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2015 saw a number of nontraditional schools earn RAMP status. Learn how you can do the same regardless of the type of school.

BY KATY O'GRADY

Developing a comprehensive school counseling program in a traditional school is one thing. But what if you work in a nontraditional school, such as an alternative school, an arts magnet school, a virtual school or a school for the deaf? What makes school counseling different in these settings? It is easy to say students' behavioral challenges or social/emotional challenges, the effects of limited language exposure, students' physical separation from school counselors or the pressures of an intense magnet environment can be impediments to effective school counseling programs. But none of these obstacles kept school counselors at five nontraditional schools from earning designation as a Recognized ASCA Model Program (RAMP) in 2015. Regardless of their nontraditional setting, these school counselors took action to provide their students with the benefits of a comprehensive school counseling program.

"At Quander Road School, RAMP allowed us to start trends that have a positive impact on our students, such as removing barriers to college," said school counselor Adrian Williams. At Charleston County School of the Arts, RAMP data helped school counselors identify ways to support struggling transfer students.

The designation also boosts school counselors. "It's a great credential to show that we're working within the parameters of something that's nationally accepted and identified as a quality program," said Lynn Morrow of New Directions Alternative Education Center. RAMP has "brought an excitement to our program and shows that we're very credible in what we're doing," said Brandon Currie of Indiana Connections Academy.

Approaches at Alternative Schools

At New Directions Alternative Education Center, a school of 450 students in Prince William County, Va., Morrow took the lead on launching a comprehensive program and pursuing RAMP when she started at the school. She was motivated by her belief that a RAMP program “is really built on student success. Having something in place for students to not only survive but really thrive – I think RAMP exemplifies that,” Morrow said. She was also drawn to a comprehensive program because of her previous career in accounting and the emphasis on accountability. “I think of the words ‘return on investment.’ We’ve got to show that we are valuable, that we are making a difference to students.”

Also in Northern Virginia, Williams is the sole school counselor at Quander Road School, a special needs alternative school where every student has an IEP. Now in her fifth year, Williams says she’s always looking for a challenge. Because of her desire to both help students and increase the school’s profile, she started working on turning Quander into a RAMP school. “The school counseling department didn’t have a vision or mission. I didn’t have a clear idea about what I was going to be doing as a school counselor until I decided to do the RAMP process,” she said. With previous RAMP experience, Williams also saw the process as a leadership and collaboration opportunity.

Students’ significant behavioral challenges are a fact of school counseling work in an alternative high school. Morrow was drawn to this environment by the opportunity to work more closely with students. At Williams’ school, behavior and mental health issues affect attendance and, therefore, academics. At least 30 percent of the school’s small population is not present on any given day. “A lot of our students just go back and forth into mental health facilities, and a small percentage are incarcerated,” she said. With sporadic attendance and behavior issues from her students, Williams looked for creative approaches, such as her Aspire program for students who had been away from school for an extended period and were dealing with anxiety

issues. It incorporates online learning and a cohort approach that provides support and accountability for the students.

For both school counselors, implementing a comprehensive program and pursuing RAMP status has shown direct benefits for students. Williams’ data showed that although all 20 seniors had indicated they would apply to college, only one or two actually did so. She uncovered barriers including lack of identification cards, family support and understanding

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of the process. Williams and her employment transition representative contacted Northern Virginia Community College’s admissions team and formed a partnership that has been in place for three years. “If you are a senior in my school, you have to apply to a college or university or trade school before your graduation date. It’s a part of the program,” she said. Quander has increased the percentage of its seniors applying to college from 14 percent to 80 percent.

With the comprehensive program in place at New Directions, behavior referrals dropped 20 percent in 2014–15 and approximately 15 percent the previous year. But more important to Morrow is the sense of school community the programming has generated among students, teachers and school counselors. “This idea of the village, it takes a village to raise a child, our school community has become that village. It’s been a really

beautiful thing where these students who so crave a sense of belonging just feel they are totally supported. And I think the comprehensive program played a huge role in that,” she said.

Williams emphasizes that school counselors should first consider the RAMP application process and be sure they are ready to follow through with commitment, organization, optimism and energy. “Build your team with people who are right for this process, who would give good feedback,” she said. “Gather your data. Be willing to carry the load and to get out there and talk to other schools.”

Tension Among the Talented

Intense student competitiveness is a dominant component at Charleston County School of the Arts (SOA) in Charleston, S.C. Marcellus Holt, SOA’s director of school counseling, began working at the school of 1,020 students in 2013. Admission to the program is by audition, with just 20 spots open in each of the nine majors. “We’ve had to deal with a lot of suicidal ideation, self-loathing, a lot of working with psychologists, a lot of eating disorders,” Holt said, and these place heavy demands on school counselors. The competitiveness can extend to parents, too, who are often passionately involved in their children’s education. Parents have resisted Holt’s efforts to address issues such as suicide prevention in the school counseling curriculum. “Parents don’t want that to be the reality for their kids,” he said.

A further complication is the time constraints of the magnet program, with students frequently pulled out for activities related to their arts emphasis. “That’s been one of the major contentions with some teachers. Our kids’ minutes come at a high premium,” Holt said. He led his previous school in attaining RAMP status and has seen positive changes already from the program at SOA. One of his first changes improved how school counselors interact with students. When he arrived, he said students would show up in the office and wait, and if a school counselor wasn’t available for them, they would leave without a school counselor even knowing they had visited. Holt introduced a “Request to See a Counselor”

form to track student needs and improve communication. “I wanted to establish a better relationship with kids and make it so they knew we were advocates for them,” he said.

