

School Counselors and School-Community Partnerships:

Perceptions From School Counselors

Sabri Dogan
Siirt University

Colette T. Dollarhide and David Julian
The Ohio State University

Abstract

Numerous authors have called for school counselors to be leaders in school-community collaborative partnerships, yet current research pertaining to school counselors' involvement with such efforts is lacking. This survey was conducted to ascertain school counselors' perceptions of their role and training relative to school-community partnerships in a Midwestern state.

Keywords: school counseling, school counselor, partnership, community, leadership

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Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.
Helen Keller

Despite the widespread employment of professional mental health and other service providers in schools, there is general agreement that schools are not able to address all students' challenges and problems (Anderson et al., 2008). Therefore, school personnel may be encouraged to utilize school, family, and community partnership programs to foster student development and positive educational outcomes. According to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), school counselors have leadership, consultation, communication, and management skills (ASCA, 2012). Consequently, counselors are encouraged to take an active role in partnership programs that address students' needs and challenges (Bryan & Henry, 2012; Griffin & Farris, 2010).

Increased attention has been given to school, family, and community partnership programs because such programs are believed to be effective in addressing students' complex and multi-causal challenges and problems (Bryan, 2005; Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Dogan, 2017; Griffin & Farris, 2010; Mitchell & Bryan, 2007; Steen & Noguera, 2010; Stinchfield & Zyromski, 2010). School, family, and community partnerships are collaborative practices between school personnel, families, community members, and community organizations (Bryan, 2005; Bryan & Henry, 2012; Mitchell & Bryan, 2007). These partnerships allow school professionals to work directly with community members and community-based organizations such as public mental health agencies, universities, businesses, churches, libraries and social service agencies to

create and implement programs that support students' academic and nonacademic concerns (Bemak, 2000; Bryan, 2005; Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). It has been documented that school and community partnership programs have direct impact on increased positive educational outcomes, social capital and support for families, and career opportunities for students (Bryan, 2005; Mitchell & Bryan, 2007). In addition, school personnel can build educational resilience in children, empower families, and bring together school stakeholders to focus on mutual goals (Bemak, 2000; Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Epstein (2010) argued that partnerships among schools, families, and communities must be understood as an official component of school, since research supports the contention that students learn more when parents, educators and others in the community take active roles in the learning process.

School counselors have highly relevant leadership, consultation, and management skills that position them to assist students in their personal, social, academic, communication, and career development needs through a variety of partnership programs (ASCA, 2012; Bemak, 2000; Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2004, 2007; Colbert, 1996; Dogan & Julian, 2019; Mitchell & Bryan, 2007; Stockton & Dogan, 2019; Yavuz et al., 2019). Moreover, school counselors are expected to take an active leadership role in planning, implementing, and evaluating school, family, and community partnership programs (ASCA, 2012). Historically, school counselors' basic roles and actions in school and community partnerships have included leadership, facilitation, advising, coordination, collaboration, advocacy, and evaluation (Bemak, 2000; Epstein, 2018; Griffin & Farris, 2010; Steen & Noguera, 2010). Theorists and other educational reform advocates suggest school counselors should perceive themselves as change

agents rather than professionals who provide only direct services (Keys et al., 1998). Participation of professional school counselors in the process of developing partnerships with the community has been valued and highlighted (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Over time, school counselors have been expected to take active roles in addressing school stakeholders' needs through partnerships with appropriate community organizations (Griffin & Farris, 2010).

In order to work more effectively and efficiently with students, Steen and Noguera (2010) recommend that school counselors engage families and community members in their children's education, partner to provide high-quality P-12 enrichment and out-of-school experiences, and collaborate to connect children to health and other critical services. School counselors who know how to find and utilize community resources located in businesses, community agencies, and community-based organizations are more likely to meet students' needs (Mitchell & Bryan, 2007). To gain optimal benefit from school and community partnerships, Epstein and Van Voorhis (2010) proposed that school counselors spend as much as 20% of their time on strengthening partnerships by working with stakeholders including educators, parents, and community partners to plan, apply, and evaluate partnership experiences.

