

DESIGNATED DATA MONDAYS

School counseling leaders in Fairfax County Public Schools (Va.) are embarking on a yearlong, districtwide data training program for their elementary school counselors. Learn how you can implement a similar program in your district.

BY CAROL KAFFENBERGER, PH.D.

How does a school district train its school counselors to systematically use data to drive program decision-making in order to serve all students? The accountability movement, which began more than a decade ago, has changed the way school counselors approach their work. School counselors are now expected to use data to develop, implement and evaluate their interventions and services. Not all school counselors received, as part of their school counselor preparation, the training necessary to empower them to extract, analyze and then use data effectively. Often not all school counselors receive reinforcement once in the field to continue to refine their data collection and analytical skills. This training gap has resulted in the need for school districts across the country to create their own data training. Let's take a look at how one large school district developed training for its school counselors, an approach that may offer a template to school district leaders and spur confidence in tackling this daunting task.

Located in Northern Virginia, just outside Washington D.C., Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) is the 11th largest school system in the country. FCPS employs 640 school counselors and 52 student service directors, serving 191 school sites. "FCPS is committed to the development of data-driven comprehensive school counseling programs that support all students," said Marcy Miller Kneale, FCPS coordinator for school counseling services and college success.

"School counselors play a critical role in identifying the challenges our students face and using evidence-based practices to close achievement gaps. Critical to the success of comprehensive school counseling programs is the ability to set goals based on identified needs. This requires school counselors to use data to identify achievement gaps, develop goals and work plans addressing needs, and effectively monitor and evaluate the impact of their programs and interventions."

With these goals in mind, Kneale and her team have designed a yearlong data training program to help school counselors develop a "laser-like focus on the challenges in their building to maximize their efforts and see the greatest results."



FCPS' school counseling services department leadership has a long history of embracing the ASCA National Model beginning in 2003 with district-wide training. Since 2006 all school counseling programs have been working toward the development of the essential elements of a comprehensive school counseling program based on the ASCA National Model. For the last two years, school counseling teams have been expected to submit annual program goals and results data. The school counseling services department reviews these essential elements and provides feedback to the schools, to help improve practice over time.

An emphasis on using data has been in place in FCPS for several years. At the middle and high school levels, school counselors can rely on other school counselors in the building as well as a director of student services for support in using data. Since the 2009–2010 school year, middle and high school counseling collaborative team leaders have met on an almost monthly basis to gain information, knowledge and skills to help transform their programs into data-driven comprehensive models,” said Darrell Sampson, FCPS resource counselor.

Despite these efforts it became clear in 2012 that a more systematic training for all school counselors was going to be necessary. School counselors and their supervisors were asking for more support as the district moved to an evidenced-based evaluation system. With the school counselors' needs in mind, and a realization that some of the built-in support available to middle and high school counselors does not exist at the elementary level where many buildings only have one school counselor, FCPS' school counseling services department began developing a yearlong training program in data gathering and usage for the district's 255 elementary school counselors.

“If our business is really to support the academic achievement of all students, then we need to be able to both quantify our work and share it with stakeholders in an easily understood format,” Sampson said. “This training

really allows us to do several things. First, we are helping our elementary school counselors identify different types of data sources that are open to them in schools, whether it is student grades or scores on standardized reading tests. Next, we are helping them to write strong goals that are realistic, rigorous and steeped in outcome data. The training moves on to help our elementary school counselors design strong intervention programs to support their goal. Finally, the focus will be on sharing the impact of their work through a DATA report, a format that is simple and easily shared, with teachers, administrators and other stakeholders.”

Designing the Training

FCPS school counseling services district leadership met in spring and summer 2013 to brainstorm a variety of training models, including train-the-trainer, training only for identified school counselors and coaching among groups of feeder schools, known as pyramids. Ultimately the team decided all 255 elementary school counselors should receive the training. The team knew from professional development best practices that “sit and get” training is rarely enough to evoke change in practice. Professional development training needs to be based on an identified need and supported through reinforcement, coaching and practice. Additionally, there needs to be the expectation that evidence of the training, a product, will be developed and used to inform practice.

Assessment of training needs: A needs assessment survey administered at the end of the school year identified the need for training in the use of data. In addition, over the summer before the training occurred, an evaluation of previously submitted school counselor program goals and results data helped the school counseling district leadership understand the challenges elementary school counselors were experiencing and also identified those elementary school counselors who were effectively using data and could be called upon to support others in the training process. District school counseling leadership

conducted an additional survey of elementary school counselors at the beginning of the 2013–2014 school year to further identify the specific needs of the training.

Training team: The training team consisted of a smaller group of the school counseling services district leadership team and a local counselor educator. All five training team members were scheduled to be available to the elementary school counselors during the half-day trainings and planning sessions and to provide individual support as needed throughout the training year. In addition, school counselors who had already demonstrated their interest and competence in using data were recruited to share successes and support colleagues during the training sessions and in their pyramid meetings.

Sessions: Training began with an introduction to the data training in August during the annual districtwide in-service for elementary school counselors. Additionally, the leadership team scheduled four half-day trainings (September, January, February and March), which all elementary school counselors were expected to attend. The half-day trainings are scheduled for Mondays, a districtwide professional development day for all elementary school staff, from 1:30–4:30 p.m. Plans involved participants sitting at round tables with other school counselors from their pyramid. Each training session includes an identified focus for that month, led by the school counseling training team, as well as time for small-group work.

