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Moving to Evidence-Based School Counseling Practice

Consider two scenarios:

Scenario 1: *Bob, a high school counselor, is asked by his principal to see what can be done to reduce fights and disciplinary referrals. Bob creates a series of guidance lessons on conflict resolution and implements these in classrooms where teachers typically provide ready access. He also sets up a peer mediation program based on handouts he picked up at a presentation at the last state school counseling association conference. He recruits, selects, trains, and supervises a team of student mediators who help resolve conflicts between peers. The program runs for five years, and during this time over 60 students participate as peer mediators. Bob is very happy with the program's success and even documents his interventions and teaches other counselors how to implement his program at a session at the state conference.*

Scenario 2: *Bob, a high school counselor, notices an increase in disciplinary referrals related to fighting in institutional data and suggests to the principal that something be done to reduce fights and increase school safety. After consultation with the principal and a discussion at a faculty meeting, he organizes*

a team of parents and teachers to find research-based approaches to reducing school violence and fighting. The team in consultation with students, identifies the problem as a lack of student conflict resolution skills, and chooses a research-based conflict resolution curriculum focused on teaching all students these skills. Bob receives training in implementing the curriculum and, serving as a trainer to the social studies teachers, he partners with them to teach the curriculum in the ninth grade social studies classes. Pre- and posttests of student learning indicate that the ninth graders have learned new conflict resolution strategies and skills. Disciplinary referrals drop by 25%. Student school climate surveys show that ninth graders think that the school is now a safer and more orderly environment. Bob and the social studies chair disseminate the results in a PowerPoint presentation to the school board, teachers, school community, and parents in the annual school counseling program report card. The following year, the curriculum is implemented and evaluated in all grade levels.

These two scenarios reflect two very different paradigms for school counselor functioning. The first paradigm reflects current common practices, perhaps even best practices. Bob is responsive to his principal's request, develops interventions using his own skill in lesson planning, and uses information transmitted through the official channels of his professional community. Bob works hard, delivers many lessons, trains numerous mediators, and gives back to the profession by teaching others how to implement his interventions.

In the second scenario, Bob is actively engaged in monitoring school data (especially data related to achievement, attendance, and safety). He uses this information as *evidence* for what problem needs to be addressed and takes the leadership necessary to get it done. Bob collaborates with teachers in reviewing different approaches to the identified problem and in selecting an approach with evidence of its effectiveness. Again, Bob teams with teachers to integrate the intervention into the academic curriculum, another practice with research-based evidence of its effectiveness. Through pre- and posttests, Bob gathers evidence that students actually learned the intended material. This learning benefits the larger school community through improved school climate and reduced disciplinary referrals. Finally, Bob disseminates the evidence of his intervention to public education stakeholders.

While the first scenario reflects twentieth century best practices, the second scenario reflects twenty-first-century evidence-based practice. We believe that the school counseling profession needs to make the transition from a best practice orientation to an evidence-based practice orientation so that school counselors can maximize their effectiveness, demonstrate their worth, and increase their legitimacy in public schools.

In this chapter, we begin this process by defining *evidence-based school counseling* and identifying specific competencies needed for evidence-based practice. Next we examine the context of

evidence-based school counseling practice by (a) looking at the forces driving change in school counseling practice and (b) reviewing the key concepts of ongoing attempts to reform practice (the Education Trust's *Transforming School Counseling Initiative* and the American School Counselor Association's National Model). Subsequent chapters will help counselors acquire this knowledge and build these skills.

Integrating Evidence and Practice

The *evidence-based practice* movement originally evolved in the field of medicine where it has been defined as “the integration of the best evidence with clinical expertise and patient values” (Sackett, Straus, Richardson, Rosenberg, & Haynes, 2000, p. 1). This approach emphasizes medical practitioners' use of best available research to guide practice and the integration of this knowledge with clinical skills. This movement has resulted in significant changes in medical practice and education. Medical educators now recognize that their students need to learn how to integrate research literature into their practice. In recent years, many human service professions have incorporated evidence-based practice principles in both professional practice and education. For example, evidence-based practice concepts are being applied in counseling psychology (Chwalisz, 2003), school psychology (Kratochwill & Shernoff, 2003), nursing (Deaton, 2001), and public health (Bronson, Gurney, & Land, 1999).

