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Advocacy in the IEP Process: Strengths-Based School Counseling in Action

As the number of students in schools receiving special education services rises, the need for advocacy for these students increases as well. Because school counselors already possess specialized training beneficial to all stakeholders in the special education process, the potential for school counselors' role in the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process is quickly increasing. This article addresses how school counselors can collaborate with teachers and special education teams in the IEP, 504 plan, and other student support team processes. School counselors can model positive communication and assist the team in identifying student and environmental strengths while also increasing family involvement. Specific ways that school counselors can collaborate with planning teams are discussed and direct links are made to Strength-Based School Counseling (Galassi & Akos, 2007) and the ASCA National Model® (American School Counselor Association, 2005).

The number of students receiving special education services has been rising steadily over the past several decades. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2005), 6,633,902 students in the United States received special education services under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part B during the 2003-2004 school year, an increase of 38.5 percent since the 1990-1991 school year. Because school counselors already possess unique knowledge, skills, and training that can be beneficial to guiding all stakeholders in the special education process, the potential for the school counselors' leadership role in the Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) process is quickly increasing (Helms & Katsiyannis, 1992; Milsom, 2004). In some schools, school counselors are directly involved in these programs, consulting with teachers, intervening with students, and supporting parents. However, the potential for increased positive involvement through advocacy, teamwork, and group facilitation is clear (Milsom, Goodnough, & Akos, 2007).

Within the ASCA National Model® (American

School Counselor Association, 2005), school counselors are encouraged to pursue systemic change through leadership, advocacy, and collaboration. More specifically, ASCA provides that "advocating for students at individual education plan meetings" (p. 56) is an appropriate activity for school counselors as part of a comprehensive school counseling program. In addition, the Strengths-Based School Counseling (SBSC; Galassi & Akos, 2007) framework addresses many issues relevant to the IEP meeting process. School counselors can fulfill SBSC-recommended roles of leadership, advocacy, collaboration, and systemic change to assist students, teachers, administrators, and parents, increasing the potential for success of the IEP.

Currently, IEP meetings have been found to often be "deficit focused" (Thoma, Rogan, & Baker, 2001) and the educational jargon used alienating to parents (Childre & Chambers, 2005; Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen, 2003). School counselors are well suited to participate as team members during IEP meetings and shift the focus toward a strengths-based framework. In working with special education professionals (who are generally viewed as the formal leaders of the IEP team and responsible for paperwork), school counselors can make unique contributions to improve the climate and approach for all involved. Furthermore, this role and approach can be generalized to other student support meetings (e.g., 504 plan, student support teams, child study teams) to improve the process of helping students through collaboration and modeling of effective communication skills. "School counselors bring to IEP teams a wealth of knowledge and skills that complements that of other school personnel" (Milsom et al., 2007, p. 23).

TRADITIONAL IEP APPROACH

IEP meetings have been required by law for more than 30 years. But, there is little research regarding the effectiveness of IEP meetings, and the few existing studies are largely negative. For the most part,

families have been found to have little influence over the process in the meeting, and student strengths or accomplishments are usually not discussed (Thoma et al., 2001). Furthermore, when students are included and attend their own IEP meetings, their participation is not meaningful (Martin, Marshall, & Sale, 2004; Martin et al., 2006). Parents have reported feeling alienated by the educational terms often used and pressured to go along with the placement and goals the school staff had predetermined. Additionally, parents have reported feeling that school staff have failed to understand their perspectives and even exhibit a lack of respect regarding the contributions they have made (Childre & Chambers, 2005; Spann et al., 2003).

There is little research examining the school counselor's role in assisting with IEP and other student support meetings. A survey conducted by Helms and Katsiyannis (1992) found 54% of school counselor respondents reported no involvement in IEP committees. However, a national survey conducted by Milsom (2002) found 83% of school counselors engaged in either individual or group counseling with students with disabilities at some point in the school year. These results reflect that although school counselors may be involved with a large number of these students, they still may not be included or involved in the IEP committee meetings.

By its nature, the traditional IEP meeting process structure is remedial. It is designed to address student problems that have already been observed and documented, and to prevent or reduce the impact of these problems on future learning. However, it is possible to begin to shift from a remedial, deficit-focused IEP meeting process toward one that is more collaborative and draws on student strengths, while continuing to meet the legal requirements outlined by IDEA.

THE IEP MEETING THROUGH THE SBSC FRAMEWORK

Identifying and Promoting Individual Student Strengths

"Strengths-Based School Counseling is characterized by counselors promoting development of student factors or strengths ... such as skills, attitudes, and knowledge that are both modifiable and have been shown to be empirically related to academic success" (Galassi & Akos, 2007, p. 5). Each individual student has strengths that can and should be discussed at an IEP meeting, and these strengths can be further incorporated into the plan of future action.

