

Raising Student Aspirations: The Need to Share a Vision

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The term *aspirations* has been defined in a number of ways. Words—such as *goals*, *dreams*, *ambitions*, *drives*—have all been used interchangeably when discussing student aspirations. We believe that aspirations drive students to be all they can be. As educators it is our responsibility to provide an environment in our school system that will allow students to do more and be more than they currently are and may be. In our schools it is necessary to help students develop an understanding of how they grow and develop and thus have the ability to make informed choices and have the capacity to adjust to change.

There is a great deal of evidence that student aspirations, particularly in rural areas, are low. Research shows that these students have lower levels of academic and vocational aspirations than students from other regions. Although low aspirations are believed to be a national issue, it seems to be more prominent in rural areas (Cobb, McIntire, & Pratt, 1985).

RATIONALE AND PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this study is to identify how principals and school counselors can combine their efforts to

raise student aspirations. If school counselors and principals develop an understanding of and respect for their roles, as well as a positive communication pattern, they will be better able to work together to meet the needs of the students.

At the Maine Aspirations Conference in April 1987, the keynote speaker, John Elkins, President of Naisbett, a private research organization that monitors major socioeconomic trends, said that structural changes in education need to take place in order to take advantage of the structural growth in the economy. The work in rural areas is changing from factory and industrial work to business and professional opportunities. Therefore, educators need to help students broaden their aspirations to include considerations of a business and professional career. Elkins proposed that to help students broaden their aspirations, educators need to structure education to create oppor-

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tunities for students to (a) learn to think, (b) learn to learn, and (c) learn to be creative. We believe that a well-balanced developmental guidance program that is integrated into the school curriculum is a step toward structuring education to create opportunities for students to learn to think, learn, and be creative.

A number of states have required guidance in the schools for all students in Kindergarten through Grade 12. A comprehensive, Kindergarten through Grade 12, developmental guidance program can help students broaden and raise their aspirations because it is designed to help all students with their educational, personal, social, career, and vocational growth and development. Leaders in developmental guidance (Gysbers & Henderson, 1988; Myrick, 1987; Wilson, 1986) agree that human beings have the potential for positive growth, development, and personal achievement. There are, however, obstacles in the environment that may slow down this process and prohibit positive personal growth and development. Within a developmental guidance program, school counselors can help students through the developing process by working on self-concept, motivation, locus of control, and decision making in classrooms, small groups, and with individuals.

For developmental guidance to be effective in the schools, however, cooperation of the entire school staff is required. This study focuses on the importance of the school counselor and the principal working together—*sharing a vision*. A comprehensive developmental guidance program requires a commitment on the part of both the school counselor

and the principal (Baker & Shaw, 1987; Gysbers & Henderson 1988; Myrick, 1987). The purpose of this article is to show how school principals and school counselors can work together in an effort to meet growth and developmental needs of all students in the schools.

OBJECTIVES

With the premise that school counselors and principals can work together in an effort to meet growth and developmental needs of all students in the schools, the objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To present selected data comparing the aspirations of rural youths with those of suburban and urban youths
2. To present the role of the school counselor and how it relates to the fostering of student aspirations
3. To present the role of the principal and how it relates to the fostering of student aspirations
4. To offer viable solutions for the principal and school counselor to work collaboratively in the school building that would enhance student aspirations.

PRESENTATION OF DATA

In order to understand the importance of the relationship between school counselors and principals and how it affects students, data are presented in four sections: (a) presentation and discussion of selected data from the National Center for Education Statistics and the Maine Occupational Information Coordinating Committee, (b) description of the current role of a school counselor, (c) description of the current

role of a principal, and (d) presentation of the results of a group meeting between four principals and four counselors in which they analyzed the role of the counselor. After the data are presented, a discussion section follows highlighting conclusions that can be drawn from the data, as well as implications for future research.

FINDINGS

Presentation and Discussion of Selected Data

Cobb et al. (1985) analyzed selected variables from the High School and Beyond (HSB) study (National Center for Education Statistics, 1983). The HSB study compared 58,000 high school students from 1,015 rural, urban, and suburban schools in the United States in order to determine if the educational, vocational, and personal aspirations of rural students differed from those of urban and suburban students. Cobb et al.'s (1985) analysis indicates that rural youths have lower levels of academic and vocational aspirations than suburban and urban youths. Aspirations are influenced by the expectations of parents, teachers, and school counselors. Since rural parents, teachers, and counselors do not hold career and educational aspirations for their youths that are as high as those held by parents, teachers, and counselors of urban and suburban youths, it is not surprising that more rural youths expect to enter the work force right after high school and fewer aspire to continue their education. Furthermore, those rural students who do expect to continue their education aspire to lower levels

of higher education, express lower levels of self-confidence in completing the degree requirements, and expect to pursue higher education for a shorter time than urban students.