Some useful partnership models promoting positive student outcomes have been suggested (Bryan & Henry, 2012; Epstein, 1995). Bryan and Henry (2012) provided a partnership process model for school counselors as a road map for partnerships. The model includes seven stages: (a) preparing to partner, (b) needs and strength assessment, (c) coming together, (d) creating shared vision and plan, (e) action, (f) evaluation and celebration, and (g) maintaining momentum. Similarly, Epstein (1995)

offered a partnership framework that includes six types of family involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. In this model, collaborating with community consists of identifying resources and services from the community to better serve students and their families (Epstein, 1995; Mitchell & Bryan, 2007; Simon & Epstein, 2001). Bryan and Holcomb-McCoy (2004) identified several types of school and community partnerships including mentoring programs, parent centers, family and community members as teachers' aides, parent and community volunteer programs, home visiting programs, parent education programs, school-business partnerships, parents and community members in site-based management, and tutoring programs. Myende (2019) argued that "collaborative planning and decision-making, effective two-way communication, eagerness to address power issues, and the creation of a culture that promotes participative leadership" (p. 1001) are necessary for partnership programs to be last longing, useful, and sustainable.

Rapidly increasing numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse students across the country requires school counselors to reexamine their role and perceptions about partnership programs and partner with families and other institutions (Aydin et al., 2012). School counselors are encouraged to utilize family meetings, informational sessions, relevant workshops, community-based meetings (Cook et al., 2012; Mitchell & Bryan, 2007), faculty support for classroom guidance lessons on diversity, and building bridges to families using diversity awareness week (Goh et al., 2007) to strengthen their connection with diverse parents. Aydin (2011) conducted a research study with school counselors to explore their involvement in school, family, and community partnerships

with linguistically diverse families, finding that race, ethnicity, and bilingual status were important factors related to partnerships with such diverse families. Aydin (2011) and Cook et al. (2012) found that non-White and bilingual school counselors had higher involvement rates than White school counselors with diverse families. School counselors who had higher numbers of linguistically diverse students had also higher level of involvement with families (Aydin, 2011).

Bryan and Holcomb-McCoy (2004, 2007) conducted a series of studies to identify school counselors' perceptions regarding their involvement in school and community partnerships. Study participants reported that school counselor involvement in school and community partnerships was critically important. However, high school counselors reported significant barriers that hindered their involvement in school and community partnerships. Bryan and Holcomb-McCoy (2007) further identified school counselor factors and school-related factors that significantly affected school counselors' involvement in school and community partnerships. They identified five school counselor factors related to school counselors' involvement: (a) perceptions of their roles functions as school counselors; (b) confidence in ability, skills, and knowledge to implement partnerships; (c) commitment to advocacy; (d) attitudes about partnerships and families; (e) and perceived barriers to engaging in partnerships. In addition to these five factors, Bryan and Holcomb-McCoy (2007) identified three school-related factors that may impact school counselors' involvement in school and community partnership: school climate, principal support, and school practices related to partnerships. School-related factors appear to have greater influence on school counselors' involvement than do the school counselor related factors (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007).

Past research also suggested that when principals stop supporting partnerships, other school personnel lose interest, and the inclination to maintain such efforts (Van Voorhis & Sheldon, 2004). Moreover, too many school counselor responsibilities, large caseloads, and lack of time are barriers to school counselor involvement in school and community partnership programs (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2004). Dedicating time to partnership programs would mean spending less time providing services to individual students, testing, and scheduling.

Although course work related to partnership programs might be available in some counseling training programs, a need exists for training in teacher education programs because future educators may be inadequately trained to conduct successful partnership programs (Epstein, 2018). Epstein and Sanders (2006) found that almost ninety percent of deans, chairs, and others in colleges of education believe that it is important for all school counselors to know how to work effectively with the community and implement partnership programs. However, less than 30% of these educators reported that they prepared their students to participate in such collaborative activities. Graduate training for school counselors has typically not taught about the importance of school and community partnerships (Bemak, 2000). It is important to note that it is not enough to educate school counseling students about school, family, and community partnerships; they must also be educated about how to advocate for and participate in partnership programs that promote students' well-being and development (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2004).

