

School Counselor Accountability: The Path to Social Justice and Systemic Change

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Expectations run high that accountability for student outcomes will continue to drive the education agenda with reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965). School counselors have also recognized the imperative to connect their work to school improvement goals. This article discusses action research undertaken by school counselors who used data-informed practice to align counseling programs with the accountability expectations of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (2002) and the American School Counselor Association (2003, 2005) National Model.

Demographic shifts in our nation's population mandate that we attend specifically to students' achievement, if as a nation, we expect to maintain our standard of living, our level of prosperity, and our place in the global economy. Simply put, we need the knowledge and contributions of students of color—together with the knowledge and contributions of all students and all our adults—to maintain our democracy.

—Learning Point Associates (2004, p. 2)

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB; 2002) leaves a legacy of accountable high-stakes expectations in which every professional in every school building is expected to contribute to the overall strategy for improving school achievement. Accountability has permeated every aspect of the educational arena. Adequate yearly progress, as measured by moving critical data elements in a positive direction, is intended to raise overall performance levels and to close the achievement gaps between high-performing and low-performing groups (Swanson, 2004). With the impending reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA; 1965), it is imperative that no school building, no principal, and no school staff member are left out of improving the success story for every student. Although previous iterations of ESEA, America 2000 (1991), and Goals 2000 (1994) required stringent graduation requirements, standards across all of the academic content areas, and innovation in curriculum and pedagogy, NCLB placed the responsibility for improving achievement squarely on every member of the school community, including parents, students, and the community at large. Although NCLB has not yet laid its mark directly on the school counseling profession, the reduction of funding for school personnel other than those who teach the core academic courses continues to erode. The school counseling profession cannot be far behind (Dahir & Stone, 2003, 2004; Herr, 2001; Isaacs, 2003; Kiselica & Robinson, 2001; Lapan, 2001; Stone & Hanson, 2002).

For more than 25 years, the professional literature has called repeatedly for increasing counselor accountability (Gysbers, 2004). In this climate of limited educational funding and the pressures of meeting adequate yearly progress, school counselors continue to be at risk as ancillary to the central goals of education (i.e., teaching and learning). Policy makers, school boards, and school system leaders, who are held accountable for improved results, may view the counseling programs in schools as fiscally irresponsible and as an ineffective use of resources (Whiston, 2002).

■ Moving to an Accountability Mind-Set

The development of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) national standards (Campbell & Dahir, 1997) encouraged school counselors to think in terms of the expected results of what students should know and be able to do as a result of implementing a standards-based comprehensive school counseling program. The Education Trust's (1997) DeWitt Wallace Reader's Digest the Transforming School Counseling Initiative (hereinafter referred to as the Transforming School Counseling Initiative) brought forward new vision skills for school counselors that emphasized leadership, advocacy, use of data, collaboration and teaming, and a commitment to support high levels of student achievement. ASCA collaborated with the Education Trust to infuse these new vision themes of the Transforming School Counseling Initiative throughout the *American School Counselor Association National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs* (ASCA, 2003, 2005 [hereinafter referred to as the ASCA National Model]). These counseling skills are presented in Table 1.

This collaboration sent a clear message to the profession; that is, school counselors are ideally situated in schools to serve as social justice advocates to eliminate the achievement gap and to focus their efforts on ensuring success for every underserved and underrepresented student (House &

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TABLE 1
School Counseling Paradigms

Past	Present	Future
20th-century school counseling: Service driven <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counseling • Consultation • Coordination 	Transformed school counseling: New vision proactive practice <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counseling • Consultation • Coordination • Leadership • Advocacy • Teaming and collaboration • Assessment and use of data • Technology 	Intentional and purposeful school counseling programs: Aligned and integrated with the educational enterprise <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counseling • Consultation • Coordination • Leadership • Social justice advocacy • Teaming and collaboration • Assessment and use of data • Technology • Accountability • Cultural mediation • Systemic change agent

Note. Education Trust (1997) and Stone and Dahir (2006).

