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Advocacy Competencies for Professional School Counselors

The American School Counselor Association National Model describes advocacy as a key role for professional school counselors, and numerous advocacy activities are presented in the model. Several authors have contributed to the literature on advocacy; however, the literature and the National Model do not delineate the dispositions, knowledge, and skills required for advocacy. The purpose of this article is to present and describe school counselor advocacy competencies recently introduced in a book by Brown and Trusty (2005).

Although advocacy has a long tradition in the counseling profession (Kiselica & Robinson, 2001), school counselors' roles as advocates have only recently received widespread attention (Baker & Gerler, 2004). For example, articles by Cooley (1998), Stone (2000), and Kuranz (2002) address the need for school counselor advocacy. In addition, Bailey, Getch, & Chen-Hayes (2003) and Osborne et al. (1998) focus on the need to teach advocacy skills in counselor education programs. Perhaps most notably, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2003) National Model devotes particular attention to advocacy. In this model, advocacy is one of the themes that underpin all of the activities in which school counselors engage.

According to ASCA, advocacy is a broad and multifaceted process. The ASCA National Model states, "Advocating for the academic success of every student is a key role of school counselors and places them as leaders in promoting school reform" (ASCA, 2003, p. 24). According to the National Model, school counselors' advocacy efforts are aimed at (a) eliminating barriers impeding students' development; (b) creating opportunities to learn for all students; (c) ensuring access to a quality school curriculum; (d) collaborating with others within and outside the school to help students meet their needs, and (e) promoting positive, systemic change in schools. Therefore, advocacy involves leadership, collaboration, and systemic change.

Advocacy also occurs on multiple levels. School

counselors often advocate for particular students and their families (e.g., Downing & Harrison, 1990; Trusty, 1996). Advocacy efforts frequently are aimed at helping particular groups of students (e.g., Cooley, 1998; Stone, 2000). School counselors advocate for better school counseling programs, better schools, and more effective community resources (House & Hayes, 2002; Kuranz, 2002). They also advocate for the school counseling profession and for social justice on local, state, regional, national, and international levels (e.g., Eriksen, 1997; Kiselica & Robinson, 2001).

The counseling literature attests to the broad conceptualization of advocacy. For example, in Eriksen's (1997) definition, generating research on the efficacy of counseling is advocacy. Myers, Sweeney, and White (2002) noted that promoting counselors' credibility in the public's eye is a salient advocacy task. Many of the multicultural counseling competencies (Sue, Arrendondo, & McDavis, 1992) involve advocacy, and advocacy is a main means for addressing discrimination (Brown, 1988; Ponterotto, 1991; Trusty, 2002).

The recent literature reveals the broad scope of advocacy, but it provides only minimal direction toward a coherent conceptualization (see Myers et al., 2002). Several authors (Bailey et al., 2003; Eriksen, 1997; Fiedler, 2000; House & Hayes, 2002; Kuranz, 2002) have provided definitions and descriptions of advocacy; and although authors vary in conceptualization, a common theme is that advocacy involves identifying unmet needs and taking actions to change the circumstances that contribute to the problem or inequity. Authors also agree that advocacy requires an altruistic disposition. The ASCA National Model (2003) provides much information about the goals of advocacy, but it provides little insight into the advocacy process and it takes only first steps in delineating the advocacy role.

Because advocacy cuts across multiple school counseling roles, occurs on multiple levels, and is conceptualized broadly, it is logical to conclude that everything school counselors do is advocacy. But if

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advocacy is inherent to everything that school counselors do, how can advocacy be adequately delineated and understood? How can it be differentiated from other school counseling roles? How are other school counseling roles complementary to advocacy? How can we—as school counselors, counselor-trainees, and counselor educators and supervisors—become more effective advocates?

The purpose of this article is to offer a structure for conceptualizing advocacy and for developing advocacy competencies. When advocacy is conceptualized and described in terms of school counselor competencies, the structure, purposes, and processes of advocacy are illuminated. In this article, advocacy competencies are first presented, followed by material on school counselors' development of advocacy competencies. The article closes with an advocacy model based on the competencies.

