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Joining the Conversation about Educating Our Poorest Children: Emerging Leadership Roles for School Counselors in High-Poverty Schools

School counselors bring special skills to the effort of educating low-income children. A review of literature on poverty and social class as correlates of student success, teacher expectations, and parent involvement provides a rationale for school counselors expanding their leadership roles in high-poverty schools by (a) serving as cultural broker among students, their families, and school staff; (b) partnering with staff to design more culturally responsive instruction; and (c) developing a more family-centric school environment.

National data reveal that the number of children in the United States who live in poverty has increased significantly over the past 5 years. In terms of raw numbers, more than 13 million children in the United States were reported to live in poverty in 2004, an increase of 12.8% from the number of children in poverty reported in 2000. As a result, in 2004 more than one out of every six American children was poor (Children's Defense Fund, 2005). Although financial need is one defining characteristic of poverty, poverty may be defined more globally as "a condition that extends beyond the lack of income and goes hand in hand with a lack of power, humiliation and a sense of exclusion" (Raphael, 2005, p. 36).

Children living in poverty present a profound challenge to today's educators and counseling professionals. These children are significantly more likely than children from middle-class backgrounds to report increased levels of anxiety and depression, a greater incidence of behavioral difficulties, and a lower level of positive engagement in school (Black & Krishnakumar, 1998; Caughy, O'Campo, & Muntaner, 2003; Samaan, 2000). They also exhibit a greater incidence of school failure, developmental difficulties and delays, lower standardized test scores and graduation rates, and higher rates of school tardiness, absenteeism, and school dropout than their middle-class peers (Davis, 1999-2000; Donahue, Schiraldi, & Macallais, 1998; Fontes, 2003).

Despite being twice as likely as their middle- and upper-class peers to demonstrate serious mental

health and educational needs, children living in poverty are much less likely to have access either to mental health care or to adequate educational services (Children's Defense Fund, 2005). Moreover, low-income children are most likely to attend schools offering the poorest quality of teaching from the least experienced teachers. Current research reveals that the quality of teaching and the quality of working conditions in high-poverty schools—defined by the U.S. Department of Education (2002) as having 50% or more of the student body eligible for the federal free or reduced-price lunch program—are significantly worse than in low-poverty schools. As a result, poor children are assigned disproportionately to teachers with less experience, less education, and less skill than those who teach other children (Peske & Haycock, 2006).

Because many of the more expert and experienced teachers transfer to more desirable schools and districts when they are able, new teachers are typically given the most difficult teaching assignments in schools that offer the fewest supports (Darling-Hammond, 2004). Most new teachers in high-poverty schools report feeling unprepared to address the challenges of working with poor students and, by extension, their parents/caregivers (Cochran-Smith, 2006). Furthermore, teachers in high-poverty schools report significantly worse working conditions, including inadequate facilities, fewer textbooks and supplies, less administrative support, and larger class sizes (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2003). As a result, the attrition rates for new teachers in high-poverty schools average between 40% and 50% over the first 5 years of teaching. This turnover rate is almost one third higher than the total teacher turnover rate across all schools. This high teacher attrition rate adds burdensome financial costs, problems of staff instability, and a lack of staff mentoring and support to the already difficult circumstances in which our poorest children are educated (Darling-Hammond).

What might school counselors bring to the conversation about working with poor children and

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families? Do school counselors have something to offer teachers as well as students? Historically, there has been a paucity of counseling literature addressing the issues of working in schools with low-income students and families. For example, a review of articles published in the *Journal of Counseling and Development* over the past decade revealed only nine articles emphasizing issues of social class or poverty. By contrast, there were 90 articles published during that time period that emphasized race, culture, national origin, ethnicity, or multiculturalism. A review of articles published in *Professional School Counseling* from 1997 to 2005 revealed similar ratios. Moreover, the voluminous literature within other educational disciplines that is available on this topic is not referenced in the counseling field (Cochran-Smith, 2006). In 2005, however, a special issue entitled “Professional School Counseling in Urban Settings” was published. In this issue, Lee (2005) identified concentrated poverty as one of the social and structural challenges confronting counselors working in urban schools. Lee also proposed a set of general competencies needed by counselors working in such settings, such as leadership, advocacy, and cultural competence. However, Lee offered few illustrations for how to implement such competencies in working with other school staff.