Hayes, 2002; House & Martin, 1998; Stone & Dahir, 2006). A penchant for social justice dictates that if school counselors “embrace a will to excellence, we can deeply restructure education in ways that will . . . release the full potential of all of our children” (Hillard, 1991, p. 31). Yet, school counselors have not universally aligned data-informed practice and accountability with equity and improving student achievement. Many continue to adhere to the “bean counting” method of accountability by reporting the totals for different types of activities. Considered “so what” data in the eyes of legislators, school board members, and other critical stakeholders this may be construed as merely a mechanism to account for productivity. School board members, administrators, and teachers understand the difference between reporting how time is spent and demonstrating the impact on academic outcomes (Louis, Jones, & Barajas, 2001; Myrick, 2003; Schmoozer, 2006; Stone, 2003; Thorn & Mulvenon, 2002).

Federal, state, and local expectations demand evidence-based outcomes as criteria for best practices. Accountability, as defined by NCLB (2002), requires a systematic collection and analysis of key data to understand, contribute to, and improve student achievement. The ASCA (2003, 2005) National Model has placed accountability into the daily vernacular of school counselors with the expressed purpose of eliminating the opportunity and achievement gaps. Accountability for student success must become a driving force for transforming and reframing the work of school counselors (ASCA, 2003, 2005; Green & Keys, 2002; Gysbers & Henderson, 2001; Lapan, 2001; Myrick, 2003; Stone & Dahir, 2004, 2007). When aligned with the educational enterprise, the school counseling program is data informed, is proactive and preventive in focus, assists students in acquiring and applying lifelong learning skills, and is delivered in a comprehensive and accountable manner (Stone & Dahir, 2006).

The primary purpose of this article is to address the urgent call by researchers to expand the traditional methods used for assessing needs and evaluating school counseling programs (Brown & Trusty, 2005; Dimmitt, Carey, & Hatch, 2007; Dollarhide & Lemberger, 2006; Herr, 2001; Isaacs, 2003; S. Johnson & Johnson, 2003; Stone

& Dahir, 2004, 2007; Whiston, 2002). Action research, a widely used methodology in general education, has the potential to engage school counselors using data-informed practice that contributes to the accountability expectations of NCLB (2002) and the ASCA (2003, 2005) National Model.

Action Research and School Counselor Accountability

“Vision without action is meaningless” (Spinetta, 2002, p. 24). Action research in education has gained increased attention for more than 25 years, evolving over time to garner support from school-based personnel to improve practice. As a systematic inquiry into the teaching and learning environment, action research gathers information about how schools perform, the impact of instruction, and how well students are learning (Mills, 2003; Sagor, 1992). With questions asked and answers found, thus generating new questions and ideas (Mills, 2003), action research can be viewed as a process of cyclical inquiry resulting in ongoing and continuous improvement. Action research requires the use of data-informed practice and follows the scientific method of inquiry, including developing a hypothesis, gathering data, analyzing and interpreting data, and then applying the results to improve practice (Lewin, 1946; Mills, 2003; Sagor, 2005).

Defined as systematic inquiry, action research is conducted by teachers, administrators, counselors, or others with a vested interest in the teaching and learning process for the purpose of gathering data about how their particular schools operate, how faculty teach, and how students learn (Mills, 2003). An action research inquiry can provoke the question, How are students succeeding as a result of the school counseling program? Taking this one step further, Suter (2006) outlined the potential contributions of action research by teachers (and counselors), asserting that classroom teachers (and school counselors) who conduct such research are reflective practitioners and can make exemplary contributions to school improvement.

Although the results of action research are not considered scientifically based evidence under NCLB (2002), school

counselors can reflect on the relationship between results, research, and their day-to-day practice. As Lewis noted, “No research without action. No action without research” (as cited by Minor, 1981, p. 485). With a growing demand for outcome-based evidence coupled with the increased pressures of accountability (Bauman, 2004; Brown & Trusty, 2005; Isaacs, 2003), action research may serve as an important venue for school counseling practitioners to articulate their contributions to student achievement and to each student’s ability to successfully navigate and negotiate his or her school experience. Thus, action research offers school counselors an opportunity to act, progress, and reform rather than accept stability and mediocrity (Marzano, 2003; Mills, 2003).