ADVOCACY COMPETENCIES

Fiedler (2000) enumerated advocacy competencies for special education professionals (e.g., special education teachers, school psychologists), categorizing competencies into the dispositions (personal qualities), knowledge, and skills needed for effective advocacy. This categorization of competencies is a commonly used structure in training various education professionals (see National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2002). Although some of the requisite dispositions, knowledge, and skills are shared by special educators and school counselors, some competencies are specific to the particular profession. In developing the following advocacy competencies for school counselors, we, the authors, used Fiedler's special-educator competencies as a guide. We relied on the literature on advocacy; and we drew from our personal experiences as school counselors, counselor educators, and advocates. Brown and Trusty (2005) published these competencies in their text on designing and leading school counseling programs, and the competencies are presented herein as they are presented in the text.

Advocacy Competencies for Professional School Counselors:

■ Dispositions:

■ *Advocacy disposition:* Professional school counselors with an advocacy disposition are aware of and embrace their professional advocacy roles. They are autonomous in their thinking and behavior. There is an altruistic motivation with the major concern being students' well-being. Advocates are willing to take risks in helping individual students and groups of students meet their needs.

■ *Family support/empowerment disposition:* Professional school counselors with a family support/empowerment disposition recognize that parents-guardians are often the best advocates for their children, and their empathy extends to parents. They join parents in advocacy for their children, and they empower families to adapt and grow.

■ *Social advocacy disposition:* Professional school counselors not only advocate for particular students and families, they also advocate to eliminate inequities and barriers affecting all people. They advocate for their profession on behalf of their students-clients, others' students-clients, and non-clients.

■ *Ethical disposition:* Professional school counselors with an ethical disposition place high value on professional codes of ethics. They recognize that many advocacy dilemmas will occur, and that analysis of ethical principles and laws is necessary for effective problem solving. Counselors with an ethical disposition possess a personal ethic of caring.

■ Knowledge:

■ *Knowledge of resources:* Resources reside both within and outside the school, and they exist in various forms (e.g., people, programs, institutions, agencies, and community groups). Professional school counselors have knowledge of a wide range of resources that can be used in the advocacy process.

■ *Knowledge of parameters:* Professional school counselors are knowledgeable of (a) school policies and procedures, (b) the legal rights of individuals and families, and (c) the scope of their practice. This knowledge helps school counselors assess problems and solve problems.

■ *Knowledge of dispute resolution mechanisms:* Advocacy often involves disagreements and conflicts. Professional school counselors have knowledge of mediation and conflict resolution strategies for working toward successful resolution of disputes. Mediation and conflict resolution are often empowering ways to solve problems.

■ *Knowledge of advocacy models:* Advocacy models give direction and focus to professional school counselors' advocacy efforts. Knowledge of various models gives counselors flexibility to various advocacy situations.

■ *Knowledge of systems change:* Professional school counselors use a systems perspective to understand the systems and subsystems inherent in schools and society. School coun-

sors form partnerships across subsystems (e.g., parents, students, school staff or administrators, other professionals, community groups) in working for positive change.

■ **Skills:**

■ *Communication skills:* Professional school counselors' communication skills serve them well in the role of advocate. Listening skills and empathy skills help counselors understand and assess problems. Effectively communicating problems and possible solutions to others is a necessary skill in the advocacy process.

■ *Collaboration skills:* Strong relationships are a necessary condition for advocacy. Professional school counselors form and maintain positive relationships with professionals and parents. Relationships with administrators require special attention because advocacy efforts often put administrators and school counselors on opposite sides of issues. Openness to others' ideas and sensitivity to others' perspectives promote positive relationships.

■ *Problem-assessment skills:* Professional school counselors use skill in assessing and defining problems and in "choosing their battles." The salience of students' needs and the possibility of successfully meeting their needs through advocacy are factors that determine choices and actions.

