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# school counselor

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## RURAL SCHOOL COUNSELING

• School counseling in  
small-town America





# ROADBLOCKS ON THE RURAL ROUTE

**School counselors in rural districts must build connections and get outside their comfort zones to overcome challenges and serve their students and communities.**

BY KATY O'GRADY

The 1,900 residents of Lovelock, Nev., have one grocery store and one fast-food restaurant in their one-stoplight town. The nearest Wal-Mart is an hour away in the slightly bigger town of Fallon.

In Mississippi's Simpson County, home to 27,000 people, the community of Pinola has no stoplight, and residents must drive 10 miles to reach the nearest gas station. Despite their small size, these and many other rural communities still have something valuable: school counselors working to meet the particular academic, career and social/emotional needs of their rural students.

Although rural school counselors experience many of the same challenges their urban and suburban counterparts experience, they also cope with challenges unique to working and living in rural communities. Most notable among these is a lack of resources, both for the students and the school counselors who serve them. In Georgia, poverty is pervasive in rural areas, said Lee Grimes, Ph.D., a counselor educator at Valdosta State University in southern Georgia. With the closing of factories in that region and minimal job opportunities, many people are “just desperately living from day to day,” she said.

One impact of such poverty, according to Crystal Brewer, Pinola’s elementary school counselor, is students’ lack of access to extracurricular activities. “A lot of our kids are living in poverty, and their parents can’t drive the half hour to get them to the places where they can take part,” she said. Aside from a weekly program at a local church and a small baseball program, “parents have to travel 30 or 45 minutes for their kids to participate in any kind of extracurricular things, which is a challenge.”

The needs of the school counselors serving these students motivated Grimes

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to create the Rural School Counselor Network of the Georgia School Counselor Association. The co-chair is SaDohl Jones, Ph.D., who has taught counseling at Albany State University in Albany, Ga., and online with Capella University. “We saw a lot of challenges with ethics and advocating for their students, advocating for their positions as school counselors and getting administrators and teachers to understand what school counselors do,” Jones said of her work in Albany. The network helps provide education to address some of these issues and gives a voice to rural counselors. “When you’ve got a powerhouse like Atlanta, it’s so easy to forget about the people in rural areas,” Grimes said.

Online teaching has demonstrated to Jones that the challenges of rural communities and their school counselors exist in virtually every state, from Minnesota to New Jersey, and Florida to North Dakota. “One of my students talked about lack of access to the Internet or having a computer. Students may not have access to the library other than coming to the school,” Jones said.

### Doing More with Less

Working as a school counselor in a resource-limited area can mean lack of access to professional development and support, positions that go unfilled in the school and accepting the reality of performing many non-school-counseling duties.

“We had to start the year with two full-time positions empty, and we still haven’t received any applications,” said Matthew Schottel, the secondary school counselor in Lovelock. The combination of duties that can occur in rural schools contributes to the challenge in filling jobs, such as the teacher who “taught our wood shop class, all of our auto shop classes, our computer-aided drafting class and two sections of weight training,” Schottel said. “As a rural school counselor, you can’t just be the school counselor. You have so many hats you need to wear because it wouldn’t be done otherwise.” He has served as the student council advisor for the past three years, coached the academic team at the high school and, at students’ request, is now helping start a game club.

Schottel finds these added responsibilities help him be a better school counselor. In his work with the student council, “I got to know the council students and the staff and student body on a whole other level, planning homecoming and dances, getting leadership involved, doing community service.” With the academic team, he trained and traveled with his students to events that let them interact with students from other schools.

Jones also sees the opportunity for school counselors to enhance their counseling work through the non-school-counseling responsibilities rural schools often require, by using those opportunities to connect with students in a way other school counselors may not be able to do. With cafeteria duty or bus duty, “as a school counselor, that’s a check-in for you with those students. You get to see who drops kids off and who doesn’t, which kids are always late, which kids are walking in without a book bag.” This provides more information for the school counselor.

Connecting with building supervisors and colleagues and educating them on the school counselor’s role and function is essential – and not difficult, Jones believes. “You have a unique position in a school. There’s no one who can do exactly what you can do, who understands the nuances of education and mental health the way you do and who understands how those things come together and influence the student in the educational setting,” she said.