With the ongoing expectations for connecting school counselors to accountability, recently, several models promoted the use of data to improve practice (Isaacs, 2003; S. Johnson, Johnson, & Downs, 2006; Reynolds & Hines, 2001). MEASURE (i.e., mission, elements, analyze, stakeholders unite, results, and educate; Dahir & Stone, 2003; Stone & Dahir, 2004, 2007), a six-step action research model, engages school counselors in the process of using data to identify a key school improvement need, focus collaborative intentional efforts, and use the results to reflect on practice (Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993). MEASURE offers a systematic and organized way for school counselors to explore a school-based problem, develop a possible course of action, and monitor progress and results (S. Johnson et al., 2006; Rowell, 2005). The research model is aligned with the precepts of the Education Trust’s (1997) Transforming School Counseling initiative, supports the accountability component of the ASCA (2003, 2005) National Model, and connects the work of school counselors to the goals of school improvement. Key to the implementation process (Dahir & Stone, 2003; Stone & Dahir, 2004, 2007) is the notion of collaboration, which requires school counselors to team with administrators, faculty, and stakeholders to cooperatively focus on data, such as attendance, promotion rates, graduation rates, and discipline infractions—in other words, the key data that are barometers of school improvement in their respective buildings. The acronym MEASURE represents the following actions undertaken by school counselors:

Mission: Connect the comprehensive K–12 school counseling program to the mission of the school and to the goals of the annual school improvement plan.

Elements: Identify the critical data elements that are important to the internal and external stakeholders. Critical data elements can usually be found on the school’s district or building report card.

Analyze: Discuss carefully which elements need to be aggregated or disaggregated and why. Analysis will determine the institutional or environmental barriers that may be impeding student achievement and adversely influencing the data elements.

Stakeholders unite: Determine which stakeholders need to be involved in addressing these school-improvement issues and unite to develop strategies. These individuals will collaborate to create an action plan, and all concerned members of the internal and external school community should be included.

Results: Describe the outcomes of the collaborative efforts that delivered interventions and strategies to move the critical data elements in a positive direction. Whether the results are significant or were minimally effective, it is essential to reassess the team’s efforts and develop the next steps toward continuous school improvement while addressing any changes in the school counseling program.

Educate: Show the positive impact the school counseling program has on student achievement and on the goals of each school’s improvement plan. Publicizing the results of an effective school counseling program is a vital step in the accountability process.

The MEASURE model proactively and intentionally encourages a counselor-led collaborative effort that is focused on annual specific outcomes and part of each building’s improvement plan. When the data and results have meaning and merit that matters to stakeholders, the school counseling program now could be viewed as effective, contributory, and accountable to student success in school.

■ Action Research Design

With the best of intentions, researchers have reported limited results data that document student successes as a result of school counseling actions and interventions (Brown & Trusty, 2005; Gysbers, 2005; Isaacs, 2003; Whiston, 2002; Whiston & Sexton, 1998). Recent studies have revealed that students who participate in comprehensive school counseling programs earn higher grades, are involved in fewer classroom disruptions, and show improved peer behavior (Brigman & Campbell, 2003; Lapan, 2001; Lapan, Gysbers, & Kayson, 2006; Lapan, Gysbers, & Sun, 1997; Sink, 2005; Sink & Stroh, 2003; Utah State Office of Education, 2007). To date, there are no studies that specifically examine the involvement of school counselors in school improvement and connect their work to school-based accountability. Thus, the purpose of this action research study was to assess the involvement of a large group of school counselors representing urban, suburban, and rural districts in critical school improvement issues and examine the outcomes and contributions as a result of their action. The examination focused on two primary issues:

- Which school improvement goals were identified as most important by school counselors to focus on?
- As a result of the action research plans, what were the contributions of school counselors to school improvement goals?



Participants

During the 2003 through the 2006 school years, more than 175 school counselors voluntarily submitted and implemented action research plans based on the MEASURE model. School counselors from 14 elementary schools, 6 middle schools, and 33 high schools, of which 24 were part of one large school system, engaged in action research. Each site's demographic information presented a wide array of diversity in setting, ethnicity, race, socioeconomic standing and achievement levels, and academic achievement.

