

# Teaming Up

## TO CLOSE EDUCATIONAL GAPS

Through collaborative leadership, educators can create a culturally relevant learning environment in which all students are recognized as assets to the school community.

The Ventura Unified School District, in collaboration with California Lutheran University, is in the process of addressing the reality of deep achievement gap issues in ways that are redefining how district staff, site administrators, school counselors and the university work together. With a common focus on confronting educational inequities that give rise to lack of access and achievement gaps, we have defined “teaming” in ways that are fundamentally changing the way in which counselors work with students, teachers and administrators.

We have recognized the need to change the role of school counselor from being cast as gatekeepers of the status quo to being members of collaborative leadership teams that transform individual and systemic disparities and inequities in schools.

This seemingly straightforward teaming process is occurring because of the district leaders’ vision that guides our everyday actions. The vision of the Ventura Unified

School District is for all students to receive an exemplary and balanced education, fostering a life-long passion for learning and engagement.

### **Counselors as social justice advocates**

Members of VUSD and CLU began this journey of closing the education gaps by recognizing that social inequities and injustices permeate all sectors of society, including schools. We then agreed that though inequities and injustices exist, they couldn’t be a reason to expect anything less from our students or us. The economic downturn has intensified a sense of despair and desperation, and has increased family stress and homelessness. Many children come to school each day carrying heavier burdens from family and societal struggles, yet are still expected to perform and achieve academic excellence.

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*By Diana L. Stephens, Trudy Tuttle Arriaga  
and Randall B. Lindsey*

School counselors are uniquely positioned to function as social justice advocates. Often counselors are called upon to deal with students unfairly characterized as “underachieving,” when far too often these students have been “underserved” and must be served in ways that may be new for many educators.

Creating culturally relevant and welcoming schools that provide a sense of belonging and support for all students and families requires knowledge and skill in rectifying injustices and closing opportunity gaps. Counselors, teachers and administrators working together can provide a culturally competent teaching and learning environment in which all students are recognized as assets to the school community. This team creates the conditions for valuing diversity and adapting to the changing needs of the community.

We believe the development of these collaborative leadership teams is at the heart of social change in schools. Our goal is to foster understanding of the conditions necessary in creating collaborative relationships to help leadership teams understand the inside-out process of personal and organizational change focused on better serving students historically marginalized in our schools and our society. This learning process includes dispelling the myth that society must rectify its injustices before schools can become cultures of justice and equity.

Effective leadership teams involve collaboration to engage multiple perspectives in providing services to all stakeholders in our schools. Inviting participation of district personnel, school leaders, teachers, school counselors and community partners enhances the opportunity to better serve the needs of all.

Our team has engaged in collaborative dialogue for the past five years. In this time we have learned that leverage for change requires clear understanding and articulation of district policy, procedures and vision that shifts the focus from all children can learn – a noble concept that we embrace – to the belief that we as educators have the capacity to learn how to educate children and youth from diverse ethnic, racial and socio-economic backgrounds.

### **University partner: A new voice**

Reframing the ways in which school counselors are included in our school-wide initiatives involves collaboration and teaming with external team members. We formed and maintain an on-going relationship and formal partnership between the school district and the California Lutheran University Department of Counseling and Guidance.

We began with conversations with one elementary school counselor, one school prin-

key personnel, which set the framework for involvement in district-wide meetings, site meetings, and one-on-one conversations.

During these developmental times, we drew from two essential resources to guide our dialogue and discussion and to divert debates that challenged the process of establishing collaborative relationships: our on-going relationship with district personnel and the Conceptual Framework of Cultural Proficiency.



cipal, and then the VUSD superintendent. In the beginning years, recognizing the reality that the university partners were “outsiders” to district-wide personnel helped to keep in the forefront the importance of seeking to learn, asking questions, clarifying understanding of current practices, and inquiring about future vision and goals.

