Professional school counselors are educational leaders with training and expertise to address the mental health concerns of students. Unfortunately, work conditions at some schools can create barriers to the delivery of effective mental health services. This article presents a case of one rural, diverse high school that transformed its school counseling program to better meet the mental health concerns of students. Through the use of data-based decision making, school-wide advisory, and a computerized identification system, the school counseling program now offers a more timely and effective delivery of mental health interventions to students in need.
immediate concerns of individual students, parents, or staff members (Reiner, Colbert, & Perusse, 2009). The counseling staff, then, may be so overwhelmed by the needs of a few that they may feel unable to design and deliver systemic approaches to address the needs of all students as recommended by best practice (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2012; Gysbers & Henderson, 2006; Lapan, Gysbers, & Sun, 1997). In such cases, school counselors also may find it difficult to implement other elements of a comprehensive guidance and counseling program, such as program accountability (Gysbers, 2004; Sink, 2009).

**SCHOOL AND COUNSELING PROGRAM CONTEXT**

Mount Baker High School (MBHS) is located in northwest Washington State in a somewhat mountainous rural setting about 15 miles from a medium-sized city of 80,000 people. The school district covers a 512 square mile region with minimal public transportation. Access to mental health services and community agencies is extremely limited. During the first year described in this case study (2004-2005), Mount Baker High School (grades 9-12) had a population of 715 students served by two school counselors. Overall, 52% of the students received free or reduced-price meals, qualifying MBHS as a Title I school. State standardized test results for reading, writing, and math during the 2004-2005 school year indicated that scores were hovering around the average state passing percentage (e.g., Reading: State 72.9% vs. MBHS 73.4%; Writing: State 65.2% vs. MBHS 63.8%; and Math: State 47.5% vs. MBHS 47.7%).

The ethnic composition of the school during the 2004-2005 school year was 10.4% American Indian/Alaska Native, 4.2% Hispanic, 1.5% Asian/Pacific Islander, 0.7% African American, and 82% White (with 12% first-generation Slavic). These ethnic percentages have remained fairly consistent over the 6-year period described in this article.

In the years leading up to the 2004-2005 school year, school counselors at Mount Baker High School spent the majority of their time working in the academic domain including course registration, educational planning, and credit monitoring. Counselors also served as managers of the school-wide testing program. Test administration limited direct services to students; however, school counselors prided themselves on making contact with every individual student at least twice a year to discuss high school course planning and post-secondary training/education options. Although it is likely that these meetings led to positive outcomes for some students, no data were collected to show that this was either an effective or ineffective use of counselor time.

Time constraints prevented the offering of small groups, but counselors worked hard to provide a limited number of classroom guidance lessons to all grade levels. For example, counselors advocated every year for the granting of classroom time to cover post-high school planning. Once in the classroom or auditorium, the school counselors felt pressure to cover a large amount of content because they had such limited opportunities in front of students. In these large-group settings, the counselors were unable to provide specific, tailored information to students. As with the individual educational planning component, no data were collected on the efficacy of the large-group academic interventions.

In terms of coverage of the other domains, the counselors had little opportunity to be involved in prevention or intervention activities related to personal/social development. Career services, delivered by the career specialist and school counselors, were seen as an auxiliary curriculum that was not core to the school’s mission. At MBHS, many students at risk for failure were not identified until a crisis emerged or after they dropped out. During the 2004-2005 school year, 77% of Mount Baker High School students graduated on time. Some students left to enroll in a county-wide alternative high school, but graduation rates at this program were only 15%. Counseling services were limited in the alternative school, so it is likely that even in this smaller setting, the mental...
health concerns of students were not recognized or addressed.

ELEMENTS OF PROGRAM TRANSFORMATION

Data-Driven Decision Making

During the 2004-2005 school year, the MBHS school staff, including faculty, administrators, school counselors, and other school personnel, undertook a data-driven school improvement process to comply with state accreditation. Over the course of the year, school staff analyzed and researched best practices and created data-driven action plans. Teachers, for example, dedicated themselves to the task of creating high-quality classroom environments and improving instructional practices.