Despite the limited professional literature, we believe that today’s school counselors can bring special skills to the task of working with students in high-poverty schools. These skills can be grouped into four general areas. First, most school counselors have received training in multicultural counseling and have an understanding of the sociopolitical context that influences low-income students’ and families’ participation in school life. Hence school counselors can help other staff become more aware of their advantaged status as middle-class educators and realize that the differences in class privilege and sociopolitical power experienced by poor families influence these families’ involvement in their children’s lives. Second, because school counselors are trained to view the world in terms of alternative perspectives, they can consult with teachers and offer alternative perspectives on low-income student and family behavior and assist teachers in designing more effective learning experiences. Third, school counselors are knowledgeable about family life and parenting. This perspective is helpful in considering the needs and potential strengths and resources of the low-income parent and family, as well as the child. Finally, school counselors are skilled in blocking blaming, redirecting problem solving, and managing a group problem-solving effort. Hence they can help staff learn how to collaborate more effectively with low-income parents both in problem solving and decision making.

These areas of counselor expertise can complement the efforts of other school professionals working in high-poverty schools. In this article, we describe and illustrate three leadership roles that school counselors might assume in working with other staff in high-poverty schools. We then discuss possible barriers that school counselors may face in implementing these new roles, and we present implications for the nature of preparation of future school counselors.

EMERGING LEADERSHIP ROLES FOR SCHOOL COUNSELORS IN HIGH-POVERTY SCHOOLS

Working with low-income students and families presents a rich opportunity for school counselors to expand their role with other school staff beyond only delivering services to individual students. Traditionally, school counselors working in high-poverty schools have been expected to provide direct services to students in the form of individual counseling, crisis intervention, or referrals to community agencies (Kaffenberger & Seligman, 2003). In addition, school counselors often have been expected to coordinate the assessment, staffing, and placement of individual students in special education and to orchestrate a student’s or family’s access to needed economic or psychological resources (Carpenter, King-Sears, & Keys, 1998). For example, several authors have underscored the important role of the school counselor in building relationships with outside stakeholders and community agencies that can facilitate the access of students and families to needed services (Keys, Bemak, Carpenter, & King-Sears, 1998). Although the need for these services is indisputable, we believe there are additional leadership roles that counselors might play within high-poverty schools.

These roles are (a) serving as a cultural bridge between teachers and students and blocking the blaming that often derails efforts to work with poor students and their families, (b) functioning as a pedagogical partner with teachers by connecting the curriculum more directly to students’ lives, and (c) teaming with teachers to create a more welcoming, family-centric school climate. These new leadership roles are in line with the roles promoted in the ASCA National Model® (American School Counselor Association, 2004, 2005) and the National Center for Transforming School Counseling (Education Trust, 2003) that encourage school counselors to address school-wide concerns, to promote preventative services, and to emphasize community building as well as individual student service delivery (Bemak, 2000; Colbert, Vernon-Jones, & Pransky, 2006).

Serving as a Cultural Bridge and Blocking Blame

We believe that school counselors can serve as a cultural bridge between families and teachers by (a) sharing information that counters teachers' deficit views of poor families and blocking blaming of families, (b) modeling how to reach out to families and build on their strengths, and (c) mediating between the conflicting cultural expectations of the home and the school. To counter teachers' deficit views of poor families, school counselors need to help teachers see that a focus on blaming parents for children's difficulties triggers parental defensiveness and derails efforts to work with them to resolve a child's problem. By showing their teaching colleagues how to *build on the strengths* of parents/caregivers and children and to *block blame* from undermining the collaborative process, school counselors can help teachers refocus their interactions with poor families (Amatea, Smith-Adcock, & Villares, 2006).

