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ABSTRACT

School counselors represent an integral part of a quality educational program designed to meet the personal, social, academic, and career development needs of today's students. Michigan school districts are experiencing and reporting a significant shortage of qualified and appropriately credentialed school counselors. A statewide initiative was undertaken to address this shortage. This paper provides information regarding the shortage and its possible causes; explains the process utilized by counselor educators to address the shortage; and shares information about an experimental credentialing program that was developed in response to the shortage. Although the actual impact of the two-tiered credentialing system on current shortage of school counselors in Michigan can only be established through systematic collection of data, it is hoped that the program will have a clear and positive effect. Representatives of the Michigan Department of Education stated that these efforts were a model for proactive, effective collaboration within the field of education. Over time it will be determined whether the experimental program has an impact on the shortage. Besides careful monitoring, large group discussions continue to work towards possible solutions. (JDM)

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School Counselor Shortages:

A Statewide Collaborative Effort in Counselor Education

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SCHOOL COUNSELOR SHORTAGES:

A STATEWIDE COLLABORATIVE EFFORT IN COUNSELOR EDUCATION

School counselors represent an integral and essential part of a quality educational program designed to meet the personal/social, academic and career development needs of today's students (Schmidt, 1999). However, like many other states, Michigan school districts are currently experiencing and reporting a significant shortage of qualified and appropriately credentialed school counselors. There has been a 13 percent decline in the total number of school counselors in the State of Michigan since 1993 -- while the number of students and their needs has increased (Fox & Swickert, 1998).

The purpose of this article is to describe a statewide initiative to address this shortage in Michigan. Specifically, this article will provide additional information regarding the shortage and its possible causes, describe the process utilized by counselor educators to address this shortage, and share information about an experimental credentialing program which was developed in response to this shortage.

The Problem: A Severe Shortage of School Counselors

In Michigan, documentation of the current shortage of school counselors was first published in 1993 (Fox, Rawls, and Folger, 1993). Since that time, the severity of the shortage has worsened. In the 1992-1993, the total student population in Michigan was 1,569,214. At that time, there were 2,723 school

counselors in the state, yielding a counselor to student ratio of 1:576. Reflective of the worsening situation, the 1996-1997 data indicated that there were 1,678,288 students in Michigan who shared a total of 2,366 school counselors. This 1996-1997 ratio was therefore 1:709 (Fox & Swickert, 1998).

These ratios are significantly larger than those recommended both by the American School Counselor Association and by the National Education Association. The American School Counselor Association recommends a ratio of no more than 1:300 (Campbell & Dahir, 1997) and the recently released position statement of the National Education Association recommends a ratio of no more than 1:250 (Hatch, 1999). The discrepancy between the recommended ratios and the ratio in Michigan appears to be worsening not because of local district hiring decisions but instead because of a lack of available and appropriately qualified school counselors.

With many veteran school counselors retiring and fewer individuals receiving new school counseling endorsements, a marked and serious discrepancy currently exists between the number of open school counseling positions and the number of eligible, qualified and appropriately credentialed school counselor applicants. As an example, the Michigan State University and Central Michigan University Career Services/Job Placement offices concurred that there were approximately 300 open and posted school counseling positions in the State of Michigan in 1997, compared to only 142 newly endorsed school counselors entering the job market.

This shortage may be explained by several factors: a high rate of retirement of existing school counselors, increases in training requirements at

counselor education institutions, and fewer graduates of school counselor training programs. It is currently estimated that the average age of school counselors in the state of Michigan is 50, with approximately 36% expected to retire within the next 5 years (Fox, Rawls, and Folger, 1993; Fox & Swickert, 1998).

Simultaneously, the training requirements for a master's degree in counseling at counselor education institutions have increased to a modal minimum requirement of 48 credit hours. These additional training requirements reflect a professional response to the increase in the number and severity of student/client needs and the concomitant increase in the expectations and responsibilities facing both schools and their school counselors. It also parallels the training requirements for the newly legislated licensing for professional counselors in the State of Michigan and the current standards for program accreditation by the Council for Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP).

