

Comprehensive School Guidance Programs in Nebraska: Implications for Rural Schools

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Archival data from an in-state survey of 428 elementary and secondary school counselors completed by the Nebraska Department of Education regarding comprehensive guidance programs was reviewed for relevant information. This information is discussed relative to the current views and knowledge regarding the state of comprehensive developmental guidance and their implications for school counselors and administrators.

As far back as the mid-1960's there were warnings (e.g., Deck & Cecil, 1990) that school counselors should not take for granted their importance within educational programming. When decisions have been made relative to program prioritization, it was counselors who often times had difficulty demonstrating their effectiveness and thus their professional utility could be viewed as expendable (e.g., Feller, 1994; Gibbs, 2003). Counselors today, however, are becoming increasingly aware that there is empirical evidence that counseling interventions do have a positive and measurable impact on students' educational and personal development (e.g., American School Counselor Association, 2004). Guidance programs that have demonstrated their effectiveness have experienced growth through focusing on results-based programs (Gysbers & Henderson, 1997).

Schools all across the United States are recognizing the weight of the accountability movement and are having to respond to questions related to the effectiveness of all educational practices (e.g., Owens & Peltier, 2002; Rothstein, 2002; Studer & Sommers, 2000; Winans, 2002). School counselors garner no exception to the accountability movement and have to examine their daily practice in working with students (e.g., McDivitt & Augustin, 2002; Studer & Sommers, 2000).

One of the major difficulties facing practicing school counselors, attempting to respond to questions of accountability, is that historically their role has been poorly defined (Sprinthall, 1971). Subsequently, school administrators, students, parents, teachers, and the counselors themselves often have very different ideas regarding their functional role with the school and the priority structure of their school counselor responsibilities. To meet these challenges ascribed to the accountability movement, the last decade has seen schools, both urban and rural, across the country adopting and implementing

comprehensive and developmental school guidance programs that include measurable student competencies (e.g., Florida State Department of Education, 1996; Idaho State Board of Education, 1996; North Carolina State Department, 1995; University of Missouri 1995; Starr, 1996; Utah State Office of Education, 1998). Typically the competencies are aligned within the National Standards identified by the American School Counselor Association: personal/social, academic and career development (i.e., Campbell & Dahir, 1997). For example, Nebraska which remains predominantly comprised of rural schools, too has taken steps to assure that frameworks are available for school counseling programs that are trying to respond to demands for evidence of program effectiveness. The Nebraska Department of Education (2000) publication provides a model for comprehensive guidance programs, that if fully adopted by local districts, would provide measurable program standards with a sense of consistency across the state (Nebraska Department of Education, 2000). Nebraska, however, is not alone in its endeavors as other rural states (Idaho State Board of Education, 1996; Utah State) have adopted standards for consistency of comprehensive guidance. Despite the availability of this written guide, questions still remain to what degree do rural schools in states such as Nebraska adopt and implement a comprehensive and developmental model of guidance.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to elucidate current views and knowledge regarding the status of comprehensive and developmental guidance within the state of Nebraska. The authors' intent was to review archival data and disseminate noteworthy results to school counselors, counselor education programs, as well as, school administrators.

As the need arose to determine the most efficient direction for the Department of Education to direct resources and support school guidance programs, questions emerged related to the current state of school guidance programs in Nebraska. Despite the presence of many progressive and effective school guidance programs within the state, no comprehensive statewide data existed relating to the proliferation of comprehensive guidance programs. To assess the regional programmatic needs of guidance, the profession's preparedness to respond to the scrutiny of accountability, and to identify staff development needs of school counselors, a survey was sent to all Nebraska school counselors employed in the Fall of 2002. Surveys were distributed through the mail and were identified by Educational Service Unit (ESU).

The 32-item survey (see Table 1.) was developed to help ascertain the specific progress related to the implementation of specific domains and program components expected to be present in a comprehensive guidance program. Individual items were developed to identify key markers that suggest the presence of an active comprehensive guidance and counseling program. The Department of Education survey was reviewed by three independent raters to determine what information may provide support for the presence of comprehensive guidance programs in Nebraska. Today, the best current standard for program evaluation may be the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs (American School Counselor Association, 2003). Because the national model was not yet published at the time of the survey, the authors determined it was most appropriate to examine survey results using criteria identified as program components of the Missouri Model (e.g., Gysbers & Henderson, 2000). The program components of the Missouri Model: response services, systems support, individual student planning and curriculum are cornerstones of the Nebraska School Counseling Guide (2000) and are essential in the 2003 ASCA model. Therefore, authors examined the data in relation to these four components.

Method

The current methodology used for this study was historical research with a primary source of quantitative records. The authors' source for data was the Nebraska Department of Education survey of comprehensive school guidance programs in Nebraska. The reviewers examined the survey questions and responses regarding the components of the Missouri Model and determined appropriate categories (response services, systems support, individual student planning and curriculum) in which to place questions 1-28 (see Appendix). Although closely related to school guidance programs, questions 29-32 were not examined by reviewers as they were designed specifically to assess aspects of career and technical education in Nebraska. The evaluation of selected survey

items by component areas allowed reviewers to examine the condition of these elements across the state.

