



Advocacy Toolkit: A Practical Approach to Advocacy

Advocacy is a key component to being an effective school counselor. Not only is it critical for school counselors to serve as advocates to their students, it is also important that school counselors advocate for their own profession. Although there is not a single strategy that will save school counselor positions, this toolkit was created to assist school counselors. This document contains a variety of practical activities that school counselors have utilized to save counseling positions, as well as show the value of having school counselors.

Awards--Apply for awards at local, state, and national level. Examples of awards that school counselors can apply for include and are not limited to the following: School awards, such as staff person of the month or staff person of the year award. At the state level you can nominate a school counselor for the Arizona School Counselor of the Year Award. Your counseling department can also apply for National awards for your comprehensive guidance program, such as the Recognized ASCA Model Program (RAMP) Award. For more information about these awards, please look at the below websites.

R.A.M.P

www.schoolcounselor.org

Arizona School Counselors Inc.

<http://www.azsca.org>

Bargaining Team--Make sure a school counselor is represented on the Bargaining Team/Site Team/School Leadership Team. Many districts have a multidisciplinary team of individuals who have the responsibility to determine possible ways to save money and which programs will be cut. It is critical that a school counselor is represented on this team.

Contest--Create an essay contest for students. Encourage students to write an essay that shows how school counselors have

made a difference in their lives. You can also connect a scholarship to the contest. Share the winning essay with staff, district members and school board members.

Data--Have a data driven program and collect data to show how you impact student success. It is important that school counselors regularly use data to create and evaluate their programs. Once you have your data it can be presented along with an overview of your program. Connecting the data to the school and district's mission statement is key to gaining support. Many school counselors have used their results data to prove that school counselors improve attendance, academics, and behavior. This has been an extremely effective way to garner support for school counseling programs. Showing how students are impacted as a result of having a school counselor adds to the value of having a comprehensive guidance program. Another successful way to use data is to show how school counselors increase the school district's revenue. Presenting data to staff, administrators, district officials, and the school board provides an opportunity to highlight the success of your program. It is suggested that you present the data regularly rather than in a reactive mode. Encourage school counselors on your team to follow the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model Program. Attending board meetings regularly is also a powerful approach to advocating for your profession.

Evaluate your advocacy and leadership skills—determine what activities you utilize to advocate for yourself. Often we may wait for someone else to advocate for us, but we cannot expect someone else to advocate for us if we do not take the initiative ourselves. One way to measure your skills is to read through this list and indicate if you have utilized any of these strategies. It is equally important to evaluate your leadership skills. In order to be an effective advocate, we must be an effective leader.

Fact Sheet—Create a fact sheet for your site or your district that shares information about the role of the school counselor, as well as highlighting how school counselors make a difference in the lives of students. It is also helpful to include community facts, such as suicide rates, violence, and number of youth in foster care.

Got Contacts? Make contacts with the business owners, managers, churches, and/or leaders of local community business organizations (i.e., banks, child-care facilities, boys and girls clubs, community centers). Develop relationships with community members. Meet the people who provide community resources available to school districts. Volunteer to speak about the school counseling program at community meetings and encourage community feedback. Provide a brief summary on who professional counselors are, their training, and what they do (brochures can be used to highlight information). Educate the contact person about how professional school counseling services are helpful to students and the community. Offer to speak to the contact person's clientele briefly during a scheduled time about the benefits of a school counseling program. Examples include for the first fifteen minutes of a weekly meeting. You could also give a sample of an activity that you do with your students (i.e. stress management and relaxation activity, violence prevention activity, give a flash light segment on a topic that is relative to the group.) Collaborate with your contacts to sponsor a community event. Often school districts have used their school sites, local parks, or community centers to host the event. These events work best when you choose a fun idea to draw in families and community members. These events are often promoted through the local newspaper and radio announcements. Not only does this strategy provide a positive way to advocate for school counselors, it also allows you to build relationships within the community which creates an excellent opportunity to garner support.

Help—it is okay to ask for help when advocating for your profession. Parent, student, and staff support are essential to advocacy. There are a variety of ways to garner support, below are some ideas that school counselors have found to be effective: create talking point letters, which provides an outline of ways that parents, students, and staff can contact the school board, such as letter writing campaigns to the school board, speaking at a school board meeting, and meeting individually with each board member. In some districts English teachers have encouraged their students to write letters to the school board about the important role that school counselors play.

