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Strengths-Based Partnerships: A School-Family-Community Partnership Approach to Empowering Students

When school counselors team and collaborate with school personnel, families, and community members to foster strengths-based partnerships, they are able to implement classroom, schoolwide, and community-based programs and interventions that support and empower children and families. Strengths-based partnerships utilize the assets found in schools, families, and communities to create strengths-enhancing environments, promote caring and positive adult-child relationships, strengthen children's social support networks, foster academic success, and empower children with a sense of purpose. This article describes a case example of a strengths-based approach to school-family-community partnerships that a school counselor in a Title I elementary school is implementing to empower low-income children and families of color.

One of the school counselor's roles is to enhance the development of *all* students. This includes locating and mobilizing resources and supports that empower students who are vulnerable and disenfranchised. This article discusses a strengths-based school-family-community partnership approach to school counseling that a school counselor (the second author) in a Title I elementary school is using to create resources and supports for children of color who live in concentrated poverty. In order to empower students who are vulnerable or disenfranchised, school counselors and other adults in schools must have a strengths-based focus; that is, they must recognize and utilize the strengths and assets that lie in children, their families, and communities.

Recent research indicates that African American and Latino families strive to raise healthy and successful children, teach them good values, and keep them away from negative influences, but they find the task daunting given the economic and societal challenges they face (Roehlkepartain, Mannes, Scales, Lewis, & Bolstrom, 2004). The task of parenting is even more daunting for those who have low incomes or are single parents. These parents feel that they have strong relationships with their children but many believe that they are limited in their

parenting by a lack of resources and opportunities and a lack of community support beyond their immediate family. Rather than pathologizing families and children of color, school personnel should affirm families' efforts and collaborate with family and community members and organizations to provide the extra-family support that families need to overcome the numerous challenges they face to their children's success. Good counseling and education recognize and build strengths rather than focus on problem reduction and correction (Galassi & Akos, 2007; Smith, 2006).

Unfortunately, school personnel often view children of color, especially those who live in concentrated poverty, from a deficit perspective (Harry, Klinger, & Hart, 2005). Research indicates that school personnel often believe that the families of low-income children of color are not interested in their education, assume that the parents are dysfunctional, and frequently blame parents for their children's academic challenges (Giles, 2005; Harry et al.; Marx, 2008; Noguera, 2001). Their conversations about low-income children of color contain unchallenged negative assumptions that reveal little understanding of the psychological and sociocultural challenges of concentrated poverty, racial isolation and prejudice, discriminatory public policies, poor schooling, and living in an economically depressed urban neighborhood on the children and their families (Harry et al.; Nation, 2008). Inevitably, these deficit assumptions and narratives have a limiting effect on parents' involvement in their children's education and on school personnel's relationships and partnerships with urban families (Giles).

Students are either "empowered" or "disabled" by their relationships with adults in schools (Cummins, 1986). By empowerment, we mean that children gain the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed, feel valued and included in the school, and develop a sense of purpose and confidence in their ability to succeed, accomplish their dreams, and affect their world. In schools that empower low-income children of color, adults possess a number of

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core beliefs and implement a variety of practices that make such empowerment possible (Cummins; Scheurich, 1998). They have high expectations for *all* students and believe that success is possible for all; they value the culture and language of the students, treat the students and their parents with respect and care, recognize families as valuable assets and powerful allies in their children's education, and believe that the school exists to serve families and the community. In addition, they work hard to foster a nurturing and positive environment for students and a warm, welcoming climate for all parents.

School counseling programs, like school environments, can be strengths-building and strengths-enhancing or strengths-limiting (Galassi & Akos, 2007; Smith, 2006). School counselors are in an ideal position to promote a strengths-based approach throughout the school. They do this by creating strengths awareness, that is, by highlighting the importance of recognizing students' and families' strengths; promoting a language of strengths throughout the school, often reframing the way adults talk about children; showing respect for students' and families' struggles; and emphasizing strengths development in counseling, classroom, schoolwide, and community-based programs and interventions. They also build strengths-based partnerships with school staff, families, and community members.

