

Being Jeffrey Doe

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As a school counselor, it is inevitable that we will cross paths with students from a variety of backgrounds, cultures, disabilities, and handicaps. For students who may be “different,” their journey through school can be filled with obstacles, stereotypes, and challenges that can affect their academic and personal lives. Part of the school counselor’s role is to advocate for, and assist, these students in achieving academic and personal/social success. School counselors recognize and distinguish individual and group differences and strive to value all students and groups equally (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2013). And one very important group that school counselors advocate for are students with disabilities.

Students with disabilities make up a huge percentage of the average school population (see Tables 1 and 2). The number of children and youth ages 3–21 receiving special education services was 6.4 million, or about 13 percent of all public school students, in 2012–13 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). With this alarmingly high figure, it is no surprise that a large part of a school counselor’s job is to ensure that students with disabilities receive the extra support that they need and have equal access to education services. In order to achieve this, school counselors must coordinate numerous efforts and collaborate with several people by enlisting the help of all stakeholders, including the student, his or her parents, school staff, and the community. For a particular student with disabilities, Jeffrey Doe, his journey through school has just begun. And through an in depth case study, I had the opportunity to see how leaders in the school, including the school counselor, have worked together to identify his needs and eliminate barriers to ensure his success. The case study into Jeffrey included my personal impression of him when we first met, countless observations of him in and out of the classroom, a look into his cumulative school file, and a personal interview with the student.

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Through the many activities of the case study, I was able to gather imperative data about the student that I believe is crucial in supporting the American School Counselor Association's position that, "School counselors advocate for the equitable treatment of all students in school and in the community" (ASCA, 2013). And from my interview with the student months after starting the case study (See Appendix for my list of interview questions), it is evident that he will continue to need supportive services for years to come; but also that all stakeholders have a keen interest in his success, from now through high school and beyond.

The School Counselor's Role

School counselors are educational leaders that affect change in our schools every day. Their role is imperative and as the education system becomes more complex, their presence and expertise will be greatly needed. School counselors participate as members of the educational team and use the skills of leadership, advocacy and collaboration to promote systemic change as appropriate (ASCA, 2012). As advocates, school counselors are the voice of the student in many aspects; and their efforts to speak on behalf of their students is commendable and, more importantly, critical to their students' overall success.

School Counselors as Advocates

According to ASCA, advocacy is a broad and multifaceted process (Trusty & Brown, 2005). The ASCA National Model states, "Advocating for the academic success of every student is a key role of school counselors and places them as leaders in promoting school reform" (as cited in Trusty & Brown, 2005, p. 259). According to the National Model, school counselors' advocacy efforts are aimed at:

- a) Eliminating barriers impeding students' development;
- b) Creating opportunities to learn for all students;

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- c) Ensuring access to a quality school curriculum;
- d) Collaborating with others within and outside the school to help students meet their needs, and;
- e) Promoting positive, systemic change in schools (Trusty & Brown, 2005).

Advocacy is a very important part of the school counselor's job and his/her comprehensive program. And to guarantee that they are meeting the students' needs, they sometimes have to collaborate with other education stakeholders.

School Counselors as Collaborators

Collaboration is a major task of school counselors and is necessary in order for them to be effective in their job. ASCA (2012) states that school counselors play a critical role in making student success a reality (p. 17). Principals need school counselors' perspective and leadership in working together on behalf of the students in the school (ASCA, 2012). Teachers need school counselors' skills and specific knowledge to work effectively with students, especially ones with special needs such as learning disabilities, family issues, emotional and social difficulties and/or health problems (ASCA, 2012). School counselors must be the ever-present voice to ensure student needs are recognized and the staff knows how to access additional help or resources when needed (ASCA, 2012).

Thus, it is crucial that school counselors effectively advocate and collaborate for all their students. In today's world, school counselors are in the perfect position to both support and lead the collaboration needed to achieve student success and to ensure student needs remain in the center of all decisions (ASCA, 2012). Students with special needs, such as physical disabilities, are especially at a greater risk for falling behind and need extra support and resources. And who is a better person to assist with their success than a school counselor?

