

Special Education Content Expert Interview

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Special Education Context Expert Interview

Ms. Sarah Welling, Ed.S., is a school psychologist at Woodward Career Technical High School in Cincinnati, Ohio. Woodward is a large, urban public school that serves grades 7th through 12th, with a predominately African-American and lower-income student body. According to the American School Counselors Association's (ASCA) National Model, school counselors must collaborate with caregivers, teachers, administration, educational stakeholders, and school staff, including school psychologists, to ensure student achievement and success (ASCA National Model, 2020). Collaboration between school counselors and school psychologists is essential, as both professionals provide direct and indirect support to students with disabilities and advocate for their needs. From this interview, it is apparent that Ms. Welling recognizes the importance of collaboration between school counselors and school psychologists, particularly when supporting students with disabilities. This discussion on the joint responsibility to unite as professionals to dismantle barriers for students with disabilities demonstrates Ms. Welling's understanding of the importance of school counselors and psychologists to work together as advocates at multiple systemic levels.

Role of a Special Education Content Expert

As a school psychologist, Ms. Welling provides direct and indirect services to students with disabilities. She described that one of her primary responsibilities is to complete evaluations and administer assessments to students, identify students with disabilities, and determine the most effective ways to support students with Individualized Education Plans (IEP) and 504 plans. Another aspect of a school psychologist's role is to provide summary reports for all student assessments and to ensure the data is integrated within students' IEP goals, objectives, and behavior plans. In addition to administering initial assessments and evaluations for students with

IEP's, Ms. Welling explained that school psychologists are responsible for reevaluating students with IEP's every three years to determine whether the student's needs have changed. Ms.

Welling reported enjoying her responsibility to provide assessments and evaluations, as it allows her to advocate for students' needs and ensure that they can receive the necessary support to access quality education.

Ms. Welling detailed several other aspects of her role in supporting students with disabilities. She described that she is highly involved in Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) at Woodward, specifically the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports program (PBIS). She co-delivers this program with other school psychologists and school counselors. Another aspect of her role in supporting students with disabilities involves crisis management. Ms. Welling explained that when students are participating in on-campus learning, one of her major roles is to manage crises due to the high levels of trauma that many Woodward students experience. The final aspect of Ms. Welling's professional role that she described in our interview is her responsibility to engage in systems-level advocacy for students with disabilities to ensure that their needs are met. It was clear from our discussion that the role of a school psychologist, much like the role of a school counselor, is multi-faceted and prioritizes supporting students while advocating for their needs.

Alignment to Course Content

One of the most apparent commonalities between both professions is the importance of recognizing and celebrating intersectionality in a student's identity. ASCA's Students with Disabilities Position Statement states, "School counselors are committed to helping all students realize their potential and meet or exceed academic standards with consideration for both the strengths and challenges resulting from disabilities," (ASCA, 2016). Ms. Welling's emphasis on

the importance of recognizing a student's identity and cultures echo's these values. She explained that supporting students with disabilities in a school with a predominately African-American student body necessitates a recognition and celebration of intersectionality and adopting an attitude of cultural humility. She described the importance of celebrating and understanding how a student's disability may shape aspects of their identity and culture and noted that the students and their families are the experts on their unique cultural and personal identities. Recognizing a student as an expert on their own identity and needs is crucial to professionals who support students with disabilities. Ms. Welling indicated that this means school counselors and school psychologists should support students in developing self-advocacy skills. She also expressed the importance of consulting students on decisions about their education and future and goal development. These principles are crucial to school counselors supporting students with disabilities, who empower them and advocate for their access to a safe, inclusive, and equitable education (Marshak et al., 2010).

