School Counselor Assignment in Secondary Schools

Research has not yet begun to investigate the practice or impact of school counselor assignment. A preliminary study sought to explore the nature and consequences of school counselor assignment practices in secondary schools. Secondary school counselors from one large Southeastern school district were asked to complete a questionnaire created for the purpose of this study. The results suggest a significant difference between school counselor assignment at the middle and high school levels. Middle schools predominantly utilized grade-level assignment while high schools used alphabetical assignment. Distinct advantages and challenges were indicated by school counselors from each assignment type. Implications for professional school counselors and future research directions are provided.

The American School Counselor Association designed its ASCA National Model® to reflect the necessary components of a comprehensive school counseling program (ASCA, 2005). According to ASCA, a comprehensive school counseling program is composed of four separate yet interdependent components: the foundation, the delivery system, the management system, and the accountability component. Much of the conceptual and research literature has centered on the foundation (e.g., Foster, Young, & Hermann, 2005), delivery system (e.g., Akos, Cockman, & Strickland, 2007), and accountability (e.g., Poynton & Carey, 2006) aspects of the model. Even with inherent overlap between these components, it is clear that little research exists on the management system or the organizational aspects of a comprehensive school counseling program.

The management system focuses on the use of calendars, on the use of data in planning, and on the working relationships among school administrators, community members, and advisory boards. Another salient part of the management system is the organization and assignment of school counselors to students. The ASCA National Model's (2005) recommendations indicate that the management agreement made between the school counselors and administrators should reflect a decision regarding both the organization and assignment of school counselors. With this, the administration and school counselors should reach an agreement on not only how students will be assigned to specific counselors but also whether counselors will specialize in different areas and whether there will be one counselor designated daily to handle crises (e.g., a “counselor of the day” program; ASCA, p. 46). ASCA suggests that schools may assign students to school counselors based on grade level, alphabetical breakdown, standards domain, academy or pathway, or a combination of these strategies.

While not specified by the ASCA National Model, Gysbers and Henderson (2006) suggested that particular assignments may be made for specific reasons. For example, they noted that a counselor assignment by surname (alphabetical breakdown) “enhances the quality of a counselor’s responsive services” (Gysbers & Henderson, p. 211) because of the extended relationships with students. This arrangement also requires collaboration and a team approach to guidance delivery or programming. In contrast, grade-level assignments are most consistent with a developmental philosophy and supportive of guidance and individual planning responsibilities because counselors are able to focus exclusively on the needs of a particular grade level. Gysbers and Henderson also advocated for consistency in counselor-student relationships with a “looping” type of arrangement in which the school counselor moves with students across grade levels (rather than a static arrangement in which a school counselor stays at one grade level on a recurrent basis).

Presumably, each school and school counseling staff should determine which type of assignment is most effective. With caseloads averaging over 475 and as high as 900 (ASCA, 2008), efficiency must be another consideration. Finally, to embody the mission of advocacy and serving all students, schools and school counselors must consider equity in terms of school counselor assignment. Even so, further defi-
nitions, explanations, or purposeful uses of various school counselor assignments have not been explored in the school counseling literature. No empirical studies have examined possible advantages or disadvantages that may exist for each. Given the absence of research on school counselor assignment, this preliminary study was designed to explore and describe school counselor assignment at the secondary level in one large Southeastern school district. Specifically, the three research questions were as follows:

1. How are school counselors assigned in secondary schools and who makes this decision?
2. What are school counselors’ perceptions of the effectiveness, efficiency, and equity of each type of assignment?
3. What are school counselors’ perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of each type of assignment?

**METHOD**

**Participants**

All school counselors who participated in this study were employees in one large Southeastern school district that contains 28 middle schools and 22 high schools. The district employs 81 middle school and 115 high school counselors. Of the 196 potential participants, 146 school counselors participated, yielding a return rate of 74%. Eighty-one high school and 65 middle school counselors completed the survey, representing 70% of the high school and 80% of the middle school counselors in the district.

The total sample was 82% female, with 72% of the participants identifying as White, 23% as Black, and 5% identifying as “other.” Years of experience were somewhat equally distributed in the sample, with 23% having 1–5 years, 33% having 5–10 years, 16% having 10–15 years, and 28% having 15 or more years of experience as a school counselor. The schools that the counselors represented reflected the diversity of the school district, with 59% identifying as urban, 29% identifying as suburban, and 12% identifying as rural.

