Building Caring Schools: Implications for Professional School Counselors

Shannon L. Ray

Nova Southeastern University

Glenn Lambie

University of Central Florida

Jennifer Curry

Louisiana State University

Abstract

Professional school counselors (PSCs) can support school personnel in promoting educational climates conducive to optimal student academic and social development. Critical elements in fostering caring schools include encouraging positive relationships; providing leadership for teachers and school personnel; facilitating collaboration between stakeholders; and providing psychoeducation. This article introduces the qualities and benefits of a caring school climate, outlines the role of PSCs in supporting caring schools, and offers practical implications and a case illustration of a PSC supporting a positive educational climate.

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School climate incorporates the physical and emotional safety of students and teachers; this sense of safety is a necessary element for building caring schools (Manning & Bucher, 2003; Peterson & Skiba, 2001). While school climate is a general concept that captures the atmosphere of the school; it encompasses the attitudes, feelings, and behaviors of students and school personnel (Hernandez & Seem, 2004). Research suggests that in a positive school climate, there is an emphasis on (a) academic learning, (b) effective discipline policies, (c) respect for others in school, (d) attention given to students' safety, and (e) involvement of the family and community in the students' lives (Elliot, Grady, Shaw & Beaulieu, 2000; Moos, 2003).

School climate may enhance or impede students' academic achievement. The school environment is based upon the interactions between the school and the community, students and the classroom, students and teachers, and students and other school personnel (Hoy, Smith, & Sweetland, 2003). Manning and Bucher (2003) identified a caring school climate as one in which students, teachers, and other school personnel communicate in a positive and proactive manner that emphasizes the value of relationships and achievement of individual potential. Further, the establishment of a trusting climate that is comfortable, safe, and supportive enhances students' learning (Hoy et al., 2003; Peterson & Skiba, 2001). Reciprocal trusting and caring relationships between teachers (and other school personnel) and students is also important (Noddings, 1992). Positive school climates that are built on trusting relationships contribute to improved student engagement and heightened academic achievement (Buckley, Storino, & Sebastiani, 2003). Optimal classrooms infuse a sense of belonging

and community building, including attention to the psychosocial dynamics of students and teachers (Lundquist, Kjellberg & Holmberg, 2002; Schroeder, 2005). Essentially, a caring, trusting, engaging, and inclusive school climate promotes students' achievement and holistic development.

However, many school climates do not possess these qualities. For example, in the school year 1999-2000, 71% of schools in the United States indicated the occurrence of at least one violent incident (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004). According to Josephson Institute of Ethics (2002), 1 in 3 high school students verbalized not feeling safe at school. In 2003, 9.2% of high school students reported being threatened or injured with some type of weapon while at school or on school property (Bowman, 2004). Adolescents are involved in approximately two million crimes annually (Erickson, Mataini, & McGuire, 2004). Further, Buckley and colleagues (2003) reported that 30% of middle school students were victims of physical aggression at school in any given year, with students in general reporting heightened incidents of missing school resultant from safety concerns (Bowman, 2004). Given these facts, it is important for all school personnel to understand the need for a safe and caring school climate.

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) advocates that professional school counselors' (PSCs) roles and responsibilities include supporting all students' academic, career, and personal/social development and achievement (ASCA, 2005a). More specifically, ASCA (2005b) states that PSCs "recognize the need for all students to attend school in a safe, orderly and caring environment" (p. 1). Therefore, this article provides PSCs with information and strategies on how to collaborate with other school

personnel in order to promote caring school environments that support students' holistic development and attainment. More specifically, it (a) introduces the qualities and benefits of a caring school climate, (b) outlines the role of PSCs in supporting caring schools, and (c) offers practical implications and a case illustration of a PSC supporting a positive educational climate.