Many educators have been socialized to view poor people as morally and culturally deficient. Believing that families who are poor have attitudes, values, and behaviors that sustain their position at the bottom of the economic ladder, these educators often blame parents for passing on these traits to their children instead of transmitting the middle-class cultural patterns they believe are necessary to succeed in school and in life. As a result, rather than viewing poverty from a sociopolitical perspective that considers systemic influences and class privilege, these educators often believe that poor people are inherently inferior because of some innate individual flaws such as a lack of motivation or poor decision making (Tutwiler, 2005).

One way this deficit view of poor families and poor children is implemented is through the language used to describe low-income children as deficient and "at risk." Another way this deficit view is implemented is depicted in a popular book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, written by Ruby Payne (1998). In her book Payne graphically describes differences in values, language patterns, and resources among lower-, middle-, and upper-class groups, and she emphasizes the need for educators to help lower-income students overcome the deficits of their family by encouraging them to choose to acquire middle-class values and habits.

However, Payne's view of poor families has been contested by a number of different scholars. For example, Ng and Rury (2006) have contended that Payne's work reinforces educators' misconceptions and popular stereotypes about the poor and suggests that poor people have choices about whether to remain in poverty. As a result, it misdirects educators' well-intentioned efforts to educate poor children by disregarding the larger social context in which these children live and are expected to suc-

ceed. Not only do these conceptualizations of low-income families fail to recognize the lack of economic or political resources available to them, it allows educators to remain unaware of their own advantaged status. Furthermore, it reinforces the belief that one group is more competent, valued, and deserving than the other (Tutwiler, 2005). As a result, educators often blame parents' lack of responsiveness and involvement in their children's education as the major cause of a child's school difficulties (Tutwiler). Moreover, research reveals that when teachers perceive parents are uninvolved, they expect lower academic performance from their children (Mandara, 2006).

What is often missing from these judgments by teachers is an understanding of the impact of schools and school staff on low-income parents and children. Many parents from lower-socioeconomic groups are often reluctant to approach a school system where they may have endured negative experiences as students themselves (Finders & Lewis, 1998) or have experienced the climate of schools as less than welcoming (Ascher, 1987; Casas & Furlong, 1994). Moreover, research reveals that schools can encourage or discourage the amount and type of participation that low-income parents display (Feuerstein, 2001). For example, in contrast to affluent parents, low-income parents report that the communication they have with schools is typically negative and problem-focused. Moreover, these parents describe themselves as being talked down to and blamed when they interact with school staff. In addition, many parents report that they are often dissatisfied with school personnel who are "too business-like" or "patronizing." As a result, these parents often avoid contact with school staff or view them as adversaries (Lott, 2001; Ramirez, 2003).

Furthermore, parents who belong to an ethnic or cultural group whose values and priorities differ from mainstream U.S. values often have a limited understanding of school expectations and policies. As a result, they often do not meet teachers' expectations for involvement. Yet teachers do not attribute culturally diverse or low-income parents' limited involvement to these many factors. Instead they tend to judge parents as uninterested or unconcerned about their children's academic progress and blame them for their children's school failure (Linek, Rasinski, & Harkins, 1997).

To counter teachers' deficit views of poor families, counselors need to help teachers see that a focus on blaming parents for children's difficulties triggers parental defensiveness and, as a result, derails efforts to work with parents to resolve their child's problem. By showing their teaching colleagues how to build on the strengths of parents/caregivers and

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children and to block blame from undermining the collaborative process, counselors can help teachers refocus their interactions with poor families (Amatea et al., 2006). For example, the school counselor might introduce other staff members to an approach to problem solving known as family-school problem-solving meetings. In these meetings that both parents and students are invited to attend, rather than emphasizing only what the child is not doing, educators can (a) report on what the child and family is doing well and what needs improvement, (b) solicit the parents' and child's views about areas of strengths and weakness, and then (c) create an action plan in the meeting with the family for how the child can move forward (Amatea, Daniels, Bringman, & Vandiver, 2004).

