

# Archived Information

## 3. EXPANDING COUNSELING RESOURCES

### The Problem

Fully adopting Tech-Prep principles implies giving students ongoing support and guidance concerning career options and the choices they must make in school to pursue these options. Many schools, however, are faced with tight budgets that severely restrict their counseling staffs and lead to high student-to-counselor ratios. To give students the attention and support they need, schools must find ways to tap other resources and “multiply” the work their professional counselors can accomplish.

### Strategies: Using Teachers, Parents, and Technology to Complement Counselor Staff

In certain Tech-Prep consortia in the national evaluation, school districts have adopted three strategies to supplement traditional counseling resources:

1. **Teachers as Ancillary Counselors.** Teachers in one consortium are trained to conduct annual “career advisory plan” guidance conferences with students and parents, and to serve as ongoing advisers throughout high school to the students they are assigned.
2. **Parents as a Career Guidance Support Team.** In another consortium, parent volunteers at one school organize and conduct career and educational planning activities, including assisting school counselors in assessing students’ interests and abilities and providing career and college information.
3. **Career Planning Software.** One consortium is using a software package that allows students who have identified a career interest to view sequences of high school and college courses that offer appropriate preparation.

### Advantages and Benefits

Asking teachers and parents to play supporting guidance roles can increase students’ contact with adults, heighten students’ sense of a supportive school and community, and free guidance counselors for more specialized tasks. Career planning software has similar time-saving advantages and gives students a chance to explore future options independently in an appealing medium.

### Implementation Challenges

To serve as ancillary counselors, teachers must expand their horizons beyond their subject disciplines and learn about all aspects of their own “industry.” Creating a stable, committed group of parent volunteers depends on effective recruiting. Counselors must coordinate carefully with teachers and parents so that these groups can play useful roles. Integrating course sequences into career planning software requires careful database construction.

## **EXPANDING COUNSELING RESOURCES**

High school counselors, administrators, teachers, and parents generally agree that students need individual career and academic counseling to make the most of their education. Moreover, some school reforms emphasize helping students identify potential career interests and aptitudes, focus their studies around a tentative career goal, and then choose courses and other activities to pursue this goal. In the Tech-Prep and School-to-Work models, the emphasis on career awareness, choice of a career major, and purposeful preparation for the transition to related postsecondary education, training, or employment places a premium on effective counseling.

At the same time, however, school counseling resources are often stretched to the limit. In today's high schools, guidance counselors often are responsible for 400 to 500 students each. In some schools, the counseling staff is so taxed that students receive only fleeting attention unless they are in crisis. Even in less stark situations, counselors' time may be spread very thinly; as a result, they may not always be in the best position to guide students' individual decision making. The time guidance counselors spend in organizing and running group activities--no matter how valuable these activities are--further constrains the time counselors can spend with individual students.

Visits to the 10 Tech-Prep consortia included in the national evaluation identified three distinct approaches to making the most effective use of scarce counseling staff time. In the Bentonville and Springdale districts in the Arkansas consortium, high schools are training teachers to conduct annual "career advisory plan" (CAP) conferences with students and their parents, and to serve as ongoing advisers to the same students during the school year. In the Salem-Keizer district in the Mid-Willamette Education Consortium in Oregon, Sprague High School formed a parent group to plan and carry out a variety of activities related to students' postsecondary planning, relieving school counselors of some tasks.

Efficient use of counselors' time is also being promoted in the same and other districts in the consortium by the use of a computer program, Career Path Planner, to help students make course selections. As explained in the following sections, each of these strategies offers benefits and presents implementation challenges.

## **TEACHERS AS ANCILLARY COUNSELORS**

The teacher-counselor model developed in the Springdale and Bentonville districts in Arkansas is a way for schools to increase guidance-oriented contact with high school and middle school students and their parents. Supplementing counselors was deemed essential because of high student-to-counselor ratios; Springdale High School, for example, had four counselors for 1,800 students. The objective is not for teachers to eliminate counselors' contact with students, but to have teachers help in communicating important information, with the counseling staff available as backup to respond to questions teachers cannot answer. The process consists of five steps:

