A DISTRICT POLICY FOR COUNSELLING SERVICES:
A PROCESS GUIDE*

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Abstract

This paper describes the process used to develop and the content of a guide for developing and implementing a district policy for school counselling service in British Columbia. Several unique features include: the composition and sponsorship of the committee, the process rather than prescriptive nature of the *Guide* itself, and its utility for a wide range of professionals involved in school counselling services.

Résumé

On trouve dans cet article une description du contenu et du processus d'élabo-ration d'un guide destiné à la mise au point et à l'implantation d'une politique régionale de services de counselling en milieu scolaire de la Colombie Britannique. Les points mis en relief concernent 1) la composition et le parrainage du comité, 2) le caractère évolutif plutôt que définitif du guide lui-même et 3) l'utilité du guide pour une grande variété de professionnel(les) impliqué(es) dans les services de coun-selling en milieu scolaire.

Guidance and counselling in the schools is at a crossroads in Canada. Bedal (1979), after interviewing provincial officials respon-sible for guidance services, concluded that school guidance priorities have changed considerably in recent years. In spite of this, none of the provinces has a formal process for establishing these priorities with the result that political and economic considerations too often determine directions. Moreover, Bedal found that only two provinces carry out a regular evaluation of guidance services.

Within this framework, it is understandable why many counsellors are dissatisfied with some of the roles they are asked to fill. In a survey of school counsellors in Canada, Brown (1980) found these inappropriate roles to cluster around administrative, clerical and teaching responsibilities unrelated to coun-selling. The same survey found school adminis-trators dissatisfied because counsellors did not place enough emphasis on consultation with family members and teachers of their clients or students. Administrators were also in

agreement with the Canadian School Trustees Association (1981) on a need for more emphasis on educational-vocational concerns in counselling services. While there is often dissatisfaction with present counsellor roles there is not always agreement on what roles counsellors should play and what constitutes an effective guidance program.

Research (Herr, 1979) does suggest that effective guidance programs can result in positive gains in students on such indices as self esteem, self concept, interpersonal relations, and mental health. Programs which focus on decision-making, career planning, school achievement, racial education, and juvenile delinquency among others have all been shown to have positive effects. However, the success of such programs is largely the result of systematic articulation of need, appropriate design, effective implementation, and evaluation of the resulting product in terms of student behavior (Collett, 1982). The present thrust toward comprehensive guidance programs with a focus on educational, vocational and personal social concerns of students is based on the conceptualization of guidance as development. However, guidance programs based on such a model are best articulated at the local rather than the provincial or national level, since priorities and needs often vary widely among communities.

This paper presents an example of how one such model was developed in British Columbia. The process involved in developing the model is discussed followed by an outline of the model itself and the implications of such an approach.

The British Columbia Example

In British Columbia, unlike many other provinces, there is no one in The Ministry of Education who is solely responsible for guidance services. In addition, the Public Schools Act contains no officially defined role for the position of school counsellor. Thus, leadership in counselling has been left to diverse groups such as the British Columbia School Counsellors Association, school districts, school administrators and the three public universities. As a result, there is no continuity of counselling services in the province. Moreover, each school district is left to determine the depth and nature of counselling services, often without clear guidelines. The problems of the counsellor serving as a quasi-administrator or being overwhelmed by a large case load are common. In addition, case loads often contain students who require counselling skills beyond the abilities of the large number of untrained counsellors (Allan, 1976).

Partly as a response to these and other concerns, the Ministry of Education in 1978 commissioned a task force on school counselling to advise on the kinds of counselling services which would normally be expected to be available in the secondary schools of the province. Chaired by a ministry official, and with membership from organizations such as police, business, labour, churches and various school personnel, the task force report (B.C. Ministry of Education, 1980) made a number of recommendations concerning the role, qualifications, and selection of school counsellors.

Because few initiatives resulted form the *Task Force Report* and the gap in provincial leadership in school counselling continued, a committee representative of the school counsellors' association, the principals and vice-principals' association and the provincial universities was initiated by the Counselling Psychology Department of the University of British Columbia. The committee established as its mandate to facilitate the implementation of the recommendations of the *Task Force Report* through the publication of a guide for local school district policy for counselling services.

The committee was guided in its deliberations by several important factors:

1. The committee was an ad hoc group whose members represented groups with a significant amount of power to influence the public school system. Moreover, the committee was not commissioned or financed by the Ministry of Education. Consequently, each representative had an investment in the success of the document and its potential usefulness to their particular group as well as a feeling of responsibility for the final product.

2. The document was written to be of most use to those groups and individuals who had the most power to influence school district policies on counselling and guidance. Thus, school trustees, school district superintendents, school principals, directors of special services and school counsellors were targeted in descending priority. The *Guide* (Action Committee on Counselling Services, 1983) can be understood and acted upon by any of these groups alone or in conjunction with the others.