Data Gathering

Sagor (2005) has reminded counselors and researchers that action research uses principles similar to those of scientifically based studies and includes data gathering, analyses and interpretation of results, and application of results to improve practice. The process of data gathering commenced when the participants attended one of several professional development sessions that assisted school counselors with the acquisition of data analysis skills and applications of data-informed practice. Each action research plan required the school counselor(s) to identify a specific school improvement goal, gather data, engage school faculty and personnel in the planning of strategies, establish a baseline, examine the aggregated and disaggregated data related to this goal, implement collaborative targeted strategies, and analyze and present results. Participants agreed to develop an action research plan to contribute to closing the gap in one critical aspect of student performance and prepared a plan to partner with colleagues to collaboratively achieve their data-driven goals. The counselors examined the accountability component of the ASCA (2003, 2005) National Model and the tenets of the Transforming School Counseling Initiative (Education Trust, 1997) to better understand the relationship of data-informed comprehensive school counseling programs and improved student success.

The professional development activity led the participants through the completion of Steps 1 through 3 of the MEASURE model. Each school's mission statement was reviewed (mission); a specific data element was selected (element), and data were collected and analyzed (analyze). Step 4 (stakeholders unite) required the participants to engage faculty, administrators, parents, and community partners in a collaborative, goal-focused action plan. Strategies were proposed that would ultimately be presented at a future meeting of concerned school and community members.

Participants were provided with a template to present their plan to the faculty at large and also to engage community collaborators. From these core groups, volunteers emerged who

committed to continuing the implementation process during the course of the school year. The action plan was monitored throughout the school year, and when the completion data were available, results (Step 5) were reviewed. The counselors also analyzed the qualitative data that addressed their school's mission; the strategies implemented; and the observable impact on students, faculty, and community. The final step, educate (Step 6), provided the participants with an opportunity to summarize their plans and publicly present the results of their efforts.

Throughout the school year, periodic support through meetings and e-mail and telephone consultations provided the additional assistance to manage the challenges encountered when school counselors shifted from traditional accountability methods (e.g., counting tasks) to a proactive and nontraditional involvement in school improvement.

Analysis of the Data

An examination of the school improvement goals that were identified as most important by school counselors revealed that more than 50% of the elementary school counselors chose "improving grades" and raising "test scores" as a primary goal. Fifty percent of the middle school counselors also chose "improving grades" as a priority, whereas slightly less than 50% of high school counselors shared a similar goal. Overall, 35 of the 53 plans established "improving grades/reducing failure" as the primary focus to connect the work of the school counselors to school improvement. Only 9% of the MEASURE plans focused on personal-social development concerns, with 6 plans establishing a goal related to school climate (e.g., reducing discipline rates and improving attendance). Eighty-nine percent of the MEASURE plans selected an academically related goal with no discernible influence from the variable of school setting, that is, urban, suburban, and rural and school levels (elementary, middle, and high school). (See Table 2.)

School Counselor Contributions

The results section of each MEASURE collaborative action research plan, in all but two instances, revealed a positive impact on the identified goal. Elementary school counselors reported the highest gains in improving student grades, with improvement ranging from 2% of the targeted group to 50% of the entire 4th- and 5th-grade population. Conversely, high school counselors reported gains but at lower rates than did their elementary school counterparts. Eighty-five percent of the high school plans specifically targeted 9th-grade failures,

TABLE 2

Selected Areas of School Improvement

School Type	Attendance	Special Ed.	Discipline	RF/IG	PG	Test Score
Elementary school (<i>n</i> = 14)		1	3	4		6
Middle school (<i>n</i> = 6)	1		1	3		1
High school (<i>n</i> = 9)	1			4	3	1
High school system (<i>n</i> = 24)				24		

Note. Special ed. = special education classification; RF/IG = reduce failure or improve grades; PG = postsecondary going rate.

which has been described as a national crisis and related to the rising dropout rate (McPartland & Jordon, 2001). Overall, these high school plans revealed a positive impact on reducing failure, thus increasing the number of students promoted to 10th grade. Additionally, one high school focused on successfully increasing the percentage of students going on to college and other postsecondary options. Summaries of the results of the MEASURE action research plans' contributions to the school improvement goals and impact on key data elements are presented in Table 3.