The school counselors conducted a counseling program audit during the 2004-2005 school year using tools in the first edition of the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2003). In doing so, they were faced with the reality that their delivery methods were too time-intensive and focused on individual educational planning. Although all students had contact with a school counselor, the emphasis did not allow for a discussion of social/emotional or mental health concerns. In simple terms, the counselors found that the responsibility to provide basic planning information prevented them from addressing underlying barriers to learning.

The school counselors at MBHS also launched a variety of data-based projects to evaluate the effectiveness of their school counseling program. These local efforts were synchronous with a national movement toward equipping school counselors to effectively collect and analyze data (Astramovich, Coker, & Hoskins, 2005; Dimmitt, Carey, & Hatch, 2007).

In fact, attention to academic and behavioral indicators and engagement in data-based decision making were being regarded as a “new cornerstone of effective school counseling practice” (Poynton & Carey, 2006, p. 129).

To begin, MBHS counselors initiated surveys of students and staff to learn about the efficacy of the existing post-high school planning program. Results from exit surveys with graduating seniors revealed that the required culminating portfolio was neither popular nor helpful in planning life after high school. When surveyed, only 25% of graduating seniors thought the portfolio was helpful in developing their post-high school plan. Representative student comments pointed to the need to overhaul the advising and support students received for their final projects. One student wrote, “I did not like the portfolio projects...they did not help me in any way plan for my future.” Another stated, “I never worked on my portfolio to the best of my abilities. It did not mean much to me so I couldn’t tell you what worked well or what should be changed.”

School counselors also used the school improvement process to analyze student data on academic achievement and high school completion. They reviewed early findings from the Consortium on Chicago Schools (Allensworth & Easton, 2007), which indicated that 9th-grade students who failed core classes were more likely to drop out of high school. The school counselors replicated the analysis and found that 9th-grade failure in core subjects at Mount Baker High School also led to higher rates of school dropout. They then presented the findings to teachers to challenge the common assumption that failure breeds character and resilience. This led the staff to begin considering how they could build support for freshmen to limit the number of failing grades and, thereby, improve graduation rates.

School counselors then turned their attention to the widespread concern about the lack of parent involvement in student planning. Staff surveys indicated that 98% of teachers believed that student achievement could increase through more effective parent involvement. However, attendance data showed that only 35% of parents/guardians were attending conference nights and survey results revealed that a majority of teachers felt they did not communicate often enough with parents.

Finally, although senior student exit surveys over the previous 10-year period indicated that a solid percentage of MBHS graduates planned to attend 4-year colleges (23%), 2-year colleges (23%), or 2-year technical colleges (16%), there were signs that preparation for post-secondary options may not have been adequate. For example, data obtained from 2001-2004 at all the 2-year state community colleges indicated that a significant percentage of MBHS students were enrolled in remedial math courses, and were therefore ineligible for college credit (2001: 37%, 2002: 54%, 2003: 47%, and 2004: 44%).

School-Wide Advisory Program

Taken together, data analyzed during the school improvement process pointed to the need to overhaul the educational, career, and post-secondary planning programs. By examining student data, teachers and administrators came to an understanding that

BY EXAMINING STUDENT DATA, TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS CAME TO AN UNDERSTANDING THAT PREPARING STUDENTS FOR LIFE AFTER HIGH SCHOOL WAS ESSENTIAL TO MEETING THE SCHOOL’S LARGER IMPROVEMENT GOALS OF ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT.
preparing students for life after high school was essential to meeting the school’s larger improvement goals of academic achievement. Specifically, the school staff recognized the need for more effective college/career planning, better outreach to 9th-graders to reduce drop-out risk, and increased involvement of parents and guardians.