Another way that school counselors might implement this cultural bridging role is (with the principal's support) to invite a team of faculty to join them in learning more about their low-income students' life contexts and family strengths. The team might decide to peruse school records to learn where families live, the language they speak, how many children are in the household, and whether the family has a working telephone or consistent address. Next the team members may decide to visit the low-income neighborhoods where many of their students live to learn about where children play and the types of stores, churches, places of employment, and after-school recreational facilities available to the children and their families. Or staff members may choose to ride the school bus routes of their students to see where the students get off the bus, how long a ride the students have to and from school, and the nature of the students' neighborhoods.

As a next step, school counselors might encourage the team members to explore how they can enhance two-way communication with students' families by (a) writing welcoming letters or notes home in which they request the family to reply, (b) conducting collaborative "back to school" orientations at times that are convenient for the family, or (c) engaging in visits to the community and family. For example, one teacher wrote a letter to parents at the beginning of the year issuing an open-ended invitation to them to tell her about their child. She wrote,

Welcome to third grade! It's always exciting to start a new school year with a new group of students. I am looking forward to working with your child. Would you please take a few moments and tell me about your child? (Shockley, Michalove, & Allen, 1995, p. 19)

As an alternative, teachers might ask children, with the help of their parents, to draw a picture of their family that would be displayed in the class-

room. Or, if a teacher believes that a student's parents/caregivers might be intimidated by the task of writing about their child, the teacher and school counselor might conduct a "family visit" to a child's home to invite parents to talk about their child's strengths and interests and to learn about the family's educational and cultural practices and circumstances. (These visits would need to be differentiated from the traditional "home visit" conducted when professionals believe there is something wrong in the home.) Each of these strategies can aid teachers and school counselors in moving beyond misconceptions and stereotypes and provide opportunities to learn about the unique strengths and life contexts of their students' families.

Functioning as a Pedagogical Partner

Teachers' assumptions about the family environment of their students can either build or sever the links between home and school. The assumption that "these kids don't live in a good environment" can destroy the very relationship with parents or caregivers that a teacher is trying to create. To assist teachers in identifying the strengths rather than deficits of low-income families, school counselors can partner with teachers to learn more about the distinctive "funds of knowledge" students have gained from their home, community, and school, and use that knowledge in designing instructional activities that are more meaningful to students. By *funds of knowledge* we mean the various social and linguistic practices and the historically accumulated bodies of knowledge that are essential to students' homes and communities (Moll & Gonzalez, 1993).

Many researchers are reporting that children from different cultural and economic backgrounds learn different funds of knowledge, and that these funds of knowledge are not treated equally in school. For example, in her influential study, *Ways with Words*, Heath (1983) described the language practices of three communities in the rural Piedmont Carolinas. One was a working-class, predominantly White community; one was a working-class, predominantly Black community; and one was a middle-class community with a history of formal schooling. Working in cooperation with teachers and local residents, Heath found that although the people in these communities lived within a few miles of one another, they socialized their children into talking, reading, and writing in profoundly different ways. As she followed the children into school, Heath discovered that the children's language practices carried implications for their academic success. The children from the working-class families, both Black and White, fell behind in school—some early on, others more gradually—and eventually dropped out of school. Children from the middle-class families, while not all

top scholars, graduated from high school.

Building on Heath's work, other researchers have described the discontinuities that children from diverse economic and cultural background can experience between the world they know at home and the world of school. To varying degrees, most low-income children arrive in the school setting with distinctive and legitimate funds of knowledge that provide them with ways of knowing that are cognitively, linguistically, and behaviorally different from their middle-class peers (Phillips, 1993). These children may find that they do not know how to show their teachers what they know in ways the teacher can recognize. They may be asked to engage in activities they do not fully understand. And they may find that their teacher talks in ways that are unfamiliar and confusing. From the start, the culturally diverse, low-income or working-class children can find school a confusing and sometimes uncomfortable place (Phillips, 1993) because their ways of knowing are not culturally compatible with the schooling environment (i.e., curriculum, teaching practices, structure, content, materials, organization).

