Implementing Competency-Based Guidance Programs in Department of Defense Dependents Schools

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Overview

Elementary, middle, and senior high school counselors have always been an integral part of Pupil Personnel Services (PPS) programs, which include school psychologists, nurses, social workers, and educational prescriptionists. They worked under service or role-statement models which featured functions that the ideal counselor would accomplish. While this approach seemed satisfactory, a number of observable criteria developed. First, if a school had a “good” counselor, a “good” program evolved. Conversely, if the counselor was not effective, the program suffered. This led to the observation that guidance programs were dependent upon the counselor’s abilities, strengths, and interests. Thus, PPS programs were based on individual competence resulting in a system of individual counselors rather than a systematic program based on a statement of mission, philosophy, and goals.

An alternative to guidance effectiveness, which is dependent on the particular strengths or weaknesses of an individual counselor and which emphasizes the role and function of the counselor, is Competency-Based Guidance (Johnson & Johnson, 1982). This new approach urged counselors to make the shift from process (role and function) to products or results, i.e., from emphasizing “what do counselors do?” to stressing “how are students different by having counselors in the school?”. The Competency-Based Guidance (CBG) program shifts attention away from what counselors do and refocuses efforts on how students benefit from the guidance program.

The Department of Defense Dependent Schools (DoDDS) is a pre K-12 school system operated for minor dependents of Department of Defense military and civilian personnel on official overseas assignments. The schools are situated on military bases located in 20 countries. DoDDS is divided into three regions: Europe, Panama, and the Pacific. The Pacific Region schools are located in Japan, Korea, and Okinawa. Each country constitutes a district managed by a Superintendent with staff educators, including an educational generalist, a computer specialist, and a special education specialist. There are 27,000 students and 34 schools in a geographical area extending 1500 miles north and south and 750 miles east and west. The DoDDS-Pacific Region system began the shift from traditional guidance to CBG in 1983. Within a few years, the system adapted CBG as the official guidance program for all.

Steps In Implementation

The first step in implementation was to get the support of the Director of DoDDS-Pacific Region. His written and verbal support created the desired atmosphere for change. The second step was to develop a five-year time line for training and for full implementation. The training consisted of an intensive workshop the first year, followed by an on-site audit and consultants’ support in the second year. These events were augmented by assistance from the Coordinator of Guidance. The third step was to decide who would attend. Everyone agreed that it was necessary for all counselors, school psychologists, and principals to work as a team during the sessions in order to develop consensus on each school’s mission, goals, and desired student competencies. The fourth and final step was to establish specific dates for the completion of counselors’ agreements, plans, progress reports, and end-of-year reports, which were to be validated by the principal and then forwarded to the Coordinator of Guidance.

Workshop Content

Each school team of counselors, the principal, and the school psychologist developed a set of program elements consisting of a statement of mission, a philosophy, a model of guidance, goals with related student competencies, a management system of assumed and assigned contributions, a student monitoring system, and an advisory council. In addition, each counselor developed an agreement for specific student, staff, and parent results and plans on how the results would be achieved. This agreement was reviewed, negotiated, and approved by the school principal.

Each results agreement contained the following: (1) specific competencies a group or groups of students would acquire; (2) results on students referred by self or others; (3) competencies to be acquired by parents; (4) competencies to be acquired by teachers; (5) self-renewal competencies; and (6) tasks or activities assigned by the principal. The plans included which competencies would be acquired by specific students, the processes and resources to be used, when the activities would be compiled, the criteria for successful mastery, and how the tabulation data would be collected. Both the agreement and plans had to be approved and signed by the building principal and copies forwarded to the central office.

Implementation

During the first year each school was visited by the Coordinator of Guidance for the purpose of reinforcing the intent of the region and to offer assistance to each counselor. The coordinator reviewed the Results Agreements & Management Plans and offered suggestions as deemed appropriate. These visits were important for morale and for reinforcing the regions’ intent, as well as for critically analyzing the results agreements and management plans.

During the middle of the first year, counselors were asked to assess the status of their program using a mid-
Evaluation

Each year an End-of-the-Year Report is completed by the counselor, signed by the principal, and forwarded to the Office of the Director. The purposes of the report are multiple:

1. The collection of data summarizing the kinds and number of competencies students have obtained, thus reflecting not only the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that students acquired, but demonstrating the answer to the question, “How are students different as a result of the guidance program?”

2. To ask counselors and administrators to analyze their program relative to what worked? What did not work? What were some constraints? How can counselors increase results next year? What plans for improvement are needed?

3. To collect and tabulate data on a system-wide basis and to share this data with all schools to increase the knowledge of what others are accomplishing, and to reinforce the notion that the CBG program efforts are a systematic approach. Likewise, to create the sense that the philosophy and goals of the guidance program, as well as the student competencies, are consistent.

4. Using the data, within the political arenas of the system, to increase the decision makers’ (the shakers and the movers of the system) knowledge and awareness of the impact of the CBG program.

Summary

Making the change from a system of guidance based on “services” and “role and function statements” to a Competency-Based Guidance program, which documents the competencies (knowledge, skills, attitudes) students acquire because of guidance, requires careful planning, specific training, follow-through support, and adequate time for change. It is necessary to prepare in detail the reasons for change coupled with identified resources in order to facilitate change within an established budget. Careful planning will gain the required support of the key administrators and the members of the Board of Education where appropriate. It is also necessary to allow ample time and continual support for change to occur. When the shift from process to product has been achieved, the positive impact on students, parents, and staff is apparent.

References


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