In a staff survey, 95% of MBHS teachers said they believed that student achievement can increase through close personal relationships between students and teachers. This perception is supported by a substantial body of research (Hughes, Cavell, & Willson, 2001; Van Ryzin, 2010; Wentzel, 1997). After analyzing the data, school staff agreed that the model in which a school counselor delivered periodic large-group lessons was inadequate to support student achievement.

Counselors researched options for building a more effective guidance program and found an advisory model called Navigation 101, which was having strong success in Washington State high schools (Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2012). Data collected at the pilot schools for Navigation 101 showed a significant increase in parent involvement, higher enrollment in college preparation courses, and a decrease in the need for college remediation following high school (Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2008). Empirical research has suggested a positive relationship between small group advisory programs and increased student attendance, improved school culture, and higher student engagement (Galassi, 1997; McClure, Yonezawa, & Jones, 2010).

The Navigation 101 program includes five key elements: (a) teacher-led small-group advisory periods, (b) planning portfolios, (c) student-led parent conferences, (d) student-driven scheduling, and (e) data collection and analysis. Overall, the Navigation 101 program was appealing to MBHS staff because it offered a way to improve the delivery of college/career readiness materials and increase personalization so the students felt supported in their required graduation projects.

To launch the program, a team of teachers and one of the school counselors met to define objectives and adapt lessons from the existing curriculum to meet the needs of MBHS students. In the first stage of implementation, Navigation 101 was piloted in a select number of advisory groups during the 2005-2006 school year. To increase teacher buy-in, counselors created short surveys to obtain teacher feedback on the lessons. This feedback was immediately analyzed and used to modify future lessons. As the program expanded to the whole school in 2006-2007, advisory groups were led by all teachers plus other certificated staff such as the librarian and administrators so the group size could be kept relatively small (17-20 students).

TO IMPROVE MONITORING AND CASE MANAGEMENT, THE SCHOOL INVESTED IN A SOFTWARE PROGRAM TO OVERLAY THEIR EXISTING DATA SYSTEM.

Computerized Identification System

By moving toward an advisory program, school counselors hoped that they could build a more comprehensive program in which small group and individual counseling in the personal/social domain could be delivered by school counselors. During the first 2 years of implementation of the Navigation 101 program, school counselors were busy collecting program evaluation data, refining curriculum, and supporting teachers in the effective delivery of the content. This meant that they did not immediately have more time to address mental health concerns. However, once the
program was established with all staff participating in school-wide career, college, and academic planning, the counselors began to sense more capacity to work on mental health concerns with students, both in small groups and individually.

At this point, the school counselors turned their attention to an examination of social/personal data to determine specific mental health concerns of MBHS students. Looking at data from the Healthy Youth Survey (HYS), a biannual mandatory screening of all Washington State students, school counselors could track how MBHS students compared to state averages. For example, 2008 survey results revealed that 36% of Mount Baker students said they felt sad or depressed over a 2-week period as compared to the 33% state average. Nineteen percent of Mount Baker students said they had considered suicide compared to the 17% state average, and 23% of Mount Baker students reported early initiation of drug use as compared to the 29% state average. Given the limited number of mental health and social service providers in the rural district, the counseling staff recognized the need to address the needs of the whole student at the school site.

Unfortunately, identifying the students to target for school counseling interventions or referral to outside mental health agencies proved to be cumbersome. The most visible cases of concern were always easy to spot, but students in gradual decline proved more difficult to identify. The student information system was not designed to detect student concerns on formative indicators (e.g., missing homework assignments, drops in attendance, or office discipline referrals). Instead, counselors had to wait until summative assessments were available (e.g., quarterly grade reports, achievement test scores), which could be months removed from the first signs of concern.

