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The "We" in Cyber Bullying: Response 1

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<u>"The We in Cyberbullying"</u>
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As former school counselors, we empathize with Ms. Sandoval as she deals with a large student-counselor ratio (700:1) and a seemingly nonstop parade of crises. While this case is complex, one thing is perfectly clear: no school counselor would be able to solve this issue alone. A systemic problem this large requires collaboration among a group of dedicated individuals led by a skillful team builder and visionary. We believe a school counselor skilled in consultation, collaboration, advocacy, and the implementation of a comprehensive school counseling program (CSCP) would be the ideal person to lead such an effort.

The biggest issue here is the widespread concern in the school and community about bullying and general school climate. While concerns about academic and career development are understandable, it stands to reason that students would have difficulty reaching their potential in these domains when social/emotional issues so frequently threaten their sense of safety at school. As such, our primary focus would be improving school climate to reduce the frequency of conflict and bullying among students. While there is no one-size-fits-all approach to issues like these, a multi-tiered response in the context of a well-designed CSCP (such as one based on the ASCA National Model [2012]) makes the most sense to us.

Preparing a Response

Like many school counselors, Ms. Sandoval is caught in the unenviable position of frequently responding to crises, rather than preventing them. And while the current situation feels overwhelming, it may provide the jumping-off point needed to design and implement a CSCP -- which would ultimately make her job feel more manageable. A first step would be for Ms. Sandoval to form an advisory team to guide the development of her CSCP, including how to best respond to larger issues of school climate. Advisory teams frequently consist of key school personnel such as teachers and administrators, but should also include stakeholders such as parents, community leaders, employers, and students. In this scenario, Ms. Sandoval is fortunate that a caring, concerned group of adults already exists, including parents, bus

drivers, an administrator who trusts and values the opinion of the counselor, and at least one teacher who understands that classroom climate impacts student learning. Ms. Sandoval may find that all she needs to do to secure cooperation from these people is ask. That said, if her initial efforts fall flat, she might look for incentives to get folks involved. A meal, snack, or coffee might be all that is needed to entice participation. Perhaps a community organization would offer a grant to fund this work and reimburse team members for their time. A nationally known speaker or film screening may pique the interest of concerned individuals.

Once Ms. Sandoval has secured cooperation from key stakeholders, the team's first task would be to gather data to identify areas for improvement, and to establish a baseline for measuring the effectiveness of their interventions. In this case, school data such as office referrals, attendance, and suspensions/expulsions would be very useful, but surveys and focus groups targeting students, parents, and other stakeholders would also be important in identifying needs and tracking perceptions of safety and climate. Based on these findings, the team could create specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, time-bound (SMART) goals for addressing the issues they uncovered, and then move to planning interventions.

Interventions

The complex issues in this scenario call for a multi-tiered response focused both on prevention and responsive services, and allowing Ms. Sandoval to operate both as consultant and counselor. At the highest level are school-wide interventions aimed at improving climate, such as comprehensive bullying prevention and intervention training for all students, staff, and school personnel to ensure a common understanding and response to this issue -- all in an effort to prevent major disruptions to school safety. Once there is a common language, definition, and procedures in place surrounding bullying and peer maltreatment, other comprehensive interventions can be implemented. One example to improve school climate would be implementation of a Restorative Justice approach to disruptive student behavior. Ms. Sandoval can take the lead to train and build capacity for this school to adopt the Restorative Justice framework to better prepare school personnel to handle conflict and work to focus on relationships as the

core element in the school. Another intervention at this level might be a community event on cyberbullying or online safety during which parents and families are given information and tools to keep an eye on their children's digital footprint in an effort to prevent minor issues from spiraling into major conflicts. Ms. Sandoval might also develop a series of preventative guidance lessons on topics such as cyber-safety, conflict resolution, and empathy education, that she could either teach herself or ask classroom teachers to deliver during advisory periods, homerooms, or other common times.

The next level of interventions would target high-risk groups of students (or families) in need of additional training and skill development. Possible interventions at this level include peer mediation or teacher facilitation of low-level conflict resolution (preferably through a standardized method such as Restorative Justice); counseling groups aimed at general skill-building in areas such as anger management; self-management, and building relationship skills through cultural awareness education.

The final tier of intervention in this scenario would include direct services provided by the school counselor, social worker, or other trained helping professional to students who are involved in major conflicts. Scheduling weekly sessions with the students most in need of direct services would serve to reinforce skill building and provide time to debrief specific examples of conflict in the students' lives. Incidents involving ongoing bullying or threats to safety would still be referred to school administration, but our hope would be that the steps above reduce the frequency of these issues while improving the overall feeling of safety among the student body -- ultimately leading to an increased emphasis on academic and career development.

References

American School Counselor Association (2012). *The ASCA National Model: A framework for school counseling programs* (3rd ed.). Alexandria, VA: Author.