Accountability in School Counseling Programs

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In a society where education is ever-changing, it is important for a school counselor to prove that they are helping improve each and every student’s chance to succeed in school. For this reason, a school counselor must be accountable for their program, which means they must be able to show how the programs are effective. According to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), accountability is one of the most essential aspects of a school counseling program. Accountability, along with foundation, delivery, and management, help create the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2012). According to Stone & Dahir (2003), “accountability requires systematically collecting, analyzing, and using critical data elements to understand the current achievement story for students, and to begin to strategize, impact, and document how the school counseling program contributes toward supporting student success” (p. 214). School counselors should embrace accountability and look for more ways to incorporate evidence-based practices within their comprehensive school counseling program.

Accountability within an educational system typically refers to whether or not a person or program is making a positive impact in areas such as test scores, attendance, retention, dropout rates, grades, and success in more difficult academic curriculums (Stone & Dahir, 2011). School counselors need to hold themselves accountable to these same standards that other educators do. This means that school counselors need to collect data to show that their school counseling program is making a positive impact on the students in the school. Most importantly, becoming accountable in one’s school means becoming a powerful leader in the school and makes it easier for a school counselor to meet the needs of the students (Stone & Dahir, 2003). Gysbers (2004) summed up the new focus of school counselors by noting, “not only are school counselors being asked to tell what they do, they also are being asked to demonstrate how what they do makes a difference in the lives of students” (p. 1).

Accountability, as defined by the ASCA National Model, includes data analysis, program results, and evaluation and improvement (ASCA, 2012). School counselors need to be able to show that each program within his or her curriculum is proven to be effective. This could mean, when creating a new program, using different program evaluation techniques to show the program’s effectiveness, or using past research on programs that have already shown to be effective. According to Dimmitt, Carey, and Hatch (2007), “school counselors are much more likely to be able to document impact when they are using interventions and practices that have already been found to be effective” (p. 50). This also helps school counselors decide which programs to use, because the school counselor is relying on research evidence. Using evidence helps school counselors define the problems and needs of the school. After defining the problem, the school counselors can create goals with a focus on evidence-based activities to prove the goals are being met (Dimmitt, Carey, & Hatch, 2007).

Accountability has not always been the focus of a school counselor’s program. During the 1960’s after the passing of the National Defense Education Act, accountability became an issue amongst educators, but not as much for school counselors. Many school counselors had identified a need for research and evidence within school counseling programs, but a model had never been developed. By the 1980’s, school counselors felt the need to prove his or her worth using evidence-based practices (Gysbers, 2004). This pressure to prove themselves continues to this day. Now, many school counselors follow the ASCA National Model when creating a comprehensive school counseling program. Once again, this model focuses on foundation, delivery, management, and accountability of one’s school counseling program (ASCA, 2012). This model also makes the research and evidence many school counselors have yearned for to prove their effectiveness more prevalent and easy to access.

As accountability and data-driven practices increase amongst school counselors, it is also important to remember that the focus remains on equity practices and closing the achievement gap among students (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Using accountability can help this process. There are three types of data that school counselors normally collect to show their accountability: achievement, attainment or access, and school culture data. Achievement data normally includes different types of testing and grades (Holcumb-McCoy, 2007). In an elementary school in Indiana, these tests might include NWEA testing, ACUITY testing, and ISTEP testing. According to Holcumb-McCoy (2007), attainment or access data includes, “promotion and retention rates, gifted and talented patterns, special education identification rates, postsecondary patterns, transition patterns, and enrollment patterns” (p. 83). School culture data includes attendance information, relationships amongst faculty, relationships amongst students, and the relationship that exists between the students and the faculty. When collecting this type of data, it is also important for school counselors to disaggregate the data to determine if there are any specific inequities present at the school. In doing this, the counselor finds out whether or not the programs are working and if the counselor needs to identify areas of concern to focus on at the school (Holcumb-McCoy, 2007).

 There are multiple models of accountability that school counselors can use to evaluate the effectiveness of their programs.It is important to understand the differences between accountability and program evaluation. According to Astramovich and Coker (2007), program evaluation happens before accountability because program evaluation helps counselors plan, implement, and refine their counseling practices. Accountability, on the other hand, is a way to provide information to the different stakeholders within the school and community to demonstrate the effectiveness of the different counseling services. Accountability should just be one aspect of a program evaluation (Astramovich & Coker, 2007).

According to Stone and Dahir (2003), “MEASUREis a seven-step process that assists school counselors in delivering a data-driven school counseling program that supports the accountability component of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model” (p. 214). In the MEASURE model, as outlined by Stone and Dahir (2011), there are six steps to improving a student’s success. MEASURE stands for Mission, Elements, Analyze, Stakeholders-Unite, Results, Educate, and systematic change. This process allows school counselors to show their data and results to administrators to demonstrate the importance of a program used in the school. It is also a way for school counselors to organize all of their information and outline the actual goals of a program (Stone & Dahir, 2011).