Brewer’s efforts to advocate for her role and transform her program resulted in a strong relationship with her principal, and that paid off when he was elected as superintendent and asked Brewer to serve as a lead school counselor for the district. She now holds meetings with all of the district’s school counselors at least four times per year. The group has learned together about implementing the ASCA National Model, and Brewer values the meetings, “not just for the professional benefit of learning from one another and being able to ask questions of one another and being able to mentor new school counselors but also from the standpoint of just encouraging one another. It can be really difficult

sometimes if nobody else understands the work you're doing or the challenges you're facing."

Avoiding professional isolation and maintaining connections to others in the field is essential for all school counselors, of course, but it requires particular effort for those working in rural communities. Although Schottel has an elementary school counselor working in a building nearby, the two have little time to collaborate, and their responsibilities differ widely. He has maintained contact with classmates from his school counseling program at the University of Nevada in Reno, has served on the board of the Nevada School Counselor Association and attends the state conference every year.

When Brewer started at her school 15 years ago, "I was the only school counselor here, and I kind of fell into the routine of the school counselor who was here before me. It took me a while and some trainings before I realized that wasn't necessarily a good thing," she said. After the district sent all of its school counselors to a training on the ASCA National Model, Brewer came home thinking, "Oh my goodness, this is what I'm supposed to be doing? I didn't have anybody else to be at work with. I was young and just kind of working in isolation."

### **Good Fences Make Good Neighbors**

Living in small communities builds close relationships and a deep knowledge about your neighbors, and this can be both beneficial and problematic. One of the biggest benefits Schottel finds is the relationships he has forged with students and seeing them around town. "They know you and introduce you to their parents. They actually will talk to you and don't avoid you, and that's huge." Brewer, too, experiences plenty of cross-over between life at school and outside of school, with family members, participants in her church youth group and children of personal friends all attending her school. "Sometimes we have to just very clearly draw that line between our professional selves and our outside-of-school selves," she said. "It's not always an easy thing to do. I have a mom right



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now who goes to my church, and her child is having issues with behavior at school. She's wanting to call me and talk to me like one mom would talk to another mom, but she has to understand that when I'm at school I'm not just another mom that child knows. I'm that child's school counselor. And so I have a different set of responsibilities to him than I would if he was just some kid I knew in the neighborhood."

Jones' school counseling students have struggled to establish these boundaries in their schools, asking her, "How do I balance that? How do I make sure I'm maintaining confidentiality? I know I can do that, but how do I respectfully, professionally maintain the boundary with other people who are inquiring about what's going on?" Both Schottel and Brewer have clear communication approaches with their teachers. "I just have to say, 'It's being handled. I can't really tell you what's going on, but I've talked with the student. The wheels are

rolling, and we're trying to do what we can to help him or her. If you know anything else, let me know, and I'll try to improve it,'" Schottel said.

Jones recommends explaining informed consent and confidentiality so teachers know that when you're not giving them information, you're not snubbing them. You're really just protecting the student.

Brewer has also encountered confusion in the community regarding professional ethics vs. personal beliefs. "I'm in the Bible belt, and I have religious convictions and beliefs. Sometimes that's hard for people in the community to understand, the lines that exist between that outside of the school and what the code of ethics say about here in the school setting," she said.

Above all, Jones emphasizes having a clear and specific understanding of ASCA's Ethical Standards for School Counselors, especially as they relate to confidentiality, parent rights, informed consent and duty to inform. Maintaining that knowledge and staying current is also crucial, she believes. "You have to stay connected to organizations like ASCA and your state organization, know the new strategies and attend trainings and webinars," Jones said.

### **Learning and Connecting**

Although getting to trainings can be hard for rural school counselors working far from conference locations, Brewer feels strongly that when opportunities present themselves, you need to take them. "You never know when those opportunities may present themselves again. I think so often with school counselors, we say, 'I don't have time for that.' Or, 'I'll come back, and there'll be all this other stuff piled up.' But we have to improve ourselves so we can do a better job for our students."

As the rural liaison for the NVSCA board, Schottel noticed that districts far from the conference locations tended not to be represented at state conferences. He made an effort to try to get school counselors from those districts involved and networking with the other school counselors.

"Rural school counselors have asked us for better access to professional



## Pursuing RAMP in a Rural School

By Katy O'Grady

Working in a rural environment can challenge and benefit school counselors who are pursuing the Recognized ASCA Model Program (RAMP) designation. Two recent RAMP applicants, Rebecca Lallier and Crystal Brewer, shared their approaches to some of the challenges. Lallier is one of two school counselors at the pre-K through fifth grade Dothan Brook School in White River Junction, Vt. Brewer is the school counselor at Simpson Central School, which serves K-8 students in Pinola, Miss.