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Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities are a special population of students that school counselors advocate and collaborate for. Because of the high probability that these students will need extra resources in order to be successful in school, federal legislators have created laws to protect them and ensure they have equal access to education. One law in particular that addresses students with disabilities is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

IDEA is a federal law that requires schools to serve the educational needs of eligible students with disabilities (Lee, n.d.). The main purposes of IDEA are to protect students with disabilities and to give parents a say-so in their child's education. IDEA covers kids from infancy through high school graduation or age 21, whichever comes first (Lee, n.d.). To be eligible for services under IDEA, a child must be found to have one of the 13 kinds of disabilities that IDEA covers. They are:

- Autism
- Deaf-blindness
- Deafness
- Emotional disturbance
- Hearing impairment
- Intellectual disability
- Multiple disabilities
- Orthopedic impairment
- Other health impairment (including ADHD)
- Specific learning disability (i.e., dyslexia)
- Speech of language impairment

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- Traumatic brain injury
- Visual impairment, including blindness (Lee, n.d.)

As of 2012, about 5.8 million school-age children in the United States receive special education services as a result of IDEA (Lee, n.d.).

Two ways that students can receive services through IDEA are by an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or a 504 plan. An IEP is a legal document that spells out a child's educational goals, disabilities and the services and support that the school will provide (Lee, n.d.). IEPs can be completed by a school counselor or other stakeholder, such as an Exceptional Children's (EC) case manager. A 504 plan, named after Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, provides accommodations to help children with medical diagnoses in school. This law requires a school district to provide a free and appropriate public education to each child with a disability (Lee, n.d.). That disability must interfere with the child's ability to learn in the classroom. Like an IEP, 504 plans are conducted by a school counselor or other designated school personnel.

Jeffrey Doe

Jeffrey Doe is a five year old, Hispanic, male student in the first grade at North Carolina Elementary School. At the time I started the case study, Jeffrey was in kindergarten. Jeffrey appeared to be well-groomed, healthy, and developmentally on target for his age. He also appeared to be from a blue collar home that lives below poverty level. Jeffrey speaks fluent Spanish and English and lives in a primarily Spanish speaking home with his mother and sister. His sister also attends North Carolina Elementary and was in the fourth grade when I started the case study. There is no information for his father on file. Jeffrey lives in a large Hispanic community which relies heavily on each other. He appeared to be just an average kindergarten student: an average kindergarten student with congenital disabilities.

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Jeffrey's Strengths & Challenges

For Jeffrey, his challenges began at his birth. He was born with a cleft lip and palate, and a congenital abnormal of the pharynx. In addition, he has been diagnosed with chronic right otitis media, velopharyngeal incompetence, sleep initiation disorder, an abnormal hearing test, and near-sightedness. Having these abnormalities has made it difficult for Jeffrey to see, hear, and speak. In school, he is not able to hear the teacher from far away and has to sit up close in order to see the whiteboards and Smart Board. Jeffrey also is difficult to understand when he speaks and has to take speech lessons to help him communicate verbally. I'm sure these challenges are frustrating for Jeffrey and those that interact with him on a daily basis.

Even with these challenges, Jeffrey is an all-American, everyday child. He is very attentive and eager to learn, and he is a great student who seems to make the best out of his situation. In fact, I don't think he really understands or realizes the magnitude of his disability at his age. And at this point, this is a good thing. His innocence is part of the reason I chose him as my case study student.

I was introduced to Jeffrey after a teacher requested that he be observed for showing signs of a learning disability. I accompanied my school counselor site supervisor to Jeffrey's classroom and completed the observation. After observing the student, I came to the conclusion that he had no learning disabilities, but faced obstacles in the classroom because of his physical disabilities. I felt at that moment that he would be the perfect student to conduct the case study on and learn more about.

The Data Collection Process

Collecting data on Jeffrey was very easy considering he was readily accessible. Because Guidance is a "Special" that students attend each week, I saw Jeffrey all the time. As previously