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Brandie M. Oliver

Butler University, bmoliver@butler.edu

Susan Kleinman

Butler University, skleinma@butler.edu

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The School Counselor as the School's "Counselor"

by Dr. Brandie Oliver, Pres. of IN School Counselor Assoc./Asst. Prof. at Butler Univ. & Susan Kleinman, LMHCA

When a crisis impacts your school community, everyone is affected; not just the students, but the teachers, the staff, the parents and many other people in the community. As a school leader, you call upon the numerous educational experts within your building and from the community at large. But do you know your school counselor possesses both the knowledge and the skills to handle the psychological implications of a crisis affecting the school community? School counselors are trained to identify, intervene, consult, and refer when students, either individually or collectively, need help with mental health concerns and trauma associated with a crisis.

The school counselor is trained to attend to the psychological dimensions of the school experience. S/he is prepared to recognize and respond to student mental health crises and needs, and to address these barriers to student success by offering education, prevention, crisis, and short-term intervention until the student is connected with available community resources. The continuum of care is not limited to students, it also includes creating a healing community for everyone in the school building, including faculty and staff. Ask any school counselor and they will tell tales of times when faculty or staff, came into their office, closed the door and the school counselor became their "counselor".

The school counselor's training in psychological matters is especially valuable now, when mental health issues are omnipresent and on the rise. The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) estimates 20% of American adolescents have a diagnosable mental disorder, from attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder to autism or chronic behavioral issues. Perhaps 8 percent meet the criteria for major depression, according to NAMI.

Even more alarming is the fact that the mental health needs of students are unmet (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2008). Estimates are that between 70 and 80% of school-aged children with a diagnosed mental disorder do not receive treatment (Greenberg et al., 2003; Mendez, Carpenter, LaForett, & Cohen, 2009). School counselors are equipped to be on the front lines of the mental health needs within the school community. They are trained to assess for mental health issues among the students, provide counsel for these students, and connect those most in need to appropriate resources. And even more alarming is the reality that suicide is the third leading cause of death for youth between the ages of 10-24 (CDC, 2014). It pays to have someone in the building that is trained to recognize those students who are psychologically vulnerable. While we can't always foresee a crisis, we can at least be there to support and heal after the fact.

A school counselor has a conjoint professional identity that includes both the role of an educational leader and mental health professional. This positions the school counselor to identify and respond to all students, including those with mental health needs. Regardless of the kind of crisis, students, parents, faculty and staff are all deeply affected by the aftermath of the trauma. The school counselor is an integral member of the community and, as such in the best position to be sensitive to the needs of the individuals in the school community. We encourage you to utilize the skills and expertise of your school counselor, who is truly the "counselor" in your school community.

by Glenda Ritz, Superintendent of Public Instruction



Another great year has started in Indiana's schools, and I know you are focused on using Indiana's new College and Career Ready standards and preparing for our new ISTEP+ this spring. While the Department of Education is obviously providing support for schools, we are also focused on ensuring that they are fairly funded. That is why, last week I proposed a 3% funding increase for schools, as well as paying for textbooks and instructional materials at the state level. Additionally, we have requested increases in funding for technology and English Language Learners.

As a state, our chief priority is to ensure our future shared prosperity. No one factor is more important to that prosperity than ensuring that our educational system is equitable and of the highest quality. This investment will strengthen schools throughout Indiana, both rural and urban.

As Superintendent, I am requesting a sensible and modest increase in funding over current levels for each of the next two years. This increase will give our schools much needed flexibility in their budgets while they deal with increases in their fixed costs, such as transportation, utilities and technology. I look forward to working with members of the Legislature on this vital investment.

In addition, I am very concerned with the costs that parents pay associated with the education of their children. Our constitution provides for a general and uniform school system that is equally open to all. That is why we have requested funding for textbooks and instructional materials for all students. By funding these at the state level, we can guarantee that all districts have equitable resources for texts while also giving parents a much needed financial break.