Perhaps in response to the increase in training requirements and perhaps in response to the increased job demands of a school counselor, fewer students have entered and graduated from Michigan counselor education institutions in the past five years. In fact, Fox and Swickert (1998) reported that there has been a 30% decline in new school counselor endorsements in the State of Michigan since 1993. Whereas there were 203 new endorsements in 1993, there were only 142 new endorsements in 1997.

Conservative estimates based on current demographic data suggest that the shortage will continue for at least the next five years. It is projected that this shortage will continue to result in (1) local districts having great difficulty in identifying qualified and appropriately credentialed applicants for open school

counselor positions; (2) an alarming increase in the ratio of students to school counselors in the State of Michigan; and (3) a decreasing ability of local districts to be responsive to the personal/social, academic and career-related needs of K-12 students.

In response to this crisis, a group of concerned professionals began meeting to discuss the nature of the shortage and possible ways to remediate it. The process began with this large discussion group involving approximately 20 individuals, involved the formation of a six person task force to develop recommendations, and next resulted in the creation of a four person subcommittee charged with responsibility for writing and presenting a proposal to the Michigan Department of Education. The following section will describe the collaborative process utilized to address the school counselor shortage in Michigan.

The Process: A Model for Statewide Collaboration

Early meetings involved approximately 20 individuals, including elected leaders of the Michigan School Counselor Association (MSCA), representatives of the Michigan Department of Education (MDE), and counselor educators from all ten counselor education institutions in Michigan. These meetings focused on documentation of the shortage, dissemination of data, projections for the future, and discussions regarding possible reasons for the shortage. The next stage of discussion also included the large group of stakeholders and involved brainstorming possible remedies for the shortage. This stage involved widely discrepant opinions and emotionally charged debate of options.

Central points of contention revolved around deeply held beliefs regarding the professional identity of a school counselor (with some viewing school counselors primarily as educators and others viewing school counselors as mental health professionals with specialized training to work within schools) and about the applicability of CACREP training programs to the daily responsibilities of a school counselor. Those viewing school counselors primarily as educators objected strenuously to the “mental health” emphasis of CACREP training programs, emphasized the necessity of retaining Michigan’s requirement that all school counselors hold a valid teaching certificate, and blamed the increase in training requirements for the shortage of school counselors. Conversely, those viewing school counselors as mental health professionals with specialized training for working in schools emphasized the necessity of training all school counselors as professional counselors first and as school counselors second, refused to consider lowering the training requirements and thereby choosing to forfeit CACREP accreditation standards, and tended to blame Michigan’s refusal to consider an alternative route to endorse non-certified teachers as school counselors for the shortage.

These differences in fundamental beliefs regarding the field of school counseling presented the group with many challenges as it struggled to work together collaboratively. Controversy specifically surrounded suggestions to reduce training requirements from 48 to 34 credit hours; suggestions to work toward the elimination of Michigan’s requirement that all school counselors hold valid teaching certificates; and the issue of whether to work together toward a united solution or to work separately on an institutional basis toward local

solutions. Not surprisingly, there were several times in the process in which it was questioned whether the group could indeed arrive at a unified solution and several times in which members would threaten to disengage from the process and pursue local solutions on their own.

As demonstrated in the literature on group dynamics, this stage of storming (Tuckman, 1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977) could have resulted in dissolution of the group; in superficial participation in the group combined with a lack of investment in the collaborative work to be done; or in true investment in the collaborative process. In this instance; the process of storming yielded (a) consensus that all ten counselor education institutions would commit to the process of working toward a unified response to the shortage and (b) the formation of a task force to more deeply explore possible unified responses. Included on this task force were six individuals representing affiliations with the MSCA, with the MDE, and with the Michigan Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (MACES).