To improve monitoring and case management, the school invested in a software program to overlay their existing data system beginning in 2006-2007 (see Duxbury, 2012). By implementing a more interactive and responsive technology interface, changes in student status could be tracked on the computer screen (Figure 1). Counselors and administrators were able to instantly identify the risk status of a student or group of students on key performance indicators such as credits earned or standardized test scores (Table 1). All staff were encouraged to create lists of students to follow on a daily or weekly basis, including the students in their advisory class. The computer software also made it easy for parents to access certain parts of the system to determine if their child was falling behind in classes or exhibiting other behaviors of concern.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Lists student name. The number indicates the number of notes a counselor has recorded on a student.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gr</td>
<td>Grade level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lang</td>
<td>Language spoken at home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sped</td>
<td>Students receiving special education services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Now GPA</td>
<td>GPA based on current grades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trend</td>
<td>GPA trend over the last two weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># MI</td>
<td>Number of missing assignments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># F</td>
<td>Number of Fs a student has</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P1-P6</td>
<td>Absences in classes by period (periods 1-6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tar Tot</td>
<td>Total amount of tardies a student has</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cum GPA</td>
<td>Student’s cumulative grade point average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cr</td>
<td>Total credits a student has accumulated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credit Check</td>
<td>Counselor can update/or view students credit requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stu</td>
<td>Number of times a student has checked online grades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Par</td>
<td>Number of times a parent/guardian has checked online grades</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Counseling Groups and Community Collaboration

By the 2008-2009 school year, the Navigation 101 advisory program was on solid footing and staff were comfortable with the screening technology. At this point, school counselors could turn their attention to meeting the needs of the students who were showing more significant signs of social or emotional distress. They sorted students by single or multiple risk factors to identify which students were most in need of counselor contact or targeted intervention. They then initiated individual meetings and counseling groups, specifically tailored to a student's area of concern.

Over the next several years, school counselors organized and delivered counseling groups on the topics of conflict resolution, sexual assault and domestic violence, student motivation, substance abuse prevention, and career/post-high school planning. On average, 45 students were served in these groups each week. Groups changed every 8 weeks, allowing students to be a part of multiple groups throughout the year. Within the MBHS alternative high school program, a school counselor led weekly group process activities for approximately 40 students on communication skills, assertiveness training, trust building, and leadership skills.

With an ample number of counseling groups in place, the school counselors recognized that some students and families needed additional therapeutic services. They responded by seeking out community mental health and social service providers to bring intensive mental health support to isolated students and families. Services were then delivered through partnerships between MBHS and a local university counseling training program, the county health department, and the local tribal community. A family resource coordinator was able to respond to referrals to expand outreach to families in their homes. Taken together, these partnerships greatly increased access to school-based and community-based mental health counseling.

Since the 2005-2006 school year, MBHS students have consistently scored nearly 20 percentage points above the state averages in all subject areas, ... previously, test scores hovered around the state average.

Results

Over the 6-year period described in this article, this isolated rural high school was the site of dramatic systemic change resulting in increased access to mental health and social services. Central to the change was the school counselors’ leadership role in collecting and presenting data, building support for an advisory program, advocating for an improved student identification system, providing targeted counseling groups, and collaborating with outside resources to improve service delivery. Through these efforts, staff members began to view the counseling staff as educational partners in the school improvement process. They also gained an appreciation for professional school counselors’ ability to attend to the emerging mental health needs of students.

A critical component of this change was the successful implementation of a school-wide comprehensive guidance program. With guidance services shared with the teaching staff, school counselors at MBHS were then able to balance their workload across the three school counseling domains. Time was reallocated such that school counselors were able to design and deliver interventions for students with emerging social and mental health needs. Results at MBHS suggest that systemic transformation also can bring about positive changes in teacher, parent, and student roles.

Teacher Participation

The data-based school improvement process raised staff awareness of the
Students and families who were falling through the gaps. Teachers recognized that, without a change in the delivery model, school counselors would never have time to reach students in need of services. Through advisory groups, teachers were able to increase personalization in the delivery of a comprehensive college and career readiness curriculum. Student confidence in the advisory program improved as revealed in their satisfaction with their post-high school planning (see Figure 2).

By the end of the 6-year transformation process, teachers and other staff members were able to make clear connections between social and emotional concerns and academic progress. Collaboration dramatically improved through the use of the new student identification system that allowed teachers to more easily track the progress of their students. When indicators such as attendance or homework completion were in decline, teachers were able to immediately make referrals to the counseling staff.

