

Educating and Advocating: A professional responsibility for school counselors and school leaders

Jessica J. Lane, Ph.D., Kansas State University

Donna Augustine-Shaw, Ph.D., Kansas State University

Melanie Scott, MS, Kansas State University

Jessica Lane is an associate professor in counselor education and supervision at Kansas State University. Jessica also serves as the counseling programs coordinator for the master's and doctoral counseling programs at Kansas State. Prior to serving as a counselor educator, she was an elementary teacher and school counselor in Kansas. She also served as faculty for nine years in preparing P-12 preservice teachers at Kansas State. Dr. Lane's research interests include: school counselor advocacy; collaboration between school counselors and administrators; social-emotional advocacy and support; trauma informed practices in schools; rural counseling and mental health.

Donna Augustine-Shaw is an associate professor in educational leadership at Kansas State University. She is a lead instructor for master's leadership academies with partnership school districts in Kansas. Donna also serves as the Associate Director for the Kansas Educational Leadership Institute providing mentoring and induction for new school and district leaders. She began her career in education as a classroom teacher and served 16 years as a principal, assistant superintendent, and school superintendent.

Melanie Scott is a school counselor and department head in Dodge City, Kansas. She taught for three years at the middle level and has been a high school counselor since 2007. She is currently the Ethics Chair of the Kansas School Counselor Association and transitioning into President-Elect. Melanie is also a doctoral student studying counselor education and supervision through Kansas State University. Her research interests include: school counselor advocacy and ethics, social-emotional learning in schools, mental health well-being of both students and staff, English language learners, and trauma informed practices including neuroscience in education.

While educators are tasked with many competing professional responsibilities, it is necessary that the focus of advocacy for student well-being stay at the forefront. For school counselors and school leaders, advocating has never been more important. Advocacy means representing the needs of students and families in every local community via important conversations and forums that enable local boards of education and legislators to understand what needs are present, why these needs must be addressed, and how students and families will benefit from support and resource allocation. Today's school counselors and leaders must provide a clear message to internal and external stakeholders in local communities and in the broader arena of state and national legislative agendas and how this impacts students and schools. This article will highlight the role of advocacy found within the professional standards for school counselors and school leaders, and shine light on the need to advocate for social-emotional learning.

In today's schools, the school counselor and building principal provide leadership to teachers and staff. The school leader and school counselor partnership is an integral and defining relationship that enables school staff to maintain a clear focus on school goals and outcomes. Together, the ability of these leaders to collaborate and focus efforts on addressing academic, social, and emotional student needs sets the stage for the success and trajectory of every student.

A critical issue in today's educational landscape is the dire need for social-emotional learning. According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), a section on *The Fundamentals of SEL* (n.d.) states, "social-emotional learning (SEL) can help young people thrive personally and academically, develop and maintain positive relationships, become lifelong learners, and contribute to a more caring, just world." SEL helps students acquire the skills and attitudes necessary to regulate and develop healthy emotions, set goals, and make responsible decisions. All skills are foundational to the well-being and success of students.

Social-emotional skills help to facilitate academic gains, establish positive school climate, and thwart off harmful student outcomes. First, academic learning cannot take place without a supportive environment for students. CASEL shares the results of a meta-analysis (Durak et al., 2011) that reports social-emotional learning enhances academic gains by as much as 11 percentile points, as compared to those that do not participate in SEL. Simply put, if a student is emotionally dysregulated, they are not focused on academic work. Next, students must feel safe and connected at school in order to learn (CASEL, n.d.). Safety and connection must be a priority for ALL Kansas students. When students feel safe at school and practice respectful interactions with others, they are more likely to carry it out with peers, into the community, into the workforce, and the home.

Lastly, SEL educational programs seek to develop healthy communication skills and essential relationships. In doing so, SEL provides an important link for students experiencing distress, trauma, and even suicidal ideation prevention. One important legislative enactment that addresses student needs in this area requires life-saving suicide prevention training for all school employees. The Jason Flatt Act, legislation passed in over 21 states, requires suicide training to lessen the stigma attached to mental health issues or "not being ok" (The Jason Foundation, 2022). Suicide prevention training, as a component of SEL, gives educators, students, and parents signs and symptoms to be aware of, coping skills, and information about community resources.