Limitations of Action Research

Action research is collaborative and realistic and empowers participants (Rowell, 2006). It is not intended to substitute for scientifically based research as formally defined in NCLB (2002). It must be noted that this analysis was not intended to declare data-driven school counseling programs as the solution to school improvement. Rather, this examination revealed a commitment on the part of the school counselors to fully participate in school improvement, take initiative as leaders and social advocates to use data to inform programs and strategies, and seek to continuously improve practice. It also must be noted that participation in the action research plans study was voluntary. It is a possibility that the participating school counselors had a prior disposition to this way of works, including engagement in collaboration and teaming, further limiting the applicability of the conclusions.

Interpretation of the Data

Traditionally, school counseling research has investigated the impact of responsive services, for example, individual and group counseling interventions (Rowell, 2005; Whiston, 2002; Whiston & Sexton, 1998), leading to an expectation that the majority of the participants would select personal-social development-related elements such as attendance, behavioral issues, or discipline data on which to develop their action plans. Overwhelmingly, the school counselors in this study chose to address academic achievement-related goals. Pressures from the accountability expectations of NCLB (2002), the current climate of school reform, as well as the influence of the ASCA (2003, 2005) National Model and the Transforming School Counseling Initiative (Education Trust, 1997), might have swayed their selections.

The impact of data cannot be unilaterally attributed to school counselor efforts. It was the commitment of the school counselor participants to lead a school-based effort that led to positive results. The school counselors demonstrated their willingness to share the responsibility and accountability for student achievement outcomes. Participants used data to inform practice and strategically connect the work of the school counselor to the greater internal and external community. The MEASURE action research plans required the school counselors to step out of their offices and collaborate and team with administrators, faculty, and stakeholders in a schoolwide effort to deliver intentional strategies and thus affect the data that are publicly

displayed on each school's report card. The partnerships that were most successful, effective, and powerful directly engaged parents and promoted parental involvement as critical influences in a child's success in school. Although every MEASURE plan addressed parent involvement in some capacity, elementary school counselors provided parents with a meaningful and active role, whereas high school counselors placed parents in an informational receptor position.

Successful plans reached deep into the community and engaged tutors from the higher education sectors, involved business partners as highly visible speakers and mentors, and also organized peer student groups to mentor and advise younger students on strategies for success. Extrinsic rewards were used across all school levels as a means to influence achievement. One elementary school reported a 50% improved increase in grades for the total population of fourth and fifth graders. Parents and community stakeholders were actively engaged with the power of partnership evidenced by the results. Successful plans also promoted counselor-principal partnerships to promote systemic change with the expressed purpose of furthering the academic success of every student (Nichter & Nelson, 2006; Stone & Clark, 2001).

The compilation of the results of the action research plans (see Table 3) portrayed the current situation of student needs and the importance of school counselor involvement as social justice advocates in school improvement. Collaborative strategies revealed a desire on the part of all stakeholders to look within the climate of their schools and examine issues and practices that potentially stratify student opportunities.

Using the transformed roles of leaders, advocates, and team players (Education Trust, 1997), these school counselors worked diligently to bring colleagues and community together to close and eliminate the achievement gap. The presence of the school counseling program is an assurance that the human and affective element in education is not overlooked. Most important, these efforts were acknowledged by the participants' principals. When data-informed practice becomes part of comprehensive school counseling programs, school counselor contributions are valued by their administrators and are seen as essential to fulfilling the mission of every school.

Conclusion

Accountability Is No Longer an Option

Researchers have called for more school counseling accountability research related to student performance (Brigman, 2006; Brown & Trusty, 2005; Dimmitt et al., 2007; Whiston, 2002; Whiston & Sexton, 1998). The critical need to transform school counseling from a marginal, peripheral service to a program central to the mission of each school has been well documented for years (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000; Rothney, 1958; Sprinthall, 1981; Watkins, 1994). Very few studies (Brigman & Campbell, 2003; Carey & Dimmitt, 2006; Lapan, Gysbers, & Petroski, 2001; Lapan et al., 1997; Sink & Stroh, 2003)

TABLE 3

Demographic Profile and Results of Participating Elementary, Middle, and High Schools