### Professional Isolation

“Reach out” is the essential advice from both Lallier and Brewer. “There’s such a good, connected community online, but also contact ASCA and ask questions” about the RAMP application process, Lallier said. With a small professional association, Vermont has limited educational offerings for school counselors, and Lallier’s home has poor Internet service, requiring her to stay at school for webinars and other training opportunities.

With no one in her district and few in her state who had applied for RAMP, Brewer chose to attend the 2014 ASCA conference and its

preconference RAMP Camp. She then e-mailed one of the presenters for feedback on her goals. “If you can’t find a person who’s in the know in your area or your district, then you start looking elsewhere. That support is there; you just have to seek it out,” she said.

### Small Towns

A close-knit community can provide crucial support for school counseling success and for RAMP. “We know the police officers, the support services, and we have a number of police officers’ children in our school,” Lallier said. “We’re able to build good working relationships.” Brewer has had support for her comprehensive program thanks to her strong relationships with administrators and her community, in which the school is the center of activity. “In this community, if kids are playing ball, they’re playing ball here. If kids are having some kind of event, it’s taking place at the school,” she said.

But those relationships can also cause challenges around confidentiality. One of Lallier’s RAMP goals addressed significant behavioral difficulties in one grade – a grade with only 43 students, 17 of whom had behavioral issues. Although

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community depth is important on an advisory council, Lallier and the other school counselor at Dothan Brook School felt the risk of a confidentiality breach was too great. “You don’t need much of an identifying characteristic and people could guess,” she said. In the end, their advisory council included one outside mental health specialist, with all other members drawn from within the school. Those members often had multiple roles. Some were also current parents; others served on boards of outside organizations.

For Brewer, finding community representation on her advisory council required casting a wide





net. No businesses are in her school community, and businesses in her county are usually closer to other schools. “We do have a business in one of the bigger towns in our county, so I was able to get one of those people to come and sit on my advisory council to represent local businesses,” she said.

Above all, both Brewer and Lallier urge rural school counselors to take advantage of the many online resources and to think creatively, especially about their professional community. “Make your community wider than just where you are, and maybe wider than your state,” Lallier said.

development,” Grimes said, and her Rural School Counselor Network is developing webinars specifically tailored for those working in rural communities. Some of the network’s webinars also focus on increasing career awareness to help students who do not want to leave their rural areas. “What can we do to help students discover careers they can follow and be passionate about but still be able to stay in the place they love?”

Another approach for expanding education for school counselors is through partnerships and technology. “We’re working now to connect rural school counselors with suburban school counselors so they can share professional development opportunities through teleconferencing or recordings,” Grimes said. “With the use of technology, we can close some of the gaps that happen for school counselors in rural areas.”

Building comfort with technology was one of the benefits Brewer gained from a training at her state conference. Although she didn’t initially see the value of social media and calls herself “a reluctant user,” a conference session opened her eyes to how Twitter and Facebook offer access to “people who are pioneers in our profession, people who are pushing the envelope and making the news and who are really doing amazing things as advocates,” Brewer said. “It wasn’t comfortable for me, but I have pushed myself to learn to use some of those technology tools just because I know the benefit, particularly for me as a rural school counselor.”

### Changing the Perspective

Working in a rural community is a choice that many school counselors make gladly. “I’ve been in Nevada for most of my life,” Schottel said. “I just like that small town kind of feel.” But school counselors in such communities often deal with negative stereotypes of people in small towns and rural communities, and they struggle with the impact of anti-rural bias on their students. “Being in a rural area does not



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limit you or your students, as far as their capabilities,” Jones said. “It just limits the resources you may have, and you may have to be more creative in what you’re able to do. Many people who live in rural areas are very, very happy where they live. So we have to make sure we’re not inadvertently equating uneducated or uninformed with rural, because that’s not accurate.”

Grimes notes that rural students often live with the idea that because they’re from a rural area they can’t achieve as much. “That is simply not true.” School counselors can make a crucial difference for these students, Jones said, by thinking outside the box, being open and being willing to connect with other districts.”

“We are a valuable group of people in the education realm, and when we connect with each other and we network and share, we become stronger,” Brewer said.

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Katy O’Grady is a freelance writer who most recently wrote for *ASCA School Counselor* about RAMP programs in non-traditional schools.