While educational leaders recognize the aforementioned issues are evident in today's schools, it remains an ethical responsibility to embrace the opportunity to advocate for student needs and well-being. Standards for school counselors and school leaders clearly identify advocacy as a professional responsibility, and emphasize social-emotional learning as a required focus in the work of these educators. The next sections will provide specificity on the standards unique and complementary to school counselors and building leaders. The Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) is the highest accrediting body for school counseling. Within the CACREP (2016) standards for school counselors, the key concepts of leadership and advocacy are clearly defined, drawing direct attention to leadership and advocacy by stating, "school counselor roles as leaders, advocates, and systems change agents in P-12 schools" (p. 32) and "school counselors have the competencies to advocate for

school counseling roles” (p. 32). Additionally, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) professional standards and competencies call on professional school counselors to “explain and/or inform the process for development of policy and procedures at the building, district, state and national levels” (ASCA, p. 3), “model school counseling advocacy competencies to promote...student success” (ASCA, p. 4), and “advocate responsibly for school board policy and local, state and federal statutory requirements in students’ best interests” (ASCA, p. 4).

The National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) Program Standards for building level leaders detail the role and responsibility of principals to "advocate for the social emotional well-being of each student and adult" in standard three (NELP, p. 28). This standard includes a focus on the development of a "supportive, equitable, culturally responsive, and inclusive school culture." (NELP, p. 28). In this work, principals should advocate for resources and opportunities that support student social emotional well-being. This also includes behavior support practices for teachers and staff in SEL. Standard five of the NELP standards clearly focuses the building leader on the need to develop a voice in advocating for the needs in their school and in their community. This advocacy is focused on building capacity in communicating these needs in the larger community and political context.

As noted above, the call to the respective professions is clear about advocacy among educational leaders. Not only is advocacy a shared expectation in the national professional standards, but it is also highly valued as a part of the Kansas Department of Education (KSDE) accreditation process. Kansas was the first state to develop social-emotional character development (SECD) standards, and SEL is one of the five board outcomes determined by the Kansas State Board of Education. At the local level, advocacy is then manifested via implementation of effective SEL education in the Kansas accreditation of schools. Statewide local employer and education data reinforced the need for high quality support of students in the social-emotional realm, as the Kansas Business Community Survey found that 81% of the business community survey would like to see enhanced non-academic social-emotional character skills, or employability skills (Kansas Social-Emotional Character Development Fact Sheet, 2020, p.1) from high school graduates.

A critical step in the advocacy efforts of school counselors and leaders is to harness the energy of teacher educators. This includes providing an increased awareness of the responsibilities outlined in their respective professional standards, increased knowledge of issues, research, and best practice, and data to highlight and tell the story about issues facing our schools. The role of leaders is to build understanding, seek input, and work in collaboration to address agreed-upon goals. Without harnessing the efforts of the educational community, including teachers and parents, the efforts of leaders are futile. School counselors and principals are at the forefront of developing instructional processes and systems with experts in the school setting, including special education teachers, behavioral specialists, and mental health professionals. Often, tiered systems of support are in place to address both academic and social-emotional needs of students. This intensive collaboration of expert opinion seeks to inform and integrate strategies of effective practice that serve as a basis of advocacy at the point of student service. Strong leadership can guide and change practice and provide the impetus for teacher-led advocacy.

Advocacy is a critical and ever-growing part of the role of school counselors and administrators. The time is now to advocate for the importance of SEL in our schools. Students need a safe place to practice social-emotional skills and behaviors guided by trained adults. The more a student practices and works at something, the better they develop it. Today's students do not just go to school to learn math, science, and reading in isolation. By working with others, they learn empathy, develop safe habits of regulation, conflict resolution, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and learn perseverance (Kansas Social-Emotional Character Development Fact Sheet, 2020, p.1).

In closing, to advocate is a part of an educator's professional role. The professional standards for counselors and leaders are clear in detailing these responsibilities. Advocacy becomes even more important when the risk increases for elimination of essential supports for student well-being. As educators, we are charged with doing what's in the best interest of students and providing a voice for their needs. Our professional responsibility demands action to support student success in today's schools. To educate and advocate is a professional responsibility for school leaders and school counselors. By leading the way, an advocacy assembly can be formed with teachers and community members joining the conversation and call to action. Every educator should begin with a commitment to become informed on topics like SEL which greatly impact our students and schools. By working together as an informed and unified coalition, school leaders, counselors, teachers, and the educational community can advocate individually and collectively. The leadership provided by school counselors and administrators can set the stage for advocacy efforts that make a difference for students and the educational community striving to care and provide for the needs of students each day. If we do not answer the call to action for what's best for students, who will?

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