Furthermore, Ms. Welling noted that a student's disability is not their entire identity but rather a component of their identity, reinforcing the importance of honoring intersectionality and other aspects that contribute to each student's individuality. She also described that it is essential to consider that each student is unique in the ways and level they identify with Disability culture, which further necessitates cultural humility. These values notably align with the concepts examined in this course thus far. Ms. Welling's emphasis on the importance of recognizing and honoring each student's individuality and identity demonstrates her respect for Disability culture (Marshak et al., 2010). Additionally, she elaborates on the importance of advocating for the removal of barriers at a systems level, which indicates that she is dedicated to equity and the pursuit of social justice for students with disabilities (Marshak et al., 2010). Overall, her

commitment to supporting students with disabilities coincides with the concepts this course has covered about Disability culture and advocacy.

Collaboration on MTSS

According to ASCA (2018), collaboration on MTSS is vital for ensuring effective programming for students. The ASCA Position Statement on MTSS indicates that it is the responsibility of school counselors to collaborate with other student services professionals, such as school psychologists, to provide proper instruction and learning supports within an MTSS (ASCA, 2018; Goodman-Scott et al., 2019). Furthermore, ASCA's MTSS Position Statement states, "School counselors work collaboratively with other educators to remove systemic barriers for all students and implement specific learning supports that assist in academic and behavioral success," (ASCA, 2018). Ms. Welling described that school counselors and school psychologists are partners in delivering and coordinating the MTSS programming at Woodward High School.

One of the most prominent MTSS programs at Woodward is the PBIS framework. This evidence-based program focuses on addressing student behavior through systems change and helping students achieve improved social and academic outcomes (Simonsen et al., 2020). Ms. Welling and the Woodward school counselors work together to evaluate data on MTSS programming to evaluate their implementation fidelity and students' outcomes. Finally, Ms. Welling highlighted that the Woodward school counselors and school psychologists also collaborate on many tier 3 interventions, including crisis management.

Collaboration on Student Services

According to the ASCA Position Statement regarding Students with Disabilities, school counselors must collaborate with other related student support professionals, including school psychologists, to ensure that the needs of students with disabilities are met (ASCA, 2016).

School counselors and school psychologists regularly collaborate to support students with disabilities through providing direct and indirect services. Ms. Welling explained that school counselors and school psychologists collaborate to provide direct services to students with disabilities through crisis management and team interventions. When asked about their collaboration on delivering indirect services to students, Ms. Welling explained that their supports involve systems-level advocacy and working together on data analysis for PBIS and other MTSS programs. The collection, analysis, and disaggregation of data to identify achievement gaps and areas of need for students with disabilities to ensure their success is one of most significant ways that school counselors and school psychologists to support students with disabilities.

Furthermore, Ms. Welling explained that one of the most vital areas for collaboration to support students with disabilities is through assisting with transition and post-secondary plans for students with IEP's and 504 plans, as appropriate. She expressed that school psychologists are not always as aware of post-secondary and transition resources, whereas school counselors are experts in this area. This role is emphasized by ASCA's Students with Disabilities Position Statement (2016), which sites transition and post-secondary planning as a vital service that school counselors deliver. These six areas for collaboration between a school counselor and school psychologist directly contribute to the support of students with disabilities because they are focused on finding ways to ensure an inclusive and equitable school community while delivering more targeted interventions to identified students at tier 2 and tier 3 of MTSS.

Self-Reflection

This interview was eye-opening and provided me with significant newfound knowledge. Additionally, my discussion with Ms. Welling reinforced essential concepts regarding the

support of students with disabilities, the importance of advocacy, and the value of collaboration. Most notably, I learned that IEP's need to be revised every three years to address any changes to a student's needs. Previously, I knew that IEP's needed to be revised over time, but I was unaware that reevaluations occurred triennially. This information was valuable, as it demonstrated that student needs often change over time. It is crucial to reevaluate and consider a student's current needs to ensure that they are continually receiving appropriate supports. I also learned that school counselors play a crucial role in contributing to college and career readiness and transition planning for students with disabilities. While I recognized that this is a vital role of school counselors in their support of all students, it was enlightening to learn that school counselors are often considered the "experts" in supporting the post-secondary success plan for students with disabilities. Ms. Welling explained that school psychologists at Woodward look to the school counselors to develop post-secondary plans for students that will be the most appropriate and beneficial, based on their specific needs. In addition to this information, Ms. Welling's interview reinforced that a student's cultural and personal identity should be honored and that school counselors and school psychologists should maintain cultural humility when working with each student. Our interview also reinforced that collaborative advocacy efforts are some of the most effective ways to ensure that students' needs are met.

