

A young woman with red hair tied back in a ponytail is shown in profile, looking down and to the right with a thoughtful expression. She is wearing a black watch with a white face and a black strap on her left wrist. She is holding a blue folder or book against her chest. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with green grass and a light-colored wall.

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Guiding Every Student:

The Challenge of School Counseling

By Catherine Paglin

At a former job, school counselor Sho Shigeoka didn't do as much counseling and guidance as she would have liked. But she did plenty of supervising. "I was on bus duty, I was on hall duty, I was on lunch duty, I was on recess duty—every single day," she says. Not only were these duties—which took up three hours daily—not the best use of her skills and training, but they cast her in a role at odds with what she wanted to be doing. "Most of the time when you're on duty you can't counsel the student. You have to say, 'Knock it off, don't do that.' You become a disciplinarian, so it was a huge conflict," she says.

Shigeoka is not alone in her experience. Scheduling, test coordination, emergency classroom coverage, and other non-counseling responsibilities fall with some frequency to school counselors. "They have sometimes received assignments that don't allow them to put their best efforts into the school counseling program," says June Tremain, Guidance and Counseling Specialist with the Oregon Department of Education.

So what is a best effort where school counseling is concerned? Certainly not hours spent monitoring lunchroom behavior. But is it constant crisis management? Is it wall-to-wall, one-on-one, therapeutic appointments with troubled youths?

State and national school counseling experts say no. "There's been a big shift in the concept of what school counseling is," says Tremain. "A program for every student rather than a service for some," is how Oregon's Comprehensive Guidance and Counseling Framework (see page 9) defines the state's new vision for counseling programs in its schools and districts. "We're saying counseling and guidance is a systemic program. It's planned, it's proactive, it's preventative," says Tremain.

Ideally, today's school counselor is an essential player in the school's central mission of academic success for all. In her present job, and with the support of her principal, Shigeoka embodies this focus. As a counselor at Beaverton's Westview High School, she spends her time in a wide variety of activities: delivering a guidance curriculum in classrooms and workshops, helping students plan career paths, responding to needs and problems that interfere with learning, coordinating programs, advocating for all students to have access to

opportunities, analyzing student data, collaborating and consulting with teachers and other staff members.

AN EARLY START

"If you want to make a difference for kids, you want to get to them early and you want to get to everyone," says Elizabeth Nahl, child development specialist at Orenco Elementary in Washington County's Hillsboro School District. (School counselors are licensed by Oregon's Teacher Standards and Practices Commission, while child development specialists (CDS) are certified through the Oregon Department of Education.)

Nahl does get to every student at Orenco School early—with a guidance curriculum. For the first half of the year she visits all 21 classrooms in this K-6 building, once a week for 30 minutes. She begins by teaching the school rules: be safe, be respectful, be responsible. Along with these she teaches Kelso's Wheel, a tool that gives kids nine conflict management choices, and helps them distinguish between a small problem they can probably solve by trying a couple of the choices, or a big problem that requires adult intervention. On the playground and in the classroom, other staff members reinforce this approach. Topics such as friendship, organization skills, bullying, and personal safety round out the guidance curriculum.

Starting in third grade, the first year of state benchmark testing, Nahl links some of her curriculum content to the teaching of test-taking strategies. On a recent afternoon she's in a fourth-grade classroom giving students a practice test on the school rules, big versus small problems, and Kelso's choices. The real test, she tells them, will be the following week. The students are full of questions: Does spelling count? Is it OK to skip a question and then go back? Will this be on our report card? And Nahl has questions for them: What should you do if you get stuck? When should you guess?

The exercise quickly becomes an object lesson in the danger of ignoring directions. Nahl clearly specifies which part of the two-part test the students are to take first. Yet no sooner have they lifted their pencils than she has to bring the test to a halt. Five students started on the wrong side of the test paper. "Can you imagine if I hadn't said anything? Thirty minutes later—oops, you took the wrong test!" says Nahl to the class.