■ *Problem-solving skills:* Professional school counselors use their communication skills and collaboration skills to build relationships and empower others. They demonstrate problem-solving skills by effectively bringing resources to bear on problems. Counselors use counseling theories and models as frameworks for decisions, goals, and actions. Many of the problem-solving models employed in counseling are useful in the advocacy process.

■ *Organizational skills:* Effective advocacy requires careful and detailed planning, gathering of information, collection and presentation of data, organized action, and follow-up. Professional school counselors are systematic in managing the advocacy process.

■ *Self-care skills:* Engaging in advocacy often involves taking risks, and advocacy efforts are not always successful. Sometimes, a high degree of energy is expended in an unsuccessful advocacy attempt. Professional school counselors develop coping skills to avoid burnout.

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Developing Advocacy Dispositions

Of the three areas of advocacy competencies, advocacy dispositions are the least mutable. That is, dispositions are most closely connected to school counselors' selves and to their beliefs and values; and these are not readily subject to change. Advocacy dispositions, however, are necessary for advocacy skills to develop. If school counselors do not have advocacy dispositions, it will not be possible to develop skills. Inversely, if school counselors do possess advocacy dispositions, it is very likely that skills will follow. Several authors (e.g., Bailey et al., 2003; Baker & Gerler, 2004; Gysbers & Henderson, 2000) maintain that effective schools and effective school counseling programs require dispositions toward advocacy. Advocacy dispositions are fundamental to multicultural counseling (Baker & Gerler, 2004; Sue et al., 1992; Trusty, 2002), and advocacy dispositions are axiomatic to the *new vision* of school counseling (ASCA, 2003; House & Hayes, 2002).

An important component of advocacy dispositions is autonomy. Fiedler (2000) noted that people new to the education professions are naturally more conforming than they are autonomous. New employees in any setting will naturally be more obedient than independent. When new professionals, however, possess advocacy dispositions, self-confidence and autonomy can be developed. Autonomy must be balanced with relationships because collaborative relationships with other professionals are necessary to the success of advocacy efforts (ASCA, 2003; House & Hayes, 2002). For example, school counselors often advocate for students who lose opportunities because they are "caught" by school rules and procedures, and counselors often advocate for students in these situations by working for flexibility from school principals. If a counselor's autonomy has eroded the relationship between the counselor and the principal, it is likely that the counselor's advocacy efforts will not be successful.

Developing autonomy does depend on school counselors' environments. Some schools maintain a culture of autonomy, whereas others maintain a culture of conformity. These school cultures are pervasive in inculcating their values. In a culture of conformity, for example, the norms, values, and expectations of conformity are imposed on students, teachers, counselors, administrators, staff, parents, and the community. In contrast, a culture of autonomy, or an advocacy culture, is a more democratic environment that values individual expression and change. A school culture of autonomy is more focused on the needs of learners than on the needs of the professionals in the school.

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Developing Advocacy Knowledge

To be effective advocates, school counselors need to develop knowledge of their particular settings. School counselors should be familiar with local referral resources, other groups that provide services for students and families, and people whose responsibilities have commonality with school counselors' responsibilities. Allies in the advocacy process may be other professionals, community members, parents, or students. Additionally, regional, state, and national resources (e.g., ASCA, Chi Sigma Iota) may be useful in advocacy efforts. Knowledge of the following basic parameters are required for effective advocacy: (a) school policies and procedures; (b) local and state political and school-governance structures; (c) special education laws (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA) and procedures (e.g., Individualized Education Plan processes); (d) Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the functions of local-school 504 committees; (e) Child Protective Services or Youth and Family Services laws and procedures; (f) particular state family codes (laws regarding families and children); and (g) student assistance program and child study team processes and procedures (Brown & Trusty, 2005).

