The New Guidance: Building A Systems Model of Competency-Based Guidance
Sharon Johnson and Clarence D. Johnson

Overview

Competency-based guidance provides a new paradigm that changes the perspective on counselors' contributions and responsibilities. There is more than one way to approach the development of a competency-based program; the one common focus is the need to ensure that all students gain the specific competencies they need to be successful students and to become successful adults. One approach is the “New Guidance Model” of Johnson & Johnson (1991) that addresses guidance program goals, competencies, counselor plans, monitoring, and management, but leaves both individual time allocations and process decisions to the program implementers. In this system, counselors determine their own professional contributions, time allocations, and processes to reach the pre-determined goals and competencies. This freedom within the system structure allows each program to develop a unique approach to meet the challenges and constraints of the specific school and population.

A system has certain characteristics (Von Bertalanffy, 1968) including the need for homeostasis. When any element of a system is changed, all other elements will change in order to achieve a state of balance. The following program elements address the results desired (mission, philosophy, goals and competencies) and the elements needed for implementation (management, counselor contributions, needs data, counselor plans, monitoring system, advisory council and calendar of events). Each element is an essential part of the system and when all elements are present, the system provides the framework within which counselors, administrators, parents, community members and students work together to ensure that students receive the competencies they need to become successful, contributing adults. A figure of this model is available from the authors.

Program Elements

The New Guidance program (Johnson & Johnson, 1991) consists of the following system of elements, while providing congruence with the school district’s mission and philosophy:

1. Mission Purpose: The mission defines the desired long range (5 to 10 years) results for ALL students and links directly with the mission of the Board of Education and administration.

2. Philosophy: The philosophy is an articulated set of guiding principles used in developing, implementing, managing, and evaluating the program. The principles (“we agree” statements) address all students, focus on prevention, specify the management system, indicate how counselors will maintain their professional competencies, and provide the ethical guidelines to be followed.

3. Conceptual Model of Guidance: A conceptual model of guidance provides a framework for student goals. This paradigm defines the domains (education, career, personal/social, leisure), the developmental level (K-12), and the competencies.

4. Goals: Goals define results to be achieved by the time the student leaves school. They are stated in terms of the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary for the student to become successful in higher education, advanced training, work, or other future endeavors, and are written for each domain in the conceptual model.

5. Competencies: Competencies are the desired knowledge, attitudes, and skills related to each guidance goal. Competencies are used to measure whether students are moving toward the stated goals.

6. Management System: The management system establishes accountability for results. It identifies who is responsible for specific students acquiring pre-determined competencies. Student results for which counselors assume accountability, and duties assigned by the administrator are included. The management system facilitates communication and the flow of data vital to making necessary mid-course corrections in program plans.

7. Results Agreements: These agreements are responsibility statements specifying the results for which each counselor has chosen to be accountable. They indicate the competencies to be achieved for students, staff, and parents, and include a separate section for all assigned duties. The administrator responsible for the guidance program must agree to the provisions of the results agreements. Agreements are audited to ensure that the assigned duties are not disproportionate to similar responsibilities expected of all teachers.

8. Needs Data: Needs identify the gap between the desired results and results that are being achieved, and relate directly to the goals and student competencies defined for the program. Needs data are used to validate program goals and indicate priorities.

9. Results Plans: The plans completed by the counselors indicate how the results will be achieved. The plan contains the competency; criteria for success; who will do what, where and when; the activities and resources; and, how the evaluation will be done.

10. Monitoring System: Through monitoring, the student and parent are aware of the individual student’s progress toward attaining the guidance goals. A responsible adult observes or measures competency demonstration and records verification on a form or student folder. Many schools use a guidance portfolio to monitor student progress and encourage students to maintain and update a computer-generated record of the specific competencies they have attained.

11. Advisory Council: The group membership represents all groups affected by the program, i.e., parents,
teachers, PPS staff, administration, local community groups, and students. The council audits guidance program results and recommends priorities.

12. Master Calendar of Events: A calendar of guidance events is published to communicate information on program activities to students, teachers, parents, administrators, and community members, and serves as a vehicle to increase the visibility of the program in the school, the district and the community.

13. Glossary: The glossary is a definition of terms, written at a basic reading level, to ensure that team members, administrators, students, parents, and community members clearly understand all aspects of the program.

The New Guidance program is being implemented in numerous states and foreign countries. In every location, as the program’s visibility, accountability, and communication have improved, the support for guidance programs has increased. Counselors currently implementing the program indicate that they have gained control over their program and their time, and now are recognized as professionals making differences in the students’ base of competence and confidence.

A Systems Model

The New Guidance model uses a systems approach. “Systems thinking is a conceptual framework, a body of knowledge and tools that has been developed over the past fifty years, to make the full patterns clearer, and to help us see how to change them effectively” (Senge, 1990, p. 7). The model, which provides for counselor self renewal, as well as self correction, is systematic and comprehensive. Strengths of the program include the following:

- Developmentally appropriate, evaluable competencies for all students Pre-K to Grade 12 are identified within the model. Competencies can also be selected from other sources.
- Is implemented uniquely at each site, thereby promoting creativity in the use of local resources.
- Allows differential staffing with counselors choosing their assignments based on areas of expertise, such as career development, educational planning, or personal growth; specific populations such as at-risk or gifted; grade levels; by last name; or no specifically assigned or identified students.
- Local community input is sought through advisory councils (Johnson, 1972), consisting of parents, community members, school staff, administrators, and students to ensure that the program is tailored to the unique needs and resources of the school.
- Full implementation usually takes about three years which allows enough time to initiate changes without losing the initial momentum.
- The management system includes evaluation of student competencies and program outcomes as an integral part of the program design, thereby allowing counselors, schools, districts, and the state to report results on a regular basis. Reporting progress in terms of student results, allows decision-makers and parents to see evidence of the benefits accrued from the funding allocated to guidance.

Summary

The new guidance program delineated above focuses on student results. The strategies to achieve results are chosen by the counselor and administrator at the local school. There is an implied curriculum that gives counselors and program managers the freedom to create strategies that match their unique expertise, interests, resources, and populations. That the results are to be attained, assessed, and reported is not negotiable; how students acquire these results is determined by the people operating the program.

References


Sharon Johnson is Associate Professor, Division of Administration and Counseling, California State University, Los Angeles, CA.

Clarence D. Johnson is an educational consultant with Professional Update, Inc. of Irvine, CA.