UNIFYING YOUR DISTRICT:

COLLABORATING TO SUPPORT STUDENT CAREER DEVELOPMENT

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People are the most powerful force within any school district. When individuals join and unite around common goals, results tend to follow, but collaboration does not happen in a vacuum; it is a learned skill that requires effort, as well as commitment and persistence. Career and technical education (CTE) and school counseling personnel share responsibility for student career development. A unified district and school boosts collective capacity (Fullen, 2010) and can optimally engage students and prepare them for the world of work.

Foundations

Collaboration is a bit amorphous, but research has highlighted important strategies and promising practices. For example, the research on teacher collaboration highlights both the barriers that must be overcome (e.g., time and common language) and the promising models, such as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). In PLCs and other successful efforts, there is dedicated time to meet, shared vision, adept facilitation, and an eye on outcomes of both the collaboration and student success.

Along with understanding the collaborative process, a deep understanding of school counseling and CTE in each district is needed. For example, contemporary school counselors focus on the American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors, which include career development and competencies very similar to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) career readiness competencies. However, they also receive explicit and implicit messages on "college for all" (Nicola, 2020), and school counselors have minimal experience in CTE (Grewe, 2019), unaware that CTE is career *and* college preparation (Todd, 2017). They also may have less time with students than teachers due to student-counselor ratios.

The 2018 Advance CTE report on the state of career advising and development highlighted the challenges for counselors making connections to CTE coursework and the connections between CTE and work-based learning. For example, only 27% of middle school counselors reported making connections to CTE coursework, even though they find value in doing so.

While coordination does occur at the national (e.g., ASCA position statement and ACTE Counseling and Career Development Division) and state levels (e.g., Missouri Connections or Nebraska Career Education), the focus here is on promising practices in collaboration for unifying CTE educators and school counselors in your district and local school building.

Promising Practices

Districts' configuration and oversight of CTE and school counseling vary. Some districts may have partnerships with centers like the Western Maricopa Education Center in

Arizona, which provides industry-standard training programs. Other districts have distinct and robust career academies (e.g., Nashville Public Schools) where more students have opportunities for work-based learning experiences and teachers and counselors are aligned to facilitate informed decisions about students' futures. Therefore, implementing promising practices for unifying around CTE will be quite diverse.

District Level: While standards, curricula and assessments are often set at the state level, expectations on the duties of CTE/school counselors, programming choices and oversight are most often led at the district level. In the Vancouver (WA) School District, there is a Career and College Ready Taskforce made up of CTE *and* counseling leadership, as well as GEAR Up, AVID and assessment personnel who work together to create systems, resources, tools, outreach and support for college and career readiness efforts in the district. They promote local (e.g. FutureMe) and other virtual resources (e.g. Xello) and support the three Es – enrollment, enlistment and/or employment after high school. Collaboration like this, led at the district level, models expectations for the building level.

Another prime opportunity for unifying a district is through **co- or cross-training or professional development designed for both CTE and school counselors**. Sessions can include current and useful labor market data, accountability data on concentrators, assessment results, such as WorkKeys, and collaborative transcript audit/review or career development approaches. For example, the Charleston (SC) County School District promotes resources and toolkits for both counselors and CTE professionals about regional work trends. Counselors, and even core subject area teachers, often have not worked outside of schools and can benefit greatly from more current and relevant information on the world of work. Similarly, CTE professionals can benefit from ideas around holistic curricular planning and helping students with strategies for motivation and self-direction.

School Level: At the high school level, typically CTE and school-counseling building leaders shape programming. Some districts may have a school counselor assigned to the CTE focus, but most often they are assigned alphabetically or to students in a specific grade. In contrast, CTE leadership may or may not have counseling backgrounds and could be a lead teacher in an industry area. Schools may not even have a designated CTE leader, resulting in collective leadership from CTE teachers.

Regardless of assignment or personnel capacity, individual student planning offers a prime area for collaboration. **Individual student planning/registration** is a core school-counseling role. Students make meaningful early career decisions in choosing electives and pathways in the transition from elementary and middle school. In high school, school counselors facilitate enrollment and explain the CTE pathway options available to students (and families). Without middle school collaboration, clear student career assessment data and current information from CTE leaders, counselors often default to a focus on core classes and push for postsecondary education preparation – most often for four-year colleges. The extensive knowledge needed for the 16 Clusters and 79 pathways in the National Career Clusters® Framework and school counselor duties around academic and social emotional support may limit the quality of support for student career development. Informed individual planning can also promote equity in varied pathways. Not only is it useful to diversify pathways, but promoting nontraditional pathways (e.g., women in STEM, men in nursing) impacts later equitable career representation. While states vary, many states now have mandates, such as the 2005 EEDA (Education and Economic Development Act) in South Carolina that requires an Individual Graduation Plan (IGP) process and career-advisement aligning majors to the 16 Career Clusters.

