

Guidance services update heard

*Department moving
in new direction*

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Judging by the reaction of members of the Agawam School Committee, initiatives taken by the director of School Counseling and staff members to revamp the traditional delivery of guidance services at the high school, junior high, middle school and four elementary schools are heading in the right direction.

Counseling Services Director Susan Schoenberger and members of the counseling staff used PowerPoint to provide the School Committee with a detailed report on how the school system is implementing a "high quality" program based on the Massachusetts Model for Comprehensive School Counseling Programs.

Schoenberger said, "Over a year ago, Agawam engaged in an extensive evaluation of current counseling services. The evaluation team made recommendations that would assist the district in implementing a comprehensive school counseling program. This year, we began to develop school counseling curriculum and a school counseling program that aligns with the Mass. Model."

While Schoenberger outlined the

many avenues needed to be traveled to develop such an ambitious program, the presentation's theme was summed up on the last page of the PowerPoint hand-out - "The old question was - 'What do counselors do?' The new question is - 'How will students be different because of the school counseling program?'"

Schoenberg explained five questions that need to be addressed to shape the building blocks to implement the program - 1) What is the purpose of the school counseling program?; 2) What are the desired outcomes or results?; 3) What is being done to achieve results?; 4) What evidence is there that the objectives have been met?; and 5) Is the program making a difference?

Schoenberg then covered goals necessary to achieve the program's success - develop a mission statement for the School Counseling Program; develop counseling performance standards and at each level of practice; begin to deliver curriculum in classrooms; and revise school counselor job descriptions.

After watching Schoenberger and her staff proceed through their presentation, School Committee Vice-Chairman Anthony C. Bonavita remarked, "I was very much impressed with the high morale of all the school counselors. The new model for the School Counseling Program has been well-accepted and is extremely proactive."

Member Linda Galameau observed, "I was impressed with the fact there is now defined direction, leadership, and follow-up to the services that are being delivered by the Guidance Department. I believe that areas of past concerns are being addressed because counselors are now going into the classrooms and talking to all the students."

"In the past, counselors would typically only see students that were really in trouble academically or otherwise those who were planning to attend college. The majority of the student body was not really being serviced. Also, I believe that with this new approach to counseling services, there is a concerted effort to reach out to parents and bring them into the process. The change in services is also timely because social issues are being addressed more than ever," Galameau said.

According to Schoenberger, counseling services are delivered through four inter-related program components at all levels - School Counseling curriculum, Individual Planning, Responsive Services, and System Support.

"The curriculum provides the content, scope, and sequence and instructional strategies of the school counseling program in a systematic way to all students K-12. The purpose is to provide students with knowledge of growth and development, assist them in acquiring and using life skills, and assist them in making future education and career plans," Schoenberger said.

According to her, Individual Planning includes school counselors assisting students in planning, monitoring, and managing their personal and career development, and to help students establish personal goals as well as develop educational and career plans for the future.

Responsive Services, Schoenberger stated, are the prevention and/or intervention activities which address the immediate needs and concerns of students. "These needs can be necessitated by events and conditions in students' lives and may require any of the following - individual counseling or group counseling; consultation with parents, teachers, and other educators; and referrals to other school support services or community resources."

Responsive Services topics may range from divorce, suicide, academic concerns, family issues, drug abuse, dropout prevention, and depression.

Schoenberger described System Support as "school counselors carrying out counseling program management and evaluation work, community collaboration, committee work, and a fair share of administrative tasks which help them to establish, maintain, and enhance the total school counseling programs."

Parent Outreach Programs, as explained by Schoenberger, included

College Planning Night for parents and students at the High School; College Financial Aid Night at the High School; Conversation with counselors through four morning coffee programs for parents; Parent Orientation to the High School curriculum; evening counselor hours at the close of each quarter at the High School, Jr. High, and Middle School; and Substance Abuse Awareness at the Jr. High.

The comprehensive use of collecting data to assess and identify barriers to learning and then target students who are in need of services are also important parts of the overall program, according to Schoenberger.

Bonavita particularly liked gathering the data to determine when and where services are needed. "It is important this data can be tracked and collected to insure efforts are being directed to the right areas," Bonavita said.

Superintendent of Schools Dr. Mary Czjakowski said bringing in Schoenberger last August to coordinate and execute the revamping of guidance services will have a positive impact on the school system for years to come.

"Susan was the right person for the job. She has shown outstanding leadership and has pulled together and coordinated the delivery of counseling services on a system-wide basis. It is a real shift from the traditional way guidance services have been delivered," the superintendent said.

Czjakowski said Schoenberger's staff of 22 has "bought into the program and she has been praised by many of the staff members for her leadership qualities."

The superintendent believes it may take three of four years for the program to evolve. Czjakowski and Schoenberger are planning to present Agawam's program as a model for other school systems to follow when area superintendents of schools gather this summer.