**Questionnaire**

Because no research was located for school counselor assignment, a questionnaire was created by the research team. A counselor educator, the director of school counselors for the school district, and two graduate students in school counseling collaborated to create the questionnaire. An initial draft was given to a focus group of six school counselors and revised based on their feedback (e.g., open-ended prompts were added based on the focus group feedback; grade-level choice was split to grade-level static and grade-level looping). The School Counselor Assignment Questionnaire (SCAQ) was designed using an electronic research tool called Qualtrics and is available upon request from the first author.

The SCAQ was composed of three sections, with the first section consisting of a series of demographic and context questions such as gender, race, size of school, and how school counselors are assigned to students at their school. The second section was composed of several Likert questions (ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree) designed to probe school counselors’ perceptions about the effectiveness of their current school counselor assignment. The effectiveness questions were built around the components of the ASCA National Model. For example, questions addressed the foundation (e.g., “Our school counselor assignment is conducive in the creation of a unified purpose”) or the delivery system (e.g., “Our school counselor assignment is helpful in delivering responsive services”). This section also included one question about both the perceived equity (e.g., “Our school counselor assignment allows us to serve all students equitably”) and efficiency (e.g., “Our school counselor assignment allows us to plan and use our time efficiently”) of their current school counselor assignment. The final section included open-ended prompts to allow school counselors to elaborate on the advantages and disadvantages of their current school counselor assignment.

**Procedure and Data Analysis**

In March 2008, an e-mail describing the purpose and voluntary nature of the research, along with a link to the survey, was distributed by the district’s director of school counselors. Data were retrieved in April and the lead authors and two graduate students analyzed the data. Basic demographic information (Part 1) and descriptives (e.g., means and standard deviations) for the Likert questions were calculated from the Qualtrics program (Part 2). No additional psychometric analyses (e.g., reliability analysis) were conducted on the questionnaire data due to the preliminary nature of the study and the small sample size.

Based on the emergent differences between levels and assignment types found in Parts I and 2, the responses to the open-ended questions were organized by level (middle and high school), then by the most prominent types of school counselor assignment at each level. This enabled the research team to outline the list of advantages and challenges by level and each type of assignment. Three of the research team members (counselor educator and two graduate students) then coded the responses for each category. Because most of the open-ended responses were concise, many were taken verbatim and little qualitative analysis was needed. After the initial list-
ing of responses, the research team met to discuss lists to achieve consistency and agreement for clustering responses into larger themes when applicable (e.g., “We get to know kids really well” and “I keep strong connection with my kids” were coded as “Relationships with students”). The research team achieved consensus on the larger themes after several meetings.

RESULTS

Research Question 1: How Are School Counselors Assigned in Secondary Schools?
In the total group of participants, 40% were assigned by grade level (27% looping and 13% static), 31% were assigned by alphabetical breakdown, 18% assigned by “other,” 4% academy or track, 4% blend, and 3% domain specific. Looping was described as the practice of staying with one cohort of students as they move through the grades (e.g., sixth-grade counselor moves up with students when they move to seventh and eighth grade), while static means the counselor remains in the grade level. Alphabetical means that a school counselor is assigned students based on some portion of the alphabet (e.g., A–F surnames are students in a counselor’s caseload). Other was a classification participants chose that included a host of distinct assignments (e.g., two counselors for three grades in middle school) and seemed to be a default choice for school counselors in academy (ninth-grade academy at the school), track (year-round middle schools), or blended assignments (a variety of assignments combined). School counselor assignment appeared vastly different between the middle and high school levels.

For the middle school participants, two clear assignments emerged: Grade-level looping and grade-level static were used by a majority of the middle school counselors (75%). Fifty-one percent of the middle school counselors identified their assignment as grade-level looping, while 25% identified their assignment as grade-level static. The remaining assignment types for middle school counselors were “other” (12%), academy/track (8%), and blend (3%). These less frequent assignments included year-round schools (mostly the track designation), schools with two school counselors assigned to three grades, and some schools that assigned school counselors to specialize in particular ways (e.g., career development counselor).