<div align="center">The Caring School Climate</div>

A caring school climate may support and promote students' overall development. According to Clark (2005), "A caring school environment can increase students' feelings of empathy for others, reduce inter-group tensions and antisocial behavior, improve moral judgment and build positive feelings towards others" (p. 9). Additionally, school climates have critical impact on students' perceptions and behavior with particular impact on students "at-risk" of being labeled with emotional and behavioral disorders (Sprott, 2004). Further, peer relationships are important contributors to students' development. Where, emotional bonding among students (i.e., attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief; classroom management; responsiveness to students; academic goals) has a significant positive relationship to students' academic achievement and attendance (Sprott). From a curricular standpoint, students' classroom involvement and investment has a strong effect (accounts for up to 25% of the shared variance) on students' standardized academic tests (Bolin, 2005). Students and teachers sense of belonging within their classrooms and schools contributes positively to the learning of all students (Ma, 2003). Furthermore, students who feel connected to their schools and classrooms have been found to engage in increased prosocial behaviors and less behavioral disruption (Blum, 2005). In other words, students who

feel connected and are involved in a caring school climate during their educational process are more successful in the academic and behavioral realms.

Students at-risk for behavioral problems often have difficulty meeting the expectations of standardized classroom environments. Common disciplinary practices are punitive: referrals, detention, withdrawal of privileges, and suspension. However, punitive disciplinary measures are not an effective method for promoting either positive environments or prosocial behaviors in children—specifically those at-risk for behavioral difficulties (Skiba & Peterson, 2003). Additionally, Christle, Jolivette and Nelson (2005) found that the practice of school suspension in response to student disciplinary problems has not been found to be an effective approach in addressing these young students' needs. Consistency in school and classroom expectations and rules remains imperative. Students exhibiting noncompliant and disruptive behaviors are often re-enacting modeled behaviors at home (systemic dysfunctionality) (Lambie & Sias, 2005). This makes unstructured classroom situations especially difficult for these students to navigate. Hence, students exhibiting behavior problems are often a "poor fit" (Skiba & Peterson, p. 68) with the typical classroom expectations. These students particularly need social skills training (psychoeducational groups) as well as an understanding of why the rules are in place (Hernandez & Seem, 2004).

Effective schools and classrooms have clear communication, orderliness, and teachers who expect students to be successful (Kelley, Thornton, & Daugherty, 2005). Additionally, positive school and classroom climates have common elements. These include a proactive and specific discipline policy that the students can easily understand as well as an emphasis on academic learning. It is also important for educators to have

respect for students and a belief that all students can learn. Family and community involvement is an additional necessary element (Davis & Lambie, 2005; Elliot et al., 2000; Moos, 2003). Therefore, all educators need to collaborate in an effort to promote these critical contributors to a caring school climate.

The Role of Professional School Counselors

PSCs hold a leadership role in the development, implementation, and maintenance of school climates (Britzman, 2005; Musheno & Talbert, 2002). Additionally, PSCs possess advanced training in counseling, classroom guidance, consultation, and advocacy that puts them in a position to promote positive systemic and climactic change (Cunningham & Sandhu, 2000; Lambie & Sias, 2005). Further, PSCs have a critical role in preparing students to become motivated life-long learners with self-reflective capabilities (ASCA, 2005a; Bemak & Chung, 2005; Hayes & Paisley, 2002). The research suggests that effective PSCs have personal and interpersonal awareness and strong coping skills and are: caring, flexible, affectively healthy, open-minded, self-directed, empathic, adaptive, and collaborative (Hayes & Paisley, 2002). Thus, PSCs possessing these qualities are in an excellent position to lead their schools in developing caring educational systems.

The PSCs role as a collaborative consultant and coordinator of services that support students' holistic development align with promoting a caring school. Suggested roles for PSCs in promoting a caring school climate are outlined in Table 1. Additionally, PSCs are in a unique position to impact the school environment at all grade levels and across schools and districts. With their advanced training in communication skills, relationship building, referral assistance, and reinforcement techniques, the PSC can

provide an invaluable service that improves the environment for all students (Britzman, 2005; Cunningham & Sandhu, 2000; Musheno & Talbert, 2002). Hernandez and Seem (2004) found that comprehensive professional school counseling programs effectively promote caring learning environments. Further, as leaders and advocates for systemic change within schools, PSCs in collaboration with all stakeholders (administrators, school personnel, parents/caregivers, students, and community members) may be catalysts in promoting and nurturing a caring school climate.