Based on this review, discussions about school counselors' leadership of and roles in school-family-community collaborative partnerships appear in the literature in

the early 2000s. Years have elapsed since such research took place. It is time to investigate what, if any, progress has been made regarding the value and perceived role that school counselors play in collaborative partnerships. It is noted that while previous research explored school-family-community partnerships, this study used school-community partnership language in the survey design. In this study, participants were surveyed regarding the following four questions: (a) What is the current status of school-community collaborative partnerships? (b) Are school counselors in charge of partnership programs? (c) How do school counselors and principals describe an ideal partnership situation in schools? (d) What are the barriers to school counselors taking an active role in school-community partnerships?

Method

Procedures

This survey-based study was designed to capture the perceptions of school counselors and principals as they considered their role with school-community partnerships and collaboratives. Once IRB exemption status was determined, permission was sought from the state school counselor association to use the email system to contact potential respondents, who were then asked to forward the recruitment email to their principal in an attempt to solicit administrative perceptions of school counselors' role in school-community partnerships and collaboratives. Two rounds of invitations were sent so that participants would have multiple opportunities to provide information. The recruitment email was sent to professional school counselors who were members of the Ohio School Counselor Association. The total number of respondents was 138. Usable response sets totaled 107 school counselors and 11

principals. This response rate provides *suggestive* data that needs to be interpreted cautiously due to the poor return rate. The poor response rate did not provide *conclusive* results regarding the research questions.

Participants

The participants included a wide variety of backgrounds and experience, as can be seen in Table A1. Percentages are presented in terms of the total responses for each question, which may not be equal to the final participant pool due to missing data. Ultimately, the respondent pool included 81 school counselors and 10 principals. First, the demographic patterns are presented for the school counselor respondents, then it is presented for the principal respondents. In terms of school setting, school counseling respondents represented all three educational levels, including 2 respondents from K-12 buildings. In terms of location context, the three broad categories of urban (28%), rural (43%), and suburban (28%) were represented. Variability was evident in respondents' experience as school counselors: 18 (22%) reported less than 1 year of experience, 28 (34%) reported between 1 and 5 years of experience, 19 (24%) reported between 6 and 10 years of experience, and 16 (20%) reported more than 10 years of experience. Overall experiences in education suggested the range of respondents also varied: 5 (6%) reported less than 1 year of experience, 15 (19%) reported between 1 and 5 years of experience, 12 (15%) reported between 6 and 10 years of experience, and 49 (61%) reported more than 10 years of experience. For principal respondents, notable differences from this pattern are visible in that the principal respondents were primarily from the middle schools ($n = 6$, 60%), a majority had 1 to 5 years' experience as a principal ($n = 7$, 70%), and yet they all had significant experience in education

($n = 9$, 90% of principal respondents had more than 10 years of experience in education).

Instruments

First, respondents provided demographic information in terms of their current job classification, school counseling setting in terms of school level, urban, rural, or suburban school, years on current job, and years in education field. Respondents were then asked to rate their agreement on a 5-point Likert-like scale (strongly disagree, disagree, not sure, agree, strongly agree) to various statements related to school counselor involvement with school-community partnership programs.

Seven statements were presented to determine participants' status of involvement in partnership programs, their attitudes toward such partnership programs, and to explore barriers to school counselor involvement with school-community partnerships. Specifically, respondents were asked to indicate their agreement to and their general attitudes toward, the following statements: (a) school counselors are involved; (b) school counselors play significant roles in how these partnerships operate; (c) school counselors are in charge of these partnerships; (d) school counselors could play a more active role; (e) school counselors are prepared to take an active role; (f) it is appropriate for school counselors to be involved; and (g) these partnerships are important tools in promoting academic success. To assess barriers, respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement to four statements: release time is essential if school counselors are to take a more active role in these partnerships; the need for training to manage such partnerships; school leaders would be highly supportive of involvement with partnerships; and key stakeholders in the community recognize the

importance of community involvement in education. Data was analyzed using SPSS statistical software.

