School counselors have been called upon to provide services to an increasing number of students with disabilities. In order to effectively manage the unique challenges they face, counselors should familiarize themselves with the American School Counselor Association's standards for working with those with special needs as well as the applicable laws governing their professional conduct and responsibilities in this role.

School counselors assisting students with disabilities School districts should clearly define the role of a school counselor when working with students with disabilities. Traditionally, the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process has involved the student, parent(s)/guardian(s), special education teachers and general education teachers. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that a team create an IEP to provide the student with a Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE) (Council for Exceptional Children 2002). This plan for educating the student will be designed to best accommodate the special needs of the student with an understanding that their disability will most likely prohibit him or her from fully participating in a regular education setting. The IEP process is an excellent opportunity for school counselors to gain experience working with students in special education programs, special education teachers and parents/guardians.

Thomas and Woods (2003) wrote that “disability” is an umbrella term that provides a uniform language for both counselors and teachers. Students with disabilities can be defined as students who possess mental retardation, serious emotional disturbances, deaf-blindness, hearing impairments, traumatic brain injuries, speech or language impediments, visual impairments, other health impediments, or combinations thereof (Thomas & Wood, 2003; McDonnell, McLaughlin & Morrison, 1997).

In recent years, school age children are being more frequently diagnosed with a variety of disabilities, such as social, emotional, communication and learning impairments (Milsom, 2002). In fact, the number of students with disabilities in the last ten years has increased about one million (United States Department of Education, 2007). Oftentimes, the special needs of children are not apparent until they begin formal education (Taub, 2006). Legislation is also encouraging school counselors to become more involved in supporting the special needs of students with disabilities. The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, Data Analysis System(DANS) found that in 2005, over six million students with disabilities attended school in
the United States. The largest proportion of these students, roughly three million, were those with specific learning disabil- ities, followed by a little over million with speech or language impairments, and half a million with mental retardation.

Counselors are oftentimes the only individuals in the school who are in a position to fairly advocate on behalf of the students (Erford, House and Martin, 2003). Therefore, schools are becoming increasingly aware of the necessity of counselor involvement in the development of support programs and the creation of specialized educational plans for students with disabilities.

Additionally, about 96 percent of children with disabilities attend general education schools, and three-quarters of these students are being educated in general education classrooms for a significant part of the school day (Frye-Meyers, 2005). Hence, many disabled students may not be receiving the appropriate support services and accommodations necessary to maximize their academic potential. Peterson (1998) wrote:

Many students with disabilities still lack access to the kind of instruction their classmates receive. In classrooms throughout the country, many of the students with disabilities are participating in “drill and kill” activities while their classmates forge ahead on assignments based on increasingly higher state standards (Peterson, 1998, p.6).

The American School Counselor Association takes a strong stance on school counselors’ work with disabled students. They are an important part of the educational leadership team and provide valuable assistance to students with disabilities. They assist students in the areas of academic achievement, personal/social development and career planning. In this role, school counselors are charged with ensuring that students become productive and well-adjusted adults.

According to (ASCA, 2007), Professional school counselors implement a comprehensive program that promotes and enhances student achievement. School counselors’ work is distinguished from that of other school professionals by the attention paid to the developmental stages of student growth; According to the American School Counselor Association:

Professional school counselors serve a vital role in maximizing student achievement. Incorporating leadership, advocacy and collaboration, professional school counselors promote equity and access to opportunities and rigorous educational experiences for all students. Professional school counselors support a safe learning environment and work to safeguard the human rights of all members of the school community. Collaborating with other stakeholders to promote student achievement, professional school counselors address the needs of all students through prevention and intervention programs that are a part of a comprehensive school counseling program. To achieve maximum program effectiveness, the American School Counselor Association
recommends a counselor-to-student ratio of 1:250. (ASCA, 2007).

Due to the rise in inclusion, school counselors must be competent enough to meet the needs of students with disabilities. They must be ready to incorporate the necessary skills into their work with students and stay abreast of applicable federal laws.

There are two major statutes pertaining to students with disabilities that school counselors should be aware of; the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1975 and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Both of these laws affect School counselor’s service to students with disabilities. IDEA provides federal funding to educational entities that provide services to students with disabilities (Council for Exceptional Children, 2002). Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, prohibits the discrimination of students with disabilities and requires that institutions meet their unique needs to the same extent that they would for those without disabilities (U.S Department of Education, 2008). Section 504 requires reasonable accommodations to be provided in order to receive funding from the federal government (Council for Exceptional Children, 2002).

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 provides disabled students with services to facilitate the provision of FAPE (Council for Exceptional Children, 2002), while also prohibiting discrimination based upon the student’s disability. Although some students with impairments to major life activities do not require special education and the benefit of IDEA provisions they may still be covered under Section 504. If so, the school counselor will have to conduct periodic evaluations for the purpose of reassessing need and continued eligibility. Failure to carry out these provisions may result in the loss of federal funding (Council for Exceptional Children, 2002).

