

At end of day, school counselors always there for students

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
Thursday, 14 March 2013 14:05 -



Counseling topic of Stakeholder meeting

Bullying, social networking issues and much more fills the days of school counselors.

Sometimes in mediating conflicts, counselors learn more than one side of a story.

But at the end of the day, Gothenburg High School counselor Jerry Wiggins said counselors are there—first and foremost—for students.

Wiggins and middle and junior high school counselor Pam Glodowski and school psychologist Danielle Nguyen shared the role of counselors and some of the issues faced by students at a March 6 Stakeholders meeting.

Stakeholders, a group of community members who meet to learn about different topics in the school district, gathered in the community room at the Gothenburg Public Library.

Wiggins described the school as a microcosm of the community.

“We’re what’s happening, good or bad,” he said.

During an initial contact with students, counselors assess:

Is the student in immediate danger or being harmed, harming others or self?

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Is the issue affecting the student's academic performance? If so, how?

What are the family dynamics?

Does the child have other resources such as outside agencies, strong parental influence, etc.?

Wiggins said counselors walk a fine line in trying to assist students with personal and social issues and still respecting family boundaries, cultures and more.

In addition to dealing with what comes up for students in grades 9-12, socially and academically, Wiggins also spends a lot of time with seniors as they make post-secondary plans.

Glodowski said she sees students dealing with more personal and social issues while Nguyen, who works with students in grades K-3, said much of her contact is through screening, observing, assessing and providing recommendations.

During a question-and-answer period, counselors were asked about the impact of social media on students, particularly bullying.

| COUNSELING STATISTICS (last 45 school days) | Students and/or parents | |
|--|-------------------------|---------|
| | Gr. 9-12 | Gr. K-8 |
| Personal/social issue | | |
| Student mental health | 4 | 3 |
| Homeless/evicted | 2 | 0 |
| Substance abuse | 4 | 0 |
| Social isolation | 2 | 0 |
| Reported child abuse/neglect | 4 | 1 |
| Student/parent conflict | 14 | 19 |
| Student/teacher conflict | 7 | 1 |
| Student/student conflict | 32 | 53 |
| Family conflict | 13 | 7 |
| Sexual assault/abuse | 2 | 0 |
| Student death (at another school) | 2 | 0 |
| Dating relationships | 19 | 3 |
| Harassment/bullying | 12 | 18 |
| Parent death | 0 | 0 |
| Death of sibling/relative | 3 | 1 |
| Divorce/separation of parents | 4 | 3 |
| Serious family illness | 1 | 0 |
| 2009-10 School Year Sessions | | |
| | Gr. 9-12 | Gr. K-8 |
| Academic/career issues | 563 | 461 |
| Personal/social issues | 818 | 804 |

Nguyen said they're still trying to figure out how to navigate through social networking and how to use devices with integrity such as staying away from dangerous sites.

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Glodowski said she tries to keep up on what and how kids are using social media.

“I see more communication and less communication,” she said, noting that using Facebook and texting takes away one-on-one human contact.

Those methods also open up more different interpretations of what is said, Glodowski noted.

Interestingly, she said some parents are more engaged with their mobile devices than their children who have difficulty getting their attention.

“I think our job is to keep up and help kids manage,” Glodowski said.

Wiggins said harassment through social media is “a big thorn for us.”

Noting that the method of communication can be a good way to connect to others, he said it can be abused as well.

The counselor then shared about a student who was fired from a job because he texted too much.

Students have also become more bold with what they post or text, Wiggins said, and often don't think that once the information is shared, it can't be taken back.

“Kids react before they think,” he said.

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Superintendent Dr. Mike Teahon said that younger staff members are quite involved in social media.

Both Teahon and Wiggins said the district has boundaries when it comes to social media relationships between students and staff.

For example, Wiggins said he doesn't text students or friend them on Facebook. He said they can call him at home on the family's land line.

Glodowski said she constantly works on bullying issues, noting that some students don't recognize when it's happening.

She said she has strategies to help students recognize and deal with the problem and learn how to stand up for themselves.

Wiggins noted that bullying also happens in adult workplaces.

Asked whether or not the district had considered an alternative school for high schoolers, Teahon said the board is currently looking at the district's organizational structure.

Teahon said board members plan to travel to schools in eastern Nebraska which are structured differently than conventional high schools.

Several years ago, when an alternative school with a non-traditional curriculum was discussed, Wiggins said district officials didn't feel there were enough students who could benefit from such a setting.

He noted that a credit recovery program was put into place that helps students who are failing

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classes.

How to keep seniors engaged and motivated was also discussed.

Although the district doesn't offer early graduation, Wiggins said they do have a program where high schoolers leave school for part of the day to work at different businesses.

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