- 1. *Recruiting Teachers.*** As the teacher-counselor model is phased in, an increasing number of teachers must be involved to maintain a schedule of annual conferences with students and parents. For example, all high school students in Springdale and Bentonville begin the CAP conferences in 10th grade, and an initial group of teachers must be recruited to meet with them. These teachers continue to work with the same students as they pass through 11th and 12th grades, and eventually "cycle back" and begin working with another group of 10th graders when their initial group graduates. The group of teachers who are involved as counselors must therefore be expanded in the second and third years of implementing the new initiative.
- 2. *Training Teachers.*** Teachers are not accustomed to being asked questions about course offerings, graduation requirements, college application procedures, and other subjects with which they have traditionally had little involvement. Careful training of teachers, and a checklist to ensure consistent coverage of conference topics, are essential (see Attachment 3.1). In the Bentonville district, counseling staff train teachers in their free periods on two days, using printed material, overheads, role playing, and videotapes. Shortly before the parent conference days, two "practice sessions" are held. Sessions with teachers are preceded by informational meetings with department chairs.
- 3. *Scheduling and Promotion.*** A two-day period is designated for conferences during a "Career Week." In Bentonville, conferences are held one day in the afternoon and evening and the other day in the morning, to accommodate parents with different schedule constraints. Each teacher-counselor is given a list of 12 to 20 students and calls their parents to schedule a 30-minute

conference with the student and parent or guardian. An advance public information campaign heightens parent awareness of the upcoming conference opportunities. A simple statement of the purposes of the CAP conference is used to inform parent and teachers (Attachment 3.2).

**4. *Conducting the Conference.*** Teachers hold their conferences at desks set up in a large space, such as the school library or gymnasium, where several guidance counselors can circulate to help answer questions the teachers cannot resolve. Teachers talk to parents and students about requirements for graduation and for graduating with honors, requirements for entry to various types of postsecondary education, the high school curriculum and programs of study, articulation and options for credit transfer, and sources of financial aid for postsecondary education. A course plan for all high school years is completed (or revised).

**5. *Follow-Up Advising.*** The teacher-counselors then become advisers for their assigned students, following them until they graduate from high school (or middle school). Students can visit their teacher-counselor in class periods set aside under block scheduling for student activities.

## **Advantages and Benefits**

Involving teachers in counseling sessions has the obvious advantage of multiplying the human resources available to communicate with parents and impart information about career and school choices in a systematic and personal way. In Bentonville, for example, 20 teachers served as counselors in the first year, supplementing the efforts of three regular guidance counselors.

The benefits of enlisting teachers as ancillary counselors appear to go beyond the distribution of information in several ways:

- ***Promoting School-Parent Communication.*** The fact that the school, through individual teachers, makes a concerted effort to reach out to parents as individuals has elicited a strong positive response from parents. In the first year of CAP conferences in Springdale, 92 percent of parents attended. In Bentonville's first year, 97 percent of parents attended. On occasion, teachers even visit parents and students at home to conduct the conference. In the second year, parents began calling to inquire about the annual conferences even before the scheduling process had begun.
- ***Broadening Students' Circle of Support.*** As a result of the CAP conferences, all students are linked with a teacher as an adviser for the remainder of their high school years.
- ***Enhancing Teachers' Understanding of Their School.*** Teachers often operate in isolation from other teachers and departments and lack a broad sense of what students must do to graduate and progress to higher education and successful careers. Serving as teacher-counselors can help them develop a better understanding of all aspects of their own industry, as they are exposed to clear

information about graduation requirements, course sequences, college entrance requirements and procedures, and other issues of concern to students and parents.

## **Implementation Challenges and Issues**

The Springdale and Bentonville districts learned important lessons about several key issues that can affect the success of involving teachers as ancillary counselors:

- ***Promoting Parent Attendance.*** Many forms of outreach to parents elicit a disappointingly low response. The Springdale consortium foresaw this difficulty and arranged for the local Chamber of Commerce to encourage area employers to give employees paid time off to attend their children's CAP conference during the well-publicized "Career Week." Success in this effort contributed to high parent attendance.
- ***Recruiting Teachers.*** In the first year, the Springdale district asked for teacher volunteers and recruited an enthusiastic group for the first cohort of 10th-grade students participating in the CAP conferences and subsequent advising. In the next two years, more coaxing was needed, because only less-enthusiastic teachers remained to be recruited. Starting off by asking for volunteers thus risks saddling every third student class with the least-committed teachers. In response, Springdale shifted to *assigning* advising responsibility to teachers preferring to disperse less-enthusiastic teacher-counselors among a group of generally committed ones and to work at turning their attitudes around.
- ***Making Time for Followup.*** Teachers' roles as ongoing advisers to students can be meaningful only if some way is found to make time for contact between them. In the Bentonville district, block scheduling has been implemented in a way that promotes this objective (see Section 2). Students have four 90-minute classes Monday through Thursday, but eight 45-minute periods on Friday. One period labeled "Encore"--which includes a 90-minute session on Tuesday and Thursday and 45 minutes on Fridays--is reserved for special activities such as clubs, tutoring, assemblies, and individual meetings with teacher advisers. Students are assigned beginning in 10th grade to an Encore period classroom with their teacher adviser and remain there through 11th and 12th grades. This arrangement allows time for students and their advisers to confer frequently and informally throughout the high school years.
- ***Bridging the Gap Between Middle School, Junior High, and High School.*** CAP conferences in Springdale and Bentonville actually begin in 8th grade, with junior high school teachers assigned as advisers for two years. The arrangements for involving teachers in CAP conferences promote interaction between high school teachers and middle school students, to help the students prepare for the transition to high school. Teachers who advise 12th graders generally complete their spring conferences more expeditiously than those working with younger students because course selection is unnecessary and postsecondary plans are usually set. These teachers use the extra time to attend sessions for 8th graders, serving as general backup to answer questions about high school and to start students' familiarization with the high school faculty.