Results

The findings of this study were organized and presented by four major research questions. Table A2 presents the findings of this survey. Research question one asked: What is the current status of school-community collaborative partnerships? When responses focused on the respondents' current status of school-community collaborative partnerships, a majority of school counselors agreed or strongly agreed that school counselors are involved in school-community partnerships (83%). School counselors stated that they play a significant role in such partnerships programs (65%) and could play a more active role (68%). In addition, school counselors claimed that they were prepared to take an active role in partnerships (74%), that it is appropriate for school counselors in their district to be involved in partnerships (93%), and that such partnerships are an important tool in promoting academic success (94%).

Research question two asked: Are school counselors in charge of partnership programs? When respondents focused on their responsibilities regarding partnership programs, only 47% agreed or strongly agreed that school counselors are often in charge of such partnerships. Areas where school counselors and principals disagreed, (more than 10% difference), included two topics: 70% of principals (compared to 47% of counselors) agreed or strongly agreed that school counselors are often in charge of school-community partnerships, and only 40% of principals (compared to 74% of counselors) agreed that school counselors are prepared to take an active role in these partnerships.

Research question three asked: How do school counselors and principals describe an ideal partnership situation in schools? When respondents were asked to consider their agreement to similar statements, they were asked to focus on ideal situations for schools in general. The majority of school counselors agreed that school counselors should be involved in such partnerships (96%), that school counselors should play a significant role (80%), that school counselors should play a more active role (83%), that they are prepared to take an active role (79%), and almost unanimously agreed (99%) to both statements that it is appropriate for school counselors to be involved in partnerships and that partnerships are an important tool in promoting academic success. Principals and counselors responded differently to the same two topics: only 33% of school counselors feel school counselors should be in charge of partnerships, 60% of principals feel counselors should be in charge. And 79% of counselors believe they are prepared to take an active role in such partnerships, only 60% of principals agreed.

Research question four asked: What are the barriers to school counselors taking an active role in school-community partnerships? Finally, respondents were asked to respond to questions about barriers to school counselors taking an active role in school-community partnerships. A majority of school counselor respondents (80%) agreed that they would need release time during the day to take a more active role in school-community partnerships and agreed (72%) that they would need more training in managing such partnerships. A majority agreed that school leaders would be supportive of school counselor involvement in these partnerships (63%), and 64% expressed agreement that community stakeholders would recognize the importance of involvement

in education. In comparison, principals agreed with school counselors regarding the need for release time for school-community collaborative work (70%) and additional training in managing such partnerships (70%).

The principals more strongly agreed that school leaders would be highly supportive of school counselor involvement (80%, as compared to school counselors' positive responses at 63%), and similarly concurred that community stakeholders would recognize the value of involvement in education (90%, as compared to school counselors' positive responses at 64%).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to learn from school counselors the nature of their involvement and their perceptions related to school-community collaborative partnerships. The study's focus deviated from previous research in that it surveyed perceptions regarding school-community partnerships rather than school-family-community partnerships. In addition, this study surveyed the perceptions of principals about school counselors and school-community collaboratives.

The findings of this study indicate that there was almost unanimous agreement that it is appropriate for school counselors to be involved with school-community partnerships and that such partnerships are an important tool for academic success. This perceptual foundation varies when looking at the extent of the school counselors' current involvement. It seems that this study's participants are involved in school-community partnerships, support significant involvement, and believe that they are prepared for an active role in school-community partnerships. This finding is consistent with what Moran and Bodenhorn (2015) found. In a study that included the family

component, Bryan and Holcomb-McCoy (2004, 2007) also found that school counselors believed that their involvement in school-family-community partnerships was very important.

However, school counselor *leadership* of school-community collaboratives shows much lower support, below 50% agreement. Interestingly, principals and school counselors have the opposite percentage on two questions: leadership and preparation. While school counselors expressed low agreement that they are in charge of collaboratives, a majority of principals thought they were in charge. While school counselors expressed high agreement that they are prepared to take an active role in collaboratives, principals expressed doubt about their preparation. McCarthy and Watson (2018) argued that school counselors should take a leadership role in promoting school-family-community partnership programs. Bryan et al. (2017) found a strong correlation between school counselors' leadership skills and their involvement in partnership programs. In addition, school counselors' self-efficacy, role perception, and principals' expectations impact counselors' partnership involvement.

