

Project Title: Perceptions of School Counselors on Participating in a Professional Learning Community

Faculty Research Grant

Final Report

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B. Restatement of problem researched or creative activity

There is a myriad of research on the importance of establishing professional learning communities for teachers, but the research literature is silent on professional learning communities for school counselors. This research project involved working with school counselors in a local school district on establishing a district-wide professional learning community specifically for school counselors. I, as the primary investigator, worked with the school counselors as a convener and facilitator and provided the forum for the meetings.

Various professional learning community models were explored and the process of setting up the professional learning model for the local school counselors was documented. The focus was on the process of creating a learning environment where the school counselors feel safe to share and develop a sense of belonging with the group. By providing them with a facilitator and meeting place through a partnership with the local university, the school counselors were given an opportunity to establish themselves as a professional learning community.

C. Brief Review of the research procedure utilized

I, along with Dr. Christopher Trombly, met with the local school counselors on several days throughout the year, including two full days in November and January. We met with them on March 31st, June 4th, 9th, and 10th. We utilized surveys and open ended responses to gauge their perceptions on the benefits of establishing a professional learning community for school counselors. We also utilized whole group discussions and small group discussions.

D. Summary of Findings

We found that the participating counselors did indeed find value in collaborating together as a professional learning community. They set a district school counseling vision, mission, and

goals for the 2015-16 school year during our time together. They had probably for the first time in a long time (if ever) discussions about such responsibilities as test coordination/administration; serving as an administrator in the principals' absence; and the use of physical restraint for students in danger of injuring themselves or others. They also worked on curriculum articulation in that they identified where the absences were and at least at the elementary level they took steps to fill in those gaps. Except for the time that they had earmarked to be with us, the counselors had not worked on their own to further themselves as a professional learning community. Likewise, except for regular reports to school administrators outlining the work in which we were engaged, the counselors had not initiated conversations with their school leaders about issues that they had deemed important nor had they advocated for the refinement of their role. For reasons that we have yet to identify, we found that the elementary level school counselors were more eager to attend and to participate actively in our work sessions than their secondary level counterparts.

E. Conclusions and Recommendations

Because the counselors themselves appreciate the work that they have begun with us, and because they recognize that they have a long way to go before becoming a fully functioning professional learning community, they have asked us to continue working with them through the 2015-16 academic year. Believing strongly in this work, and happy to be of service to the Russellville public schools, we have agreed to maintain this project. Because we do not expect to incur any expenses (e.g., for materials), no further funds will be requested for this endeavor. We have submitted a proposal to share our findings at an upcoming national conference; we also hope to include them in a published journal article.