<center>Implications for Professional School Counselors</center>

As noted, the PSC plays an integral role in building positive school climates (Britzman, 2005; Cunningham & Sandhu, 2000; Musheno & Talbert, 2002). PSCs possess the training and skills necessary to educate and role model dispositions (i.e., honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship [ASCA, 2005b]) that reflect an optimal academic and psychosocial learning environment. PSCs may help the school develop a shared vision that incorporates core values of all stakeholders (Rion-Gaboury, 2005). This includes imparting information to teachers and other school personnel about positive self-talk techniques (e.g., intrapersonal statements of capability, self-efficacy, and affirmation that assist students in heightening their self-esteem and competencies) that may be role-modeled and taught to all students. PSCs should have extensive community networks and may utilize those to foster positive classroom communities; for example, students engaging in disruptive classroom behaviors or suffering from emotional difficulties can be linked with community mental health agencies. Such referrals may improve not only the attitudes of individual students, but also that of the entire school (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001).

This collaboration fosters cohesiveness amongst the school, the family, and the community (Canfield & Ballard, 2004).

Family and School Connection

There are specific tasks that PSCs may employ to promote a caring school climate. These deliberate actions include collaboratively constructing a written behavioral expectation policy for students and all school personnel. It is also important for PSCs to engage stakeholders within families and communities; specific examples include PSCs facilitating groups for families and hosting parent workshops, spearheading service learning projects, networking with community members, and coordinating good multimodal communication between home and school (i.e., school counseling program newsletters, webpage, telephone calls, student portfolio projects, etc.). As highlighted in Table 1, PSCs may achieve many of these goals by facilitating psychoeducational groups for students, caregivers, and school personnel. Specific topics are myriad but may include (a) communication skills training, (b) conflict resolution, (c) anger and stress management, (d) bullying, (e) parenting skills, and (f) relationship-building.

According to ASCA (2005b), PSCs should take a collaborative leadership role in violence prevention. This is particularly important considering the heightened incidences of school violence in recent years (Erickson, Maitaini, & McGuire, 2004; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2004). Three approaches to violence prevention in schools that the PSC may lead include prevention through psychoeducation (the classroom guidance curriculum); identification and intervention for at-risk students; and appropriate response to incidences (Peterson & Skiba, 2001). For further clarification regarding

PSCs and school safety, please see ASCA (2005b); Hernandez, and Seem (2004); and Peterson and Skiba (2001).

Family-school collaboration that emphasizes communication and enhances resources contributes to safer schools (Peterson & Skiba, 2001). Family involvement in schools benefits students and all school personnel. This includes heightened academic achievement as well as social and emotional development (Davis & Lambie, 2005; Elliot et al., 2000). Therefore, a central goal in promoting a caring school climate is for PSCs to foster increased family engagement in students' educational experience.

Assisting Classroom Teachers

PSCs may support teachers by providing psychoeducation on the benefits of holding regular classroom meetings. Classroom meetings involve utilizing principles of civic education in aligning the democratic process by incorporating viewpoints of all stakeholders (students, teacher[s], and the PSC). Classroom meetings should be held on a weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly basis; the frequency and duration of the meetings is specific to the school environment such as classroom size and school setting. The classroom meeting should include the teacher and all students. The classroom meeting may provide a forum for discussion of general classroom functioning (both positive and negative) as well as allow for student input regarding classroom rules. The PSC's understanding of group dynamics may enhance classroom communication. Topics for classroom meetings may also include explicit instruction in problem-solving, respectful behavior, and social skills that may assist in reducing behavioral difficulties (Edwards & Mullis, 2003). Furthermore, since character education programs are mandated in many schools; the classroom meeting is one place the character education curriculum may be

implemented. PSCs can collaborate with teachers in facilitating these meetings; in cases where the teacher is not comfortable leading the meeting, a team approach may be used. Edwards and Mullis emphasized the importance of communication between teachers and PSCs. Additionally, promotion of a caring educational climate that supports collaboration between teachers in developing lessons as well as observing colleagues both teaching and conducting classroom meetings sharpens teachers' skills and enhances creativity (Wilms, 2003).