Dispute resolution mechanisms typically come in the forms of mediation and conflict resolution, and counselors' knowledge of these techniques can aid in the advocacy process. Mediation is a nonadversarial, confidential process used to resolve disputes (Fiedler, 2000; Leviton & Greenstone, 1997). A mediator is an impartial, third party who is not initially involved in the dispute. School counselors—as advocates—are not impartial third parties in disputes, and therefore they are not appropriate mediators in most situations. However, counselors may use resource people outside the school for mediating disputes. Current IDEA amendments specify that mediation be available for resolving special education disputes. School counselors should have familiarity with conflict resolution strategies because these dispute resolution mechanisms have wide applicability in schools (see Sweeney & Carruthers, 1996). Change often involves conflict; and therefore, conflict resolution strategies are especially applicable to advocacy.

Advocacy models provide frameworks for advocacy processes. Advocacy models are not frequently taught in counselor-training programs, and they are not often found in school counseling journals or books. The models of Eriksen (1997), Fiedler (2000), and Svec (1987, 1990) lay out stages or steps in the advocacy process. Also, an advocacy model is presented subsequently in this article. It is useful for school counselors to be familiar with multiple advocacy models because particular models

were formulated for particular advocacy contexts.

Advocacy often involves changing school systems or other systems (House & Hayes, 2002; Kiselica & Robinson, 2001). There are many subsystems within schools (e.g., students, teachers, departments, administrators), and schools function in larger systems (e.g., communities, school districts, state departments of education). According to VanZant and Hayslip (2001), understanding systems theory helps school counselors conceptualize how systems become dysfunctional, how they remain dysfunctional, and how they can be changed. Rowley, Sink, and MacDonald (2002) described the use of systems theory in school counseling program development, and Keys and Lockhart (1999) demonstrated how school counselors can use systems theory to foster collaborations for stimulating systemic change. An understanding of systems theory also helps advocates approach advocacy problems in numerous ways.

The following is an example of how knowledge can serve school counselors in their advocacy efforts: The first author of this article was a new high school counselor in a rural school district. There were no mental health counselors in the immediate area; and therefore, students who needed mental health services either received services from school counselors in the district or were driven over 20 miles to another county to see a mental health counselor. The two elementary counselors in the school district had intimate knowledge of the political system in the county, and this knowledge led to a detailed advocacy plan. All the school counselors in the district spoke before the County Board of Supervisors, presenting objective data and demonstrating the need for mental health services in the community. Through this and other well-planned efforts, a mental health counselor was hired by the county and an office was provided. This successful advocacy effort required not only advocacy dispositions and knowledge, it also required skills in areas such as communication, collaboration, problem assessment, problem solving, and organization.

Developing Advocacy Skills

Professional school counselors' communication skills are relied upon heavily in their advocacy endeavors (Brown, 1988). Empathy helps counselors understand students' needs from students' perspectives, and it helps in building trusting relationships with students and families. Trusty (1996) maintained that school counselors' empathic understanding and positive relationships with students are necessary for effective advocacy. Empathic understanding and communication skills also promote assertive behavior.

In advocacy, assertive, objective communication

often is needed, especially when disagreements arise (Fiedler, 2000). Disagreements often become emotionally charged and personalized, deteriorating into anger and resentment, and thrusting the disputing parties into defensive positions. When disagreements begin to arise, objective communication keeps the focus on facts and concrete information; and it helps maintain a professional level of communication.

Communication skills are useful in presenting to groups and engaging in the public relations aspects of advocacy (Eriksen, 1997). For school counselors to advocate for their profession and for their students, they will need skills in oral and written communication to educate or persuade various publics. As noted in the aforementioned example of advocacy, delivering persuasive arguments to the County Board of Supervisors helped in providing local mental health services for students. Advocates may need to deliver persuasive oral presentations to central office personnel, school committees, school boards, parents, community groups, or political decision-makers.

