

This is Not Your Grandparents' School Counselor

School counseling just isn't what it used to be. Over the past several years, we've asked college students and adults, ranging in age from 20 to 65 about their experiences with school counselors. The main question asked was: "What do you remember about your school counselors in elementary school, middle school or high school?" Here's a smattering of what we've heard:

"Nothing. I didn't have one. There was no guidance counselor in my high school."

"The term guidance counselor was used for the older man stuffed in a closet under the stairs in my high school. He was not what I would think the role of the school counselor could be."

"My school counselor was great. She helped me figure out which colleges to apply to and gave me career tests or something. I really liked talking with her."

"I think there was a school counselor, but I don't know what she did, and I know I never met with her individually."

"We had a really cool counselor in my middle school. We could just drop by any time. We'd skip classes, drop by to talk with her, and she'd give us excuses."

"It was the '60s. You won't believe this, but my guidance counselor used to smoke pot with us after school. Looking back, it was pretty weird."

"The whole reason I decided to become a school counselor is because of my high school counselor. Sometimes he came into class to teach, and I went to see him when my parents got divorced. He was also the assistant track coach. He was amazing."

Overall, we've heard two main themes about school counseling through the years. The first theme is inconsistency. It seems there were hardly two school counselors who were alike. The second common, but negative memory, especially among 35-60 year olds, is of having a school counselor who said something like, "You're not college material."• Interestingly, virtually every adult who talked about receiving this discouraging message ended up going to college and succeeding. This leads us to suspect that many of the school counselors from the 1960s to the early 1980s were either terribly poor judges of academic potential -- or over-trained in using reverse psychology. Either way, many students view these school counselors as discouraging.

In 2003, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) took a bold step forward. Perhaps in response to the inconsistent delivery of school counseling, the association published "The ASCA National Model: A Foundation for School Counseling Programs."• This model professionalized school counseling and ensured greater consistency in services across the United States. Additionally, ASCA has been publishing ethical standards for school counselors since 1984 and most recently revised these standards in 2004.

The ASCA National Model® describes school counselors' roles and functions. No longer is the school counselor an undisciplined maverick lurking on the fringe of the school community. Instead, the ASCA National Model affirms that school counselors and school counseling programs are dedicated to promoting and facilitating learning and academic success in all students. School counselors don't focus their time on special-needs students or college-bound students or any particular group; they're academic facilitators for everyone. Additionally, the school counselor is now a manager of a comprehensive school counseling program, and that program ensures that school counseling services are delivered more consistently and requires school counselors to help students make progress in the following specific areas:

Academic development: School counselors help students obtain and maintain the attitudes, knowledge and skills needed for academic success in the present and for the future.

Career development: School counselors help students understand their personal skills and talents in ways that allow them to acquire skills for exploring the world of work and for making informed career decisions.

Personal/social development. School counselors engage students in activities to promote positive interpersonal knowledge, attitudes and skills. These assets are central to helping students make healthy decisions, set reasonable personal goals, cope with difficult and stressful situations and consider their personal safety inside and outside the school setting.

In contrast to the school counselors of our generation, contemporary school counselors are central players in the education of all students. They are consistently positive, encouraging and supportive of students, teachers and school administration.

If you go to your child's school, you'll find the school counselors not only provide individual and small-group counseling but that they also make regular appearances in the classroom to teach larger groups of students about career decision-making, conflict-resolution skills, test-taking strategies and much more. In addition, with the frequency of high-pressure standardized testing in schools, it's usually the school counselor who supports teachers and students as they prepare to go through the stressful testing process. School counselors also function as community liaisons, meaning that if you want to contact someone at the school to discuss your child, the school counselor is often your first point of contact. Even more importantly, if you're the sort of person who sometimes gets nervous about calling your child's school, the school counselor is a professional who, by definition, is trained to help you feel comfortable, to welcome your input and to streamline your access into the school. Put another way, the school counselor is the friendly face and listening ear that makes your job of being a concerned parent easier. As Jayna Lutz, former school counselor at Oakland High School in Dayton, Ohio, says, "One of the best services school counselors provide is open access between parents and the school. When we maintain open communication with parents, it helps everybody concerned."

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