School counselors working with disabled students should provide accommodations to the extent necessary to give them the same educational opportunities as their non disabled counterparts, including any requisite materials, services, or related aids. School counselors must also remain current with regard to any amendments to Section 504 to ensure that students are receiving the services guaranteed to them by law (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

To help disabled students eligible under FAPE to achieve greater independence, School counselors should provide them and their parents with information on any programs and services available to assist them (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). In order to assist these students in making an effective transition to the workforce, school counselors may also wish to discuss the accommodations offered by post-secondary education settings, occupational training programs and employment agencies. Milsom (2002) states that school counselors have an obligation to advocate for students with disabilities. However, while advocating on their behalf, school counselors should also try to teach them how to eventually become their own advocates. One of the most important tools school personnel can give
to any student, especially those with special needs, is self-empowerment and independence. Frye-Myers (2005) states, “Advocacy is one of the ASCA National Model’s main themes and the use of advocacy was indicated as a strategy that counselors employ to meet the personal/social needs of their students with disabilities (ASCA, 2007).

School counselors must stay current with laws and amendments that pertain to students with disabilities. Establishing a strong rapport with these students as they confront the unique challenges of their condition may be the catalyst in the creation of long-term, mutually-beneficial relationships with both students and parents. Participating in the IEP and the review processes for section 504 can offer school counselors the opportunity to bolster their own reputations and expertise, produce meaningful impact on the lives of the students they serve, and secure new resources for families as well as the school as a whole.

**Recommendations for School Counselors**

School counselors provide a variety of services to students with disabilities. Because the number of students with disabilities and impairments has increased markedly over the last decade, the need for additional support services has also increased. School counselors are being asked to get involved more than ever before in promoting and supporting students’ academic, social and career development (ASCA, 2007). The American School Counselors Association (2007) believes that “school counselors are an important part of the educational leadership team and provide valuable assistance to students.” For example, they play an imperative role on the individualized education program (IEP) team. According to Milsom, Goodnough, & Akos, (2007), “school counselors can assist IEP teams in developing relevant goals and identifying realistic individual or group counseling interventions to assist students with disabilities in meeting those goals” (p. 22).

School counselors can also play a vital role in bringing attention to students’ non-academic needs such as social development and personal skills. According to Frye-Myers, (2005), “students with disabilities become more handicapped by their lack of personal and social skills than by their academic skill deficits, and research indicates that strong personal and social skills are necessary for future success as an adult” (p.442). Additionally, school counselors can assist students with disabilities in choosing the proper classes, offering suggestions for career exploration, and focusing on student strengths. Milsom, Goodnough, & Akos, (2007), state that school counselors are uniquely trained to assist students with processing their abilities, interests and values as well as helping them to understand how these skills can assist in choosing a career. Students with special needs may rely on school counselors to advocate on their behalf by contacting college admissions offices to inquire about accommodations and other support services.

School counselors are often responsible for the monitoring and updating of
Section 504 plans for eligible students. It is important for school counselors to have a thorough understanding of accommodations available to students so that they can present as options to the students who may need them. School counselors should also know how to appropriately interpret and act upon the language for Section 504 plans so they do not put the school in a position of unnecessary or unavoidable liability. According to Shaw and Madaus (2008), Section 504 plan coordinators are usually school counselors, teachers or administrators. Shaw and Madaus (2008), wrote that a majority of school counselors were responsible for the overall coordination of the plans, whereas a majority of the administrators indicated they ran the actual Section 504 meetings. The Section 504 coordinator, whoever he or she may be, is responsible for designing and instituting accommodations specific to the needs of each eligible student. A coordinator may also act as a liaison between the parent/guardian and the school to answer questions that address concerns, and, if necessary, modify the plan currently in effect. The coordinator is also responsible for providing the classroom teachers with a copy of the Section 504 plan.

According to the American School Counseling Association Position Statement: Special Needs Students (2004), school counselors have a great many responsibilities. With particular attention paid to Section 504 plans, school counselors should coordinate the Section 504 team and supervise the implementation of their plan. School counselors should be aware of their school districts policies and procedures as it relates their role when working with students with disabilities, remaining watchful for any potential conflicts of interest.

Additionally, Frye-Myers (2005), state that “There is an increased risk of suffering from depression, conduct disorders, and substance abuse related to a diagnosis of a disability” (p. 442). This could be a result of the disability itself or the stigma associated with having a disability. School counselors can collaborate with special education teachers, general education teachers, outside community agencies and the school administration when working with a student with a disability. School counselors can be extremely influential and beneficial in aiding students with a disability by teaching him/her the necessary social skills to decrease social and/or personal deficits (e.g. developing friendships, trying new activities, and participating in the classroom discussions). Furthermore, school counselors can create a network of on site school personnel that support, mentor and advocate for students with disabilities.

According to Milsom (2002), due to training inadequacies in many counselor education programs, school counselors may require supplemental training to work with students with disabilities. To recover from this disadvantage, they must stay current with respect to the current special education laws and continue to better educate themselves by attending seminars and conferences on topics such as laws pertaining to special needs students and issues related to students with disabilities.
Finally, because professional school counselors are advocates, who create opportunities for equity in education access (ASCA, 2007), it is critical that school counselors become an active voice during IEP team meetings and advocate on behalf of students with disabilities. They must also be equipped to assist their colleagues with relevant background information on students with disabilities. School counselors must maintain their commitment to supporting and enhancing the lives of all students, especially those with disabilities.

References