Arizona legislators are powerful. Ask for their help by contacting your legislators and encourage others to do the same. It is key that legislators hear the voices of school counselors and their supporters. One way to communicate with your legislator is to write to them. You can find out who is your legislator by going on <http://www.azleg.gov/>. Another powerful way to seek legislator assistance is by attending town hall meetings to discuss your concerns. You can also schedule an individual meeting with your legislator to discuss the important role that school counselors play and how they are integral to the success of students.

I—There is no “I” in TEAM—Create an advocacy team made up of school counselors who are leaders. Work with this team of school counselors to develop advocacy ideas. Have regular meeting and develop strategies within your district to advocate for school counselors. We are stronger when we work together, rather than in isolation. Create a phone tree which makes it simple to contact school counselors when information needs to get out quickly. Many school counselors have used this strategy to get school counselors to board meetings or to get them to conduct letter writing campaigns.

Journals and articles—Be aware of research and articles about the effectiveness of school counselors. Share these articles with administrators and school board members.

Kee a running list of parents, students and staff members that would be available to speak at board meetings about the important role that school counselors play. One way to get support from parents is by making parents aware of your availability. Make positive contacts with parents regarding their child by writing a positive letter/email or making a phone call. Create a parent resource center. Create a coffee talk session for parents, which is an informal discussion group to help parents. Conduct parent workshops on relevant topics pertaining to their students. Strategies to gain teacher support include: providing teachers with an overview of your guidance program, which includes goals of your program and data, meet with department groups, provide support and encouragement to new teachers, be

visible and available to teachers, conduct trainings for staff members on issues that are relevant to your population, encourage feedback from teachers about your guidance program, and be at the table of various committees.

Local Media—Contact the local media. Have them write a feature article about the important role of school counselors, highlighting how the school counseling program makes a positive difference on the lives of students and is an essential piece of the educational process. A feature article is also a great way to share your data. Arrange for local radio time for public service announcements, encourage students to help with this. Utilize public television stations to advertise and/or feature your guidance program.

Market your school counseling program—do not be afraid to toot your own horn. Strategies to market your program include, but is not limited to the following: create a program brochure, have an updated website, create a monthly newsletter that highlights the events and activities that school counselors are involved with, utilize your school newspaper to write a regularly featured article about activities that the school counselors are involved with, send out a sample of your monthly calendar of activities, utilize exhibit space in the school or community to publicize your guidance program.

Network—who are the people in your district that have power? Network with these individuals and share with them how school counselors make a difference. Develop relationships with district officials, school board members, and administrators. Offer your expertise by volunteering for special projects that these influential people have.

Open House—have an open house. Similar to an art show, serve refreshments and share results. This is a creative way to highlight your program. Some counselors utilize a poster display of data, a slide show of various activities that they have been involved with, and a power point presentation featuring results. It is especially powerful if you invite your students to do a testimonial about how

the school counseling program has helped them. Invite staff, community members, district officials, and school board members.

Portfolio—Create a portfolio comprised of evidence and examples of the work you do. This is a perfect way to share what you do with your administrator. Whenever your administrator is visited by the Superintendent or other personnel they can easily share what their counselor is doing with them too. It has everything you are doing in it. Place items in a three ring binder; add some cover sheets to add to the presentation. You can include items like the following: National Standards for School Counseling, Counselor Schedule, Action Plan, any guidance curriculum you use, including any guidance lesson plans, professional affiliations, results data, copies of presentations you have conducted, any agendas where you presented, student surveys you have given.

Questions—Be prepared to answer common questions regarding school counselors. Some questions include: what does a school counselor do, why is important to have school counselors? Create a Q&A most frequently asked questions about your school counseling program.

Resources —Utilize resources designed to assist school counselors. Professional organizations, such as AzSCA and ASCA have a wealth of information designed to assist school counselors. If you are not a member of both organizations, join them! It is well worth your investment. Attend conferences and workshops. Conferences allow you to keep current on best practices and often provide an opportunity to rejuvenate.