 The first step of using MEASURE is to write out one’s mission, which ideally combines the school’s mission with the ASCA’s National Model. The second step is to identify the element in one’s school that one is trying to change. For instance, one might be trying to increase the overall attendance or trying to increase the amount of students trying to pass a state exam like ISTEP. The third step is to analyze the current school data. This might mean looking up raw scores for state exams or looking up attendance rates on the Department of Education website. Once the data is collected, the school counselor should disaggregate the data to focus on demographics. Then, the school counselor can determine where inequities are present within the school and determine which areas to focus on with their programs (Stone & Dahir, 2011).

 The next step in the MEASURE model is to identify which stakeholders in the school or community that could help make this new program work. These types of people include faculty of the school, parents, school board members, businesses in the community, or even people in church organizations. The goal is to gather the people who can help create a positive change in the school that will help the students succeed. The fifth step is to evaluate the results of the program (Stone & Dahir, 2011). Stone and Dahir (2011) state, “even if the targeted results were met, there is still reflection and refining to do” (p. 33). The sixth step is to educate the stakeholders and other pertinent people about the results of the program. This way, school counselors are showing the positive impact of their programs and providing data to other school counselors for their future programs. The final part of the MEASURE system is to invoke systematic change within the school, home, and community. The MEASURE system is intended to enhance student learning at all levels by involving multiple stakeholders within the school and community (Stone & Dahir, 2011).

 The MEASURE model for evaluating school counseling programs is great when evaluating specific programs within a school counseling curriculum. However, it does not necessarily evaluate the program as a whole. Instead, a school counselor would need to look at each individual piece of their program to identify what is working and what is not. As a future school counselor, I would use MEASURE to evaluate each of my programs on an individual basis and to determine if the programs have an equity focus. My favorite part of the MEASURE program is that it is a developed program that outlines each step to the process of collecting data. Using this system makes it simple to analyze data and less time-consuming for future school counselors.

 There are multiple other models of accountability that school counselors frequently use. These models include Gold Star and RAMP, which are very popular amongst school counselors. RAMP is a program, based on the ASCA National Model, given to individual schools that meet the expectations of a comprehensive school counseling program. RAMP helps school counselors evaluate their program and identify areas in need of improvement (ASCA, 2012). The goal of RAMP is for school counselors to show how the actions of school counselors affect students (ASCA, 2008). Since RAMP is identified by the ASCA National Model as a strong method of program evaluation, school counselors can use the evaluation model to evaluate the success of their overall program. However, I would not necessarily use RAMP when identifying the success of individual programs within my school counseling curriculum because I think it is important to focus on the standards used within the state one practices in.

 To determine if schools are eligible to be qualified as a RAMP school, a school must submit an application that shows the overall components of their school counseling program. Programs must provide their vision statement, mission statement, school counseling program goals, ASCA Student Standards (competencies and indicators), annual agreement, advisory council, calendars, school counseling core curriculum action plan and lesson plans, school counseling core curriculum results report, small-group responsive services, closing-the-gap results report, and the program evaluation reflection. If an individual school scores high enough on each of these components, the school will be considered to be a RAMP school. School counselors who follow the ASCA National Model strive to be a RAMP school (ASCA, 2008).

 Gold Star is recognized by the Indiana School Counselor Association and created by the American Student Achievement Institute. The goal of the Gold Star School Counseling Initiative is to answer three questions: what do students gain from Indiana school counseling programs, what are the components of a sound school counseling program, and what skills and knowledge do school counselors possess? There are nine program standards to which school counseling programs need to adhere in order to be a Gold Star school in Indiana. These standards include program foundation, data-based accountability, student guidance, student counseling, student advocacy, program management, professionalism, professional resources, and a school counseling improvement plan (ASAI, 2013). These standards also include specific student standards that match the standards for the Department of Education. Following the Gold Star standards would mean the program fits the Indiana School Counselor Association standards, but not necessarily the ASCA standards. As a future school counselor, the RAMP standards for schools seem more data-driven and more focused on achieving equity for all students.

Once a school counselor has determined which measures he or she is using for accountability and program management, it is important to examine research in one’s area of interest to determine which programs previously implemented are successful in other schools.One of the two areas of school counseling that I am interested in is elementary school counseling. Although most people understand individual counseling, school counselors offer a variety of services including small group counseling and classroom guidance presentations. It is essential that school counselors look up the research in this area because these types of programs are so important, it is desirable to use measurements that are effective at evaluating classroom and small groups. The developmental aspects of this age group (elementary) are vast and the programs have to match the numerous needs of the students as well. For this reason, my school counseling program would need to be developmentally appropriate and beneficial for the students. Accountability will prove that my programs are effective so that I know I am not wasting my time or the students’ time.