In contrast, the children from middle-class homes, where the funds of knowledge correspond nicely to those that are valued at school, experience much less discontinuity. They know what the teacher is talking about most of the time and if they don't, they know how to ask for help in ways the teacher recognizes. In addition, they are likely to know how to tell stories in ways the teacher understands (McIntyre, Rosebery, & Gonzalez, 2001).

As a result, school failure is a much more likely outcome for low-income than for middle-class children. To avoid this outcome, teachers are now developing approaches that capitalize on the funds of knowledge that low-income students bring from their family and community. For example, Moll and Gonzalez (1993) and McIntyre et al. (2001) described how teachers first interviewed families to learn about their distinctive funds of knowledge and then used that knowledge to contextualize their instruction and curricula.

To implement this pedagogical partnering role, the school counselor might team up with a group of interested teachers who are willing to visit and interview a family to learn about the parents' goals for their children, their ways of teaching their children, and the types of learning and teaching that go on in their household. Information gleaned from this interview then would be used to design classroom instructional activities implemented by the teacher and/or school counselor that build upon the family's interests and ways of learning. Other instructional activities might be designed for parents to carry out at home. For example, one teacher (McCaleb, 1994) learned from the low-income par-

ents of her students that they all wanted to improve their children's literacy. So she invited parents to attend one evening session to learn how to develop individual storybooks on family themes with their children. These family storybooks (a) served as tools to give voice to parents and encourage their participation in the school, (b) offered parents an opportunity through dialogue to nurture their children's literacy by engaging in literacy development activities with their children, and (c) celebrated and validated the family's home culture and their concerns and aspirations.

These activities underscore the importance of empowering low-income parents to contribute intellectually to the development of lessons. School counselors also can work to strengthen social ties across families by creating opportunities for families to connect with each other. This might be done by the school counselor interviewing parents to learn about their existing concerns, knowledge, and resources; and then organizing a social event, providing needed services, or establishing a space at the school, such as a parent resource center, where families/parents can connect with each other and with the community. For example, one parent resource center, known as the Rainmakers, was operated by parents within an elementary school who took on the role of helping their neighbors successfully fight rent increases occurring in their low-income community (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2005). Obviously, all families can benefit from increased social support as well as greater knowledge of informal and formal services. By discovering what families self-identify as their needs, school counselors can use or build on existing parent or family resources through the development of a family resource center.

To provide more information to teachers about these various techniques, school counselors might team with other staff to organize pre-service or in-service professional development workshops that are responsive to teachers' needs. The topic of these workshops might range from joint problem solving with culturally diverse families, to classroom management with culturally diverse students, to redesigning the curriculum to include more culturally specific content. Each of these topics might assist teachers in becoming more responsive to their students' unique interests and strengths.

Creating a More Family-Centric School Climate

Historically, teachers and schools were expected to be the exclusive experts at "delivering" education to children. Children's socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds often were viewed as obstacles to be addressed or overcome outside the classroom through provision of parent education or specialized mental health or social services (Dryfoos, 1994).

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Students and parents were expected to accommodate to the school and follow its lead. Those parents who did not come when called by the school for various events or conferences were viewed as not caring, deficient (i.e., lacking time, interest, or competence), hard to reach, and having little to offer to the education of their children (Leitch & Tangri, 1988; Lott, 2001). In this “edu-centric” perspective, teachers viewed parents’ involvement in their children’s schooling only in terms of the school’s values, goals, and priorities.