### **A bottom-up, top-down strategy**

Thus, the professor’s strategy emerged, to seek “bottom-up” knowledge by ongoing visits with school counselors, learning about school members’ daily practices, their successes and the challenges they faced. Concurrently, our “top-down” strategy was focused on relationship-building with the superintendent and key district personnel responsible for student support services. The university researcher learned the superintendent’s vision for the district and for the role of external team member. The superintendent took the lead in defining our roles as collaborative team members with other

By using the Tools of Cultural Proficiency (Stephens & Lindsey, 2011) to ground our work, a deeper understanding of the collaborative process emerged. We slowed down the conversation to capture each voice and assess our own cultural knowledge; learned to understand, appreciate, value and manage differences; and reframed initial labeling of students in ways that help us meet our goals.

We learned that first and foremost the adults had to have conversations about beliefs, values and assumptions about the role of counselors and how that role might impact student achievement before we could actually structure a new path for students. The new collaborative leadership teams provided the opportunity for these conversations and opened gates for the new learning paths for students.

The Ventura Unified School District serves 17,000 students attending 28 schools. VUSD educators work diligently to inspire all students to excel academically and reach their full potential. We recognize success,

creativity and achievement through a variety of indicators.

Our mission is to ensure that all students pursue their chosen life paths and become responsible and contributing members of our society. As we set high expectations for student performance, we also set high expectations for the performance of adults. We believe that every child can learn, and our responsibility is to provide the resources and opportunities for that belief to be realized.

As VUSD educators, we further believe that continuous professional learning is the best way to meet our responsibility to educate all children and youth. We are ready to meet the challenges of the future and we are committed to achieving our goals.

As we prepare our students academically, we also recognize the need to provide safe and healthy teaching and learning environments. We strive to create school climates that foster a sense of respect for diversity, community and wellness. Creating this community of respect for diversity and wellness requires educators to team with

other agencies and organizations to ensure that a network of mutual care surrounds our children.

#### Vision guides mission

In the VUSD, the mission to educate all students includes two components – safe, healthy schools along with high performing schools. These two components are clearly focused on a student’s ability to “find an honoring place at the table” throughout the district.

Regarding the first component of safe and healthy, the district’s mission does not equate to metal detectors and higher fences. For VUSD, a “safe” learning environment is one where all members of the school community are valued and respected. A safe learning environment occurs when students are guided to reach their full potential through supportive and caring relationships with one another and with the adults in the district.

The school counselor’s role has become integral to the development of “healthy” learning environments. In VUSD, healthy

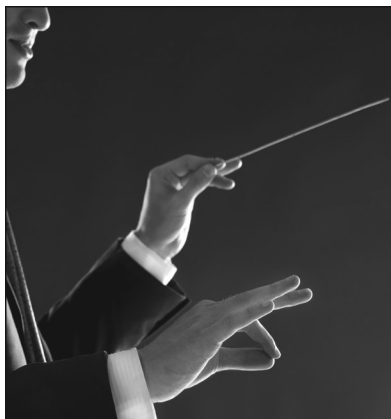
refers to the well-being of the whole student. As the school counselor assists in developing the master schedule program for all students and individual access for every student, he or she becomes essential in assuring that all students receive the opportunity for a healthy learning environment as intended by the VUSD mission.

The second component of our mission – high performing schools – logically follows safe and healthy. VUSD staff members believe students cannot be expected to perform to their highest academic potential without being in a safe and healthy environment. The school counselor is again a key component as a provider of access to rigorous and appropriate course offerings for every student. The counselor’s role in developing students’ academic programs and advocacy for every student to be prepared for college and career are critical to the high performance component of our mission.

In keeping with our vision and mission, we actively support the conditions for collaboration by continually engaging in collaborative partnerships, fostering shared leadership, involving community agencies to serve students and families, and maintaining a healthy, holistic approach to student learning that includes nurturing their physical, intellectual, social and emotional development. In developing collaborative leadership teams, we have learned much – both what to do and what not to do. We share our learning as principles for collaborative teaming.

