



SCHOOL COUNSELORS

REFLECT REPORT
015-2016

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Today's school counselors are vital members of the education team. They help all students in the areas of academic achievement, personal/social development and career development, ensuring today's students become the productive, well-adjusted adults of tomorrow.

The BHM district employs seven full-time licensed school counselors. The elementary schools have no school counselors, the middle school has three and the high school has four. Although the role of the counselors is slightly different dependent on the setting, counselors work with all students to meet their personal and academic needs. School counselors are assigned students either by grade level at the middle school or alphabetically by last name at the high school. School counselors stay with that student for all years they are in each setting. The ratio of student to school counselor at BCMS is 410:1 and the same ratio at BHS is 450:1.

School counselors meet with students individually, in groups, and also provide classroom presentations. School counselors provide developmental guidance, support and solution-focused counseling. School counselors are not trained as therapists and cannot diagnose or provide long-term treatment of students. School counselors work with students in a confidential manner and are required to follow the laws of mandated reporting.

BHM school counselors find their time spent in a variety of ways. Student needs are identified and addressed through communication with teachers and administrators, through meetings that address behavioral and attendance concerns as well as groups that focus on academic struggles. Students often self-refer if they are in need of school counseling support. Parents and guardians will also communicate with school counseling staff when they have concerns regarding their students.

Duties completed by both the middle school and high school counselors include:

- provide resources to students and families dependent on needs
- consultation with school staff on struggling students

- organization and proctoring of district and state testing
- 504 Accommodation Plan case management
- lunch room supervision
- Collaborate with community agencies and organizations

Site-specific duties for BCMS include:

- daily instruction of study skills course
- Prime Time advising committee
- WEB student mentoring program

Site-specific duties for BHS include:

- registration of new students
- course registration for all students
- implementation of Personal Learning Plans
- oversight for exchange students, concurrent enrollment planning and implementation, scholarships,

NATIONAL STANDARDS

While professional school counselors are known for helping students explore their abilities, strengths, interests and talents, their work goes well beyond that. Professional school counselors are certified and licensed educators who are uniquely qualified to help students maximize their academic success, career readiness, and personal and social development. School counselors have the education and experience to help students plan for college and ensure they are ready to enter the workforce. Counselors are also a valuable resource to parents in this process. They also support a safe learning environment, which many students and school leaders rely on (MSCA, 2014).

The American School Counseling Association's (ASCA) National Model is the foundation to a comprehensive school counseling program. ASCA National Model is built on Foundation, Delivery, Management, Accountability in the domains of personal/social, career, and academic planning. National school counselor-to-student ratio is 1:450. The American School Counselor Association recommends a school counselor-to-student ratio of 1:250 (ASCA, 2016).

STATE AND NATIONAL TRENDS AND RESEARCH OF BEST PRACTICES

Driving the need for better access to counseling services are concerns that students are forced to wait days and sometimes weeks to receive guidance needed to improve grades, explore potential careers, or overcome the social and emotional challenges kids face everyday.

Governor Mark Dayton, among others have cited the counselor shortage as a key weakness in public education in Minnesota. A report released by Minnesota 2020 in

2009 showed the rapidly expanding need for mental health professionals in our schools to support safe and effective learning. According to the report, more than 90% of school counselors had reported helping students deal with interpersonal and family problems, depression, aggressive or disruptive behavior, anxiety, and ADHD. In the same study, 92% of counselors said a lack of state support is the leading challenge facing school counselors. (MSCA, 2014).

Research shows dramatic benefits result when students have access to comprehensive support services, including:

- Dramatic increases in post-secondary enrollment and career readiness
- Increased school attendance rates, ACT scores, and graduation rates
- Decreased disciplinary action and suspension rates
- Increased math and reading proficiency level

School counselors say these positive impacts align closely with outcomes needed to reduce Minnesota's achievement gap. Counselors also say their work to improve workforce readiness and help students explore career options could be a major tool in addressing the state's impending worker shortage.