Alphabetical assignment (57%) was most common in the high school sample. The other assignment types included a combination of “other” (22%), grade-level looping (7%), blend (6%), grade-level static (4%), and domain specific (4%). The blend category represented a series of high schools that employed a specific freshman counselor(s) (often in a 9th-grade academy), typically with an alphabetical assignment for Grades 10–12.

Finally, school counselors also reported who primarily determined school counselor assignment. Forty-five percent of the participants indicated that the counseling department made the decision, 40% reported school administration, 11% other, and 3% central office. “Other” included a collection of responses that included mutual decision making and decisions made by previous employees.

Research Question 2: What Are School Counselors’ Perceptions of the Effectiveness, Efficiency, and Equity of Each Type of Assignment?
Due to the distinct differences between middle and high school counselor assignments, results for this research question were considered by level. No statistically significant differences for effectiveness, efficiency, or equity were found for either level between the two predominant types of assignment. Means were slightly higher for grade-level looping as compared to grade-level static in middle school. Specifically, the mean for overall effectiveness was 3.61 as compared to 3.44, efficiency was 3.15 to 3.00, and equity was 3.06 to 3.00. For the high school sample, means for effectiveness (2.96 to 2.83) and efficiency (2.79 to 2.50) were slightly higher for alphabetical assignment as compared to the collection of assignments listed under “other.” The equity mean for “other” (2.67) was higher than the mean for alphabetical assignment (2.32). However, the lack of statistical significance, small sample size, and exploratory nature of the research (e.g., new questionnaire) limit conclusions related to these data. More utility was found from the open-ended questions around advantages and challenges with each type of assignment.

Research Question 3: What Are School Counselors’ Perceptions of the Advantages and Disadvantages of Each Type of Assignment?
Middle school counselor assignment. Again for clarity and space considerations, the results from the open-ended questions are organized by school level and by the two dominant types of assignment by level. For the middle school, the 33 school counselors who were assigned by grade-level looping felt that there were three distinct advantages to this form of assignment, including the ability to form relationships (61%), stability (18%), and the ability to advocate for students (12%). (Note: Percentages are provided for each particular assignment type by level; for example, 61% of the 33 middle school counselors in grade-level looping assignment mentioned relationships with parents.)

A representative comment from school counselors
working in grade-level looping arrangements was that “the relationship building with students and families is the most effective feature.” Another comment was that the “rotation and continuity of counseling services throughout middle school” allows the school counselors to really get to know the students and provides them with knowledge that “enables [them] to serve as advocates for [their] students and as valuable resources for [their] teachers.”

Finally, school counselors found utility in the looping practice because “rotating each year keeps [them] current on issues that affect students at each level and keeps [them] from burning out with doing the same thing year after year.”

Despite these noted advantages, disadvantages to this practice also were mentioned, although they were more widely distributed around a variety of topics. A noted disadvantage with the looping-type assignment in middle school related to the lack of specialization (15%). One school counselor noted,

> It becomes very difficult to perfect any programs that the school does at a particular grade level because every year the counselor either has to learn how to do it for the first time, or has to relearn how to do it because it has been 3 years since that counselor did it last.

Additionally, several counselors were disappointed with the lack of collaboration and teamwork that this form of assignment afforded (12%); for example, one school counselor noted that “looping with the students … limits collaboration with teachers and administrators due to the fact that the counselor must get to know a whole new set of teachers and grade-level administrators.”

Another distinct drawback mentioned by 12% of the school counselors working under this assignment was the inequitable nature of service delivery. The looping practice, in the words of one school counselor, “causes the workload for the eighth-grade counselor to be much greater than at other grade levels with having to conduct high school registration and rising sixth-grade transition activities simultaneously.” As noted by a school counselor, working with students only at one grade level is also a disadvantage “when one counselor is out because the other two counselors do not usually know students at the other grade levels.” This becomes especially problematic “when issues arise and the student is asked to meet with a counselor he or she has never seen before.” Thus, coverage when counselors are out for some reason is a distinct drawback of this form of assignment (12%).