School-family-community partnerships are especially conducive for building strengths-enhancing environments, that is, those that promote the protective factors, developmental assets, resources, and supports that students need to succeed (Bryan, 2005; Galassi & Akos, 2004; Mitchell & Bryan, 2007; Scales, 2005). The main protective factors that schools, families, and communities foster to increase resiliency in children are caring and supportive adult relationships, opportunities for meaningful student participation in their schools and communities, and high parent and teacher expectations regarding student performance and future success (Benard, 1991; Bryan). These protective factors in turn produce external assets of empowerment and support for students and internal assets of commitment to learning, positive values and identity, and social competencies in children (Scales).

School-family-community partnerships are especially important for low-income children of color because the school is one of the most important institutions in resource-poor urban neighborhoods that typically have a dearth of businesses and community organizations (Noguera, 2001; Smith, 2006). Schools can play a critical role in unleashing assets for children by collaborating and connecting with community members and organizations. In many low-income communities, after-school, pre-

vention, mentoring and tutoring, academic and cultural enrichment, and college success programs are the result of collaborative efforts of schools and community organizations. These programs provide children and their families with the experiences, relationships, skills, and values that they need to increase their assets and reduce risks.

School counselors, teachers, other adults, and community members in schools build strengths-based partnerships when they (a) recognize and affirm the strengths inherent in children, their families, and communities regardless of their background; and (b) utilize the strengths in the school, families, and community to create assets, resources, and supports that empower children. Principals, teachers, counselors, and all school personnel recognize and affirm strengths by developing a culture in which they intentionally find ways to celebrate *all* children and their families and let parents know that their efforts are appreciated even when their children are struggling in school. In addition, they intentionally change their language about parents from deficits to strengths; for example, instead of saying, "These parents don't care," they may say, "I am amazed at the resilience of our parents given the challenges they face." They also locate and tap the assets in the community (e.g., businesses, colleges, nonprofit clubs and organizations, police and fire officers, art and dance schools, places of worship), with which they can partner to create programs and other resources and supports for children and families.

The following case example illustrates how the second author utilizes strengths-based partnerships. She describes the process and strategies that she has used to develop strength-based partnerships between the school, families, and community members and the outcomes of the resulting partnership programs. These efforts have transformed the school climate by cultivating a strengths-enhancing environment that supports and empowers children in an urban school. Comments from school staff, parents, and students about these partnership programs and the school counseling program in general are included from a survey that was distributed in the middle of the second semester.

BUILDING STRENGTH-BASED PARTNERSHIPS: A WHOLE-SCHOOL APPROACH

I (the second author) was hired as the school counselor at a Title I urban elementary school in Tampa, Florida, at the beginning of the 2007-2008 school year. The school had 629 students including Head Start and K-5 students. About 528 were African American/Black, 4 were White, 77 were Hispanic, and 20 were multiracial. The majority of the stu-

dents (98%) were on free and reduced lunch. Most of them lived in the nearby neighborhood and walked to and from school. As a new school counselor, I stepped into a school with students who have many needs; some are homeless, in foster care, have incarcerated parents, and many are raised by grandmothers.

Although my master's program prepared me extensively to develop and implement a school counseling program, I struggled with what was needed to help urban students overcome the huge personal and social challenges and stressors that they dealt with daily. As I searched for effective strategies for my work with this population, I discovered and utilized strengths-based individual and group counseling (Smith, 2006), culturally relevant bibliotherapy (Day-Vines, Moore-Thomas, & Hines, 2005), and school-family-community partnerships (Bryan, 2005). These strategies fit with my vision for a comprehensive school counseling program that would build students' resilience by fostering the protective factors necessary for them to overcome risks (Benard, 1991) and develop strengths and assets in students (Galassi & Akos, 2004; Scales, 2005). I was particularly inspired by Bryan's (2005) article on partnership strategies and programs that foster academic achievement and resilience for children in urban schools.

My vision was and is to create a comprehensive school counseling program that will enhance the academic success of all students through prevention and intervention programs focused on students' academic, personal/social, and career development. My goals are to make *families* feel at home and valued in the school; help *students* feel celebrated and cared for so that they want to come to school to learn; focus on and enhance *students' and families'* strengths; involve the *community* in touching the lives of families; encourage our *school* family (administration, staff, teachers, custodians) to accomplish our school vision, "Imagine the best for every child and make it happen"; and partner with school staff, families, and community members to reach our school mission, "Success is our only option."