Sexton, Schofield, and Whiston (1997) have argued that adopting an evidence-based practice approach would help the school counseling field become better integrated by basing training, knowledge generation, and practice in the evolving knowledge base of the profession. They pointed out that use of the existing *outcome research* to guide both training and practice can help ensure that professional activities reflect best practices and are consistent with each other. We believe that an explicit model for evidence-based school counseling is needed to accomplish the promise for the approach noted by Sexton, Schofield, and Whiston (1997).

outcome research

research that evaluates whether an intervention causes changes in behavior, affect, and/or cognition

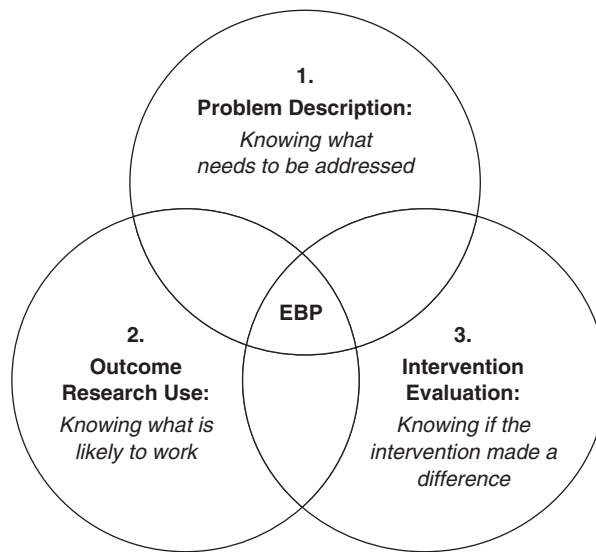
A Model for Evidence-Based School Counseling Practice

We have developed the following model (see Figure 1.1) from Shlonsky and Gibbs's (2004) general model for helping professions.

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Our model of evidence-based school counseling practice suggests that school counselors need to use evidence to determine what needs to be addressed (*problem description*), which interventions or practices should be implemented (*outcome research use*), and whether the implemented interventions or practices were effective (*intervention evaluation*).

Figure 1.1 A Model of Evidence-Based School Practice (EBP) in Counseling Practice



Knowing what needs to be addressed is accomplished through the integration of institutional data on student performance with data from sources such as school climate surveys and needs assessments. School counselors need to be able to access institutional data, collect essential supplemental data, and “mine” the data to come up with a description of problems that need to be addressed. In essence, to be operating in an evidence-based practice mode, school counselors need to have the evidence that a specific problem needs to be attended to. The best evidence is a quantitative description of the problem. A school counselor, for example, would want to collect data on the frequency and nature of disciplinary referrals before deciding that an intervention was necessary. Chapters 2 and 3 provide detailed explanations of how to know what needs to be addressed.

Knowing what is likely to work is accomplished through a survey of outcome research literature and an integration of this information with an analysis of what can be implemented with fidelity in the counselor’s particular setting. School counselors need to understand

the characteristics of good outcome research, be able to access evaluations of research-based practices, team with colleagues to identify effective interventions, and evaluate the feasibility of implementing these interventions with reasonable similarity to the way they were implemented in the outcome research studies. A school counselor, for example, would need to be able to determine both that a given bullying prevention program has been shown to reduce bullying behavior and that the format and time requirements of the program were compatible with the school's schedules and routines. Chapter 4 is an in-depth discussion of how to know what is likely to work.

Knowing if the intervention made a difference is accomplished through local evaluation. Knowing that a particular intervention is supported by sound outcome research does not assure that it will have the desired impact in all settings. It is still necessary to evaluate the impact of the intervention in the counselor's particular setting. This evaluation is for both program improvement and accountability purposes. It is important to know whether a given program should be continued. It is also pragmatically important to be able to document the positive impact of school counseling interventions for local educational decision makers who need to know whether the personnel and material investments in the program yielded benefits for students. Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8 identify ways to know if interventions and program components are making a difference.