With the grade-level static assignment (n = 18) at the middle level, the most frequently cited advantage was the nature of the school counselor’s work being strengths based and/or specialized (44%). School counselors were pleased with the ability to do what they are best at within this assignment; a representative comment was that “each counselor can focus on grade-specific activities and developmentally appropriate strategies.” Another school counselor agreed, noting that “because the developmental issues and differences are so significant in middle school … [grade-level static assignment] works well for each [counselor] to be a specialist in [his or her] grade.” Another frequent theme was the positive relationships that the school counselors were able to establish with teachers (33%). School counselors were satisfied with their ability to “get to know [their] teachers and the expectations of the grade and classes well.” Finally, the third most frequent theme (10%) that emerged was the teamwork and collaboration that this assignment afforded; one school counselor reported that even though “each counselor works in the area of their strength … [the school counselors] collaborate and know about the other’s children.”

Despite these noted strengths of the grade-level (static) form of school counselor assignment, there were also some drawbacks reported. Many of the school counselors working under this type of assignment saw limited ability in forming relationships with students and parents (33%). One school counselor noted that “it is difficult to really develop strong relationships with students and parents over the course of a year.” Other responses about disadvantages were spread across a variety of topics with no specific emergent categories.

**High school counselor assignment.** Three themes emerged as advantages to employing school counselors by alphabetical assignment. Relationships were cited as the primary advantage (58%), with one school counselor noting that the assignment “allows [them] to counsel the same students throughout their high school years; as a result, [they] get to know [their] students better and can more effectively work with them.” The second theme that emerged was that of collaboration (20%), where one school counselor indicated that the group of counselors “work together as a team to consult with one another, fill in for one another, and collaborate together to be a very effective department.” Finally, having exposure to multiple grade levels was seen as a strength (13%), with one school counselor enjoying “the variety of the different grade levels.”

In spite of the consistency in responses of these strengths, there were no dominant themes that emerged in the disadvantages for alphabetical assignment. When reporting disadvantages, one school counselor expressed frustration with the lack of an “opportunity to get to know all students, [not] just
the ones in your alphabetically assigned caseload.” Further, other school counselors identified the fact that “students in 9th and 12th grades get the most attention” and that “the needs of each grade level vary greatly” as particular disadvantages to this form of assignment. Finally, one school counselor noted that school counselors don’t have the opportunity to “capitalize on counselors’ individual strengths as much as they could because they divide by alpha.”

While some school counselors noted particular strengths (e.g., getting to know teachers of a certain grade level by a looping school counselor) and weaknesses (e.g., lack of equity for 9th- and 12th-grade counselors by a static grade-level assignment counselor) in the “other” category, the classification captures too few responses in too many diverse assignments to offer coherent strengths and weaknesses as a whole.

**DISCUSSION**

As with any exploratory research, definitive conclusions are not the objective of this research. Instead, these data provide an initial exploration into the particular phenomena. Research constraints (e.g., a new instrument and the local sample) also temper the conclusions that may be drawn from this study. Even so, school counselor assignments seem to be a critical issue that can impact the effectiveness, efficiency, and equity of counseling service to students. Moreover, professional school counselors seem to clearly note distinct advantages and challenges for certain types of assignments. These advantages and challenges may not only impact service delivery, but also may impact the job satisfaction of professional school counselors.

The results of this preliminary study suggest that there are distinct differences between how school counselors are assigned at the middle and high school levels. While grade-level assignment appears to be the dominant format in middle school (both looping and static), alphabetical assignment appears more common in high schools. While there are developmental differences between levels, looping or staying with students throughout grades was seen as useful by these participants.

The primary existing research available on looping comes from early childhood centers and elementary school teaching. Data from teachers at a child-care facility mirrored the findings of the present study, with documented advantages of looping including stability of care, increased understanding of children’s needs, better relationships between teachers and parents, and easier transitions (Hegde & Cassidy, 2004; Little & Dacus, 1999). Also, research on looping in primary schools found that both students and parents were more positive about their experience at school, had an increased sense of intimacy, and showed an increase in reported student motivation (Nichols & Nichols, 1999) in looping arrangements. Staying with students over time seems to have some research support and resonates with the fundamental importance of relationships in the counseling profession.

Developmentally, the stable presence of one individual amidst the changes of adolescence may be particularly valuable in middle and early high school given the number of changes that individuals experience during this developmental period. While managing puberty and the transition from middle to high school, many students might find it helpful to have a school counselor who has knowledge of their situation and can provide the necessary support.

