

Counselors as Leaders: Five Skills that Impact Student Achievement

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Counselor roles continue to evolve in response to changing demographics and depleting resources such as time and finances. Challenges continue to mount as counselors strive to meet diverse challenges of the students they serve, while ensuring academic success for all students in a continuous-improvement environment. School counselors, schools, and districts are being challenged to simply do more with less. This trend is projected to continue given the current state of our country. In an educational environment fraught with external influences often viewed as stressors, research supports that student achievement is strongly enhanced through student/staff relationships. Personal and interpersonal characteristics of adults in the school setting become increasingly important. School counselors are uniquely trained and are equipped to become strong leaders in their schools. Those who choose to accept leadership roles, can positively impact student achievement.

A research meta-analysis was conducted by McRel, as cited by Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003), that examined the impact school leaders had on student achievement. Waters et al. identified 21 leadership responsibilities that are significantly associated with student achievement. The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC), formed by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), developed standards for principals. However, the leadership practices affecting student achievement identified by research are generally not evidenced in the ISLLC standards; specifically, they do not include 17 of the 21 identified leadership responsibilities. Interestingly, all 21 identified leadership practices are dispositions and performances evidenced in Indiana Department of Education, Division of Professional Standards, School Services Professional Standards, and School Counseling Professional

Standards and the American School Counseling Associations, Ethical Standards for School Counselors.

A research study was conducted by the author to determine whether key counseling skills and identified leadership practices would form into definable factors impacting student achievement. Five key counseling skills were identified because of their strong overlap in leadership and counseling standards, as well as their student achievement significance (Waters et al., 2003). The counseling skills were identified as: promote positive relationships, model advocacy, recognize the need for improvement and facilitate the change process, collaborate with other educators, community leaders, and parents, and utilize current literature and research. The administrative practices identified were from the work of Waters, Marzano, and McNulty. These practices were selected because they were significantly correlated with student achievement.

Research results indicated five factors, that when considered simultaneously, correlated with student achievement. However, the nature of correlation means that leaders, to include counselors, who accomplish these five factors can positively impact student achievement, but the absence of these leadership factors can negatively impact student achievement. What are the five factors?

Expert Authority Orientation

This factor focuses on credibility as an educational leader amongst all stakeholders. School leaders are knowledgeable about educational best practice, ensure necessary resources are available, provide a safe, stable environment that encourages a focus on academics, communicate effectively with school-community members, and advocate for the school to garner community support.

Academic Support

This factor concentrates on providing direct curricular, instructional, and assessment assistance. Leaders are knowledgeable and actively engaged in shared decision-making relative to curriculum, instruction, and assessment. They are willing to notice and acknowledge the hard work of others engaged with them in the decision-making process.

Change Capacity

The heart of this factor is valuing and fostering a culture of change. Leaders establish strong lines of communication, valuing input from a variety of stakeholders. They are willing to challenge the status quo to address school and individual needs.

Success Motivation

This factor is about developing trustworthy relationships that genuinely acknowledge, reward, and celebrate teacher accomplishments. These leaders encourage risk-taking and innovation for all faculty through their support of teachers, and demonstrate these qualities. This factor supports a culture of change.

Ethical Transparency

This factor describes the degree to which leaders' belief and rationale for decisions are apparent to stakeholders. Teachers preoccupied with inconsistent decisions and mistrust detracts from student achievement. Growth and change occur more quickly if all stakeholders are aware of the leader's core beliefs, goals, and plan for accomplishing goals. Leaders who are transparent and consistent over time will dispel mistrust and establish credibility.

Raising awareness of the impact personal and interpersonal skills can have on student achievement is vital. Equally important is the understanding that the five factors must be systemically reflected upon (i.e., they must be viewed as a system, not five independent factors).

Expert Authority Orientation is strongly correlated with all other factors, and most strongly with Ethical Transparency (.384). Thomas Sergiovanni (2006) posited that moral and ethical transparency were critical components of successful leadership. Ethical Transparency was highly correlated with Change Capacity (.343). Highly effective leaders are able to bring about increased student achievement through the school improvement process. The fulcrum for school improvement is relationships, relationships established through open communication and a transparency of beliefs and goals (Sergiovanni). Effective leaders are able to garner support with stakeholders, motivating staff to accomplish school goals. Advocacy and agency for change are moral imperatives for the building level counselor (Sergiovanni). Academic Support was strongly correlated with Expert Authority Orientation (.353) and Ethical Transparency (.298). Research supports a healthy school climate where all staff members are focused on the vision and mission of the school, grounded in a common core set of values, ideals and beliefs, utilizing all resources produces positive results (DuFour, 2004; Senge et al., 2000; Sergiovanni).

Sergiovanni (2006) described the how a leader's head, heart, and hands (i.e. their beliefs, values, theories of practice, reflections, behaviors, decisions, and actions), impact effectiveness. Effectiveness is a result of how others perceive a leader and their intentional transparency efforts. The more transparent the leader, the more opportunity he/she has to bring about change. And change is most often a result of the leader's behaviors, actions, and decisions, based on their beliefs and values, becoming institutionalized through programs, policies, and procedures. Counselors who develop their leadership 'head, heart, and hands,' are leaders who systemically focus on the five key counseling factors. The emergence of five key counseling skills as factors provides an additional lens for counselors to view their leadership relative to student achievement.

Counselors must rise to the challenge of school leadership. Utilizing their unique skill set to work not only at the individual level, but on the school and district stage can positively impact student achievement. It is critical that school counselors become aware of how they are perceived, and be cognizant of the impact it can have on the student achievement. Personal and interpersonal skills do matter!

Questions:

1. How can school counselors incorporate *Change Capacity* into their skill set?
2. What is meant by “head, heart, and hands” of leadership?
3. How will this article impact your practice as a school counselor?