It would be helpful if integrative approaches to evidence-based practice existed to support effective school counselor practice. Current approaches to using data in school counseling tend to focus on either problem description or intervention evaluation. Several data-based decision-making models have been developed for school counseling (Dahir & Stone, 2003; Isaacs, 2003; Reynolds & Hines, 2001). These models connect with the larger movement to use data-based decision making in standards-based school reform. These models are very strong in supporting effective use of school data to define problems, but have less to say about the use of outcome research or program evaluation (Poynton & Carey, 2006). Other models show strength in terms of supporting the evaluation of school counselor-implemented interventions (Lapan, 2001; Rowell, 2006), but do not provide information to help school counselors to use data to define problems or to apply outcome research literature in determining what approaches would be likely to be successful. We believe that effective practice requires competence in all three domains of the model. All of these competencies are systematically covered in this book. Table 1.1 contains a brief self-assessment that will help you determine where you currently stand in relation to these skills. We suggest that you complete this survey now, save your answers, and take the test again after you have completed the book.

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Table 1.1 Brief Self-Assessment of Essential Competencies Required for Evidence-Based School Counseling Practice

<p>Please rate your present confidence in demonstrating each of the following competencies. Do not spend a lot of time analyzing the items; your first impression is usually the best. If you do not understand the terminology, chances are you do not yet know the content area. Use the following scale:</p> <p>1 = I am unable to do it right now. 2 = I can do it with effort or support. 3 = I am proficient.</p>			
<p><i>Problem Description.</i> School counselors can use existing school data and collect and use additional needs assessment data to plan and direct school counseling program activities and interventions and determine measurable outcomes for these activities and interventions.</p>			
1	2	3	I can describe the role of data-based decision making in school improvement and reform.
1	2	3	I can access data on school information systems.
1	2	3	I can collect needs assessment data to help plan interventions.
1	2	3	I can use data-mining tools (disaggregation and comparison) to generate useful planning information.
1	2	3	I can set measurable goals and benchmarks to guide practice.
1	2	3	I can lead a data-based decision-making team.
<p><i>Outcome Research Use.</i> School counselors can access and evaluate outcome research in order to identify research-based activities and interventions and determine the feasibility of implementing these activities and interventions at their site.</p>			
1	2	3	I can describe the criteria for strong outcome research studies.
1	2	3	I can determine the quality of evidence that results from different types of outcome research studies.
1	2	3	I can access and search the outcome research literature.
1	2	3	I can describe the results of the major outcome studies of school counseling practice.

1	2	3	I can use meta-analytic and analytic reviews to help evaluate the outcome research literature.
1	2	3	I can use the work of expert panels to help evaluate the outcome research literature.
1	2	3	I can lead school teams to identify research-based approaches and interventions and assess the feasibility of implementing these practices in my setting.
<i>Intervention Evaluation.</i>			
School counselors can assess the impact of school counseling activities and interventions, use evaluation results to improve practice, and communicate evaluation results accurately and effectively to stakeholders.			
1	2	3	I can use data to evaluate school counseling interventions and activities.
1	2	3	I can evaluate the extent to which activities and interventions accomplish immediate learning objectives.
1	2	3	I can evaluate the extent to which student competency attainment results in changes in achievement-related data.
1	2	3	I can evaluate the extent to which changes in student behavior following school counseling interventions impacts achievement.
1	2	3	I can analyze evaluation data.
1	2	3	I can design a comprehensive evaluation for the overall counseling program.
1	2	3	I can accurately convey evaluation results to a wide audience.
1	2	3	I can create a survey to meet program needs.
1	2	3	I can create a PowerPoint presentation to share my results.