From the outset, I began developing a schoolwide school-family-community partnership and teaming approach to school counseling. I knew that unless I was intentional about building partnerships, they would easily be forgotten amidst the numerous daily and equally important activities I was involved in as a school counselor. These activities include individual and group counseling, classroom guidance, chairing the Child Study Team, peer mediation and peer counseling, children and staff birthday celebrations, Terrific Kid of the Month, and a school-wide violence prevention program. Realizing that I needed to draw on a broad set of resources that must

start with teaming and collaborating with the school's administration, teachers, and other staff, I followed a seven-step process to partnership building: (a) discover the principal's vision and align my vision with hers, (b) share my vision with teachers and garner their buy-in, (c) team with student services personnel, (d) reach out to parents and family members, (e) locate and build relationships with key stakeholders and persons of influence in the community, (f) plan and implement strategic and ongoing partnership programs, and (g) evaluate progress and celebrate accomplishments.

Aligning and Sharing the Vision

School principals are the most important allies of a school counseling program. I met with my principal immediately to hear the vision and mission for the school and to discuss how the goals of the school counseling program aligned with the vision and mission of the school. Her collaborative leadership style and commitment to building community fit readily with the school-family-community partnership focus that I envisioned. We agreed strongly on the need to implement programs that encouraged families to be involved in their children's education and that fostered resilience for the students. She shared her vision for many programs including the Gentlemen's Club and the Ladies Club (discussed below under "Implementing Partnership Programs").

Teaming and Collaborating with Staff

After garnering the support of the principal, my next goal was to build strong relationships with the student services personnel and teachers. School counselors cannot build school-family-community partnerships alone (Bryan, 2005; Mitchell & Bryan, 2007). The student services personnel agreed to create a collaborative team, the Care Team, which works together as one unit rather than duplicating services to students. Our team comprises the school psychologist, school social worker, the behavior specialist, an administrator, and me. We meet weekly to consult about student cases and collaborate on treatment plans for working with each student. The team has become an integral arm of the school counseling program, providing strong support for classroom-based prevention programs, individual and group counseling, and partnership programs.

To garner buy-in from the teachers for the school counseling program, I met with the teachers at the beginning of the school year at the first professional learning community meeting (faculty and staff meeting) to share the roles of the school counselor and present the school counseling accountability plan and goals for the year. The plan included a description of classroom-based, schoolwide, and community-based prevention and intervention programs that

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would be implemented to meet these goals and how they would meet the vision of the school. In addition, I attended teacher team meetings at every grade level to assess student needs and determine how best I could help the teachers. A teacher shared the following:

The first time we met as a faculty this school year our new guidance counselor was introduced. She began her introduction by telling us all the great things that she was planning to do at Just. She was the fourth guidance counselor [who] had been introduced to the staff in the past 3 years, so I was a doubting Thomas because of my past experiences with our counselors. I believed that she would have to prove it, and prove it she has!

I have continued to maintain collaboration with the teachers throughout the year by working closely with them to plan classroom guidance that meets their student needs, discussing new plans with them, and involving them in planning schoolwide programs. I promote strengths talk about students, parents, and teachers in all of our meetings and conversations and frequently use the school motto as a form of encouragement. One teacher commented on this practice:

[The school counselor] has been the poster child for our school theme, “Imagine the best for every child and make it happen.” And she frequently says this as she makes things happen that others thought were impossible. [She] believes that anything is possible for our students.

These efforts have helped to create a collaborative climate in the school; teachers and staff feel included in the school counseling program while providing support for the program. Strengths talk also has resulted in an increasingly positive environment reflected in school personnel’s more positive conversations and attitudes about children and families, and vice versa.

Reaching Out to Parents and Family Members

With the principal’s support, I convened and chair the Parent Involvement Committee, which comprises nine teachers and one parent who is also a teacher’s aide in the school. We collaborate together to foster parent/family and community involvement in the school. Some of the programs we have planned and implemented successfully include Great American Teach-in, Red Ribbon Week (Drug-Free: the Healthy Way to Be), Read and Feed Night, Black History Month Concert and Celebration, and

Math Night. The committee involved the whole school community to make these events happen. For example, for Great American Teach-In, 44 community members came to classes to share their careers and experiences with students. Teachers were escorts, served as hostess or host, and donated food and other supplies.

