meetings
- Administrative lack of sensitivity to school counselors' caseloads
- School counselors may not be in attendance when they have an assigned task
- Inaccurate belief may exist that school counselors address only social skills
- Inaccurate belief that school counselors only provide behavior modification or social interventions in isolation of the students' program
- False belief that students' academic needs must wait until school counselor magically addresses emotional issues
- Lack of local education agency (LEA), IDEA, and 504 updates to school counselor
- Lack of ability to follow up on counseling interventions due to caseload size
- Other school staff may feel that they don't have to cooperate with counseling part of team plan
- Teams may fail to specify academic and behavioral success outcomes
- Lack of support for proactive interventions for students with mild disabilities who are at risk for eventual academic failure
- Families, advocates, and agencies may have unreal counseling expectations
- Lack of resources, especially alternative placements, for students in extreme need
- Ethical concerns for limited counseling resources being provided to students with the most vocal parents
- Ethical concerns when being required to provide additional services, which warrant more training or supervision (Erford, 2003, p. 372).

Important considerations in assuming these tasks include what school counselors feel is in their professional role to assume, whether or not they have appropriate training in taking on these tasks, contents of their defined job description, and perhaps most importantly, the question of how the completion of these tasks will better serve their students with special needs.

Questions for Reflection

1. Who are the professionals that work with students with special needs at your school? At your school district?
2. What are their roles?
3. How are the roles communicated?
4. What tasks are unique to certain professionals?
5. What tasks are shared among these professionals?
6. What preparation/training do these professionals have in working with students with special needs?
7. How many students at your school have special needs? How many in your district?
8. What are the services available to students with special needs in your school/district? In your community?