Meeting by Meeting

September – Setting goals: In preparation for the first session, the school counselors were asked to look at their school data and review their school improvement plan goals. The first session focuses on writing a program goal that aligns with one of their school improvement goals. School counselors learn about writing specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time-bound (SMART) goals and work through various examples. The session

includes time for the school counselors to work on their individual goal and get individual assistance and feedback from colleagues and the training team. School counselors are required to submit their program goal along with how the goal supported the school improvement plan by Nov. 1.

January – Planning: Session two gives the elementary school counselors time to review submitted goals and to develop action plans for achieving their goal. The session begins with time to share their goals with other school counselors in their pyramid, followed by a short presentation providing guidance around identifying the action plans and data collection. The school counselors also learn about survey development and then create a survey for their own data-collection purposes. A considerable amount of time at this session is devoted to giving the school counselors individual help from the training team and allowing time to collaborate with colleagues.

February – Analyzing data: The third session focuses on aggregating data in a way that helps the school counselors assess whether their intervention has had an impact on students and how to represent the data to stakeholders. School counselors are expected to bring collected data to the session to aggregate, analyze and create graphs to represent the results. Again, the session includes time to work with others in their pyramid, share their data and get any necessary individual help from the training team.

March – Sharing data: The final session focuses on summarizing the SMART goal intervention and sharing the process, the results data, the implications and the recommendations. School counselors produce a one-page data report using the DATA format. The reports identify the SMART goal, the action plan for implementing the intervention and collecting data, the results data, and the implications and recommendations that can be made based on the data. The session includes time for additional training and feedback on sharing results data.



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Three Prongs

Although the training program is still in its first year, the school counseling services leadership team has come to realize the importance of three tools: support, resources and ongoing evaluation.

Support: Since all elementary school counselors are organized into pyramids, the pyramid leaders provide opportunities at their monthly meetings for school counselors to share their progress and receive support concerning their efforts to achieve their program goal. The school counseling services leadership team is also available to support the pyramids and help individual school counselors as needed.

Resources: All Designated Data Monday handouts, PowerPoint presentations and document examples are posted on the K-12 School Counseling Blackboard site. All team members are available during the in-person training and by e-mail to answer questions and provide additional support and coaching.

Ongoing evaluation: Key to successful professional development is ongoing evaluation. To establish goals you need to know where you are and where you are headed. The FCPS school counseling services team leans heavily on ongoing evaluation of the training program via the bi-annual needs assessment, a review of submitted results reports and an evaluation of each training session using Survey Monkey. Additionally, the training team meets before and after each Designated Data Monday to discuss the plans, examine data conducted and

ensure a common message is infused into the training and training materials. At the end of the school year all school counselors will submit a product, a DATA report, evidence that the training goals were met. And finally, a final online evaluation of the training, using Survey Monkey, from the perspective of the school counselors will be conducted at the end of the school year.

Advice to Other Districts

Although this training is still a work-in-progress, the Fairfax County team offers the following lessons learned to other districts looking to develop similar training.

“Being able to provide a common message and format to these trainings that reaches all of our professionals, whether they are experienced with data or just beginning to understand the concepts is one of the biggest challenges,” Sampson said. “Space and time are issues because of the number of school counselors and the geographical size of the school district,” said Ellissia Price, FCPS elementary school counseling specialist.

Additionally, the training team offers these points:

Realize systematic change takes

time: Identify early adopters and support them with their work so they can become leaders in their efforts moving forward.

Make connections: It’s important for school counselors and other stakeholders (administrators, teachers, parents, other school personnel and the community) to understand how school counseling is an integral part of the instructional program. Principal buy-in is critical in moving the work forward. If school counselors are still engaged in a high volume of non-school-counseling-related responsibilities, significant change will be challenging.

Know what you’re trying to accomplish:

Be clear about what you are trying to accomplish so everyone is on the same page. Set goals and a work plan and determine metrics you will use to measure success. Engage district leadership and school counseling stakeholders in the process. Consider having a

parallel plan to engage school administrators in professional development that shares the role and impact of school counselors within a building.

Develop a strategic long-range plan:

Make sure your plan for the development and implementation of comprehensive school counseling programs across all levels, K–12, uses a systematic approach with checkpoints, timelines and assessments.

Identify training needs: Collect data from the school counselors to identify specific training needs, and evaluate their training needs based on an assessment of where they are in their efforts to use data to develop a comprehensive program.

Identify training procedures:

Consider how you can support school counselors throughout the year as they translate training to practice. Examine existing professional development structures in your system, and look for opportunities for your school counselors.

Articulate the message: Continue to drive home your message of the importance of data-driven programs every chance you get and in multiple ways (websites, publications, professional development). Everyone needs to hear the message more than once and in more than one way. Whenever possible, link the work to existing expectations, such as school improvement plans. “The leadership role is to help school counselors see that using data is the work; it’s not more work,” Kneale said.

Not only are we hoping to solidify the data collection and intervention skills of all of our elementary school counseling professionals, but we are hoping that this will allow them to advocate for school counseling, both within their schools as well as at the district level and beyond,” Sampson said.

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