In addition, rural students do not express the same interest as urban students do in correcting social and economic inequities. This indicates that although some rural youths may be leaders in their own communities, they do not seem to carry this leadership beyond their communities into the rest of the world. Another difference between rural and urban youths is that rural parents do not seek to give their children better opportunities than they currently have. This might lead one to draw the conclusion that rural youths do not aspire beyond the confines of their well-known environment. If their rural environment, therefore, does not begin to provide them with a broad experience and with opportunities to learn about how they would function in different environments, these rural students may continue to have low aspirations. According to the preceding data, at a national level it seems that rural high school students have lower academic and vocational aspirations than urban and suburban students have. The following data describe the academic and vocational aspirations of high school students in Maine, which is characterized as a rural state.

In order to determine the career and life-style aspirations of students in Maine, the Maine Occupational Information Coordinating Committee (Thompson & Shannon, 1990) conducted a study with 754 students between the ages of 15 and 17. According to the results, it seems that the majority of the students in

Maine perceived themselves to be average or above-average academically; however, less than half aspired to go to college. Because most of the students in Maine live in rural areas, it might be expected, based on the HSB results, that the youths in Maine would have low vocational aspirations. This seems to be the case because a "Realistic" work environment (made up of people who have athletic or mechanical ability, who prefer to work with objects, machines, tools, plants, or animals, or who prefer to be outdoors) was chosen by the highest percentage of Maine students as the most appealing work environment. Also, as one might predict, an "Enterprising" work environment (made up of people who like to work with people by influencing, persuading, or performing, leading, or managing for organizational goals or for economic gain) was chosen by the lowest percentage of Maine students as the most appealing work environment. Additionally, less than 25% of the students in Maine indicated that they liked white-collar work. When one considers the issue of pursuing aspirations beyond high school, it becomes obvious that Maine youths expect to limit themselves to the opportunities available in Maine. The data support that only one-quarter of the respondents would either attend postsecondary educational schools or meet their career plans outside the state of Maine.

These results suggest that, as with rural youths across the nation, Maine youths also aspire only to what they are familiar with and do not intend to broaden their aspirations in order to influence and lead others in a more global world. The data clearly support the hypothesis

that rural students have lower levels of aspirations. The next obvious step is to look at the role of the school counselor and principal to show how they can have a positive impact on students.

Role of the School Counselor

The school counselor is concerned with the growth and development of all students, Kindergarten through Grade 12. Ideally, the school counselor works proactively, with emphasis on helping students master developmental stages and tasks in learning, career, vocational, personal, and social areas while putting less emphasis on remediation. This preventative approach requires the school counselor to provide (a) classroom guidance units, (b) small group counseling, and (c) individual counseling for all students.

Traditionally, however, the school counselor's days are consumed by working with problem students and helping with crisis situations as they arise. Consequently, there does not seem to be enough time for the counselor to work developmentally with all students. The school counselor may have large student:counselor ratios and may be required to perform tasks that do not allow functioning at a level that involves all students developmentally. For example, the school counselor may have to perform basic clerical tasks (report cards and counting credits), provide disciplinary action, monitor attendance and tardiness, administer and score intelligence and psychological tests, and schedule classes. Because the school counselor may be involved in the preceding tasks, how can there be time to help students with self-con-

cept, motivation, locus of control, identifying personal strengths, understanding feelings and behaviors, understanding others, social skills, communication skills, decision-making skills, problem-solving skills, and preparation for the world of work? How can the school counselor help raise student aspirations? Baker and Shaw (1987) suggested that "there must be a willingness to forego some traditional activities which do not achieve any particular purpose or which can be achieved equally well through other means" (p. 17). This would require a commitment from both the school counselor and the principal.

If some of the traditional activities were relieved, as suggested by Baker and Shaw, the school counselor would be able to function as a counselor, educator, consultant, and resource person with individuals, small groups, and large groups. As a consultant, the school counselor would confer with parents, teachers, administrators, and community members about the needs of students in order to develop and deliver specific units (classroom and small group) to meet those needs. As a resource person, the school counselor would coordinate faculty- and staff-development programs related to guidance in an effort to help faculty and staff integrate guidance-related concepts into the curriculum. In essence, the school counselor's role is dependent on involvement of the entire school staff, the parents, and the community.

Role of the Principal

Studies of factors that contribute to making an effective school conclude that the leadership of the principal

is a significant influence. The principal is responsible, among other things, for establishing conditions that support teachers' work.

In this respect, the principal encourages leadership among teachers, counselors, and students. The principal respects the role of each and provides opportunities for critical and meaningful involvement of staff in important decisions. The principal must also organize available resources that will provide maximum support to instruction. It is obvious why the leadership role of the principal in an effective school has become an important consideration in efforts to restructure schools during this period of reform.

The actual list of a principal's duties is a long list indeed. The report of the National Commission on Excellence in Educational Administration (1987) addressed a number of significant issues for administrators. Areas that were highlighted as being characteristic of good schools with effective principals include those that (a) demonstrate they are learning communities, (b) foster collegiality, (c) individualize instruction, and (d) encourage involvement.

The question is how an administrator can foster such characteristics. Before answering this question, one must first understand the daily hurdles principals need to address. Factors such as budgets, politics, legal issues, student test scores, teacher unions, management styles of school boards, and special interest groups consistently dictate the principal's role. In short, the school principal is more of a crisis manager than educational leader.