3. The *Guide* was designed to be descriptive of a process to use in evaluating and constructing a counselling and guidance service based upon assessed needs; no attempt was made to prescribe a program that the committee thought best. In this way individual school districts or schools are left with the freedom to decide what is needed, desirable, and feasible given the unique factors operating in their specific situation. This was done to avoid a major pitfall of the *Task Force Report* of 1980.

4. The content of the *Guide* reflects what has been learned by the most recent techniques and programs in comprehensive needs based guidance systems (Collet, 1982). This allows the *Guide* to be concise, informative and relatively free of counselling jargon and other barriers to widespread use by educational decision makers.

Description of the Guide

In the *Guide*, eight important areas of counselling services are discussed: needs assessment, counselling services, designing and implementing programs, counsellor qualification and selection, referral and support services, information services, physical space and facilities, and evaluation of the counselling program. In this section of the paper, a flavor of each of the sections will be provided. It is well to bear in mind that the overall purpose of the *Guide* is to assist school districts to develop and implement policy on counselling services.

Needs Assessment

The *Guide* emphasizes the process of examining counselling programs in the light of the needs of constituents. The purpose of needs assessment is to enable a district or school to establish a hierarchy of priorities based on objective data. Needs assessment provides policy makers and counsellors with a solid foundation for clarifying goals and objectives and for identifying discrepancies between current student behaviors and student-centered objectives. It also permits policy makers to direct their attention to reducing or eliminating the discrepancies between stated goals and perceptions of services being offered. The eight steps proposed for the needs assessment process are: initial commitment of the parties concerned, the clarification of the direction and intent of needs assessment, a plan for the assessment itself, the collection and summary of the information, analysis of

the information and finally, reporting of the findings, reassessment of priorities, and subsequent planning of program improvement.

Counselling Services

One common problem that has plagued the development of policy for school counselling services has been the failure to identify and use desirable student outcomes as the basis for counselling policy and practice. Such outcomes are more useful to policy makers once they are framed within the delivery system. The *Guide* presents a framework from which individual districts can choose goals and services consistent with their needs and capacities. The goals and services depicted in the *Guide* are portrayed in a 7 x 6 matrix with student outcomes on one axis and counsellor delivery systems on the other. Seven aspects of student outcome are presented: self-knowledge, interpersonal relationships and communication, career development, educational planning, learning and study skills, human development and social awareness. The counsellor delivery systems include: individual counselling, group counselling, curricular offerings, referral, consultation and coordination, and providing information. Thus, the *Guide* was able to provide a matrix for counselling services with three or four suggested items for each of the 42 cells of the matrix. For example, for the student outcome area, *interpersonal relationships and communication*, one entry for the *curriculum* delivery system reads: "counsellor may teach communication skills, such as active listening, perception-checking, and paraphrasing to students" (p. 15). Another example in the student outcome area *career development*, an entry of the *consultation/coordination* delivery system reads: "counsellor, may consult with parents concerning a student's career options in the light of employment trends" (p. 16).

Designing and Implementing Programs

The Guide proposes that the impetus for designing and implementing new programs may come from either the school level or the district level. In either case, a working committee composed of all the groups involved in or affected by the design and implementation process is proposed. In those school districts in which no working committee of this kind is functioning, the components of the committees representing both the district level and the school level is proposed. In addition, the sequence of steps that the committee might

institute is detailed for both the instances when the new program has been based on a needs assessment and when it has not.

Counsellor Qualification and Selection

The issue of school counsellor qualifications has been unresolved in several Canadian jurisdictions. Among the components of the problem is that counsellors are oftentimes selected from the teaching staff of the school. At the time of selection, many have not been trained or have just begun training. The problem is then how to encourage training for a large complement of counsellors who, at least in British Columbia, are not required to have further training. Moreover, that training is not always readily available to them because of the unique geography of this province. Although several professional groups in British Columbia, including the British Columbia School Trustees Association and the British Columbia School Counsellors' Association, have adopted policies regarding the advanced training of counsellors, it remains contingent on individual districts to implement such policies. The primary focus of this section of the *Guide* then is to propose a procedure for the development of a district policy regarding counsellor qualifications. This policy is to be developed in light of the intended role for the counsellor in the district, the statements of counsellor qualification by the professional associations, availability of resources for improving qualifications, and the areas of district need as identified in the needs assessment. The development of the policy is undertaken by the district staff with full consultation of the district counsellors' association. Subsequently, this policy for training and selection of counsellors can be adopted by the school trustees.