Collaborative relationships are developed largely through effective communication, and collaboration skills and communication skills are closely related. Developing and maintaining positive relationships with school administrators is paramount. School counselors and principals should come to a mutual understanding regarding school counselors' advocacy roles. However, trust is not an easily attained quality in relationships; and it is wise for counselors to be cautious, especially with regard to confidentiality issues. Counselors should take steps to ensure that all collaborators behave ethically and professionally. Advocacy must be balanced with diplomacy and relationships because if collaborative relationships suffer due to advocacy, then advocacy is less likely to be successful in the future (see Brown, 1988; Brown & Trusty, 2005; Kiselica & Robinson, 2001). Advocacy does involve risks, and collaborative relationships may be at risk when one is advocating for change.

Among all the skills needed for advocacy competence, problem-assessment skills are the most specific to advocacy. Problem assessment is one of the first steps in advocacy models (see Eriksen, 1997; Fiedler, 2000; Svec, 1987, 1990). According to Eriksen, advocacy problems are assessed and advocacy actions are taken based on two major criteria: (a) the reason for advocacy is compelling, and (b) it is likely that a viable solution can be attained. Trusty (1996) maintained that when advocating for individual students and groups of students, one should identify problem etiology as the first step in problem assessment. That is, the counselor determines the extent to which the problem arises from the student or students, the family, the school, or the students' environments, or

from the interactions among environments, student-family characteristics, and school characteristics. In assessing problem etiology, school counselors should have a deep understanding of students' and families' worldviews and environments because the appropriateness of many school policies and practices depends on students' and families' worldviews, environments, and associated values. There is a natural tendency for education professionals to attribute problem etiology to students and families; and likewise, students and families tend to attribute problem etiology to schools. It is often unrealized that the actual problem etiology lies in the interactions (the lack of fit) among environments, students-families, and schools.

Objective data are required for objective problem assessment and problem definition (Fiedler, 2000). For example, consider the following two statements related to an advocacy problem in a middle school: (a) "We need to establish more extracurricular activities that are attractive to students from African American and Latino groups"; or (b) "Whereas the average number of hours of participation per week in extracurricular activities is 3.75 hours for White students, the averages for African American and Latino students are 1.25 and 1.10 hours per week, respectively." Clearly, the second statement makes a stronger and more objective argument, and it implies a more objective and measurable goal.

After advocacy problems are assessed and clearly defined, the focus should turn toward problem solving. Problem-solving skills are used in developing detailed action plans. School counselors who are skilled in taking divergent perspectives on problems and solutions are effective action planners and problem solvers. Knowledge of systemic change is useful in developing action-planning skill. Various problem-solving strategies employed in counseling can be applied to problem solving in advocacy, and these counseling strategies have the advantage of an empowerment focus. Davis and Osborn (2000), for example, applied solution-focused strategies to working toward solution-focused schools that concentrate on strengths, solutions, and change, rather than on difficulties from the past. These schools would have a culture of advocacy.

For advocacy to be successful, school counselors need organizational skills for (a) collecting, analyzing, and presenting data; (b) planning and organizing actions on multiple fronts; and (c) managing the advocacy process. One salient organizational skill involves identifying and coordinating resources for particular advocacy endeavors. People within and outside the school may be advocacy allies, change initiators, or change agents. Also, there will be those who passively or actively resist change. When school counselors are skilled in identifying adversaries and

Retrospective interviews of effective advocates would likely shed light on how school counselors' advocacy dispositions interact with and develop in school environments.

resources, mobilizing resources, and managing communication among those involved, the advocacy process unfolds in a systematic and organized manner.

All advocacy efforts are not successful, and therefore, self-care skills are needed. A counselor might invest considerable time and energy into an advocacy effort, only to fail in producing change. Baker and Gerler (2004) and Kiselica and Robinson (2001) noted cases of counselor burnout resulting from advocacy. Burnout is one of the risks associated with advocacy; however, administrator and supervisor support can lessen the likelihood of burnout.