Children greatly enjoy these activities. However, more importantly, these activities promote values and strengths such as optimism and finding purpose, valuing your body, and reading for pleasure. The Great American Teach-In exposed students to numerous careers that inspired them to think about pursuing careers to which that they had not previously been exposed.

I looked for practical strategies to reach and facilitate conversations with parents and family members. During these conversations, I am consciously trying to create a more positive narrative that makes parents feel welcome in the school and see themselves as assets in their children’s education. One of the strategies I use to reach parents is to “hit the streets” after school, that is, I go into the school yard and the street in front of the school to chat with parents, talk about our vision for the children, and invite them to programs. For instance, once a month, I make sure that I go out to invite parents to All Pro Dads (discussed under “Implementing Partnership Programs”). Direct contact with and personal invitations to parents have helped to increase their involvement in the school. One teacher observed that because of the school counseling program, “excitement about school is in the air this year” and there is “increased parent involvement.” Another teacher commented that “parents seem to be more involved and interested in what is going on in their child’s education.” A teacher also shared the view that the school counseling programs has improved the school’s relationship with families “by getting them involved and letting them know that they are welcome and important to not only the children but the staff also.”

Locating and Connecting with Community Partners

In building partnerships with communities, it is important to locate cultural brokers and allies or community persons of influence (Bryan, 2005; Mitchell & Bryan, 2007). I located some powerful community members who have become allies of the school counseling program and key liaisons with parents and the community. Among them is a cafeteria worker (now a custodian), a grandmother of the community who helps me gain the trust of families and the community. She plays a major role in calling parents and inviting them to All Pro Dads. The school resource officer is another ally; he has

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been at the school from its opening and knows the community well. He helps me by reaching out to parents for any event, transporting students to events, attending a community housing meeting with me, and providing support for every school counseling program.

Another major step in building strengths-based partnerships is locating assets in the community (e.g., community members, businesses) and collaborating with community organizations and members to mobilize resources and supports for students and the school counseling program. Some of the community organizations and members that I have built relationships with include the Kiwanis Club, the Family and School Support Team, Big Brother Big Sister, University of Tampa Student Athletes, University of South Florida faculty, Chick-Fil-A, McDonald's, Sam's Club, Family First, the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, Century 21, Pioneer Cleaners, the Patel foundation, a local Baptist church, an international athlete, a local law firm, and an upscale restaurant, Valencia Gardens, where a dinner was held for the Gentleman's Club and the Ladies' Club.

These community organizations and members are invaluable in providing resources and inputs such as time, volunteer hours, funding, and speakers for partnership programs and activities. For example, a University of South Florida faculty member has been working with the school counseling program to implement a schoolwide violence prevention program. Big Brother Big Sister provided mentors to more than 30 students in the school. Big Brother Big Sister mentors have included high school students, college students from the University of Tampa (UT), senior citizens, city government employees, and other community mentors. For instance, 11 second graders were mentored by high school students in a leadership class.

Implementing Partnership Programs

Below we discuss three of the major partnership programs that have helped to increase families' involvement in their children's education, create caring adult relationships for students, promote a caring and encouraging school climate, and create a resource-rich, strengths-enhancing environment for students: All Pro Dads, "Every Child a Gift at Christmas" and other celebrations, and the Gentlemen's Club and Ladies' Club.

All Pro Dads (www.AllProDad.com). The fatherhood program of Family First, this is a monthly breakfast meeting of fathers and children. Fathers, stepfathers, uncles, brothers, and guardians (and mothers and grandmothers for those children who do not live with their fathers) come to school to enjoy breakfast with their children. The goal of the program is to establish stronger relationships among

fathers/mothers and children and increase the involvement of fathers in their children's education. Breakfast is provided by Chick-Fil-A or McDonald's and prize drawings are done at each breakfast. At each meeting, parents and families publicly highlight their children's strengths and speakers from the community share on the importance of fatherhood and other topics related to successful parenting and academic success. Parents share why they are proud of their child, but students often surprise us by sharing why they are proud of their dad or mom.