This task force met regularly for approximately six months. During this process, heated debate continued within the context of a commitment to work together toward a unified response. Research into possible solutions was conducted. Consultations with the MDE were also frequent. The outcome of this task force was a recommendation to the larger (original) discussion group that the first response toward the shortage be a proposal to the MDE to create a two-tiered credentialing system for school counselors. This recommendation represented the task force's best attempt to address concerns that the 48 credit hour training requirement (and more specifically, the 600 hour internship requirement) were

responsible for decreases in admissions applications and matriculation, desires to maintain training standards for school counselors which are commensurate with the standards for other professional counselors in the state of Michigan, and deeply held convictions regarding the importance of the teaching certificate for school counselors in Michigan.

The task force then convened a meeting with the larger discussion group and presented the group with a description of its process and its recommendation. The larger discussion group concurred with the task force recommendations and called for the appointment of a subcommittee to write a proposal to the Michigan Department of Education for the creation of an experimental program allowing for a two-tiered credentialing system as recommended by the task force. Four counselor educators, two of whom also served on the governance board of the MSCA, were appointed to this subcommittee and were charged with the responsibility of writing the proposal.

In writing the proposal, the subcommittee consulted frequently with representatives of the MDE, the MSCA, and MACES. Upon completion of the written proposal, other professional associations were contacted to review the proposal and asked to write letters of support. These professional associations represented a variety of stakeholders invested in public education representing constituents who would be affected by the proposed two-tier system of endorsement. Specifically, the task force contacted: all ten universities with counselor education programs; directly related counseling associations (MCA, MSCA, and MACES); education associations [such as Michigan Association of School Administrators (MASA), the Michigan Association of School Personnel

Administrators (MASPA), and the Michigan Elementary and Middle School Principals Association (MEMSPA)]; and education-related teacher unions (the Michigan Federation of Teachers and the Michigan Education Association). Finally, the subcommittee presented the proposal to the Professional Standards Commission of the Michigan Department of Education for approval and did a final formal presentation to the state board of education. The proposal for an experimental program was officially approved by the MDE in April, 1999. Specific aspects of the program will be detailed in the following section.

The Outcome: A State-wide Experimental Endorsement Program

Effective July 1, 1999, Michigan has implemented an experimental program involving a two-tier process of credentialing for school counselors. This program is a direct result of the collaborative process engaged in by counselor educators, the Michigan School Counselor Association, and the Michigan Department of Education. Nine out of the ten counselor education institutions will be participating in this experimental program.

Specifically, the proposal presented by the subcommittee involved the creation of an Experimental Counselor Education Program as described in Rule 4, R390.1304 of the Michigan School Code. The experimental program involves the creation of a two-tiered system for the endorsement of school counselors in the State of Michigan. At the first tier, individuals will be eligible for a "Preliminary Authorization for Employment" after completion of a minimum of 34 semester hours of coursework in a school counselor training program but prior to completion of the master's degree in school counseling. This authorization for employment will be valid for a maximum of three (3) years, during which the

school counselor would be expected to complete the remaining requirements for a master's degree and the (full) Endorsement as a School Counselor. Failure to meet the requirements for Endorsement within the three year time limit will result in expiration of the Preliminary Authorization for Employment.

One attractive feature of this program is that it allowed both for the development of a unified, statewide response to the school counselor shortage and for some degree of variation across universities with regard to specific requirements for the preliminary authorization for employment. Just as each university possesses slightly varying curricular requirements for a master's degree in counseling and for the full endorsement as a school counselor, each university maintained a level of autonomy regarding the course content, configuration, and sequencing to be completed by students in order to be eligible for the university's recommendation for Preliminary Authorization for Employment. Specifically, some universities will require the completion of 35 credit hours prior to recommendation for the preliminary authorization for employment whereas others will require the completion of 43 credit hours. This flexibility therefore allowed for agreement with respect to minimum standards and for each university to elect to require the completion of additional hours prior to recommending a student for preliminary authorization for employment.