Parent Involvement
A major goal in the school improvement process was to increase parent/guardian involvement in all aspects of student life. Data collected every year reveal that family involvement has improved across several indicators. Parent attendance at the student-led conferences increased from 35% in 2004 to more than 90% in the first years of implementation. This parent attendance rate remained steady at 94% through 2011, and immediately following the conferences, 90% of parents continue to help with course registration, leading to increased commitment to the students’ stated academic plans. Finally, families’ online access to academic and behavioral indicators has increased the communication between home and school.

Student Access to Support
Prior to implementing the comprehensive advisory program, students were served through individual meetings or large-group presentations on academic planning. Unless they sought out counselors for support with emotional concerns, evidence hinting at mental health problems might not show up until the end of a semester when staff looked at academic and behavioral indicators like passing rates, absenteeism, or office discipline referrals.

By the end of the 6-year program improvement process, all students at MBHS were receiving 17 academic and college/career planning lessons each year through advisory classes. School counselors and other staff members also were able to use the upgraded identification system to respond very quickly when academic or behavioral indicators suggested a decline. In this way, they are more likely to catch a problem before the symptoms become severe and make appropriate referrals.

In the final 2 years of this case study, nearly 10% of students were participating in small counseling groups. As another sign of increased student support for mental health issues, coordination between school and outside resources has also improved. For example, the school district saw a dramatic increase in the number of families served through a Family Resource Coordinator (185 students served district-wide in 2009 compared to 400 students served district-wide in 2010).

Academic Achievement
The reporting of results would not be complete without mentioning the impact of school improvement and program transformation on academic achievement. Since the 2005-2006 school year, MBHS students have consistently scored nearly 20 percent-age points above the state averages in all subject areas, a remarkable record considering that previously, test scores hovered around the state average. These improvements have led to the school being recognized regionally and nationally for academic achievement.

STAFF MEMBERS BEGAN TO VIEW THE COUNSELING STAFF AS EDUCATIONAL PARTNERS IN THE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PROCESS. THEY ALSO GAINED AN APPRECIATION FOR PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL COUNSELORS’ ABILITY TO ATTEND TO THE EMERGING MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS OF STUDENTS.

CONCLUSION
This article presented a case of one rural, diverse high school that transformed its school counseling program and in doing so, improved its mental health counseling services to students. Through the use of data-based decision-making, a school-wide advisory program, and technological advances, professional school counselors at MBHS are now able to deliver and coordinate a comprehensive program to meet the academic, career, and personal/social needs of students. This includes a school-wide academic and college/career planning curriculum, a wide array of small counseling groups, and collaborative partnerships with mental health service providers to deliver therapeutic sessions to individuals.

The story of transformation observed at this one school is part of a larger transformation occurring across the United States as school counselors and other professions strive to better coordinate school-based support services. Researchers in the fields of
school mental health (Adelman and Taylor, 2008), school nursing (DeSocio & Hootman, 2004), school psychology (Doll & Cummings, 2007), and response to intervention (Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2009; National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010; Shores, 2009) are all promoting a similar process of reform. Whether it is called comprehensive learning supports (Adelman and Taylor, 2007), population-based services (Doll & Cummings, 2007), or comprehensive school counseling and guidance (ASCA, 2012), all parties are calling for strong alignment with the school’s mission to serve all students. Furthermore, all approaches require effective collaboration among the various school-based support professionals to reach students in need of more specialized mental health services.

Unique to the case presented in this article is the role that professional school counselors played in leading reform efforts. Through data analysis, school counselors at MBHS were able to help staff members make clear connections between mental health concerns and academic progress. They garnered support for systemic change that brought personalized academic and career planning to all students and increased parent involvement. Through technological advances, school counselors invited all staff members to take notice of barriers to student success and act upon their concerns. Most important, through program transformation, students who need mental health services in this isolated district now have that opportunity.

REFERENCES