Each IEP meeting includes discussion of the following: current academic performance (i.e., student grades), annual educational and other goals (if student has reached goals created at a previous meet-

ing), applicable special education services to be used (i.e., speech therapy or counseling), participation and performance in standardized testing (i.e., accommodations for testing necessary for the coming year), dates and places of special activities, and marking progress toward established goals and objectives (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Because the IEP meeting is a rare opportunity for all involved with the child to meet and discuss progress in these areas, a strong plan for positive action on strengths-based characteristics is fitting. By viewing these discussion areas through a student's current skill set, a more positive plan for future action can be created. Furthermore, this SBSC approach values family perspectives, allowing for a more holistic picture to be painted by all involved with the child. For example, a parent may have knowledge of strengths a child may demonstrate at home as compared to a school setting (i.e., repairing a mechanical item like a lawnmower). The simple discussion of this strength with mechanics may lead to a more positively oriented goal or strategy for the IEP.

After student strengths have been identified, it is important the strengths are actually incorporated into the plan. As mentioned above, student strengths may be mentioned during an IEP meeting but then may be simply listed on a form. Special skills or knowledge must be *integrated* into the plan. A link should be made from the strength to the future interventions. For example, the student who can fix the lawn mower should be encouraged to explore science projects or assignments with a more hands-on approach. Perhaps the test for parts of an atom will include creating a model and explaining the parts.

With this focus, parents, teachers, and students should be encouraged to generate a list of such strengths prior to the meeting. This might promote a distinct effort to examine and record strengths. This additive focus may initially take greater effort but will likely create a more optimistic, personalized, and successful plan for the student. An overall focus on positive development rather than problem prevention and remediation will be a constructive and optimistic shift for students, parents, and school personnel. With the school counselor's knowledge of group dynamics and communication, the counselor can fulfill a role as facilitator, model, and advocate in assisting in this important shift.

Identifying and Promoting Collective Environmental Strengths

As part of their leadership/advocacy role, school counselors are in a position to help identify and promote strengths within the school. As part of a family-school collaboration project, Weiss and Edwards (1992) applied Tagiuri's (1968) framework of orga-

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nizational climate to school settings. According to Tagiuri's framework, the four elements that contribute to climate are culture, milieu, social system, and ecology. This framework and its elements can be used to provide a structure for how to examine the school counselor's role in addressing environmental strengths regarding the IEP meeting process.

Under this framework, *culture* refers to the general belief systems and values undergirding the school climate. With regard to the IEP meeting process, school counselors can begin to look for indicators of the school personnel's beliefs regarding educating and working with students with disabilities and their families. As mentioned previously, moving the IEP process from deficit based to strengths based can impact values significantly.

Milieu refers to the characteristics of the people and the groups in the school. This can include characteristics such as cultural or linguistic diversity, socioeconomic status, and disability, among many others. Groups within the school can include staff, students, and families. The more that school counselors are aware of the unique characteristics that make up the individuals and groups within their schools, the better able they are to plan specific programs to help their school. For example, if a school counselor observes that several members of the IEP team lack an understanding of cultural diversity and how it can impact family involvement, the counselor can arrange for additional professional development in this area. As another example, if after studying the school's milieu the school counselor discovers that many parents or guardians work the night shift at the local factory, the counselor may encourage the IEP team to consider meeting times and/or locations that are more convenient for these families.

When assessing the *social system*, school counselors can observe the types of relationships present between various individuals and groups within the school. During IEP meetings, school counselors can observe the interactions between school staff and families and note whether communication is one-way (perhaps with the school staff presenting information with little input from the student and family) or more collaborative and asset focused (with all members of the IEP team, including the student, participating equally).

The element of *ecology* refers to the actual physical structures and space in the school. When applied to IEP meetings, a couple of ecological concerns for the school counselor to consider include the seating arrangement during the meeting (seating everyone in a circle tends to be seen as more egalitarian than seating school staff on one side of the table and family members on the other side of the table) and the location of the meeting (in a private area where confidential information cannot be overheard).

Determining the School Counselor's Advocacy Role

Because school counselors have so many responsibilities in schools today, it is unreasonable to expect daily coordination of all interactions with special education students, teachers, and parents. However, in a supporting role as a facilitator and advocate, school counselors have the opportunity to make a significant impact, improving the process. School counselors can model in IEP meetings, student support teams, and 504 meetings to improve the experience for these students and families. Furthermore, school counselors could perhaps provide training and consultation services to IEP coordinators and special educators creating an even greater overall impact.

As mentioned previously, ASCA (2005) encourages school counselors to advocate and collaborate for systemic change, as well as for individual students in the IEP meeting. The SBSC framework (Galassi & Akos, 2007) supports promotion of strengths over problem prevention. The needs of special education students are clear and there is great potential for positive impact within the school system. As a strengths-based school counselor, one can advocate for the use of evidence-based interventions as well as collecting data to evaluate strength-oriented interventions.

CONCLUSION

School counselors have the opportunity to emphasize the strengths of the student, highlight environmental strengths, stress strength promotion over problem reduction, and promote positive development within the IEP process. In addition, school counselors can assist in shifting the approach to all student meetings (e.g., 504 plan, student support meetings, child study teams) applying the optimistic, strengths-based lens for all students. The school counselor working as leader and consultant can assist in changing the process to address positive qualities in individuals and within the system. Working proactively as a liaison, advocate, collaborator, and consultant between parties, school counselors have the potential to improve the IEP experience for all. ■

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