PSCs may support classroom teachers in multiple areas (e.g., focus on positive student behaviors, establish clear and concise rules, judiciously engage in praise and approval, develop knowledge in conflict resolution and social skills training, respect student differences, and foster positive communication) (Erickson et al., 2004). PSCs are tasked with utilizing their advanced training and dispositions to help establish positive school climates at all educational levels (ASCA, 2005b). PSCs have the ability to make a systemic and positive impact in all classroom and school climates. The following is a case illustration of a PSC facilitating some of the suggested strategies in promoting a caring school climate.

<div align="center">Case Illustration</div>

Applying concepts of a caring climate within the context and framework of a school's specific needs is a vital and important task for PSCs. The third author of this article was an elementary PSC in close proximity to a military base where over 80% of the students in her school were children of active military parents/caregivers. In the summer following the September 11, 2001 attacks, the military base was informed that all troops stationed at that base were being deployed to Iraq. The school administration

and I were concerned for the students and were committed to insuring that the school community would provide consistent care in a safe nurturing environment.

The administration and I collaborated in the development of a plan designed to increase both student-school connection and school-family supports. I developed a faculty in-service training to assist school personnel in identifying students' behaviors associated with fear, trauma, anxiety, or stress. Further, the faculty was given case scenarios and contingency planning in the event that a deployed parent/caregiver was killed in action.

Because many of the school personnel were military spouses, the school administration and I coordinated with parent/caregiver volunteers for respite support to teachers. In addition, I conducted a military spouse support group after school for faculty and staff. Additionally, the administration and Parent Teacher Association (PTA) provided one hot meal (dinner) each month to military faculty and their children.

During the first week of school, newsletters were sent to families informing them of the school counseling services offered. I began facilitating small group counseling for students with deployed parents/caregivers within the first month of school. During large group guidance, I focused on emotions, expressing feelings, and identifying support systems. Since the military transferred troops to this local base, there were many new students enrolled. I began a peer helper program to assist transitioning students. This program linked existing and new students and provided new students with group academic and social supports.

In addition, I extended support to parents/caregivers by conducting several workshops in an effort to assist military spouses with school-age children. These

workshops were primarily attended by women whose husbands were deployed, placing them in a single parenting role. Two workshop style programs were designed and conducted by this author in the first six weeks of school. The first was designed to promote parent-child connectivity and was titled, "*Talking to Your Child about Deployment: A Parents/Caregivers Guide for Military Transition.*" The second program was focused on assisting parents/caregivers in fostering their student's school success during family transition. It was titled, "*Helping Your Child Achieve: Strategies for Busy Parents/Caregivers.*"

In an effort to provide additional academic support for students experiencing difficult times, the faculty and I implemented several new programs. One was cross-age tutoring, where fourth or fifth grade students tutored younger students in reading and math skills. I also enlisted the help of many community stakeholders for this purpose. A local retirement community sent elderly volunteers to read to kindergarten and first grade students and to assist in art projects. Often these projects involved making banners, cards, and care packages for soldiers. Big Brothers and Big Sisters provided mentors and the Boys and Girls Club offered additional after school program opportunities. A local National Guard Unit sponsored a holiday party and provided every student in the school with coloring and activity books, crayons, and stickers.

As this case illustration demonstrated, school personnel can promote a caring school climate that supports all students' holistic development. This case illustration was of an elementary school level PSC; however, these same strategies (facilitating school programs, assisting families, and supporting teachers and students) may be appropriately adapted to the developmental needs of both middle and high school age

students. It is important to recognize that schools, families, students, and communities have unique needs; therefore, the strategies employed by the PSC to promote a caring school climate need to be tailored to the unique and ever-changing needs of the stakeholders.

Suggestions for Future Research

Current events in the United States underscore the need for safe and caring school environments. Studies that focus on early identification and interventions for at-risk students are needed (Buckley et al., 2003) to effectively reduce school violence. Additional research investigating the efficacy of specific intervention strategies PSCs can employ includes: early identification of students needing school-based counseling services; practical approaches to promoting family and community school engagement; strategies that effectively support students' educational engagement; best practices in educator preparation; reducing barriers to student learning and development; and improving student peer relationship building techniques. Each of these areas warrants further, systematic exploration.