Photo: Catherine Peglin

Counselor Linda Eby meets with Latino Club to assist with planning the year's activities.

After a study break, Nahl gives instructions for the second half of the test. "Are you going to make noise?" asks a girl eagerly. "Do you want to play the concentration game?" Nahl asks the class. "Yeah!" the students chorus.

As students get to work Nahl circulates around the room doing her best to distract them. She tugs at their test papers; she pipes in a high-pitched voice "Help, help. I don't know the answer"; she detaches a yellow, smiley-face balloon from the teacher's desk and bounces it noisily near students' faces. If students can stay focused they win the game; if they talk or laugh or stop working, they lose.

After the practice test Nahl reminds the students that in a real testing situation a student might be yelling by the classroom door and they should be able to ignore the interruption. "One of the keys is not to look up. Don't look at the distraction. Focus your eyes where you want your mind to be," she advises.

Leaving them with study tips—practice 10 minutes every night—Nahl moves on to the next classroom.

For some students the guidance curriculum is not enough. Nahl works with teachers to identify children at risk of academic, social, emotional, or behavioral difficulties, so that she can offer them additional support, often in the form of small-group counseling. Fourth-grade teacher Janice Lusk cites several reasons she might refer students to Nahl: not making friends in the classroom, being frequently angry or upset, striving for perfection and not understanding that it's OK to make mistakes, or having difficulty cooperating with others on class work.

"I can't imagine what it would be like if she weren't here," says Lusk of Nahl. "It's very hard to get to small groups of children when you have 30. You can ask them to stay at recess, but it's not the same. It does take that small group or individual intervention for many kids to be successful, and that's exactly what she's so good at doing."

FEELING THE SQUEEZE

Across Oregon, pressure to close the achievement gap is increasing, while district budgets are shrinking. School counseling has borne a disproportionate share of cuts. Over the last 12 years, while student enrollment increased by 8.1 percent, the number of counselors dropped by 15 percent, according to the Oregon Department of Education's 2003-2004 annual report. As a staffing category, only librarians suffered a greater decline over the same time period.

"There are situations across the state where counselors are hearing their jobs won't be renewed. It's frustrating to think people think that's an expendable position," says Miriam Hoelter, president of the Oregon School Counselor Association (OSCA).

These staff cuts put extra pressure and sometimes bigger caseloads on the counselors who remain. In the 2003-2004 school year, the state had 1,114 counselors and more than 551,000 students, or almost 500 students per counselor.

"A counselor's job is to support their students and staff, and if their students and staff have less they're going to need more support," sums up Nahl. She cites three examples:

- As special programs like music and PE are cut, some students find fewer reasons to like school. The counselor must support these students and the remaining teachers, who are striving to maintain the students' involvement.
- As class sizes increase, some students have more academic and social difficulties. They may get into fights or become distracted from schoolwork. The counselor must support teachers and students in this more frustrating environment.
- In times of budget cuts, layoffs, and uncertainty, the counselor is often the one other educators in the building look to for moral support.

Another source of pressure is the socio-economic conditions that set the stage for academic struggles: poverty, lack of health care, language barriers, alcohol and drug use including methamphetamine, abuse, and family instability. For help with these problems, counselors must look longer, harder, and in more places for outside resources that, like school budgets, are shrinking as the needs grow.

"The sad thing is we've lost a lot in the last three years," says counselor Brian Baker, OSCA Elementary School Counselor of the Year, referring to cuts in county-level social services. For instance, there's no way Baker can counsel all the kids who need individual therapy at Gresham-Barlow District's Highland Elementary. Instead, he helps parents choose outside counselors who meet the student's needs and fit the family's insurance plan. But for those without coverage, finding free counseling is "next to impossible," he says.

And trying to find counseling is just one element of what Baker terms “the huge social work part of the job.” In November, he arranged for 10 families at Highland, a Title I school, to receive Thanksgiving boxes from a local charitable organization. He refers families who need help with rent to one agency, and those who need emergency food and clothing to another. He frequently accesses a charitable fund that provides eyeglasses to needy children who lack other resources for vision care. Sometimes Baker, who speaks Spanish, will accompany Spanish-speaking children to the eye exam.