BHM PROGRAM STRENGTHS

Buffalo High School

At the high school we strive to make as much personal contact as possible. Our understanding is that these students will be "ours" for four years. The best way to address the needs of our students, whether it's personal, social, or academic, is to be visible, knowledgeable, and trustworthy. We keep a very open door and advocate for students in any and all of their needs. Our focus is meeting the student at their current needs, which can range from crisis management to college entrance exams. Building a rapport with students and families allows us the opportunity for families to have the best experience possible at BHS. Being able to prepare our students for life outside of BHS is a primary goal we deliver on daily.

Buffalo Community Middle School

At the middle school our building initiative is focused on an Intensive Care Unit (ICU) model. ICU is based on bringing resources together for students who are struggling. Often when a student is struggling to be an effective learner in class, there are additional personal, social and emotional issues. ICU works for students by believing that all people involved in a student's life will contribute to their success. There is not a person in our BCMS building who is willing to let them fail. Our role as a school counselor, is to be lifeguards for students. As lifeguards, we are accessing resources, problem solving and communicating with all invested individuals. We are often the first resource parents, teachers and students access when a concern arises.

Caring for the whole student, we are concerned with a student's basic needs being met.

We have multiple programs in place to help address when these challenges arise. Our Backpack Buddies program gets food to students in need. Each week, students are sent home with a backpack full of food and return the empty backpack to be refilled the next week. Our students may receive free and reduced lunch options while at school, but need the extra resources while at home. Throughout the school year we collect school supplies and distribute them to students in need. During the holiday season we apply for grants and receive donations from our staff. This money is put towards our Holiday Cheer program. We determine student's needs and are able to take students shopping for holiday gifts for family members and themselves. Often these students are picking up basic need items for their family during these shopping trips.

BHM PROGRAM LIMITATIONS OR CHALLENGES

Counselors are faced with the challenge of being the first line of defense against adolescent mental health issues. We are often the first adults to work with students when parents, teachers, fellow students or even the student themselves first realizes that there is a major life difficulty. Counselors use tools such as the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire to look for mental health warning signs to share information with parents and help advocate for the next best steps to help the student in need.

Counselors are not doctors. We use a solution focused approach to help students, but we are not qualified to medicate and treat mental health disorders, such as depression, anxiety or bipolar disorder. Counselors are part of a mental health team and their services should be paired with doctors or psychiatrists who are able to diagnose disorders, prescribe medications and treat using advanced techniques such as psychotherapy.

At the high school level our academic challenges are on tracking at-risk students, with our priorities focusing on mental health and crisis situations, which leaves little time left to consistently track low-performing students and communication with parents/teachers. As well as the amount of time committed to our current schedule change process. Many student's belief is that we are able to change their schedule at anytime. Although this is part of our jobs, it is definitely not the most important and it is incredibly time consuming.

Through the area of college/career prep, BHS school counselors challenge is the timely distribution of information and resources. We send comprehensive info at the beginning of the school year, but parents are requesting information at the time it is needed as well as what is appropriate for each grade level throughout the course of the school year.

When looking at personal/social challenges, we largely see an increase in frequency and intensity of children's mental health concerns. We do a lot of crisis management, increase of hospitalizations which requires case management. Most of our job is spent being reactive, with a lack of preventative programming.

At the high school we feel that students do not have access to counselors in a timely

manner. Although our ratios are average in comparison to the national average, our access is poor. Students often wait for multiple days before being able to see their counselor. Counselors currently are scheduled for appointments for every half hour as well as having walk-ins, and crisis situations that come in. We also feel that many people do not have a great understanding about what a school counselor's role really is. Teachers and parents do not always know what we do or how to access us. As stated previously we do not provide therapy as some parents think we do, and many do not know that we are available to help facilitate recourses.

At the middle school level, counselors conducted parent and student surveys to determine strengths and limitations of the program. Both parents and students indicated a lack of knowledge of who their assigned counselor was and what services they would be able to provide for the student. For students to be able to access the full array of services that counselors provide, they must feel they have access to these resources and an understanding of how counselors are able to help.