All Pro Dads has helped to create a respectful space for strengths-focused (rather than problem-focused) conversations between school staff and parents and an encouraging environment for children. Attendance at these monthly breakfasts ranges from 125 to 140 parents and students. One student shared his view of All Pro Dads: "I like All Pro Dads because we get to eat a good breakfast. ... You get to stand up and share your feelings. There are good speakers there." Another student said, "I like All Pro Dads because even the parents are a part of something." Teachers also share the view that All Pro Dads has increased parent involvement in the school: "I think it is a good way to keep parents involved at school while giving them info (speakers) that can encourage them."

Not only has All-Pro Dads increased positive identity and feelings of self-efficacy among the students who received praise and affirmations from participating parents, it also has led to the increased involvement of fathers and males in the school in general. For instance, the new PTA emerged out of All-Pro Dads, and some of the PTA leaders are participating fathers. The school also has recruited more male volunteers as a result of All Pro Dads.

"Every Child a Gift at Christmas" and other celebrations. Students and staff need to feel appreciated and celebrated; however, the experience of being celebrated may be infrequent in environments where there are few resources, such as urban neighborhoods and schools. Celebrations create a feeling of validation and affirmation and a sense of belonging for students and staff. The school counseling program has implemented Birthday Celebrations, Terrific Kid of the Month, and Every Child a Gift at Christmas. At Christmas, every child went home with a gift. The Every Child a Gift at Christmas program took a tremendous amount of coordination and collaboration with community stakeholders. I received numerous donations of gifts and cash for purchasing gifts from community organizations and businesses. In addition, I collaborated with student volunteers from UT and other community organizations to purchase and wrap gifts for every student.

The principal described the vision for the program:

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[The school counselor] had a vision that every child in the school would take home a Christmas present. She began contacting organizations to donate money so this could happen. She worked with the Athletic Department at the University of Tampa, and the student athletes did all of the shopping and wrapping. In addition to UT, she worked with other agencies to have presents brought to school and handed to each student during a holiday celebration. Her vision became a reality on December 7th, when every child in the school beamed with excitement as they opened bicycles, balls, dolls, clothes, and other gifts.

One teacher said,

A chance for every child to get a gift is incredible. The children were so thankful for the gifts and they were substantial, not cheap. This was an important event for my students because many of them did not get gifts for Christmas.

I implemented Birthday Celebrations with the goal of making students and staff feel celebrated. For students celebrating birthdays, we announce their names on the morning news and sing Happy Birthday to them. At the end of the month, all students who had a birthday during the month eat lunch together on a decorated stage in the cafeteria and get to choose a gift. I team with two teachers to celebrate each staff member's birthday. The teachers deliver a gift, card, and balloon and sing Happy Birthday to each teacher celebrating a birthday. Students and teachers love the birthday celebrations. One of the team members shared, "It is a joy to see smiles on the children's faces when we sing to them and give them a cupcake and a gift. The staff loves to have their birthday card, candy, and a song too."

I team with the media specialist to celebrate Terrific Kid of the Month, a major celebration that students love. Students are selected by teachers monthly for consistently demonstrating the character trait of the month, following school rules, and displaying good attitudes to work and others. Family members attend the celebration. They receive a certificate and a personalized award (a special note written to the student by the teacher which is framed with a photo of the student and their teacher) at the monthly celebration. Coupons are donated by McDonald's and Golden Corral for each award winner. One parent shared that Terrific Kid of the Month is her favorite program because "it teaches them [the children] that good things get rewarded." A teacher commented, "Terrific Kid is a great incen-

tive and also great for the students' self-esteem. They really need this." These celebrations have created an environment in which students feel affirmed and valued and experience a sense of belonging in their school.