When looking at the ideal situation in schools in general, the same pattern emerges, but only one third of the school counselors express that they should be in charge, while two-thirds of principals believe they should be. In this category, principals express more agreement that school counselors are prepared to take an active role in these partnerships; this suggests that they may have doubts about the school counselors they work with, but not about the profession of school counseling as a whole. Principals' support is crucial for school counselors' involvement in partnership programs. For instance, Van Voorhis and Sheldon (2004) found that when principals

stop supporting partnerships, other school personnel lose interest, and the inclination to maintain such efforts.

It appears that most of these respondents believe that school-community partnership programs do have direct impact on increased positive educational outcomes. However, it is interesting that school counselors in this study seemed less confident that the community is willing to partner with schools. Further, it is worth noting that the topic of leadership of these collaboratives was not positively accepted by these responding school counselors, who did agree that they are and should be involved, that they are and should be playing a significant role, that they are and should be playing a more active role, and that they are and should be well prepared to play that active role. However, they eschewed leadership, even though principal respondents thought they were and should be in charge of the school-community partnership. More study needs to be done to understand respondents' perspectives toward leadership.

Finally, when examining barriers, school counselors and principals agree that release time would be important for school counselors to take more active roles with these partnerships, and they agree that school counselors could use more training with how to manage a school-community partnership. School counselors seemed to hold less confidence than principals, however, that school leaders would support their school counselors being more involved with collaboratives, and that community stakeholders would be willing to become involved with the school. Research has been conducted to determine the barriers hindering school counselors' involvement in partnership programs (Bryan et al., 2017; Bryan and Holcomb-McCoy, 2004, 2007; Moran & Bodenhorn, 2015). For example Bryan and Holcomb-McCoy (2007) found that school

counselors' perceptions, confidence, skills and knowledge, commitment, and attitudes as well as school climate, principal support, and school practices related to partnerships could be barriers for school counselors' involvement. Bryan and Holcomb-McCoy (2007) argued that school-related factors have greater influence on school counselors' involvement than school counselor related factors. Finally, like this study, Moran and Bodenhorn (2015) found time and schedules as the most common barriers to collaboration.

Implications

For practitioners, this is a reminder that these school-community collaboratives are varied in nature and form, but that they are essential for student success. It is also a call to action to remind practitioners that these partnerships are valued by school administrators, and that school administrators expect school counselors to be in charge of such collaboratives. School principal respondents of this study endorsed the statement that they would be highly supportive of school counselor involvement in these partnerships.

For school counselor educators, these findings suggest the need for continued training in leadership, advocacy, and collaboration/consultation (Bemak, 2000; Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2004, 2015). Based on this study, it might be argued that this is an area that, while expressing confidence in their preparation, counselors still report reluctance to accept this leadership role. Explicit practice in establishing and maintaining collaboratives with the community in field experiences would benefit school counselors-in-training.

Limitations and Future Research

The limitations of this study are found in the very low response rate, especially among principals. While the responses from school counselors is informative, the small response set from principals is merely suggestive and indicative of the need for more exploration of this topic. Because this is an exploratory study, it was deemed valuable to provide such information to form a context for understanding the topic, but it suggests that much more study needs to be done. Further, the fact that this study represents respondents from one Midwest state and who are members of the state school counseling association further limits generalization from these results. Caution needs to be exercised in drawing conclusions from the small sample that is limited professionally and geographically. Finally, comparison of results to previous research is limited by the lack of focus on family partnerships in the survey language of the current study.

Additional research is urged to address questions arising from these results. A national study of this topic is warranted, as is further exploration of the leadership question. Both of these topics could lend themselves to qualitative and quantitative approaches. In addition, this study found that principals and school counselors have different opinions regarding school counselors' leadership and preparation for effective collaboration programs. Further studies may explore the reasons why principals and school counselors take different perspectives.

Conclusion

School counselors serve large numbers of students, with the unique charge of providing for the academic, career, and personal/social needs of each student in the building. There are many situations in which students' issues transcend the school

building, involving the community at large. Concurrently, there are many persons and organizations in the community who are willing to work with schools, whose resources and energy will provide the web of significance that will support students in their development (Starkman et al., 1999). When school counselors engage in building school-community partnerships, those resources have an effect on students' and families' issues, resulting in better quality education for all. This study suggests that school counselors are involved with, but not leading, these partnerships, and yet school counselors have unique training and skills in leadership that could make these partnerships highly effective. Therefore, although school counselors are trained to be transformational leaders and advocates, it would be beneficial for more counselors to assume additional leadership roles in their respective settings to demonstrate and substantiate their competence and skills. More study is needed to understand why leadership is not being accepted in these collaborative efforts.