It becomes obvious that in order for principals to have a positive impact on schools, they will have to use

more resources. Principals must have a vision, not only in the sense of looking toward the future and making educated predictions but also in which they can see the whole picture. They must be driven by the need to understand the problems around them, while constantly striving to look for solutions.

In this light, administrators need to match needs with resources, aware of when to intervene and when not to. Educational decisions must be based on a broad perspective of academic choices. This again requires the use of others from both within and outside the school building. A principal must not only create a climate of involvement but also be an advocate of participation from students, teachers, counselors, staff, and parents for day-to-day operations and long-term planning. The overall goal of all these participants, one may say, is to acquire the necessary resources to meet the needs of the entire school system.

Results of the Group Meeting

A group meeting was conducted with four school counselors and four school principals from different school districts in Maine. These particular school counselors and principals were chosen because they worked collaboratively and their students were considered to have high aspirations. The group represented two high schools, one middle school, and one elementary school in various socio-economic environments. The meeting began by separating the groups into two rooms: counselors in one room, principals in the other. Both groups were given the same questionnaire and asked to (a) rank order a list of activities

that school counselors *should do* and (b) rank order the same list of activities identifying what school counselors *actually do*.

Realizing that the counselors and principals selected for this activity were considered to be successful and that their students were considered to have high aspirations, it was not surprising to find that there was a great deal of consensus between the two groups. The top four activities of both groups regarding what counselors do and should do were (a) help students individually with personal problems; (b) help students have greater self-understanding and show how it relates to future life; (c) work with small groups of students regarding issues of decision making, problem solving, communication skills, and interpersonal skills; and (d) participate as a member of pupil evaluation teams.

The two groups also agreed on certain suggestions that need to be adhered to if school counselors and principals are to work successfully together. The suggestions were that (a) school counselors should not be overburdened with paper work, (b) the perception that school counselors do not work very hard needs to be changed, (c) there is a need for school counselors to be more active regarding parental involvement, and (d) the role of the principal to the school counselor should be that of support and assistance.

It is interesting to note that the principals and counselors were in total agreement as to what counselors do and should do and what needs to be done to create a more effective counseling program.

These findings support our hypothesis that a successful relation-

ship between the principal and school counselor creates an environment in the school that will foster high aspirations. We believe that the successful relationship between counselors and principals is due to the fact that they share a vision. A shared vision exists if values, beliefs, and behaviors regarding the welfare of the school and students are the same for principals and for school counselors. A shared vision exists if the school counselors and principals are willing to take the time to communicate regarding the welfare of the school and students. If compatibility does not exist between counselors and principals, uneasiness, resentment, lack of respect, and uncooperativeness will prevail, thus creating an educational environment that stifles student aspirations.

DISCUSSION

The issue of student aspirations is not only a rural concern but also a national one. There has been one study after another identifying that students have low aspirations in our schools (Barringer, 1984; Cobb et al., 1985; McIntire & Pratt, 1984; National Center for Education Statistics, 1983). It is time to ask the following questions: What needs to be done? What should be done? What must be done? It is time for a solution. In this article we offer just that. Our solution includes two key actors in the school system: the principal and the school counselor. It is our belief that these two actors can work together, involving staff, parents, and community members, to have a positive impact on students, thus raising their aspiration levels.

The next logical question to ask is how school counselors and principals can positively influence their relationship with one another. And how can a good, working relationship between a school counselor and principal affect student aspirations? To answer the first question, a description of what school counselors can do to enhance the relationship between themselves and principals is provided. First of all, school counselors can inform principals about the role of the school counselor in order to provide a foundation from which the counselors and principals can work together. Second, school counselors can consistently inform the principals about the specific needs of the students, the strategies used to meet those needs, and the effectiveness of those strategies. On the other hand, principals must provide leadership and support for the guidance program. Support can come in two forms, administrative and psychological. School counselors must be given the necessary resources not just to get the job done but to do it well. Principals must also provide encouragement; a pat on the back can go a long way. Above all, principals must consult with the guidance staff regarding special issues, concerns, or problems that may exist in the school. The emphasis for both the principal and school counselor is that there is a need to open channels of communication. Without communication, there is little or no chance that the two groups could ever share a vision.

This study brings to attention a number of areas that need to be addressed by future research. There is obviously a need for future research

related to the continued critical examination of the basic question: How can schools raise the aspirational levels of students? Specifically, there needs to be a larger knowledge base in the following areas:

1. A definition of high aspirations that will be representative of various socio-economic, political, educational, and age groups
2. The change process regarding the introduction of a comprehensive developmental guidance program that will use the skills and resources of school counselors and administrators
3. The relationship between the school counselor and the principal and how they work together to foster an environment conducive to raising student aspirations
4. The role of all types of school personnel and how they influence student aspirations
5. The types of staff development necessary to create a school climate that will promote higher student aspirations

We believe that until there is a strong relationship between principals and counselors, raising student aspirations will fall short. If all students are to be provided the opportunity for positive growth and development, it is essential that a comprehensive developmental guidance program be in place. We believe that a comprehensive developmental guidance program cannot exist unless there is support, respect, and communication between the school counselor and principal.

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