Evidence-Based School Counseling in the Context of the Reform Movement

Public education in the United States—and therefore the practice of school counseling—is in the midst of dramatic transformations reflecting a move to a standards-based model of education. Understanding this shift is critical to understanding the importance of adopting an evidence-based approach to school counseling

practice. The origins of the standards-based education movement have been traced to the famous report, *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). With passionate rhetoric, this report highlighted perceived problems with public education in the United States. The most frequently quoted passage of the report reflects the Commission's sentiment about the magnitude of the problems and the urgency for change:

If an unfriendly power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves. We have squandered the gains in achievement made in the wake of the Sputnik challenge. Moreover, we have dismantled essential support systems which helped make those gains possible. We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament. (p. 5)

The report was effective in focusing public interest on the reform of public education and in motivating governors and state legislators to view public education improvement as a high priority. Educational reform became a consistent theme of the National Governors' Association (1991) and state leaders became more aware of and interested in ways that state government can influence public education.

standards-based education

formal curricula that specify scope, sequence, and student performance expectations

Energized by *A Nation at Risk*, state leaders began looking for ways that state government could effectively catalyze reform in public schools. In the 1990s, many states were passing comprehensive education reform legislation (e.g., Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990, Massachusetts Educational Reform Act of 1993) requiring the development of state curricula and testing systems referenced

to the state curricula. A variety of other reforms were also designed to increase the funding level of low-income schools, strengthen building-based management, and increase high school completion rates by creating state-supported alternatives to traditional public schools. At the core of these approaches is a commitment to what has come to be called "standards-based education." In the present, the vast majority of states are pursuing standards-based approaches to educational reform.

On January 8, 2002, President George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) initiating an unprecedented level of federal control of public education. NCLB includes many of the

features of standards-based education reform employed by comprehensive state legislation. NCLB requires frequent testing, the regular public reporting of quantitative indicators of schools' performance (related to standardized test scores, attendance, and high school graduation rates), and strengthened sanctions against schools that fail to meet adequate yearly progress expectations. NCLB requires the documentation of yearly gains in both improving general academic achievement and reducing the achievement gap between white students and students of color. Both individual schools and districts are accountable under NCLB.

empirical research

research that bases its findings on observation or measurement

In addition, NCLB has established the necessity for public education practices to be based on empirical research. The federal government now is committed to investing in evidence-based education—that is, to supporting educational practices that can be proven effective through rigorous, controlled, scientific research. Under NCLB, public school educators are expected to consider the results of relevant, scientifically based research before making decisions about implementing interventions.

School Counseling and Standards

The emergence of standards-based education as the predominant reform strategy in public education has presented a few particularly dramatic challenges to the school counseling profession:

1. *The government has higher expectations for the public schools and has focused the mission of public schools on academic outcomes.* School counseling evolved in the context of the vocational and humanistic education traditions. The former tradition emphasized that preparation for work is an important outcome of K–12 education. The latter tradition emphasized the importance of developing self-knowledge, social interest, and interpersonal competence as part of a rich public school education. By holding public education accountable for standardized achievement test scores and applying high-stakes sanctions, standards-based educational reform narrowed and focused the mission of schools. Activities that are clearly connected to this narrower mission have taken on greater legitimacy. Activities that have a less obvious connection to basic education and achievement have lost legitimacy. School counselors' traditional focus on vocation, self-knowledge, and interpersonal development, although obviously valuable, is not always seen as immediately connected to enhanced test scores.

2. *Academically oriented state curricula and testing systems have taken precedence over local curricula as the foundation for comprehensive developmental school counseling programs.* In the 1990s, comprehensive developmental guidance (CDG; Gysbers & Henderson, 2000) was the widely accepted standard for program organization. CDG emphasizes that school counseling should operate as an organized program designed to meet the developmental needs of all students. To provide organization and direction, CDG programs operated from a curriculum that was developed locally (as were all public school curricula before standards-based reform). The shift to state curricula with a focus on basic subjects rendered local school counseling curricula less relevant (however effective they may be). The school counseling profession also lacked its own national professional standards, seriously affecting its credibility as a participant in educational reform and improvement.

3. *School counselors and guidance directors lacked the skills necessary to participate in data-based decision making and quantitative accountability reporting.* These skills were not normally taught in school counselor education programs. Opportunities to develop these skills were not widely available through professional development mechanisms. The profession lacked standard ways of measuring its impact on students and of demonstrating effectiveness.