In an effort to provide a clearer picture regarding the rural characteristics within the data collection and to control for the possibility that large districts employing greater numbers of school counselors might skew the data associated with more rural areas for this item, the results exclude counselors from schools associated with ESU's 3, 18 and 19. These areas include the cities of Lincoln, Omaha and much of the surrounding metropolitan area. Of the 278 surveys that represent all other Nebraska areas, 53% of counselors indicated having a school board adopted guidance program.

The cumulative examination of all elements suggests trends in, or the presence of, implemented comprehensive guidance programs. For example, the presence of one component did not assure the existence of others. All components work together to provide comprehensive guidance programs for all students. By examining the data resulting from the survey, researchers hoped to answer the following question: What is the level of implementation of comprehensive guidance programs in Nebraska schools?

Interpretation of Data

Of the 917 Professional School Counselors surveyed throughout the 19 Educational Service Units (ESU), 428 completed and returned survey for a response rate of 46.7%. Data in this section are shared in relation to each of the program components that comprise a comprehensive guidance program. For a complete list of survey item responses see the Appendix.

System Support

This component includes activities necessary to support the overall guidance program and other educational programs within a school or district. Examples might include writing guidance lessons or curriculum, staff development, community resource development, and policy support (adapted from Gysbers & Henderson, 2000).

Evidence of an implemented system support component is largely dependent upon the presence of a formally documented guidance program. Responses to item 1 indicate that 59.6 percent of the respondents believed that their school board had adopted a written guidance and counseling program. The presence of a board-approved curriculum also provides evidence of policy support that is critical to the availability of key resources for ongoing curricular development. In response to the same item, 22.5% of counselors answered "no" to having a board approved guidance program while an additional 17.9% were unsure. Although results from item 1 provided evidence of the presence of adopted guidance programs, item 2 assists in determining whether the adopted program was aligned with the Nebraska School Counseling Guide for Planning and

Program Improvement (Nebraska Department of Education, 2000). A statewide response rate of 40.9% indicated such an alignment existed.

Other evidence of system support was also apparent in responses to items 3 and 5. For example, 76.9% of responding counselors indicated that their program was systematic rather than a series of isolated activities, and 86.4% agreed that their program was designed to have a developmental emphasis. Although the items pertain to descriptors of a curriculum, the work necessary to create a coordinated and sequenced program provides evidence of the existence of system support component. That is, an active system support component is essential to the development, maintenance of, and implementation of a guidance curriculum component of the comprehensive program.

Closer scrutiny and evaluation of an active system support component failed to provide evidence of its presence in many schools. For example, less than 25% of the respondents indicated their school had an advisory committee (item 8). Annual reports are provided to convey effectiveness of guidance programs in only 26.3% schools (item 21) and less than half indicated that their guidance and counseling program underwent district-wide guidance program evaluation (item 26). These responses suggest that some important elements of the system support component are still absent or lacking in many Nebraska schools.

Responsive Services

The purpose of this component is to assist students who are challenged by problems that interfere with their healthy personal, social, career, or educational development. This aspect of the guidance program can be preventative or remedial in nature depending upon unique circumstances. This guidance program component can be offered as individual counseling, small group counseling, consulting or through other dynamic means. (adapted from Gysbers & Henderson, 2000).

Results from item 15 indicated that 94.1 percent of the respondents believed that their guidance program had a component of responsive counseling services, including referral, for students, families and teachers in crisis situations. Only 2.8 % of the respondents indicated that the guidance program did not have such services in place and 2.8 % were unsure. This again points to a very high level of agreement among respondents that the responsive counseling component was in place.

Results from item 19 indicated that 94.8 percent of the respondents believed that the guidance program intentionally supports teachers, administrators, parents and community with regard to school counseling issues by providing consultation, information and/or referrals. Only 1.2 reported that such services were not available and 4.0 % were unsure.

The findings overwhelmingly support the belief that the response component of a comprehensive guidance programs are in place and that these findings generalize across all regions of the state. What is less clear is the nature of the response services. For example, responding to the needs of the students can take a preventative (proactive) or remedial (reactive) stance. Prior to the implementation of comprehensive guidance programs, the tradition of a clinical-service model was largely comprised of counselors responding to immediate student needs and was typically remedial in nature. Survey items do not distinguish between preventative and remedial counseling practices in relation to the response component. Although both preventative and remedial activities are expected aspects of the response component, a strictly remedial posture may suggest that a guidance program continues to operate in a mode other than the comprehensive guidance model.

Individual Student Planning

The individual student planning component is intended to guide students in the development of their educational, personal/social and career plans. Students become more aware of their own development and take action on their next step both educationally and vocationally. Activities can be offered individually or through the use of group guidance. (adapted from Gysbers & Henderson, 2000).