School	Setting	Location	No. of Students	School Improvement Goal	Result
Alimacani Elementary	Urban	FL	1,110	Reduce discipline incidents	46% reduction in discipline incidents
Arbor Elementary (Grades 4–5)	Suburban	NJ	519	Improve 4th-grade standardized test scores	14% increase of students achieving proficiency
Bryceville Elementary	Urban	FL	228	Improve 3rd-grade standardized test scores	10% of the students moved to Level 3 or higher
Canella Elementary School	Urban	FL	860	Improve the promotion rate of Hispanic students (improve grades)	6% reduction in retention of Hispanic students
Eisenhower Elementary School (Grades K–3)	Suburban	NJ	484	Reduce 2nd- and 3rd-grade failure (improve grades)	29% reduction in 2nd- and 3rd-grade failure
George Washington Carver Elementary	Urban	FL	395	Improve 3rd-grade standardized test scores	14% of the students moved to Level 3 or higher
Grandview Elementary (Grades K–3)	Suburban	NJ	506	Improve standardized test scores	93% of students achieved proficiency
Hall Elementary School	Suburban	OR	500	Improve standardized test scores	50% increase in students reaching benchmark
Hull Elementary School	Urban	FL	335	Reduce 4th- and 5th-grade discipline referrals	62% decrease in 4th- and 5th-grade referrals
Knollwood Elementary School (Grades K–3)	Suburban	NJ	472	Improve homework completion rates to improve grades (K–2)	15% improvement in homework completion
Martin Luther King Elementary (Grades 4–5)	Suburban	NJ	489	Improve grades	50% improvement in the number of students achieving improved grades
PS 199	Urban	New York City	986	Decrease special education referrals	21% reduction in referral; 19% reduction in classification
PS 229 Emanuel Kaplan Elementary School	Urban	New York City	1,333	Improve 4th-grade test scores	8% of 4th-grade students moved from Level 2 to Level 3
Randolphville Elementary	Suburban	NJ	505	Reduce discipline incidents	38% decrease in discipline rates
Conackamack Middle School	Suburban	NJ	564	Reduce the suspension rate	Suspension rate did not decrease
Darnell-Cookman Middle School	Urban	FL	1,225	Improve 6th-grade test scores	2% of the students increased their test scores
Memorial Middle School	Urban	FL	1,175	Reduce 7th- and 8th-grade retention rates	8% reduction in retention for 7th and 8th graders
Quibbltown Middle School	Suburban	NJ	550	Reduce 8th-grade retention rates	4% reduction in retention of 8th graders
Schor Middle School	Suburban	NJ	529	Improve grades	16% increase in students achieving higher grades
Tomlin Middle School	Suburban	FL	1,501	Attendance	No change in the data
Chelsea Technical Academy	Urban	New York City	950	Reduce 9th-grade failure (improve grades)	19% increase in 9th grade promotion
East High School	Urban	NY	2,074	Increase the postsecondary going rate	13% increase in the postsecondary going rate
Long Island City High School	Urban	New York City	4,100	Increase number of Regents diplomas (improve grades)	5% increase in number of Regents diplomas
Newington High School	Suburban	CT	1,503	Increase the postsecondary going rate	3% increase in the postsecondary going rate
Newtown High School	Urban	New York City	4,290	Improve attendance	2% improvement in average daily attendance
Pike High School	Urban	IN	2,493	Improve postsecondary going rate	10% increase in the postsecondary going rate
Piscataway High School	Suburban	NJ	2,223	Reduce 9th-grade failure (improve grades)	32% reduction in 9th-grade failure
South Kingstown High School	Suburban	RI	1,300	Reduce 9th-grade failure (improve grades)	55% of 9th graders at risk of retention moved to 10th grade
Stanton College Preparatory High School	Urban	FL	1,520	Increase PSAT scores	24% increase in the number of students achieving national merit recognition
Jefferson County Public Schools (24 high schools)	Urban, suburban	KY	96,000	Reduce 9th-grade failure (improve grades)	5% reduction in 9th-grade failure

Note. Scoring rubric: Level 1 = below proficient, Level 4 = above proficient. A Regents diploma is a college preparation diploma. PS = public school; PSAT = Preliminary Scholastic Assessment Test.

meet the criteria of scientifically based evidence under NCLB (2002). Failure to establish significant and recognizable school counselor contributions to student achievement is tantamount to being counted out (Martin, 2004). In the world of 21st-century schools, where increased academic performance for all students is the mandated goal, school counselors must take this next powerful step and become routine users of data to inform and sharpen their focus. Data, those cold hard numbers, come to life as school counselors are assured of their direct impact on individuals and groups of students to improve their opportunity to acquire an equitable education (Stone & Dahir, 2006).