Referral and Support Services

One premise developed in this *Guide*, and a premise that follows from the implication of basing a district policy on needs assessment, is that the district's needs have been identified. It is recognized that in a province as diverse as British Columbia not all of the school districts will be able to provide the same high level of service. It is in cases such as these that the need for well developed referral and support services is evident and required. Two aspects of referral and support systems are emphasized in the developing of district policy: first, that the full identification of all the referral and support services that are needed by

and available to a given district be fully available; and, second, that referral procedures, which are key to the use of a referral network, be adequately developed and clarified to the extent that in-service programs be provided for school personnel for the effective use of referral procedures. Included in this section of the *Guide* are suggestions regarding the use of paraprofessionals as adjuncts in counselling services.

Information Services

The systems that need to be organized for the efficient functioning of a counselling service at the secondary level are grouped as record systems, including academic records, educational and career planning data and attendance data; and resource systems, including post-secondary educational opportunities and materials, career education data, community resource listings and work experience information. In most instances, a provincially-based data file and a local data file are proposed, using online computer services and microcomputers. Appended to the *Guide* is a list of information and referral resources that can be used as starting points for establishing an extensive local data file.

Physical Space and Facilities

The *Guide* suggests parameters for the physical space and facilities that are required for the delivery of effective counselling services. Among the recommendations are individual counselling offices, conference room, secretarial space, as well as a list of equipment and supplies appropriate to the effective delivery of services. It is also suggested that secretarial and support staff be available to assist counsellors.

Evaluation of the Counselling Program

The evaluation of school counselling programs is discussed from the viewpoints of counsellor accountability and outcome evaluation.

One focus of evaluation can be directed toward the counsellor's activities, and called counsellor accountability. This type of evaluation can be accomplished through input-output analysis, in which the potential benefits of a program as well as its costs are projected. An annual comparison yields data to inform us whether it costs more or less to achieve the outcomes, where the greatest amount of

money was spent, and how expenditures related to stated priorities. Krumboltz's (1974) criteria for the effective use of an evaluation system are used: the domain of counsellor responsibility is defined, activities of the counsellor are stated as costs, not accomplishments, the accountability system is constructed to promote professional effectiveness and self-improvement, and the users of the systems must be represented in designing it. These criteria follow from the use of other sections of the *Guide*.

Outcome evaluation, which follows the development and implementation of a program, is designed to provide information on the overall effectiveness of the program to assist decision makers to determine the future course of the program. Outcome evaluation focuses on program accountability.

Both program accountability and counsellor accountability are ongoing evaluation components, and interact directly with counselling program activities and student outcomes. Furthermore, these accountability systems provide feedback to modify school district policy and the school counselling program objectives.

Implications

We have documented the procedure that was followed in formulating the *Guide* and described the resulting product so that our efforts might be of benefit to others. This process as well as the format of the resulting product contain some implications for those concerned with providing quality school counselling services.

First, those involved in school counselling should be encouraged by the fact that such a diverse committee was able to work together to provide a document such as the *Guide*. Sometimes, school counsellors tend to view school superintendents as opponents. Teachers frequently view school trustees or ministry representatives with suspicion and university personnel are often seen as somehow removed from reality. Our committee was composed of people representing school counsellors, school administrators, school superintendents, the provincial School Trustees Association, the Ministry of Education, and two provincial universities holding differing views regarding counsellor training. Not only were these groups able to work together, there was consensus that each representative group made a positive

contribution to the final document: i.e., the result occurred because of, not in spite of, the diverse composition of the committee. Undoubtedly, the unifying force was the commonly perceived need to improve counselling services and the common commitment to produce a useable document. It would appear that when diverse groups have a common purpose, such as the improvement of counselling services, it is possible to overcome differences and work together.

Second, initial feedback on the *Guide* indicates that one strength of the document is the focus on process rather than outcome. The committee was guided in its deliberations by the desire to outline a procedure to follow when attempting to improve counselling services. Further, we outlined procedures for picking and choosing the parts of the *Guide* that were most relevant for particular schools or districts. We deliberately avoided giving prescriptive sets of outcomes or ideal program components against which most counselling services would be found wanting. Our initial feedback indicates that when a process document is produced, people are favourably disposed to using it. In fact, when the *Guide* was distributed to constituent groups for comment, several districts reported that they had already begun to incorporate some of the suggestions.

Third, a major strength of the *Guide* lies in the emphasis on counsellor accountability that pervades the document. In these days of program cutbacks and increased emphasis on counsellor accountability, counsellors need more convincing data to validate their programs than number of students utilizing the service. The specific suggestions contained in the *Guide* are seen as positive suggestions for increasing counsellor accountability as well as increasing the quality of service offered.

Recently, there have been many attempts in Canada to make more explicit the roles and client expectations for counsellors. We have outlined an attempt in British Columbia to produce a set of specific, process oriented guidelines for improving school counselling services. If the initial feedback is a forecast of future reaction, the resulting guide should prove useful to all groups interested in offering quality school counselling services.

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