Conclusion

PSCs can assist administrators and teachers in creating an environment conducive to supporting the academic, career, and personal/social development of all students (Roach & Kratochwill, 2004). As noted, school climates are based upon the interactions between the school and the community, students and the classroom, students and teachers, and students (along with their families) and other school personnel. In safe and caring school climates, students, teachers, and other school personnel communicate in a positive and proactive manner that emphasizes caring and

empathic relationships (Leary, Kowalski, Smith & Philips, 2003; Manning & Bucher, 2003). PSCs may support teachers in preparing students to become life-long learners by creating a school climate where students feel connected and intrinsically motivated to achieve.

PSCs are collaborative advocates for systemic change that supports all students' holistic development (ASCA, 2005a). Additionally, PSCs have a professional responsibility to promote and maintain a safe school environment for all students (ASCA, 2004). Further, PSCs' unique training and high level of inter- and intra-personal awareness, in conjunction with their empathic and caring dispositions, allows them to facilitate caring environments amongst school personnel, students and their families, and the community (Cunningham & Sandhu, 2000; Hayes & Paisley, 2002). As Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern (1990) aptly stated, "A successful school, like a successful business, is a cohesive community of shared values, beliefs, rituals, and ceremonies" (p. 31). The PSC is in a position to foster a caring and cohesive school community.

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Table 1

Suggested Roles for PSCs in Promoting a Caring School Climate

PSC Roles	Involved Stakeholders	Action
Facilitating psycho-educational trainings and imparting information	Teachers, school personnel, parents or caregivers, and students	Topics: social skills, self-efficacy communication skills, stress and time management, interpersonal connectedness, conflict resolution, marketing the counseling program, etc.
Minimizing barriers to student learning	Teachers, school personnel, parents or caregivers, and students	Spearheading initiatives to improve school climate; provision and referral services for students with academic, behavioral, emotional, and/or familial concerns.
Collaboration and consultation	Teachers, school personnel, parents or caregivers, and students	Team-building and consultation on a school, classroom, and individual student level
Family engagement	Parents or caregivers, school personnel, teachers, and students	Spearheading school-based activities that include the school-home connection such as family social outings and parent trainings/workshops
Mentoring	Teachers, school personnel, and students	Serving as a leader in the school and role-modeling positive character attributes

Assessment and program evaluation	Teachers, school personnel, parents or caregivers, and students	Assisting with the identification, development, dissemination, and evaluation of assessment measures (e.g., school satisfaction, classroom environment, teaching efficacy, needs identification)
Advocacy	Students, parents or caregivers, teachers, school personnel	Supporting and assisting all students and their families to achieve to their potential
Mediation	Students, teachers, school personnel, and parents/caregivers	Leading peer mediation programs, fostering communication, and supporting systemic change

Note. Adapted from "Family engagement: A collaborative, systemic approach for middle school counselors," by K. M. Davis and G. W. Lambie, 2005, *Professional School Counseling*, *9*, 144-151; "A safe school climate: A systemic approach and the school counselor," by T. J. Hernandez and S. R. Seem, 2004, *Professional School Counseling, 7*, 256-263; "The transformed school counselor in action," S. Musheno and M. Talbert, 2002, *Theory into Practice, 41*, 186-192; "Some simple and yet overlooked common sense tips for a more effective classroom environment," J. Simplicio, 1999, *Journal of Instructional Technology, 26*, 111-116.

Author Note

Shannon L. Ray, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Center for Psychological Studies, Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Specific interest and expertise in training school counselors in working with displaced youth and their families; best practices for school counselors in working with eating disorders in adolescent males; and clinical training of school counseling students.

Glenn W. Lambie, Ph.D., Assistant Professor and School Counseling Track Coordinator, Counselor Education Program, University of Central Florida, Orlando, Florida. Specific interest and expertise in professional school counseling; counselor development and supervision; and school-based individual, group, and family counseling for service for "at-risk" student populations.

Jennifer Curry, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Counselor Education Program, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Specific interest and expertise include professional school counseling; counselor wellness and self-efficacy; and providing school-based play, expressive arts, and experiential therapies for students.

Correspondence regarding this article should be sent to: Dr. Shannon Ray, Nova Southeastern University, Center for Psychological Studies, 3301 College Avenue, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33314 or via email at shanray@nsu.nova.edu