Thanks to the comprehensive school counseling program, Holt and his team were able to provide data about freshman failure rates for the first time for their district audit in fall 2014. They had identified that students who transfer into the school in ninth grade, rather than beginning the program in sixth grade, have a difficult time transitioning. “Those are the kids who need extra support. We were pulling those kids out for small groups and for study skills strategies and testing strategies,” Holt said.

For school counselors seeking RAMP designation in a similar magnet program, Holt recommends starting the process by getting out into the school community and collecting data. Even though that sounds basic and simple, it’s critical to support direction and effective change, he said. For a competitive environment like SOA’s, he urges school counselors to beef up their school counseling skills. When student anxiety is high, “those kids need someone to kind of talk them down and need us to provide that,” he said.

Expanding Experiences for Deaf Students

Limited access to language and life experience results in significant delays in language, communication and social skills for the 200 students ages 3–21 at the Pennsylvania School for the Deaf (PSD) in Philadelphia. These delays present a formidable barrier to academic and vocational success, according to Marsha Miceli, the school’s director of student development and student life. “In meeting the needs of our student population direct and visual approaches are imperative, including the use of American Sign Language,” Miceli said. Such visual experiences include interactive PowerPoint presentations, deaf actors and groups performing on campus, recruiters from postsecondary schools and programs, visits with invited deaf role model speakers and educational field trips to ASL-interpreted programs such as Cooper Hospital’s Traumatic Injury Prevention Program.

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Marsha Miceli, Pennsylvania School for the Deaf, at the RAMP Recognition Dinner at #ASCA15

In 2006, the PSD school counseling program began following the ASCA National Model. Previously, school counseling services had been available only by referral or as responsive services. Students who didn't have access to school counselors often asked for additional support, Miceli said. The team worked hard to be sure the program would achieve RAMP status when they applied. "Creating mission and vision statements, program goals, a core curriculum and identifying appropriate competencies and indicators has helped us streamline our efforts," she said. And this allows the program to meet the needs of all students. The school counseling team found the use of data challenging at first. "We struggled with both language and technological barriers, but we learned to appreciate [data] because it ensures program effectiveness and accountability," she said.

With no language barriers at PSD, students often seek information, clarification or incidental learning from school counselors throughout the day. "Students especially enjoy socializing with peers who share the same language, ASL. This teaches students social skills and builds on their emotional intelligence, but they often place a lesser priority on academic learning," she said. School counselors teach students greater respect for learning, authority and to do their homework via groups and programs that show students the meaning of school and the value of an education.

Another significant challenge is the mainstreaming of deaf students who are at or near developmentally appropriate levels in local school districts. This results in a lack of thriving deaf students who can serve as role models in schools for the deaf.

PSD provides counseling to all students on a weekly basis in groups addressing proactive and preventive topics and developmental issues students often face due to limited access to language. Their data have shown noticeable improvements in grades and behavior when school counseling access is made available to each and every student, Miceli said.

Growing Value at a Virtual School

Brandon Currie knows that limited face-to-face time with students is a drawback to working as a school counselor at a virtual school. But the manager of counseling services at Indiana Connections Academy also recognizes that communicating primarily via text or instant message has some major pluses. "There's no limit on when you can speak to the students; you can contact them and have conversations really at any point in the day to make sure you're meeting their needs," he said. And with students in their own homes, he has found them more forthcoming in discussing issues. Founded in 2010, the school serves 3,600 students across the state in grades K-12, with seven school counselors.

Currie had worked on the RAMP application at his previous school. "It's a great foundation for finding out the needs of the school while also advocating for students and the school counseling department," he said. Advisory council meetings for Indiana Connections Academy's program have educated staff and administrators about what school counselors do on a daily basis. Now the school staff collaborates to address the needs of the school and has empathy toward the school counseling program.

His first objective in beginning a comprehensive school counseling program at the new school was to focus on postsecondary options for students. "Students come in as freshmen and don't really understand what a credit is, how you get it or how it affects you or your GPA," he said. His administrators now understand

the urgency of adding more career and technical opportunities and electives to help prepare students. The school counselors are developing partnerships with local colleges and looking to create dual-credit options, internships and job shadowing.

The school's virtual nature caused one of the largest logistical challenges to the academy's RAMP application process. With advisory council members living across the state of Indiana, holding council meetings in person was challenging. The snowy Midwestern winter provided further complications, but the members prevailed. "We had a lot of support, and I think people were just excited to be a part of it, to have a voice in how we were structuring things, moving forward in areas of need and setting priorities for our program," Currie said.

Taking time to understand your needs and to prepare for the program are Currie's primary recommendations to school counselors at virtual schools who want to pursue RAMP. He also emphasizes communication with administrators and building a successful team. "It's really getting people on your side who want to take part in this," he said. "Not only parents, students and community members that can be key members of the advisory council but teachers from different grade levels and arenas, from special education to math to language arts, because they're all having different experiences with the students, they can all bring their different pieces to the table." ❏

Katy O'Grady is a freelance writer who most recently wrote for *ASCA School Counselor* about building an advisory council.