Outside curricular plans, understanding and promoting CTE-related **experiential and extracurricular opportunities** can be a shared task. Just like school sports or clubs, CTE and career development professionals can promote apprenticeship opportunities, Career and Technical Student Organizations (CTSOs), job shadowing and more. With CTE industry expertise and school counselor linkages to academic pathways, students and families can understand the opportunities for growth. School counselors can also assist with resumes, cover letters, mock interviews and employability skills to make valuable work experience a reality. These experiences help students understand the connection between school and work.

Both school counselors and CTE professionals can also monitor successful collaboration through **student outcomes**. Successful college and career advisement should equate to more students earning Industry-recognized Credentials (IRC) while in high school or even some components of those credentials. Helping students match to appropriate CTE tracks is necessary for this to occur. Other outcomes can include articulation agreements between high schools and community or technical colleges, an increase in students earning dual-enrollment CTE credit that builds to an IRC or associate degree, or student participation in structured work-based learning opportunities (internships or apprenticeships). These are indicators of quality individual planning but

also demonstrate that students have gained employability competencies as well as specific industry skills and knowledge. Both school counselors (gatekeepers, advisors) and CTE professionals (educators, industry partnerships) impact student pathways.

Getting Started

Unification and collaboration require several components. A few starting points include:

- Build relationships: It takes time to do so, but relationships allow for connection, trust, norms and productive discussion with mutual respect. A healthy interdependence is needed.
- Make time: This is obvious but the hardest step. Just as teachers have grade level or subject area meetings, school counselors and key CTE leaders should have regularly scheduled time with a clear purpose. Common planning time reduces isolation, fosters collegiality and leads to insights around context-specific issues.
- Create a shared vision and common goals: Student career development goals are a shared responsibility. These will include traditional markers for counselors around postsecondary education and CTE outcomes on workforce readiness. Some view these as opposing goals – but well-informed practitioners know these are co-dependent outcomes. CTE leaders know that social, emotional and academic development influence career readiness, just as school counselors recognize that career readiness and planning affect academic engagement and motivation.
- Clarify roles and responsibilities: The responsibilities of the CTE coordinator and school counselor can vary quite a bit. It may require a two-person jigsaw technique to piece together a coherent programming approach. As staff learn from each other, collaboration accelerates.
- Design strategies and programs to enhance CTE: Once other pieces are in place, new strategies in the local context can commence. We highlighted promising practices above, but additional opportunities may include:
  - Common website. Cross listing CTE options (courses and extracurricular opportunities such as apprenticeships) and school counseling in one location draw attention to both and communicate the linkage between academic and career planning. For example, listing graduation requirements next to Career Clusters provides connected resources (e.g., Texas CTE).
  - Common language. School counselors and CTE professionals that adopt common language around college and career readiness, Career Clusters, and more. For example, the Nevada Career and Technical Education system adopted the ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors for common goals.
  - Curricula relevance. Curriculum that is appropriately sequenced and industry relevant and diverse, engaging instruction (project/problem based, hands-on, experiential) that has appropriate breadth and depth. This is not only for CTE curriculum, but the integration of career illustrations in the core curriculum as well as core academic subject connections in CTE offerings. A focus on relevance is supportive of and not opposed to or replacing rigor.
  - Co-instruction and advising. School counselors who spend time observing CTE curriculum offer better academic pathway and career guidance. Similarly, having CTE leaders co-advise in student planning results in better guidance. For example, the team in Glendale United High School District in Arizona use CTE funding to automate and streamline advising systems that link directly to CTE curriculum.
  - Virtual resources. Attractive, self-guided virtual resources like student planning tools offered by Xello or MajorClarity boost collaboration. Students can set the pace, and both counselors and CTE professionals can offer support and further guidance and monitor student progress.
  - Information and engagement for families. Some families reject CTE curriculum with misplaced concerns about limiting college preparation. Collaboration to share information about rigorous CTE programs of study, linkages to core curriculum, and the career and learning/motivational benefits of student engagement are necessary. This could include curriculum nights, videos and interactive material, or accurate website and listserv information.
- Plan assessment and evaluation and renewal: This should be part of any optimal educational programming. Collaborations like PLCs are designed around using student learning as evidence and feedback on programming. Assessing career competencies provides guidance on where to start and serves as an ideal pre-post evaluation. Disaggregated data around demographics and Clusters also inform access, equity and programming needs.
- Advocate. Finally, building a community of allies for CTE includes influencing parents or families, key administrative and school leaders (e.g., school board), and student champions that demonstrate the benefits of CTE experiences.

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