It should be noted that the minimum requirements for the Preliminary Authorization for Employment as a School Counselor actually meet or surpass all specifications of the Current State Code for (full) school counselor endorsement in Michigan and yet represent an easing of requirements in comparison to the current expectations of Counselor Education Institutions. This is because the

current practice of Counselor Education Training Institutions demand that students exceed the specifications described in the State Code. Table 1 compares the specific conditions for endorsement under the current state code, for endorsement recommendations currently used by universities, and for the newly proposed Preliminary Endorsement.

(Insert Table 1 here)

The requirements for full endorsement therefore remain identical to those used in current practice, and the new idea is comprised of the creation of a time-limited preliminary endorsement. Table 2 provides a narrative description of the two levels of endorsement which will be used by universities participating in this experimental program.

(Insert Table 2 here)

Reflections

Although the actual impact of this two-tiered credentialing system on the current shortage of school counselors in Michigan may only be established through the systematic collection and analysis of data over the next five years, it is hoped that the program will have a clear and positive effect. Attractive aspects of the program include: (a) the flexibility allowing each institution to specify its curricular requirements for the preliminary endorsement; (b) the fact that the standard requirements for full endorsement remain intact; (c) the retention of the requirement for a teaching certificate; (d) the likelihood that this program will render counselor education training programs more competitive and attractive to

prospective students (who often are faced with the choice of earning a 48 hour master's degree in school counseling or earning a 30 hour master's degree in another discipline within the field of education) (e) the immediate expansion of the pool of available candidates for employment; and (f) the opportunity for school counseling students to accept employment as a school counselor and complete their internship requirements while being paid.

According to representatives of the Michigan Department of Education, this effort within counselor education was a model for proactive, effective collaboration within the field of education. Dr. Carolyn Logan, head of teacher certification and school counselor endorsement in Michigan, explained that when professions fail to respond proactively to such shortages, the result is often times a legislative attempt to address the problem. Unfortunately, such legislative mandates are rarely based on the level of expertise represented by a statewide, collaborative effort on the part of the affected profession. Dr. Logan suggested that, by collaboratively working toward a unified response to the school counselor shortage, Michigan counselor educators have perhaps avoided an external solution to the problem through legislative action and have instead taken the opportunity to use their expertise to address the problem internally. Specifically, she stated that "This shortage situation was managed in exemplary fashion whereby professionals with expertise in the field assumed leadership responsibility for the design and negotiation of a strategy to increase the supply of practitioners. More importantly, this approach assures compliance with existing standards, rather than lowering standards as commonly proposed by those less informed." (C. Logan, personal communication, January 3, 2000).

Despite this commendation from the Michigan Department of Education, time is needed to determine the impact of the experimental program on the shortage itself and on public perceptions. Whether additional, external solutions will be forthcoming via legislative action remains to be seen. In the meantime, careful monitoring of the shortage will continue. In addition, the large discussion group continues to meet and work collaboratively toward additional possible solutions.

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Table 1:

