

Director- Level Leadership

The move from a school counselor at the building level to a district school counseling director requires a new outlook and focus. Learn to identify what's most important and what makes the greatest impact.

BY MARCY MILLER-KNEALE





Leadership, advocacy, collaboration and systemic change provide a framework for school counselors, but these four tenants also help to guide the role of the school counseling district directors as they support the school counselors.

Generally, when school counselors move into the role of a school counseling district director, the training may be limited. However, district directors need to recognize the important contributions their school counseling training has provided them as they continue working toward equitable outcomes for all students in this new role. District directors have an impact on student achievement through the work they do to support school staff, the advocacy they provide to change district policies and practices, their ability to form strategic partnerships to support students and school counselors and their ability to bring about systemic change through their work.

However, the move from serving 300 students to 200,000 requires a different perspective to be able to support the work, sustain the challenges and ultimately accomplish your goals.

Identify What's Important

District leaders align resources around the most important initiatives. As a district leader, your time is incredibly valuable. How you spend it

sends a clear message to your colleagues, the community and those you support about your values. District leaders need to reflect on the needs of the system, the students and the school counseling professionals and allocate their available time accordingly.

As a district director, undoubtedly, there will be some commitments you will be expected to take on to support the school system. Beyond that, your annual goals as well as the district's mission and vision should guide decisions around how you allocate your time and your budget. District school counseling leaders are often double- or triple-booked with meetings and committee participation. How would you, for example, handle a principal request to present information about the district's bullying prevention program at a parent meeting when, at the same time, you're scheduled to meet with a community partner offering to provide scholarships to college-bound seniors? The wide lens you had as a school

counselor and ability to navigate through systems to support students will certainly serve you well as a district director, but it can also be your Achilles heel unless you are able to effectively prioritize and learn which requests you can and should say no to. District directors must be careful to strategically lead as opposed to taking on so much work they can no longer see in what direction the work is heading.

Prioritizing as a district leader is not without challenges. Rarely do you have a partner doing the same work at the district office to help inform your decisions, and many school communities are full of special interest groups or projects that can quickly take your time away from the work you need to do to support schools. New district leaders should seek out mentors to support them in learning the specific considerations of prioritizing in their districts. When thinking about the items on your to-do list, consider the following questions:

- Is this work part of federal, state or local requirements?

- How does this work fit into the goals, mission and vision of our programs? Is there a strong connection between the work and the goals or a weaker one?
- What is the impact on staff and students if I am unable to do this work? Does that impact relate to the overall goals of our district?
- Do I have the resources necessary to complete this work? If not, will I be able to secure the necessary human and capital resources to complete the work?
- Is the timeline reasonable for completing this work? Can I work with my supervisor if it is not?

Understand Your Impact

Ideally, each day school counselors get to experience the positive outcomes of their work with students, families and teachers. Watching students grow, learn, overcome challenges and reach goals gives us a sense of purpose and meaning in the work we do to serve them. The high fives, hugs and heartfelt thank-you notes can

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District Director Collaboration

District directors are invited to participate in a series of monthly webinar meetings designed to help district directors collaborate and share resources. These meetings are available to all district directors at no charge and will be held on the third Tuesday of each month at 4 p.m. Eastern (1 p.m. Pacific) beginning in the fall.

Meeting Topics: District directors will facilitate each meeting on timely topics for district leadership. Participants have the opportunity

to share their own experiences or ask questions about the meeting topic.

Registration: District directors will receive an e-mail with registration information. Be sure to choose **Central/School District Office** for your work setting in your ASCA membership to ensure you receive the e-mail. You only need to register once, and you will be automatically registered for all meetings.

become a distant memory at the district office. Suddenly, getting 100 percent of students to graduate on time takes on a whole new meaning when you have to worry about 12,000 of them as opposed to a few hundred of them.

Just as school counselors use data to determine their impact on students, district leaders also examine data to see their impact on school counseling programs and the students they serve. District school counseling leaders consider the specific needs and goals of the school counseling division when setting goals for their work. In addition to considering the needs of students, district leaders translate those needs into the training, resource and policy needs for the district. For example, the division may have a goal focused on closing achievement gaps. District leaders must determine the needed professional development, resources and policy changes to address the division goal. As a district leader, it is important to consider the process, perception and outcome data you will collect to understand the impact of your programs and services on students and the school counselors that you support. To help you in identifying meaningful metrics for your work, consider the following:

How will I know if school counselors have the resources, knowledge and skills to address the needs of our students in relationship to our division and school strategic goals?

How will I know if the resources and professional development school counselors are accessing are meeting their needs?

How will I know if school counseling

programs are having an impact on student achievement, discipline and attendance?

How will I know the impact of policies, program and practices on students and schools?

Success at a district level looks and feels vastly different than success in a school. The wins are fewer and farther between, and often, you will not see the individual impact of your work on a student. However, there is great joy to be found in the success at the district office. Securing funding to expand school counseling positions to make sure students have the supports they need to be successful, changing a district policy that disadvantages certain students or finding a business partner to fund a college trip for all students in your district represent systemic change and are victories you should celebrate. Although it may take you much longer to check something off the to-do list as a district leader than it did when you were a school counselor, when you do get to check something off, it's a big deal.

Find Partners

Partnerships play a critical role in mobilizing district initiatives. Building-level school counselors rely on school staff, parents and community partners to secure the resources and support necessary to implement comprehensive school counseling programs. As a district leader, you will form similar partnerships to secure resources and supports for schools to serve students. Strategic partnerships can assist you in navigating the national, state and local politics and initiatives and



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allow you to share responsibility of the important work affecting schools and students. For example, you may partner with principals to support the hiring and retention of highly effective school counselors. Or you may work with the district human resources department to develop an evaluation system that accurately captures the expectations for school counselors and that serves as a tool for professional growth and development. Or partner with local colleges and universities to provide opportunities for school counselors to learn more about how college admissions decisions are made so they might better advise their students. District leaders are far more likely to meet their goals if they can collaborate with others who have similar goals, including other school counseling district leaders. When considering partnerships ask yourself:

- Which organizations or individuals have similar goals to the district’s school counseling programs?
- What organizations or individuals

already partner with our school system or individual schools?

- Are there other district school counseling leaders I can connect with either through the ASCA SCENE, the association’s online professional network, or in my region to support each other’s work?
- How might a partnership with a particular group or individual be mutually beneficial?
- What would the goals of this particular partnership include?

Remain Connected

School counselors who transition from leaders within their buildings to district school counseling leaders will need to find ways to remain connected to the work to ensure the services and supports they provide to schools are timely, meaningful and relevant. District leaders can take part in regular check-in meetings with school teams, site visits, new school counselor orientation programs or serve

as a member of school advisory councils to understand the various and current needs throughout the system. District leaders may also want to develop an advisory council with school and community stakeholders. Finally, district school counseling directors can use needs assessments with the schools they support to ensure they are addressing the ongoing needs of the school counseling programs.

The role of a district school counseling leader is full of challenges but also full of rewards. Setting reasonable goals, measuring your progress, prioritizing your work, finding partners and staying connected to the work of schools will support you in effectively managing the work.

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