4. *The school counseling profession has lacked a strong research base.* Demonstrating that school counseling interventions are supported by empirical research has been difficult. Since the early 1970s, many authors have noted the dearth of good studies examining the effectiveness of school counseling interventions and have predicted dire consequences if the profession were to continue to function without a solid research base (Burch & Peterson, 1975; Gerler, 1985; Humes, 1972; Robie, Gansneder, & Van Hoose, 1979; Whiston & Sexton, 1998; Wilson, 1986). Whiston and Sexton (1998) conducted the most comprehensive review of the school counseling literature in recent years, focusing on studies published between 1988 and 1995. They located 12 outcome studies related to guidance curriculum, 10 studies related to individual planning, 25 studies related to responsive services, and 3 studies related to system support activities. Their study indicates that the school counseling profession is suffering from an evidence gap that limits practitioners' abilities to identify evidence-based best practices, which limits the credibility of the field. Unless the profession can demonstrate that its interventions are supported by empirical evidence, school counseling will be less legitimate in the emerging evidence-based education environment.

To operate in the current standards-based public school environment, school counselors need to be able to (a) demonstrate that their

practice is guided by sound evidence, (b) use quantitative data in program planning and management, (c) use quantitative evaluation approaches to evaluate student outcomes, and (d) present quantitative data effectively to demonstrate that they are operating responsibly and effectively in local settings. For the school counseling profession to respond effectively to the research, evaluation, and data-use challenges of standards-based education, changes in school counselor role and function related to data, in school counseling program management and accountability practices, and in school counselor education practices will be required. Several current initiatives have the potential to produce these changes.

School Counseling Reform

The Education Trust

Transforming School Counseling Initiative (TSCI)

In 1996, the Education Trust initiated a project to transform the role of school counselors by connecting school counseling to standards-based education reform and by focusing the profession of school counseling on the goal of eliminating the achievement gap. The Education Trust first established a new vision for the school counselor's role and function and then worked with six funded lead counselor education programs and a number of unfunded companion institutions to accomplish reform in the initial preparation of school counselors. Participating university-based preparation programs committed to revising their school counselor education curriculum, reviewing admission processes to create a more diverse student population, redesigning their practicum experiences, and strengthening their partnerships with school districts and state education agencies.

The Education Trust defines school counseling as "a profession that focuses on the relations and interactions between students and their school environment with the expressed purpose of reducing the effect of environmental and institutional barriers that impede student academic success" (Education Trust, 2005). This model calls attention to the importance of interventions at the systemic level to promote change in the capacity of educational systems to educate all students and an explicit connection between school counseling and school reform. Several new skills have been identified by the Education Trust as essential to this reformed role. These skills include leadership, advocacy, use of data, teamwork and collaboration, and effective use of technology (House & Martin, 1998). Both the explicit skills and methods for teaching them have been refined by the lead and

companion institutions. Some specific processes for data-based decision making and using data to facilitate education reform emerged from this process (see Dahir & Stone, 2003; Hayes, Nelson, Tabin, Pearson, & Worthy, 2002; Reynolds & Hines, 2001).

The Education Trust's new vision considers quantitative data skills to be critically important for school counselors. These skills are seen as necessary for counselors to track all students' academic performance, to use student achievement data to plan interventions, and to advocate persuasively for systemic changes in school policies, procedures, and practices. School counselors need data skills to participate effectively in and contribute to school level, standards-based educational reform.

American School Counselor Association National Standards

The American School Counselor Association has developed two major initiatives that directly connect school counseling with standards-based reform. ASCA National Standards were published in 1997 (Dahir & Campbell, 1997). Nine standards relating to three broad domains of student development (academic, career, and personal/social) were developed as a statement of the intended student outcomes of all school counseling programs. Examples of specific student competencies were published with each standard. The expectation was that the standards would be useful for the design and construction of school counseling programs and that their use would increase the legitimacy of school counseling, position school counseling as integral to the educational mission of public schools, and facilitate the development of measurable indicators of student learning.