Yet many parents from lower socioeconomic status (SES) groups feel reticent about communicating with the school. These parents often report feeling unsure how to help their children succeed in school because they lack confidence, communication skills, and knowledge about the teaching and learning processes used in schools (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Lareau, 1989). They also frequently work in jobs that have inflexible schedules and long or unpredictable hours (Collignon, Men, & Tan, 2001; Garcia Coll et al., 2002). In addition, these parents often have multiple child-care, elder-care, or related family responsibilities that may make them less able to be involved. Furthermore, these families often have difficulty finding affordable housing and, thus, are frequently forced to move their households. As a result of these multiple stressors, low-income parents suffer from a greater susceptibility to marital conflict and to debilitating stress and depression (Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski, & Apostoleris, 1997; Weiss et al., 2003).

Moreover, these parents often find access to involvement in their children’s schooling more difficult than do higher-SES families, because schools make assumptions about how families should be involved that effectively make school-based resources less available to lower-SES families (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, & Reed, 2002). For example, many school events and parent-teacher conferences are held during the school day or at times and places that are convenient for school staff rather than for families. Finally, lower-SES parents’ school-related knowledge and skills often are influenced by more limited access to extrafamilial or professional support systems. This lack of a support system is illustrated by a study (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995) of elementary school parents’ responses to specific demands of helping their children with homework. When middle-class parents judged their skills to be inadequate in helping with a homework task, they tended either to ask others in the family to help, to ask the child to get more information at school, or to seek additional help themselves by calling the teacher or a knowledgeable family member or friend (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992). In contrast, lower-income parents reported having few-

er family resources and experiencing greater difficulty in getting suggestions and knowledgeable help.

For low-income parents to feel less alienated from school, many educators are realizing the need to work in a different fashion with students’ families. The primary goal of educators embracing this perspective is to redesign existing parent-school activities so that they (a) are experienced by all families *whether they can come to school or not*; and (b) contribute to a more collaborative family-centric school climate characterized by trust, two-way communication, and mutual support in achieving the educational aims for students. Rather than involve parents only when there is a crisis or problem to be solved, or require them to attend large, impersonal meetings, these educators communicate with parents around the positives as well as the negatives of their children’s school life and make current school activities (e.g., parent orientation meetings, letters to parents) more meaningful and engaging.

Many school counselors have taken a leadership role in teaming with other school staff to create such a family-centric school climate. Often a team looks for ways to communicate its genuine interest in connecting with the parents of all of its students and planning family-school activities that can adapt to the level of emotional or physical energy that a parent has available (Amatea, Daniels, Bringman, & Vandiver, 2004; Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). To do this, the team looks closely at existing school and classroom activities and examines various aspects of the current school experience (curricula, administrative and communication procedures, special programs, after-school activities, assessment and evaluation programs, and health programs) to locate opportunities for parents, students, and school staff to interact with one another. These interactions should occur in ways that emphasize family involvement in children’s planning, decision making, problem solving, and learning and that give the opportunity for families and school staff to experience each other differently. Moreover, the team looks at how it might include low-income parents in these activities whether they come to school or not.

To implement this school climate change role, school counselors can encourage their principal to appoint a school-wide team (in which the school counselor might participate or lead) to assess existing family-school activities. These activities could be redesigned with an eye to making them more “family-friendly” and welcoming, and to making them a permanent part of the normal school calendar. For example, the team might decide to redesign the existing format of the back-to-school orientation program to provide more opportunities for teachers, parents, and students to get to know one another and to send a message that “we need to work as

partners to achieve quality education for our children.” Traditionally such programs have been designed either for parents or for students, and they consisted of one-way communication from the school to parents (or to children) about the curricula, rules and routines, and typical procedures in the school. Although this information is important, this traditional way of structuring these meetings often sets up a hierarchical rather than a collaborative relationship between families and schools. The team might design the meeting to include the students as well as the teacher and parents and give each an active role and an opportunity for meaningful discussion.

Redesigning such existing family-school activities can powerfully impact the culture of the school, encourage parent involvement, and create a more welcoming, family-centric school environment (Epstein, 2001). By reaching out to low-income families early in the school year, the school staff can establish the norm of collaboration around educational goals early and create an opportunity for parents/caregivers to have positive, nonproblematic interactions with the school in which they have more meaningful roles.

BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTATION

These new leadership roles of (a) serving as a cultural bridge between teachers and students, (b) functioning as a pedagogical partner with teachers, and (c) teaming to create a more welcoming, family-centric school climate provide exciting opportunities for school counselors to improve the schooling of our poorest children. However, there are a number of personal and institutional barriers that can block the implementation of these new leadership roles. First, some school counselors may feel inadequately trained and underestimate the skills they have to offer in implementing these roles. School counselors may dwell on their lack of skill and preparation in leading other staff or find themselves being influenced by the same stereotyped views of poor families under which many teachers operate. As a result, school counselors may have difficulty helping teachers develop a different perspective about low-income families.

Given this mindset, it is important for school counselors to remember that they have special skills they bring to this effort. Most school counselors have received training in multicultural counseling, have become aware of their advantaged status as middle-class educators, and realize that the differences in family resources available to the poor are the result of class privilege rather than moral deficits. In addition, school counselors are trained to view the world in terms of alternative perspectives. As a result, they can consult with teachers and offer them

alternative perspectives on student and family behavior. School counselors also are skilled in blocking blaming, redirecting problem solving, and managing a group problem-solving effort.

A second barrier is that staff interaction may be unnecessarily limited by the institutionalized routines and policies of the school. For example, school policies may prohibit staff from committing time and effort to interacting proactively with poor children and their families or to allocating time in the school day to meeting with one another, visiting a family’s home, or meeting with a group of families. Instead staff may expect to allocate time to deal with a child or family only when there is a crisis to resolve. To address this barrier, school counselors will need to persuade their principal that a change in policies and procedures is needed by communicating a vision about the possibilities of involvement of low-income families. Obviously, collecting evidence from low-income parents about their needs and assets can be a first step toward convincing one’s administrator that a change in policy will reap dividends.

A third barrier consists of the expectations held by other staff members about the role they define for the school counselor. Some staff may expect school counselors to only be skilled in working in crisis situations with individual children rather than in assisting teachers in changing their classroom practice. While every teacher in a school may not be open to this role change, school counselors can develop allies within their teaching faculty who are willing to partner in involving low-income families in their children’s learning and contextualizing instruction to connect with these students’ lives.

A final barrier that some school counselors may report is their lack of time or energy for these new activities. Feeling overloaded with existing responsibilities, school counselors may see these new roles as just one more responsibility added to an already full workday. It is essential that school counselors renegotiate their work role with their principal so that some of their current responsibilities are modified and a portion of their time is committed to promoting a more positive and productive school climate for low-income children and their families—a condition that is now only experienced in most schools by middle-class children and their families. To do this, it might be useful to develop a 3- to 5-year plan with the administrator in which many of these organizational changes could be tried out and evaluated.

We believe that there is a great need for counselor preparation programs to help school counseling students prepare themselves to assume these leadership roles in high-poverty schools. By increasing their knowledge of the macrosystemic influences impacting poor families via readings, video/films, and guest speakers, school counseling students can move

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beyond the common stereotypes held by educators. In addition, through use of reflective techniques and experiential activities, counselor preparation programs can more systematically facilitate the development of student awareness of class bias and privilege. School counseling students also can gain greater exposure to the strengths and characteristics of impoverished communities through real-life interactions embedded in formal classroom instruction, immersion experiences, community events, and dialogue with community representatives. Finally, school counselors in training need structured opportunities to develop their skills in consultation, advocacy, and community development by partnering with teachers, parents, and community members.

In summary, research indicates that more than one out of every six American children was poor in 2004 with roughly a fourth of those experiencing very severe poverty (Children's Defense Fund, 2005). These children pose a major challenge to schools. In this article, we described some of the realities that school counselors and teachers face in working with such students. We then described and illustrated three distinctive counselor leadership roles that we believe are essential to assisting school staffs in working with low-income children and their families. We also discussed the barriers to implementing these new roles, and described specific strategies for addressing these barriers and for preparing counselors and other educators to meet the needs of low-income children. ■

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