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Appendix

Table A1

Participant Demographics

Demographic Variable	School Counselor Respondents		Principal Respondents	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
School Level				
Elementary	20	25	3	30
Middle	14	17	6	60
High	43	53	1	10
K-12	2	2		
School Environment				
Urban	23	28	1	10
Rural	35	43	6	60
Suburban	23	28	3	30
Length of Time in Current Job				
Less than 1 year	18	22	1	10
1 to 5 years	28	34	7	70
6 to 10 years	19	24	0	0
More than 10 years	16	20	2	20
Length of Time in Education				
Less than 1 year	5	6	0	0
1 to 5 years	15	19	0	0
6 to 10 years	12	15	1	10
More than 10 years	49	61	9	90

Table A2

Survey Results Based on Those Whose Survey Responses Indicated Agree or Strongly Agree

Survey Statements	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Number (Percent) who indicated Agree and Strongly Agree	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Number (Percent) who indicated Agree and Strongly Agree
Current Reality, Anchored in My School						
School counselors in my school or schools in my district are involved in school and community partnerships.	4.05	.921	67 (83)	4.00	.943	8 (80)
School counselors in my school or schools in my district play significant roles in how school and community partnerships operate.	3.68	1.06	53 (65)	3.50	1.36	6 (60)
School counselors in my school or schools in my district are often in charge of school and community partnerships.	3.26	1.15	38 (47)	3.30	1.42	7 (70)*
School counselors in my school or schools in my district could play a more active role in school and community partnerships.	3.6	.996	55 (68)	3.50	1.27	6 (60)
School counselors in my school or schools in my district are prepared to take an active role in school and community partnerships.	3.84	.798	60 (74)	3.30	1.42	4 (40)*
It is appropriate for school counselors in my school or schools in my district to be involved in school and community partnerships.	4.21	.702	75 (93)	4.30	.483	10 (100)
Community partnerships are an important tool in promoting academic success.	4.35	.793	76 (94)	4.70	.483	10 (100)
Ideal Situation in Schools in General						
School counselors should be involved in school and community partnerships.	4.43	.569	78 (96)	4.40	.516	10 (100)

Survey Statements	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Number (Percent) who indicated Agree and Strongly Agree	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Number (Percent) who indicated Agree and Strongly Agree
School counselors should play significant roles in how school and community partnerships operate.	4.12	.748	65 (80)	4.20	.632	9 (90)
School counselors should be in charge of school and community partnerships.	3.02	1.00	27 (33)*	3.70	.949	6 (60)*
School counselors should play a more active role in school and community partnerships.	4.04	.660	67 (83)	4.20	.632	9 (90)
School counselors are prepared to take an active role in school and community partnerships.	3.86	.833	64 (79)*	3.90	1.10	6 (60)*
It is appropriate for school counselors to be involved in school and community partnerships.	4.33	.548	80 (99)	4.60	.516	10 (100)
Community partnerships are an important tool in promoting academic success.	4.41	.519	80 (99)	4.70	.483	10 (100)
Possible Barriers						
I believe release time during the workday is essential if school counselors are to take a more active role in school and community partnerships.	4.12	.748	65 (80)	3.80	.919	7 (70)
I would need training to know what to do to “manage” a school and community partnership.	3.86	.848	58 (72)	3.80	1.14	7 (70)
School leaders would be highly supportive of my involvement in school and community partnerships.	3.74	1.02	51 (63)*	3.70	1.06	8 (80)*
Key stakeholders in my community recognize the importance of community involvement in education.	3.72	.869	52 (64)*	4.00	.471	9 (90)*

Note. Scale responses included: 1 (*strongly disagree*), 2 (*disagree*), 3 (*not sure*), 4 (*agree*), 5 (*strongly agree*).

* Indicates more than 10 percentage points between school counselor responses and principal responses.