Do not forget that people are resources as well. Who are the experts in your area that can assist you? AzSCA has board members who have a wealth of knowledge, if you are having trouble or need direction, feel free to contact board members. Their email addresses are always located on the AzSCA website.

Supervisor Support—discuss strategies to help advocate for school counselors with supervisors of school counselors at the district level and at the site level. Successful supervisors/coordinators of counselors do the following: Work with administrators to keep them updated on issues related to school counselors, provide feedback to site administrators in regard to appropriate and inappropriate duties for school counselors, coordinators for school counselors can advocate for school counselor on all levels and help to build professionalism, they also should visit sites to support counselors and communicate with their administrators, coordinators keep school counselors updated, conduct district counselor meetings, which include ongoing trainings.

Unions—Depending on your district, school counselors may have their own union or be part of the teachers union. There are also some districts where the school counselors are not members of a union at all. This suggestion is aimed at school counselors who are part of a teachers union. Make sure that you have counselor representatives so your voice is heard. Request regular meetings to discuss how the union is supporting school counselors, as well as addressing contract language. Districts that have been successful in keeping school counselors often have a counselor on the bargaining team or financial team.

Video—Create a video advertising your guidance program. This suggestion works best when you are able to feature students who talk about the impact that school counselors have had on them. Use this video in presentations and attach it to your website.

What are other school counselors doing to advocate for their profession? There is no need to reinvent the wheel. Talk with other counselors to discuss more strategies to advocate. Some activities that school counselors do include: provide presentations describing your comprehensive guidance program conduct

trainings at staff meetings about pertinent information (i.e. ADHD, Suicide Prevention, Bully Prevention, Violence Prevention, etc.), meet with new teachers and explain the role of the school counselor. The possibilities are endless!

X marks the spot! How do you get evaluated at your site? Is your administrator aware of the role of the school counselor? Do they understand what a comprehensive school counseling program looks like? Are they supportive of your program? Do you work together with your administrator to reach the goals at your site? Too often administrators are not trained on what the role of the school counselor is. Often they may think that the main priority of the school counselor is to be the scheduler of classes and that is it. In many instances there are administrators who assign non-counseling duties to their school counselors, which impede the ability to fully implement a comprehensive counseling program. If you need improvement in this area start educating your administrator(s). Ideas include inviting them to your planning meetings; show them how your action plan connects to the goals of your school site and to the mission of your school. Keep them abreast of all the activities that you do. Work with them to create a partnership. If your administrator uses a teacher evaluation to evaluate you, work to create an evaluation tool that is functional for a school counselor.

You are important! Never forget to recognize the positive impact that you have on students and the power that you have to make a difference in the lives of the students you work with. When you get discouraged remember your students need you! Self care is a critical component to being the best counselor you can be. Do something to take care of you.

Zoom into to the Zone—In order to advocate you have to be in the zone, meaning you have to have passion for your profession. Too often school counselors wait for someone else to do the advocacy. We often expect that people will understand what our

positions entail and how our programs are critical to the success of students. The reality is we have to work hard to prove our worth. School counselors are experts in advocating for our students. We know what that looks like and we work hard to advocate for our students. It is equally important to advocate for our profession. Fully advocating for your profession requires a comprehensive approach. One approach is not enough. So often counselors have not been trained on how to advocate for our profession, please do not use that as an excuse to not act. There are some school districts where school counselors have had trainings on how to be a leader and how to advocate for themselves. To be an effective school counselor we have to be a lifelong learner and a leader. Time is of the essence; we must act fast and start advocating today. During these difficult economic times and due to the budget deficit in Arizona it is critical that we each take necessary steps to advocate for our profession. Even when the economy improves it is key to continue to advocate for school counseling, often school counselors can be reactive and do not start advocating until it is too late. School districts that did not make cuts to school counseling programs are often the school districts where advocacy efforts have been the in effect. If you are reading this and you are not a member of the Arizona School Counselors Association, please consider joining. Becoming a member of AzSCA is the first step in beginning the advocacy process. You are encouraged to take this tool kit and share it with your counseling team. Create an action plan for implementing advocacy strategies and make advocacy efforts part of your comprehensive guidance program.