The Gentlemen's Club and the Ladies' Club (www.stephenpetersgroup.com). Mentoring and after-school enrichment programs are effective sources of empowerment and support for students and integral to school counseling programs (Bryan, 2005). I collaborate with the principal, teachers, parents, and numerous community members to coordinate the Gentlemen's Club (GC) and the Ladies' Club (LC). These clubs bring together school and community stakeholders with the intent of empowering students. The clubs were created by Stephen Peters (2001) to serve as a lifeline for boys and girls who often "fall through the cracks." There are Gentlemen's Clubs and Ladies' Clubs in more than 100 schools in the United States. These programs have been featured on "The Oprah Winfrey Show." The goals of the program are to instill hope and purpose in the students and educate them about options available for their futures, to help them understand that they do not have to be ruled by the rhythm of the streets, and to teach them the social skills and etiquette necessary to behave like gentlemen and ladies. This process begins by "capturing" these students and helping them to see themselves differently.

Thirty-one female and 31 male students were chosen to be in the clubs. A wide range of students were chosen, not just the "good" students as is typical in many schools, but students who could benefit from the program. Students meet weekly in separate groups with teacher facilitators. One facilitator is assigned to lead and mentor five students. The students dress in white shirts (and ties for young men, stoles for young ladies). During their time together, community speakers have spoken to the gentlemen and ladies on many topics including choices and consequences, self-worth and respect, goal planning, attitude, and leadership. Many of the speakers have shared how they have overcome obstacles and are now living out their own dreams and aspirations. The gentlemen and ladies also have attended a dinner at an upscale restaurant and college and professional athletic events (including a Buccaneers game and a UT basketball game), things that most of them had not done before. They finish out the year discussing college preparation, conducting community service projects, and compiling their dreams and aspirations.

A teacher shared that GC is her favorite school counseling partnership: "I really love the Gentlemen's Club. I believe we are definitely making a difference in these children's lives." Another

teacher observed, "For the first time in this school, children with behavior problems were not looked at with negativity, but with a positive view. The students even feel better when they are in GC and LC attire."

Students also feel impacted by GC and LC. One student remarked that LC was her favorite because "they teach us how to be young ladies and you get to be with all of your friends." Another student said of LC, "It shows me how to be a lady and how to control my anger and it helps me to reach toward my goal to become a doctor." A male student said of GC, "You learn new stuff and go places that people would never imagine."

GC and LC promote the protective factors and assets that foster resiliency in children: a caring relationship with an adult, close connection with teachers, aspirations of college, and meaningful involvement in school. Therefore, it is not surprising that many of the gentlemen's and ladies' commitment to learning and desire to engage in positive, socially appropriate behaviors have increased. Attendance has improved and behavior referrals have decreased for the gentlemen and ladies in GC and LC. On average, the students had 5.86 absences during the 2007 school year from September to February ($SD = 5.00$, $n = 43$) compared to 3.67 absences for the same period in the 2008 school year ($SD = 4.03$, $n = 43$). During the 2007 school year from September to February, students had an average of 2.84 referrals ($SD = 3.64$, $n = 50$) but had an average of 0.82 referrals for the same period in the 2008 school year ($SD = 1.85$, $n = 50$).

The principal is really excited about the contributions of the school counseling program to this venture:

For starters, [the school counselor] initiated the implementation of the Ladies and Gentleman's Clubs. After attending the facilitator's training with Stephen Peters, she took on the challenge of overseeing the entire program. ... Due to her work, this program has been featured on the news twice and has been featured in newspaper articles five times this school year.

GC and LC ended the school year with a Dreams and Aspirations banquet at which the mayor was the speaker. At the banquet, the gentlemen and ladies displayed albums depicting memoirs and positive statements from their facilitators as well as their dreams and aspirations for the future. These albums are a source of immense pride to the students.

CONCLUSION

School counselors who feel overwhelmed by the

numerous tasks that they already perform may see a partnership approach to school counseling as inapplicable or impossible. A partnership approach to school counseling requires a paradigm shift among school counselors. They must recognize that schools and school counselors cannot create the strengths and assets that children need alone, especially children who face numerous economic and societal struggles. Bridging connections with teachers, school staff, families, and community members allows school counselors to impact children's lives by creating supports and assets that empower them and their families long after they leave the school. These connections are built with one teacher, one family, and one business or community organization at a time. Potential partners with untapped resources are everywhere. As these partnerships are built, they create a spider web of support for students and families and result in asset-rich schools, families, and communities. ■

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