Baker also taps the OEA Foundation (see page 26), which provides small cash grants to members so they may help students with pressing needs. He’s used the program to purchase coats and clothing for children fleeing domestic violence. Once he even used it to pay for a student’s Ritalin prescription when the family fell into a short-term gap in insurance coverage.

DATA AND DISTRESS

Hoelter believes anyone who understands the value of a comprehensive guidance and counseling program, supervised by a trained school counselor, would have great difficulty picturing their school without one.

At the same time, she says, “It’s our responsibility to make sure what we’re providing is that helpful, and that effective, and that essential. I don’t want to be the one saying you can’t live without my program. I want them to be saying it because that’s how they feel.”

Rebekah Hardy has no hesitation saying so. She blanches mentally if she imagines losing the two counselors—Linda Eby and Shawn Diez—at the Gresham-Barlow District’s Gordon Russell Middle School. “It scares me to death. It would be incredibly detrimental,” says the seventh-grade language arts teacher.

The Gordon Russell counselors run small groups for students who need academic and emotional support; at lunchtime they facilitate student leadership groups such as Peer Mediators, Diversity Committee, Latino Club, Peacemakers, and others; they coordinate transition activities between grade school and middle school, and between middle and high school; they give individual attention to students in immediate distress. Hardy gives them much of the credit for establishing “a positive school environment” and “a sense of community that promotes student achievement”—as specified in Gordon Russell’s school improvement goals.

But the counselors at Gordon Russell aren’t resting on their laurels. In the era of standards, school report cards, and No Child Left Behind, school counselors are beginning to share the demands of accountability—the responsibility to shape their programs in response to documented needs, and to show results.

“Traditionally, we’ve been asked to say how many groups we’ve done, how many students we’ve served,

Following a Framework

What should a guidance and counseling program look like? *Oregon’s Framework for Comprehensive Guidance and Counseling Programs Pre-Kindergarten through Twelfth Grade*, published by the Oregon Department of Education, helps districts, schools, and counselors answer that question.

“For many years, districts have been expected to have comprehensive counseling and guidance, but it was not until we had the Oregon framework, that we clearly defined the components and indicators of an effective program,” says June Tremain, Guidance and Counseling Specialist with the Oregon Department of Education.

The framework lays out four student development domains which every program should address: learning to learn (academic), learning to work (career), learning to live (personal/social), and learning to contribute (community involvement). It also identifies 15 elements of a quality program, everything from a mission statement to program planning and evaluation.

Working with the department of education and national experts in the field, two groups of districts are designing programs based on the framework. Districts in the lead group — Colton, Forest Grove, Gresham-Barlow, Medford, North Marion, Portland, and Salem-Keizer—spent the initial year of a three-year process reviewing their existing programs. These districts are now beginning the design phase of the process. The final year will be devoted to implementation and evaluation. A second group—Hillsboro, Jefferson, Jefferson County, Oregon Trail, Redmond, Reynolds, and Sisters—began the review process, or program audit, in summer 2005.

During the review process, districts look for gaps and duplications within their programs. For example, some find they are covering the academic, personal-social, and community involvement areas adequately, but need to expand the career domain. Others find they have a strong elementary program but need to strengthen middle and high school efforts, or vice versa, says Tremain.

“Using the framework will help us coordinate and articulate programs throughout the district, grades K through 12, and provide services to all students,” says Donna Goss, a counselor at North Medford High School who is participating on her district’s design committee.

Oregon’s Framework for Comprehensive Guidance and Counseling Programs can be found at <http://www.ode.state.or.us>. Use the ODE Search and enter “Counseling Framework.”

and how many parent meetings we sat in on. And now we're being asked to say how many students are doing better socially, academically, and in terms of planning for their future, as a result of things we've done," says Eby, Gordon Russell's veteran child development specialist.