Counselors need to develop their personal coping skills. When school counselors possess advocacy dispositions, there is a natural tendency to personalize advocacy efforts. Fiedler (2000) stressed the cognitive coping skill of reframing. Through reframing, we counselors help our students and others avoid personalizing or internalizing the difficulties they encounter. Likewise, reframing can help us view our own experiences more rationally and selectively. For example, a particular “unsuccessful” advocacy effort might be perceived as (a) a personal failure, (b) the result of inadequate planning, (c) a valiant best effort, (d) a growth experience, or (e) a successful start toward change.

Behavioral coping skills also should be developed. All those involved in the advocacy process (e.g., students, parents-guardians, school counselors) should mutually support one another. Personal behavioral coping skills might involve engaging in hobbies and pastimes, sports and physical exercise, or other enjoyable activities. When counselors balance their advocacy efforts with their own personal needs, they can avoid burnout and maintain an effective advocacy role.

A Model of the Advocacy Process for Professional School Counselors

Brown and Trusty (2005) derived several useful practice guidelines from the advocacy competencies. We now present a step-by-step model of the advocacy process based on those guidelines and based on the competencies. The following tenets and strategies are integral components in one or more other advocacy models (Eriksen, 1997; Fiedler, 2000; Svec, 1987, 1990), and most are supported by other literature on advocacy (e.g., Bailey et al., 2003; House & Hayes, 2002; Kuranz, 2002).

1. *Develop advocacy dispositions.* Develop and clarify professional identity around advocacy dispositions. Having advocacy dispositions is motivating to the advocacy process, and advocacy dispositions help in making decisions of an ethical-legal nature.

2. *Develop advocacy relationships and advocacy knowledge.* Build collaborative relationships with decision-makers and potential advocacy resource people and groups. Acquire knowledge of parameters, and gain an understanding of relevant systems within and outside the school.
3. *Define the advocacy problem.* Gather data and other information to understand and objectively assess and define the advocacy problem and to aid advocacy efforts. Determine problem etiology and understand the problem in the context of systems.
4. *Develop action plans.* Clear and specific plans of action should effectively utilize resources and anticipate difficulties. Be flexible unless an important moral principle is at stake.
5. *Implement action plans.* Use problem-solving skills, communication skills, collaboration skills, dispute resolution mechanisms, and advocacy models for producing change. Monitor, organize, and manage advocacy efforts on various fronts. Ensure that agreed-upon changes are implemented. Promote and support collaborators and others as changes unfold and as setbacks occur.
6. *Make an evaluation.* Evaluate the effectiveness of advocacy efforts by following up on changes and determining if needs are met. The problem assessment and problem definition should specify or imply appropriate evaluation criteria.
7. *Celebrate or regroup.* If advocacy efforts are successful, recognize and reward contributions to success and empower all involved (including students and families) to become advocates for themselves and others. If goals were not reached, regroup and focus on support and coping.

CONCLUSION

There is wide agreement that advocacy is a necessary role for professional school counselors. Although the advocacy role has been touted extensively in the literature, there has been little analysis of the personal qualities or expertise needed for advocacy. We have presented the dispositions, knowledge, and skills needed for effective advocacy. These competencies provide direction to the development of advocates, and they illuminate the process of advocacy. We hope that the advocacy competencies and the model of the advocacy process presented herein are practically useful for school counselors and counselor-trainees. Further, we hope that the advocacy competencies and the model can be useful as a basis for expanding knowledge of advocacy.

It seems that qualitative studies (e.g., case studies) could add to the profession’s knowledge of how school counselors develop advocacy competencies in

particular environments. For example, retrospective interviews of effective advocates would likely shed light on how school counselors' advocacy dispositions interact with and develop in school environments. Quantitative studies could be used to determine levels of competence and investigate the relationships among advocacy dispositions, knowledge, skills, and other variables. Qualitative and quantitative program evaluation data could be used to refine advocacy practices and advocacy models. Much of the profession's knowledge regarding advocacy is propositional in nature. In the authors' estimation, there is a dire need for data-based studies and evaluations to shape our knowledge of school counselor advocacy. ■

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