While ASCA hailed the significance of the National Standards, a study performed five years after they were released revealed that the standards did not contribute to increased legitimacy, to improved role and function, or to a change in school counselors' beliefs or behaviors with regard to the continuing performance of nonschool counseling activities (Hatch, 2002). While school counselors believed that the standards professionally legitimized them, operationally very little changed. As will be discussed more fully in Chapter 9, the National Standards did not provide the operational efficiency, institutional legitimacy, and political social capital that were hoped for (Hatch, 2002).

One reason that the expected positive impact of the ASCA National Standards did not occur may be that the standards themselves are not as elaborate or compelling as the standards of many national professional associations. The ASCA National Standards consist of nine general statements (e.g., "Students will acquire the

attitudes, knowledge and interpersonal skills to help them understand and respect self and others.”) with examples of student competencies. In contrast, the standards created by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics in 1989 (National Council of Teachers of Mathematics [NCTM], 2006) provided a comprehensive description of the scope and sequence of mathematics learning, including grade level performance expectations.

In order for curriculum standards to meet national standards, they need to be based on existing research about what teachable skills have known relationships to achievement and to provide measurable indicators of student performance in those domains (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development [ASCD], 2006). In part because of these weaknesses, the ASCA National Standards did not resolve a major cause of the lack of school counseling program legitimacy within schools: educational leaders' perceptions that school counseling program outcomes (especially outcomes related to personal/social development) are relatively unimportant. National standards are not enough if there is still not general understanding of how the content of those standards supports learning. Currently, the profession still lacks a set of agreed upon, measurable, student learning outcomes that have established relationships to student achievement, a plan for scope and sequence, and psychometrically sound instruments that are able to measure these outcomes.

The ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2003) was developed as an overarching programmatic, organizational, and systems tool to explicitly link school counseling programs to the academic mission of schools and to connect school counseling programs with standards-based educational reform. The National Model was built upon the comprehensive developmental guidance approach (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000; Myrick, 1993) of organizing services but calls for a standards- and results-based approach (Johnson & Johnson, 1991), program management, and accountability. The National Model also emphasizes that school counseling programs should recognize the critical importance of the goals of enhancing student achievement and eliminating achievement gaps.

Successful implementation of the management and accountability systems of the National Model requires that school counselors have a broad range of data skills including the following:

- Using student information systems to monitor student performance
- Analyzing student performance, school process, and perceptual data to plan, monitor, and evaluate interventions

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- Analyzing disaggregated student performance, school process, and perceptual data to plan, monitor, and evaluate interventions designed to address achievement gap issues
- Developing and implementing data-based, decision-making systems in the school counseling program (Isaacs, 2003)
- Identifying research-based practices and interventions
- Developing ways to measure and evaluate student outcomes
- Evaluating interventions
- Presenting quantitative outcome results to a wide variety of constituencies
- Conducting effective program evaluation

The ASCA National Model and the Education Trust initiatives mentioned earlier require that school counselors develop facility in and comfort with data use at a level that has not traditionally been expected in school counselor education programs. They address two of the three components of our evidence-based practice model (Figure 1.1): *Knowing what needs to be addressed* by collecting and analyzing data and *Knowing if the intervention made a difference* by measuring the results of the intervention. This model includes the additional factor, *Knowing what is likely to work* by referring to the outcome research. These three skills combined constitute evidence-based practice in school counseling.

Summary

Evidence-based school counseling is a new approach to practice that requires that school counselors be able to use data-based evidence in program planning, evaluation, and accountability efforts. This approach calls for school counselors to have knowledge and skill sets that differ from those traditionally taught in counselor education programs. These skills sets can be organized into the domains of problem description, outcome research use, and intervention evaluation. We believe that adopting an evidence-based practice approach will lead to better alignment with the academic mission of schools, increased effectiveness of school counseling programs, and improved ability to communicate successfully about this enhanced effectiveness. Competence in an evidence-based practice approach to school counseling will enable school counselors to use evidence to determine: What needs to be done? (Chapters 2 and 3); What is likely to work? (Chapter 4); and What difference did the intervention make? (Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8).