Since school counselors frequently go into the classrooms for classroom guidance presentations, it is important that they examine the best research in this area. One issue of concern is the classroom climate and how comfortable the students are in the classroom. Sink and Spencer (2005 & 2007) examined the effectiveness of school counselors and other educators using the My Class Inventory-short form to examine the climate within the classroom. First, Sink and Spencer (2005) examined classroom climate with respect to how it affects school counseling. In 2007, classroom climate was examined in regard to the teachers’ opinions. Fraser’s My Class Inventory-Short Form (MCI-SF) is a 25-item self-report measure looking at the classroom environments in elementary schools. Data was collected from 2,835 students from the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades in twenty different schools in Washington. Elementary school counselors, and some teachers, administered the MCI-SF to these 2,835 students. However, graduate students analyzed the data for consistency and accuracy. The results showed that the inventory was reliable when using the 18-item version with just the Satisfaction, Cohesion, Competitiveness, and Friction scales. The Difficulty scale warranted some caution because it did not appear to be reliable. This means that the 18-item scale of the MCI-SF can be used as an accountability tool for elementary school counselors (Sink & Spencer, 2005).

Two years later, Sink and Spencer (2007) evaluated the MCI-SF for Teachers from a teacher’s perspective to determine how they judged classroom climate. The study analyzed information from 371 elementary teachers at 22 participating elementary schools using the MCI-SF for Teachers. This is different from the MCI-SF because it is a 30-item measure given directly to the teachers. Once again, Sink and Spencer found that the measure needed some revision, and cut it down to 24-items. Using the revisions, the study found that the measure was reliable and would be an effective tool for school counselors to use to assess classroom climate in an elementary school. Conveniently, many of the items match up with the MCI-SF given to students, so the school counselor can compare the two inventories to find any major differences (Sink & Spencer, 2007).

Creating a safe environment for students is one of the primary goals of school counselors, especially in elementary school when many students are transitioning or going through different developmental stages. Since students stay in one classroom for most of the day in elementary school, it is easiest to assess classroom climate from this main classroom and those specific teachers. If a school counselor uses the MCI-SF, with the specific moderations, one can look at the classroom climates of each individual classroom to determine where specific needs lie. For instance, when creating the foundation of a program, the MCI-SF could be given yearly in the month of October, by which time teachers and students are acclimated to the classrooms. Then, the school counselor can create programs around these results and areas for improvement in the classrooms, which is part of the management and delivery of the program.

 Another important aspect of elementary school counseling is incorporating useful small groups. Therefore, it is essential to look at the research in this area to identify the accountability of different small groups. Bostick and Anderson (2009) examined the effectiveness of a small-group counseling program working on social skills with third graders. Forty-nine third graders, identified using a screening instrument over a three-year time period, were chosen to participate in a ten-week group counseling program called Social Skills Group Intervention (S.S.GRIN). Previous studies had shown that this program led to increased self-efficacy in social situations, increase in peer relationships and liking, less social anxiety, and less aggressive behavior problems. Each group contained five to six students, with ten groups evaluated over the three years. The group assessed students on loneliness and social anxiety using multiple scales, a 16-item Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction Questionnaire and five items from the 18-item Social Anxiety Scale for Children-Revised. The results of this study showed that students who expressed loneliness and worry over friendships before the start of the group were less worried when the group ended. The school counselor also sent out teacher and parent evaluations to see if the child was more cooperative, had more confidence, and if the child displayed better communication skills, with a majority of positive responses (Bostick & Anderson, 2009).

 As a school counselor, finding successful programs that other school counselors have found to be effective is essential to the creation of my own program. The group in the Bostick and Anderson (2009) article showed accountability by assessing the students on two different scales, assessing teacher opinions, and assessing parent opinions. This information is more qualitative than quantitative, which is also important in a comprehensive school counseling program. However, since social skills training is something that is necessary at every elementary school, using the S.S.Grin would be beneficial to my program. I would add more components to the program, looking at the academic achievements associated with successful training of these social skills. This would happen at the foundation level of my program, and carry over into my delivery of the program and later in the management of the program. This is also another way to prove the accountability of the program by showing the stakeholders that the program improves multiple areas of the students’ lives. Similar to the program examined by Bostick and Anderson (2009), I would use the S.S. Grin program at multiple levels of my program. I would conduct a basic social skill guidance presentation on a monthly basis inside the classroom, then organize a small group for students who are identified as needing extra services.

 Accountability is an essential part of a school counseling program. It helps school counselors show stakeholders the importance of their job, while demonstrating to school counselors the efficacy of their own programs. Accountability is more than simply interpreting data; accountability involves data analysis, program results, and evaluation and improvement (ASCA, 2012). Accountabilty and program evaluation can be used hand-in-hand, but should not be confused as the same thing. Program evaluation involves looking at one’s overall comprehensive school counseling program, while accountability looks at the individual programs and how they are helping the success of the students. Numerous measurements have been developed for both program evaluation and accountability, each with their own strengths and weaknesses. An effective school counselor will use multiple instruments to perform both program evaluation and accountability analysis to assure both themselves and other stakeholders within a school that the school counselor’s programs are working to better the student body and provide a greater degree of equity in education.

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