A Comparison of School Counselor Endorsement Requirements in Michigan

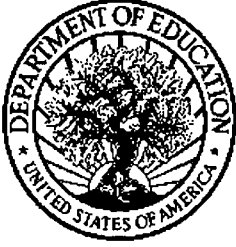
Current State Code Requirements for Full Endorsement	Current University Requirements for Full Endorsement	Requirements for Preliminary Authorization for Employment
<p>1) An applicant for endorsement shall possess a current valid Michigan teaching certificate. The sponsoring institution shall make recommendation concerning counselor endorsement at the appropriate level or levels, elementary and secondary, for which he qualifies.</p> <p>2) An applicant shall have successfully completed an approved counselor education program of not less than 18 hours of credit. The program shall be approved by the state board of education and shall include the following skills and current areas or their equivalent:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guidance services - philosophy, principles and practices • Individual and group analysis - nature and range of human characteristics and appraisal methods <p>Guidance information - vocational development theory, educational and occupational information</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counseling theory and practice - individual and group procedures, administration and coordination relationships, professional relationships and ethics 	<p>1) An applicant for endorsement shall possess a current valid Michigan teaching certificate. The sponsoring institution shall make recommendation concerning counselor endorsement at the appropriate level or levels, elementary and secondary, for which he qualifies.</p> <p>2) An applicant shall have successfully completed a master's degree* in an approved counselor education program. The program shall be approved by the state board of education and shall include the following skills and current areas or their equivalent:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guidance services - philosophy, principles and practices • Individual and group analysis - nature and range of human characteristics and appraisal methods • Guidance information - vocational development theory, educational and occupational information • Counseling theory and practice - individual and group procedures, administration and coordination relationships, professional relationships and ethics 	<p>1) An applicant for preliminary endorsement shall possess a current valid teaching certificate. The sponsoring institution shall make recommendation concerning counselor endorsement at the appropriate level or levels, elementary and secondary, for which he qualifies.</p> <p>2) An applicant shall have completed a minimum of 34 credit hours in a master's degree program in an approved counselor education program. The program shall be approved by the state board of education and shall include the following skills and current areas or their equivalent:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guidance services - philosophy, principles and practices • Individual and group analysis - nature and range of human characteristics and appraisal methods • Guidance information - vocational development theory, educational and occupational information • Counseling theory and practice - individual and group procedures, administration and coordination relationships, professional relationships and ethics

Current State Code Requirements for Full Endorsement	Current University Requirements for Full Endorsement	Requirements for Preliminary Authorization for Employment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supervised experiences - laboratory, practicum, or internship • Evaluation - statistics and research methodology, follow-up evaluation, and measurement methods <p>3) The applicant shall take and pass the Michigan Guidance Counselor Test.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supervised experiences - laboratory, practicum, or internship • Evaluation - statistics and research methodology, follow-up evaluation, and measurement methods <p>3) The applicant shall take and pass the Michigan Guidance Counselor Test.</p> <p>*Until recently all universities which trained school counselors required that, in addition to meeting the requirements of the Current State Code (described to the left), each student also complete a masters degree**. Currently one university has eliminated this requirement.</p> <p>**The requirements for that masters varied from 32 - 48 credits. Students graduating from 48 credit hour programs are eligible both for endorsement as a School Counselor and for licensure as a Professional Counselor. Students graduating from a master's degree program with fewer than 48 credit hours are never eligible for licensure as professional counselors in Michigan.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supervised experiences - laboratory, practicum, or internship • Evaluation - statistics and research methodology, follow-up evaluation, and measurement methods <p>3) The applicant shall take and pass the Michigan Guidance Counselor Test.</p> <p>4) The Preliminary Endorsement is valid for a maximum of three (3) years. During this time, the applicant shall complete the requirements for a master's degree program in an approved counselor education program to receive the (full) Endorsement as a School Counselor.</p>

Table 2.

Michigan's Experimental Two-Tiered Credentialing System for School Counselors

Endorsement Level	Brief Description of Requirements
Preliminary Authorization for Employment	<p>Counselor Education students will be eligible for a preliminary school counselor endorsement after completion of a minimum of 34 semester hours toward a master's degree in an approved program, through which they meet all curricular requirements of the Current State Code for endorsement (including passage of the Michigan Guidance Counselor Test) but prior to their completion of the university requirements for the Master's degree. This Preliminary Endorsement will be valid for a maximum of three (3) years during which time the individual is expected to complete all remaining requirements for the 48 hour Master's Degree and the (full) School Counselor Endorsement. Failure to obtain the Master's degree will result in expiration of the Preliminary endorsement.</p>
Full School Counselor Endorsement	<p>Counselor Education students will be eligible for a full School Counselor Endorsement after completion of 48 hour Master's Degree Program and recommendation of the University.</p>



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