Eby may work in an office with couches and soft lighting to set students at ease, but she's no stranger to hard data. "Just this morning we were putting together the graphs from the student needs survey," she says pulling papers from files. At the beginning of the year all Gordon Russell students complete an online survey, in which they indicate how many days of school they missed the year before; how strongly they agree or disagree with statements such as "I turn in my homework assignments" and "I make friends easily"; and whether they have concerns in 13 areas ranging from "My own anger" to "Family member has a serious illness."

Looking at the graphs that result, Eby can see that out of approximately 200 students in each grade, 70 sixth-graders, 60 seventh-graders, and 40 eighth-graders expressed concern in at least one area. Among sixth graders and seventh graders the biggest concern is loss ("Someone close to me has died"). The numbers—65 sixth graders and 52 seventh graders—suggest, says Eby, that she should give a classroom lesson for all students on dealing with loss. This may be sufficient for those who have lost a grandparent or a pet. She will form support groups for students whose loss is most intense.

Another area where Eby has just begun using data is in preparing students for high school. Last year, high school counselors came to the school to talk to eighth graders about this topic. Before and after the visit, Eby tested students on what they knew about topics such as how many credits they need to graduate, the consequences of failing, career strands, eligibility for extra-curricular activities, CIM and CAM, and the level of responsibility students must take in high school. The differences in the pre- and post-test were huge, says Eby, pointing to a graph labeled "High School Understanding." But impressive as the test results may be, they aren't enough. "What we need to see now is their failure rate as freshmen, and that will tell us whether this and other interventions we're trying actually make a difference. So we're just beginning that process, but that's what we're moving toward," says Eby.

Shigeoka and her fellow counselors at Beaverton's Westview High are equally dedicated to developing data-driven intervention strategies for students. For example, after the first quarter of the year, counselors sorted freshman grade records to identify students failing or in danger of failing multiple classes. Then they checked these students' eighth-grade reading and math benchmark scores. Students who met benchmarks but were failing classes, were placed in a group focusing

on improving study skills. For students who didn't quite meet the reading benchmark, a different group, led by a reading specialist, is more appropriate, says Shigeoka.

The Westview counselors use data to advocate both for individual students and for systemic change. Shigeoka, for example, is concerned about Advanced Placement enrollment patterns in her building. Data shows that race and income predict for the most part which students will and will not access these courses. Counselors may not be the ones who find a solution to this issue, but they are taking leadership to address it. "We're going to have a conversation with the AP teachers and the entire staff to talk about what's going on and what we can do about it," says Shigeoka.

Even in schools with the best planned, most preventive, most proactive, most data-driven guidance and counseling programs, emergencies will happen and the counselor must attend to them.

Three weeks into the school year at Gordon Russell, a boy's father dies. Even before this crisis the student is struggling academically. To make school more manageable for him, Eby arranges schedule changes that reduce his course load and allow for regular counseling time. She also enrolls him in an after-school academic support club staffed with teachers and high school student tutors.

On a recent afternoon, Chris*—a pale, wiry boy with light hair, wearing a Laker's basketball jersey and black muddy tennis shoes—sits across from Eby while she explains his new schedule and checks on how he's managing. They discuss who will pick him up on the days when he stays for the after-school program, how he can avoid forgetting his PE clothes again, how he liked talking to a new girl who had also lost her father, and how he's handling angry feelings.

"How'd you do on your homework last night?" asks Eby gently.

Chris shakes his head and looks uncomfortable.

Eby urges him to write down all his assignments in one place in his notebook so he can show the list to his special education teacher. At their next meeting, she says, they'll sort through his backpack and work on organization skills.

Chris looks up. "Can we do it now?" he asks pleadingly.

When Eby hears about counselors being laid off in other districts she worries most about students like Chris: "Even with my help he's going to struggle, but without somebody here he could be a school dropout in a year, because right now he doesn't want to come to school. It's too much on top of everything he's dealing with."

Tears glint briefly in her eyes. "I get a little passionate about that part of things," she says.

**Name has been changed.*

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