However, research (e.g., Fitzpatrick & Irannejad, 2008; Zack, Castonguay, & Boswell, 2007) suggests that the counseling working alliance with adolescents may vary considerably on a variety of factors (e.g., readiness for change, interpersonal skills, use of exploration, focus on tasks or goals, resistance, gender matching). Further, Blair (1999) highlighted three factors in schools that significantly affect the development of the school counselor-client relationship and alliance: the influence of the school counselor or other significant adult (e.g., parent, teacher) over who becomes a client, intervention goals and desired outcomes, and intervention methods. While Blair mentioned consistency as one variable related to strong working alliances, longevity or time may be just one of many factors that impact working alliances for school counselors.

While the impact of school counseling assignments on school counselor-student relationships and on student development may provide a strong rationale for grade-level grouping or alphabetical assignment, the contemporary programmatic nature of comprehensive school counseling also might be influential. With more static school counselor assignments, professional school counselors appear to feel more competent at carrying out the tasks associated with their grade (for example, the transition to middle school in 6th grade, high school registration in 8th grade, or college/career placement in 12th grade). Additionally, sustained assignment at one grade level allows the counselor to design and continually evaluate and refine a variety of developmentally appropriate programs over time, including groups and classroom guidance (particularly with middle school teaching teams). With expertise in the particular developmental level of the students and the grade-level curriculum and requirements, counselors can arguably increase their efficiency if not their effectiveness in programming tasks.

Perhaps these should not be viewed as mutually exclusive assignments. Rather, professional school
CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL COUNSELORS

School counselor assignment also may be a relevant consideration for elementary school counselors and might be influenced by roles recommended by the ASCA National Model. If more than one school counselor works in an elementary school, assignment might be made by developmental or grade level (e.g., K–2, 3–5) for a programmatic focus, or by looping to enhance school counselor-student relationships, or with some sort of blend to maximize the advantages of each.

Assignment at the secondary level becomes increasingly complex in light of the increased number of school counselors and students in the school and the increased demand for individual student planning and responsive services (ASCA, 2005). This is accompanied by the increased need for school counselor involvement in the career and postgraduate planning phases. In addition, research recognizes the often increased school counselor involvement in administrative activities at the secondary level (Amatea & Clark, 2005). Despite this growing emphasis on paperwork and non-counseling duties, school counselors at this level are involved in more individual counseling and remediation in comparison with elementary school counselors (Amatea & Clark). Due to the demands placed on school counselors to assist both with registration and future planning at the secondary level, school counselor assignment becomes increasingly important in delivering these services in the most effective, efficient, and equitable manner possible.

The data from this research suggest that secondary school counselors are using grade-level and alphabetical assignment most frequently. Although ASCA does offer alternative strategies, they seem to be used much less frequently and may be less practical in traditional settings. For example, domain-specific assignment for school counselors with particular expertise assigned to help with career development or personal/social concerns was only mentioned by 4% in these data. It could be argued that development is too interrelated to be appropriately addressed by school counselors assigned to a single domain. Furthermore, the lack of specific caseload (individuals assigned to one counselor) may confuse students and school counselor responsibilities. Although some alternative assignments were reported by some participants in this study, particular or specific school cultures (e.g., magnet schools, year-round schools, or ninth-grade academies) seemed to relate to these less common assignments.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research might examine how different types of school counselor assignments impact measurable student outcomes, such as academic achievement, college attendance rates, or behavioral indicators (attendance, behavioral referrals). Further utility of school counselor assignment may be investigated most effectively through soliciting students’ (or parents’) views on how the experience of having different school counselors in different years compares to the experience of having the same school counselor across multiple years. Finally, other types of school counselor assignment should be modeled and studied. Some of the blended types of assignments revealed in these data—such as 9th-grade school counselors and 10th to 12th grade under an alphabet assignment—are worthy of study. School counselors also could be assigned according to the four aspects under the ASCA National Model delivery system: responsive services, classroom guidance, planning, and system support. Using this method of assignment, schools could hire school counselors specifically for these roles (e.g., school counselors with teaching experience for classroom guidance, school counselors with administrative expertise for planning or system support).

It seems necessary for each school and school counselor to thoughtfully examine the school counselor assignment currently in use and determine what advantages and challenges exist. Effectiveness, efficiency, and equity in services to students and families are important considerations that school counselors should evaluate. With these data in mind, professional school counselors can negotiate the optimal school counselor assignment in management agreements with administration.

References


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