The middle school counseling team took this information from the survey and implemented action steps during the 2014-15 school year. The team scheduled classroom visits to explain the role of school counselors to all 6th grade students and spoke during administrative presentations to all three grade level student bodies (6th, 7th and 8th grade). The team also wrote an article for the BCMS parent newsletter outlining the roles and resources that could be offered from middle school counselors. The article included pictures and contact information so parents would feel more comfortable making initial contact when they have concerns that could be addressed by the counseling team.

NEXT STEPS

Buffalo High School

At the high school we have determined that our next steps should focus in the areas of academic, college/career prep, personal/social, and program development. Specifically in regards to academics we would like to be more consistent with our tracking of at-risk students and those that are academically struggling. We are looking to address our schedule change process to reduce the amount of time we spend changing schedules and increase our productivity in other areas. Our goal is to give a presentation in the fall to our staff about our program, what we do, and how we can serve them and students. We would also like to create a Student Services brochure promoting who we are, what we do--this could be given to families as well as teachers.

When looking at the area of college/career prep, we are looking to implement parent information nights during conferences. Looking at what the key information per grade-level and the time of year that the conferences take place. We would like to assess how we communicate important information with students and families to improve the timing and the quantity of people getting the information. From the survey that was given out

last year, we also determined it would be best to move our junior meetings from spring time to the fall so juniors would get information sooner, followed up with individual meetings in the springtime.

The personal/social area next steps are to focus on reviewing our accessibility for student appointments and opportunities for more student appointments. We know that much our job is reactive responses rather than being able to be proactive. Many students that come in for an appointment have to wait 3 days to a week just to get on the calendar. We think it is key for us to be available in a more timely manner. We currently spend 10 hours a week in the lunchroom for supervision, without that duty we could add 20 more appointments to our calendars. There has been an increase in frequency and intensity of children's mental health concerns and we know how important our role is in supporting students.

Through program development we hope to gain additional counseling staff. We will continue to look each year at adjusting out counseling duties and responsibilities based on our caseload sizes. We would also like to attend trainings and implement the ASCA National Model.

Buffalo Community Middle School

Buffalo Community Middle School was able to add a third counseling position to the team for the 2014-15 academic school year. This addition reduced caseloads, allowed counselors to be assigned to one entire grade level and reduced pressure on an already overcrowded schedule. Because of this addition, the counselors at BCMS are now able to focus more of their time and energy on the following proactive steps.

BCMS counselors now teach an academic support class entitled Study Skills. There are two sections of Study Skills in each of the grade levels. This class serves the academically neediest students who do not already receive support through Special Education or English Language Learner services. These academically at risk students are taught important skills to be successful in their other classes. Students receive check ins with a counselor who knows their story and cares about them deeply. They are given the opportunity to access the technology that they need to complete homework and projects and also experience a differentiated academic environment where they are valued and respected for who they are.

BCMS counselors are using their PLC time and the collaborative inquiry process to continue to write curriculum and improve the techniques used to teach and support our most academically at risk students. This year the counseling team implemented an incentive program that rewarded students with prizes of their choice. Students earned incentives if they could demonstrate and use the learning targets taught in the Study Skills class. Moving forward, there is also a plan to work with older students who can be trained as mentors and role models to inspire these often unmotivated students to be the

best they can be at school.

The WEB peer mentorship program was also brought into BCMS with the addition of a third counselor. WEB is now the primary 6th grade orientation program using extensively trained 8th grade peer mentors. WEB eases the concerns of 6th grade students, prepares them to be successful from their first day of Middle School and empowers our 8th grade leaders to set the culture they want for their school. This program will continue to grow and blossom with each successive year.

Counselors are highly active in improving the Problem Solving Team and Response to Intervention processes. These are building wide initiatives designed to help the learning of all students. Counselors will continue to serve on these teams and committees to make sure that all students are receiving the best that BCMS can offer.

The counseling team is continually improving the classroom lessons we teach in the domains of academic, career and social/emotional. These lessons are taught as single day lessons in specific content area. These lessons cover a wide array of topics from self esteem, mental health, career choices, every day living and healthy choices. These lessons have resulted in immediate positive impacts for individual students. BCMS counselors will continue to do whatever it takes to improve our craft and help students in whatever way will improve their learning, mental health and ability to cope with the challenges of Middle School.