## **PARENTS PROMOTING AWARENESS OF POSTSECONDARY OPTIONS**

Parents are usually eager for schools to provide useful information about their children's postsecondary options, but they can also serve a valuable role in providing and disseminating information to broad groups of students. In doing so, they not only relieve the burden on school counseling staff but also broaden and enhance students' exposure to career and educational options.

In the Mid-Willamette consortium in Oregon, parents of students at Sprague High School, with the help of a Sprague counselor, formed a volunteer group in the mid-1980s to promote student awareness of career and postsecondary education opportunities. Although the volunteers have historically focused on facilitating students' transition to college, more recently they have begun participating in a schoolwide and regionwide strategy to increase the career development aspect of guidance.

The self-styled "Beyond Sprague" group has had as many as 50 parents involved in any school year and has conducted the following activities, which are broadly available to all students (including those considered to be Tech-Prep participants):

- ***Skills and Interest Testing.*** Since 1994, parents have helped staff from the school's Career Resource Information Center (CRIC) in administering the Microskills and Career Information System (CIS) interest and skill inventories to 10th-grade students. Parent volunteers and CRIC staff work with rotating groups of sophomores, as part of their required Consumer Education course, to explain and help students complete these career assessment tools, interpret the test results, and provide information about career exploration workplace activities available through the CRIC.
- ***Planning Interviews.*** At least one parent volunteer interviews every member of the junior class about his or her postsecondary plans, and volunteers continue to meet with many seniors. The volunteers help students identify career goals, provide individualized information about postsecondary options, and make referrals for additional information and assistance. For example, students seeking full-time employment after high school are referred to the CRIC for job search assistance. Students with plans for college receive information about available scholarships and the college application process, as well as how to locate materials for making college selections. The interviews are also used to gather information for schoolwide reporting on students' postsecondary plans.

- ***Preparing Information Products.*** The parent group has prepared a handbook on options after high school for seniors and edits, prints, and binds the handbook. Beyond Sprague volunteers have also prepared and distributed a newsletter for seniors notifying them of college testing dates, application deadlines, and how to apply for financial aid.
- ***Organizing and Supporting Information Events.*** Annually, the Beyond Sprague group organizes and hosts a PSAT Orientation Night for juniors, a college information night, and an evening information session for college-bound juniors and seniors about financial aid. Parent volunteers also run SAT help sessions and financial aid workshops. In addition, parents organize and act as hosts for visits to the school by colleges and universities.

### **Advantages and Benefits**

Staff at Sprague High School have seen several benefits from the activities of the Beyond Sprague parent group. The most important benefit is the time the parent group's activities save for busy counselor staff. Alone, the counselors and CRIC staff would be unable to assess and assist all students at each grade level in making career and educational plans. The parent volunteers ensure that all students receive some individual attention in gathering information and forming decisions about postsecondary activities. In addition, the group increases the opportunities for students to interact with adults, which can broaden the range of information and perspectives to which students are exposed.

### **Implementation Challenges and Issues**

The Sprague High School experience confirms the potential value of parents' groups as an added resource for counseling staff, but several challenges are still likely to confront such efforts:

- ***Recruiting Interested Parents.*** Formation of parent groups may be initiated by interested parents or, as in Sprague High School, by counseling staff. In both cases, it is useful to recruit a core group who are interested in helping students in the long term, rather than only in the process as it affects their own children. Stability of membership can promote improvement of procedures and coordination with school staff. Parents whose children are currently students are likely to be most active and should be recruited as well. Interested parents with available time may be in short supply, however. Sprague informational materials emphasize that volunteer activities vary in their time commitment and frequency, and encourage all forms and levels of participation. The school has developed a brochure about Beyond Sprague that it sends to parents and includes additional information about the group in the packet it sends to parents each fall (see Attachment 3.3).