Results from survey item 4 appear to strongly support students having access to planning in the development of their educational, personal/social and career plans, with 94.6 % of the respondents indicating that their guidance programs serve all students. Results to item 16 also seem to support access to planning to both students and parents/guardians, with 74% of respondents indicating that their schools guidance programs offer opportunity for individuals and families/guardians to develop and monitor educational/career plans annually. Responses to both items seem to indicate that the participants felt students and families had access to individual student planning. Despite the positive nature of this data, it is important to note the substantial difference between delivering individual planning activities to all students and merely making this opportunity available. This distinction is not made clear by the survey data.

The results also appear to support that respondents felt that students had access to all postsecondary options of training including; apprenticeships, military, and technical education program as well as 4-year colleges and universities, when assisting students with educational/career planning. Of counselors responding, 74% (item 17) agreed that their students had access to the above training options. The availability of these options provides evidence that individual student plans reach beyond the scope of isolated academic decisions and do

not strictly adhere to individual decisions relating only to issues relevant within the school environment.

While the responses to items 4, 16, and 17, indicate that counselors felt that students had access to individual planning services, item 22 illustrates that challenges remain across all program components. Specifically, only 60.4% of respondents felt they are provided with sufficient access and time with students to implement effective guidance and counseling activities. This data illustrates a potential disconnect between having a written program in a school and the actual implementation of the program.

Curriculum

The guidance curriculum is the key element concerning the developmental aspect of the comprehensive guidance program. It contains goals for guidance instruction and student competencies that address the needs of students in grades K-12. It is designed to serve all students and is often implemented through classroom or group guidance. (adapted from Gysbers & Henderson, 2000).

Of those responding to item 4, 94.6% indicated that their program serves all children and 86.4% indicated the program has a developmental emphasis. Of particular interest, however, is that a lower percentage indicated the presence of a written guidance curriculum in each of the following curriculum domain areas: 69.2% career development, 69.8% academic development, 66.9% social development, and 67.0% personal development (item 14). Although most counselors feel their programs serve all children and that the program is developmentally appropriate, over 30% of respondents could not affirm that they have a written curriculum in the key domain areas central to state and national standards for school counseling activities.

Discussion and Implications

The demands on school counselors for continued accountability are many and varied. These demands are especially true of rural educational systems. Without a comprehensive school guidance program in place the school counselor essentially becomes the guidance program in these rural locations. Knowing this, it is vitally important to collect and review data to better understand comprehensive guidance programs and its consistent implementation within rural schools.

The compilation of data from this survey provides a glimpse into the current views and knowledge regarding the state of comprehensive developmental guidance within a state with predominantly rural schools. Although many of the survey items yielded encouraging results, there were several indications that the state of guidance in Nebraska is not where it needs to be with respect to broad

implementation of comprehensive developmental guidance.

When considering the survey data as a whole, it seems unlikely that Nebraska school counselors are well prepared to provide statewide accountability data concerning program effectiveness. Although a few districts may be well suited for this type of scrutiny, it is evident that Nebraska is lacking a minimal number of consistent factors between programs. Certainly districts must maintain enough autonomy to modify their guidance program to suit their unique needs, yet it is critical that they also be able to demonstrate a substantial degree of alignment with standards established by the profession. This problem was illustrated by the nearly 60% of counselors who said “no” or were “unsure” if their school had adopted the model in the 2000 Nebraska School Counseling Guide for Planning and Program Improvement (item 2). Understanding that the Nebraska model is deeply rooted and consistent with the guidance model promoted by the American School Counselor Association, it leaves the question, “What model, if any, are the majority of schools implementing”? At best, the data might suggest that school counselors do have programs fashioned after national frameworks, but simply may not be familiar with state initiatives to ensure that comprehensive guidance is consistently being implemented. If school counselors are to respond to accountability demands as a unified body, we must assure that our professional dialogue is consistent and our programs are indeed comprehensive.

In examining the survey results, some apparent contradictory data emerged suggesting that the degree of implementation might not be as high as some individual survey items would indicate. Although individuals identified having programs with a developmental emphasis that serve all students, responses to other items reveal key aspects of a comprehensive model were not in place. Because the implementation of a comprehensive program can take years to fully put into practice, some the missing components are likely the result of programs in transition. It is important for coordinators of new comprehensive programs to continue their efforts from the implementation stage through evaluation and program enhancement stages.

Conclusion

Perhaps the greatest value of this survey data is that it creates an important point from which to measure program growth for future comparison. In order to prepare counselors for the student needs of tomorrow we must know where we are today. The voluntary act of participation in the survey itself suggests that counselors are willing to participate in data collection and are embracing the challenges of accountability. As a body of professional school counselors we must continue to look for ways to measure our program success and the related

student development. Although some guidance-related data is being collected, many questions remain concerning the degree to which students in public and private rural educational systems are receiving instruction toward career, academic and personal/social competencies? School counselors can no longer trust that what they have done successfully in the past will protect their positions in the future. More importantly, educators and school counselors must be prepared to provide evidence of how their program effects positive change in students. By formally adopting and implementing a guidance program with measurable student competencies, rural educators and professional school counselors can assure that all students are benefiting from the systematic delivery of dynamic guidance and counseling activities.

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