Overall, this interview significantly impacted my development as a future school counselor. My discussion with Ms. Welling also helped me to identify several areas of personal growth and development. The first area of growth that I identified from our interview is the importance of collaborating with students' caregivers to understand their child's needs and encourage families to actively participate in their child's IEP and 504 processes while supporting them throughout the experience. While I feel that I already actively participate in IEP and 504 meetings, I plan to

engage more with our students' guardians to support them through this often confusing process. This aligns with ASCA's Professional Standards and Competencies B-SS 5 a, which states that school counselors must gather information on student needs from families, teachers, administrators, other school staff, and community organizations to inform the selection of strategies for student success. This goal also aligns with B-SS 5 b, which states that school counselors must share strategies that support student achievement with families, teachers, administrators, teachers, school staff, and community organizations (ASCA, 2019).

The second area of growth that I identified from our interview was that it is critical to advocate for students' needs at multiple systemic levels. For instance, professionals can most effectively advocate for students' needs when they advocate at the school level, district level, and state level. This interview helped me recognize that we are in the position to enact change on behalf of students, and therefore, it is important to act on the opportunities we have to advocate for their needs. While I advocate for students at the school level, I would like to expand my advocacy to the district, local, and potentially state levels. This area aligns with ASCA's Professional Standards and Competencies Mindset 6, which states, "School counselors are leaders in the school, district, state and nation," (ASCA, 2019). This mindset indicates that school counselors have a responsibility to engage in systems-level advocacy. Next, establishing frequent communication with school psychologists was an area of growth that I identified. The pandemic has made establishing frequent communication more difficult. However, I plan to continue developing my relationship with the school psychologists so that we can effectively collaborate to support our students. This area aligns with ASCA's Professional Standards and Competencies B-PF 6 e, which explains school counselors' responsibility to collaborate with

administrators, teachers, and other staff in the school and district to ensure culturally responsive curricula and student-centered instruction (ASCA, 2019).

Finally, taking the initiative to develop opportunities and interventions where school counselors and school psychologists can collaborate to support students with disabilities is an area of significant professional growth for me. While I have collaborated with school psychologists to support students with disabilities through PBIS, I would like to challenge myself to collaboratively identify and implement another evidence-based intervention for students with disabilities at Woodward. This area aligns with the ASCA Position Statement regarding Students with Disabilities, which states that it is the responsibility of a school counselor to collaborate with other related student support professionals to deliver services (ASCA, 2016). This goal also aligns with ASCA's Professional Standards and Competencies Mindset 5, which states, "Effective school counseling is a collaborative process involving school counselors, students, families, teachers, administrators, other school staff and education stakeholders," (ASCA, 2019). This reinforces the importance of collaboration when advocating for and supporting students with disabilities.

While I have had many opportunities to work with Ms. Welling as Woodward Support Squad organizers and building-level team members, her elaboration on how our professional roles facilitate student success helped me gain a more thorough understanding of the role of a school counselor in advocating for and supporting students with disabilities. My interview with Ms. Welling significantly contributed to my understanding of the importance of cultural humility when honoring students with disabilities' personal and cultural identities. Our conversation reinforced that school counselors meaningfully support and advocate for the needs of students with disabilities through implementing evidence-based interventions to address their needs. This

discussion furthered my comprehension of the specific ways that professional school counselors and professional school psychologists can collaborate to achieve this common goal of supporting and empowering students with disabilities.

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