Time is no longer a luxury. School counselors ethically cannot sit back (ASCA, 2004) and watch the gaps grow. Data-informed design and program implementation is essential for the profession to thrive and survive in the 21st century. Engaging in action research is a commitment that could be made by every school counselor to forward these goals.

Turning Toward the Future

School personnel nationwide face enormous challenges in providing every student with an education that ensures that every student will graduate with all options after high school, including college (ASCA, 1997, 2003, 2005). The action research data presented provide evidence that school counselors can initiate, develop, lead, and coordinate programs that can contribute to systemic change and improved learning success for every student.

Beliefs and good intentions alone will not contribute to systemic change. Using data provided a solid foundation for school counselors to act on their belief system and to identify and rectify issues that affect every student's ability to achieve at expected levels (Stone & Dahir, 2007). By their willingness to work within an accountability framework, the participants defied the pervasive belief that socioeconomic status and color determine a young person's ability to learn. Accepting this challenge propels school counselors to accept responsibility as social justice advocates, focus strategic and intentional interventions to remove barriers to learning, and raise the level of expectations for students for whom little is expected. When school counselors contribute to school improvement goals, they perceive critically, explore widely, and examine their ideas against explicit and considered moral values and empirical data (Learning Point Associates, 2004). School counselors are concerned not only with what learners need to do, but also with what they can become, that is, compassionate, critical thinkers and contributors to society (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2007).

The accountability component of the ASCA (2003, 2005) National Model demonstrates how school counselors can progress from a "counting tasks" system to aligning the school counseling program with standards-based reform and the expectations and requirements of NCLB (2002). The implementation of action research plans established these school counselors as leaders, advocates, collaborators, and data-driven decision makers in their respective schools. Using

the concept "one student at a time and one school at a time" (Stone, 2006), school counselors moved to front and center to help narrow the information and opportunity gaps.

The use of collaborative action research is an important tool for school counselors to enter the accountability environment that continues to dictate public education (Rowell, 2005).

For more than 50 years, action research has had a strong tradition of practice as a tool for teachers (Sagor, 1992; Smith, 2001) and holds potential to strengthen school counseling's position in the current climate of accountability to position school counselors as valued professionals in the hierarchy of school personnel (Rowell, 2006). School counselors can provide an assurance that every student's needs are addressed in the critical calculations to develop a data-driven school counseling program that would contribute to closing the gap (Stone & Turba, 1999). The use of action research could place school counselors foremost in the role of social justice advocate using school-based data to inform practice and build assurances into the system that no students are left behind (Martin, 2004). As a form of inquiry, it can be instrumental to developing and implementing a data-informed comprehensive school counseling program (ASCA National Model [ASCA, 2003, 2005; Stone & Dahir, 2007]).

School counselors can no longer passively react to the challenges facing schools and youth; it is a critical time to take action and accept the challenge of contributing to school improvement (Gysbers, 2004). Acting as agents of school and community change, school counselors can create a climate where access and support for quality and rigor is the norm (Lapan, 2005; Stone & Dahir, 2007). By doing so, school counselors provide underserved and underrepresented students with a chance at acquiring the education skills necessary to fully participate in the 21st-century economy (R. S. Johnson, 2002; S. Johnson et al., 2006; Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2007; Stone & Dahir, 2007; Stone & Martin, 2004). With an accountable, data-driven school counseling program, school counselors will be seen as powerful partners and collaborators in school improvement and champions of social justice bent on narrowing the opportunity and achievement gap (S. Johnson et al., 2006; Stone & Dahir, 2006). There lies the key to a thriving future for the profession of school counseling.

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