- ***Providing Appropriate Training.*** The more actively and comprehensively parent volunteers are involved in providing career and educational information, the more they need to know to be effective. Administering interest and skill inventories clearly requires a thorough understanding of assessment tools, for example. Even directing students to relevant resource materials for college planning requires a familiarity with available materials and guides. Sprague High School uses its counselors to train parents on interviewing skills and administering and interpreting the inventories. Counselors and volunteers have attended workshops together on communication skills, financial aid, and college admissions requirements. All volunteers are given an orientation to the school CRIC and other school facilities and resources. The amount of training provided to the Beyond Sprague volunteers varies; the schedule and focus of such training needs to be flexible, because new volunteers are added at different times and participate to different degrees in the various activities.
- ***Ensuring Student Safety.*** Parent volunteers may in some cases work closely with individual students. Thus, student safety is a key concern. To address this concern, the district office conducts a basic background investigation of all parents who volunteer for Beyond Sprague. This requirement for becoming a volunteer is stated in information materials, both to alert potential candidates and to reassure parents that all volunteers have been screened.
- ***Maintaining Connections to Counselor Staff.*** Recruiting and maintaining parent involvement requires identifying a member of the counseling staff as a parent liaison. A school staff person must be available to answer questions, respond to individual offers of assistance, and coordinate the various parent volunteer activities.

## **USING SOFTWARE TO LINK INTERESTS AND COURSE SELECTION**

Getting students to explore their own interests and then use those interests (and their skills) as a foundation for choices in school is a common goal of school counselors. The high schools in the Mid-Williamette Education Consortium in Oregon are using computer software that allows students to view secondary and postsecondary course sequences that can help them prepare for careers they have identified.

The Career Path Planner (CPP) is a software program that allows local districts or consortia to enter information about locally available course sequences into the database. Each district or school identifies the courses available at the school that students should take to meet high school graduation requirements and the outcomes specified for Oregon's six Certificate of Advanced Mastery (CAM) endorsement areas (similar to career clusters). Schools then enter these course sequences into the computer database. The community college adds postsecondary courses leading to two-year degrees or certificates. It also adds bridge programs designed by the consortium and offered at the community college for students who did

not have access in high school to secondary courses required for CAM career areas. The secondary and postsecondary courses are linked in the computer system by CAM area.

The output of the CPP is relatively comprehensive. When a student selects an occupation of interest, the system identifies the CAM area most closely related to the chosen occupation and generates a description of the occupation and the broader CAM area. The student can then display and print the course sequences and requirements associated with the occupation specifically, or the broader CAM, including both high school and community college courses. Plans have been made to expand the database to include four-year college and university programs that are related to students' career interests.

### **Advantages and Benefits**

Computer tools like the CPP can begin to engage students more effectively in choosing courses for career planning. By generating a hard-copy list of relevant courses that students can take home with them, the software formalizes the process of considering course options. The community college portion of the printout provides parents and students with information on entrance requirements and related postsecondary occupational specialties.

### **Implementation Challenges and Issues**

Although computerized databases of course sequences are an appealing technological aide, they are likely to be meaningful to students only if they represent real and relevant choices. In schools where basic graduation requirements crowd out all but a few elective choices, or where the range of academic or vocational electives offered is narrow, students with quite different career interests may gain little new information pertaining to the course choices they have to make. If articulated programs of study are defined to link high school sequences to specific occupational programs and their courses at the postsecondary level, students could use systems like CPP to look ahead at the courses they would end up taking if they chose to prepare for a particular career. In the short term, however, the choices they make in high school may be affected little by the printouts the system generates. There is some risk that

emphasizing the linkage between a career interest and course choices, if students actually have few real options in the short term, may detract from the value of exploring career interests for longer-term reasons.

The Mid-Willamette Education Consortium schools, in the process of implementing a course sequence database, also discovered the challenge of recording the numerous course offerings and their details correctly. It takes time and training to ensure that all schools input their course information properly. Information for different career paths must be provided in a readable and consistent format and must be updated regularly. School staff need to become sufficiently familiar with the system to input the data correctly and to make changes. The consortium held initial orientation sessions and then more detailed training for relevant staff. The consortium provided all its schools with (1) guidelines for assembling course information, (2) sample course sequence worksheets developed by one school as a model, and (3) a data dictionary that defined terms and identified the format to use for entering course information consistently.

**ATTACHMENTS:**

- 3.1 BENTONVILLE HIGH SCHOOL CHECKLIST FOR FAMILY CONFERENCES
- 3.2 BENTONVILLE HIGH SCHOOL STATEMENT OF PURPOSE FOR FAMILY CONFERENCES
- 3.3 PARENT OUTREACH FLYER: "INTRODUCING THE BEYOND SPRAGUE GROUP"