#### Don’ts – What to avoid in developing teams

- Don’t cast the school counselor in the role of the “gatekeeper” of current district and school site policies and practices that perpetuate disparities in resources and services to all students.
- Don’t limit the role of the school counselor to be primarily focused on academic scheduling, diffusing conflicts, and interventions with students cast as defiant, disruptive or unmotivated.
- Don’t perpetuate the invisibility or marginalization of school counselor expertise by fostering their non-participation as members of collaborative leadership team.
- Don’t conclude that school counselors





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have little or no accountability or responsibility in contributing to student academic success, college and career readiness, and personal and social skill development.

### **Do's – For collaborative teaming**

- Ensure that the school counselor is an integral member of the Student Success Team and School Leadership Team. The presence of the school counselor can identify barriers students are experiencing and reframe conversations using asset-building language and approaches.

- Involve the school counselor in the success of all students through participation and leadership in such activities as parent training and support groups, professional staff development, student support groups, student activities, prevention programs, college and career readiness, team building and future planning goals for students.

- Utilize the expertise and knowledge of a school counselor in programmatic decisions, school culture building, safety on campus, and school-wide initiatives.

- Recognize the ability of the school counselor to contribute to the success of all students through the implementation and coordination of comprehensive and integrated resources for students, families and staff members.

- Give credibility and attention to the school counselor's ability to view a student's needs by recognizing that equity does not mean giving every student the same. The school counselor recognizes that equity means giving every student what he or she needs to be successful.

- Involve school counselors in the behavior interventions designed for all students in the Response to Instruction and Intervention (RtI2) model as a systematic and thoughtful foundation for building assets in all students.

### **Mission drives action**

Counselors as gatekeepers only serve to maintain the status quo and the widening of education gaps. Today, schools need counselors as transformers of individual and systemic disparities and inequities in schools.

State and national school counseling standards long ago established school coun-

selors as partners in contributing to student achievement by mandating development of competencies as advocates, collaborative leaders and agents of change in identifying and rectifying disparities in services and resources for all students. We realized that as district and school administrators, we needed to embrace these standards and not miscast school counselors in limited roles

## **Counselors as gatekeepers only serve to maintain the status quo and the widening of education gaps. Today, counselors need to be transformers of both individual and systemic inequities in our schools.**

of providing ancillary, remedial, or mental health service.

Counselors, administrators and teachers on school leadership teams in today's schools must demonstrate continuous improvement in their collaborative efforts of creating effective school environments where safety, care and high achievement are evident.

### **A VUSD illustration**

An example of the school counselor living the safe, healthy and high performing mission is taking notice of a student with excessive absences, facilitating a team approach to seek to understand the reasons for the excessive absences and case-managing the solutions on behalf of the student. The school counselor can serve as the link from referral to intervention.

By establishing the relationship with the child and family and assessing the barriers to school attendance, the counselor has created a "safe" environment. The counselor's ability to form a team that might include a nurse, parents, students and support staff together to focus their expertise and concern and offer solutions and advocacy for regular student attendance creates the "healthy" component of the mission. Finally, ensuring

that the student is monitored regularly, is placed in appropriate classes, and is targeted for success is the "high performance" of the circle of influence.

### **Opening the gates for our students**

In VUSD we are focusing our energies on closing education gaps by partnering with a valued university colleague to reshape our conversations and our program. Our journey has led us to a new way of learning and new actions that are clearly aligned with our vision and our mission and is now more inclusive for our students and their families. Together, we are creating conditions for collaborative leadership teams to make decisions that have the best interests of our students at the center of the conversation.

Rather than gatekeepers, we are now gap-minders. We are mindful that educational gaps have existed for marginal student groups far too long now. We are mindful that through collaborative leadership teams we can open gates now for these students to set them on a path of safety, health and highest performance. ■

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