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School Counselors as Social Justice Leaders: An Innovative School–Family–Community Partnership With Latino Students and Families

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Abstract

Teaching and Reaching Every Area (TAREA) is a comprehensive school–family–community partnership designed to increase Latino student achievement. The authors use action research to describe how a school counselor developed TAREA and post hoc analysis to provide examples of social justice and systemic collaboration leadership dimensions. The authors detail parent, staff, and student engagement outcomes. Throughout, they transform the abstract concept of leadership into concrete steps for school counselor advocacy and action.

Keywords

school counselor leadership, equity, partnership

As microcosms of society, schools reflect the changing ethnic and racial demographics representative of the United States (Evans, Zambrano, Cook, Moyer, & Duffey, 2011). Increasingly, communities include a significant number of Latinos. In 2015, Latinos comprised 17.6% of the total U.S. population and 24.3% of elementary or high school student population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Further, 42.5% of Latino children lived in poverty in 2013, which is more than children of any other racial or ethnic group (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). A pervasive achievement gap exists between Latino children and their White peers with a difference of between 21 and 26 points on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (Hemphill & Vanneman, 2011). Exacerbating the situation, parents who are culturally and linguistically different from the majority culture are often excluded from decisions involving their children in school systems (Evans et al., 2011). The challenge for schools is to develop culturally inclusive forums for parents and schools to connect with one another and create systems of support that impact educational outcomes.

With knowledge, skills, and training, school counselors are well equipped to lead efforts to increase Latino family engagement and student achievement. School counselors can serve as leaders in multicultural advocacy (Evans et al., 2011) and act as "culturally responsive change agents who integrate instructional and school counseling practices" to initiate, develop, and implement equitable services and programs for all students (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2012a, p. 11). Aydin, Bryan, and Duys (2012) asserted that school counselors' "expertise in human development, collaboration, and systems change" puts them "in the best position to promote partnerships with families" (p. 146). Evans, Zambrano, Cook, Moyer, and Duffey (2011) placed special emphasis on school counselors' role as advocates for culturally diverse families; this includes challenging schools to address injustices and become more responsive to the needs of all families. Thus, a crucial step is examining multiple ways in which school counselor leaders can foster collaborative partnerships among schools, families, and communities to impact academic achievement of students.

In this article, we describe one elementary school counselor's leadership effort in developing a comprehensive school, family, and community partnership that provided differentiated accessibility to school resources for students and families separated by geographical, language, and cultural barriers. This case study focuses on a school counselor who developed Teaching and Reaching Every Area (TAREA), a homework and parent engagement program. We use an action research approach to describe its development and post hoc analysis to highlight critical aspects of school counselor leadership skills (Young & Bryan, 2015).

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Overcoming Barriers to School Involvement

When parents are involved in their children's learning, children do better academically than their peers whose parents are less involved (Thelamour & Jacobs, 2014); this is widely known. Families with limited personal experience in formal educational settings have not had the opportunity to construct the role of parent as educational advocate (Gonzalez, Borders, Hines, Villalba, & Henderson, 2013). Conversely, when parents feel that schools are responsive, they are more likely to be engaged (Gonzalez et al., 2013). Thus, greater engagement with all parents, including Latinos, is in the best interest of both students and schools. Increasing engagement among Latino parents starts with learning parents' interests and needs. In their prescribed model for expanding Latino parents' involvement, Gonzalez, Borders, Hines, Villalba, and Henderson (2013) suggested that school officials learn how parents prefer to be involved in their children's education and offer skills training to support and expand upon these activities. Schools also must be creative in how they market programs to parents. For example, schools can recruit Latino parents using several means including bilingual flyers, informational booths, and personal invitations from members of the community (O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2014). In extending invitations, schools must be mindful of potential barriers, which range from communication issues to lack of trust (Gonzalez et al., 2013). To be effective leaders in building relationships with Latino families, school counselors must seek out and build partnerships with resources within the community (Aydin, Bryan, and Duys, 2012; Evans et al., 2011). By forming alliances with community organizations, school counselors can harness the power of larger systems to affect the lives of students and their families. This work necessarily requires complex leadership skills.

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School Counselor Leadership as a Means to Advocacy

School counselors are called upon to serve as equity and school-wide leaders. Previous research has found that school counselors who utilize leadership skills can create positive change in areas such as mental health and crisis response (DeKruyf, Auger, & Trice-Black, 2013; Fein, Carlisle, & Isaacson, 2008), accountability and data use (Sink, 2009), and response to intervention and positive behavior interventions and supports (Betters-Bubon & Donohue, 2016; Ryan, Kaffenberger, & Carroll, 2011).

School counselors have also been called to serve as leaders in creating school–family–community partnerships (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Examining factors that relate to school counselor involvement, Bryan and Henry (2012) proposed a school counselor–led school–family–community partnership process. Other research has described the positive role school counselors can play in creating partnerships (see Dotson-Blake, Foster, & Gressard, 2009; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010; Griffin & Steen, 2010); yet much of this research does not adequately describe the leadership skills needed to engage in the partnership building. We assert that without substantive leadership skills, school counselors will not be equipped to fully engage in advocacy and partnership work. In other words, advocacy will not happen without counselors using requisite leadership skills to effect systemic or community change.

Assessing School Counselor Leadership

A significant amount of research has explored the measurement of school counselor leadership. Researchers have examined how specific leadership models can be applied to school counselor leaders (see Bore & Bore, 2009; Dollarhide, Gibson, & Saginak, 2008; Janson, Stone, & Clark, 2009; Wingfield, Reese, & West-Olatunji, 2010). Other researchers have used existing leadership instruments to measure leadership traits and skills among practicing school counselors. Mason and McMahon (2009), for example, used the Leadership Practices Inventory (Kouzes & Posner, 2011) to examine differences in leadership among veteran and new school counselors, noting that veteran counselors in small school environments rated themselves higher on leadership scales.

Most recently, Young and Bryan (2015) reexamined the extant leadership literature to develop a School Counselor–Specific Leadership Scale (SCLS). Grounded in leadership literature, their analysis of the SCLS yielded five dimensions exemplifying school counselor leadership practice: interpersonal influence, systemic collaboration, resourceful problem-solving, professional efficacy, and social justice advocacy. The SCLS moves the field forward by allowing school counselors to analyze their strengths and weaknesses across role-specific leadership dimensions. Further, the SCLS situates the important roles of systemic collaboration and social justice advocacy, skills essential to building school–community partnerships, within a leadership frame.

Further research is needed on how school counselors use leadership efforts to advocate for and engage marginalized students and families within school and community settings. The purpose of this article is to highlight the school counselor leadership skills used to create a partnership program between families, communities, and school staff to affect Latino student engagement and achievement. We provide an overview of TAREA including the impetus of the program, school counselor action steps, and outcomes. Within that description, we outline the essential leadership activities and skills utilized by the school counselor. We highlight Young and Bryan's (2015) leadership dimensions of social justice advocacy—the willingness to challenge the status quo for equitable outcomes—and systemic collaboration—practices reflecting

Table 1. Student Characteristics Over Program Years.

Student demographics	Year 1 2009	Year 2 2010	Year 3 2011	Year 4 2012	Year 5 2013	Year 6 2014	Year 7 2015
Enrollment	478	400	427	447	463	513	584
Free and reduced meals (%)	42.5	28.8	25.8	28.0	24.2	25.3	20.0
Special education (%)	6.1	6.5	6.6	6.0	4.1	5.5	6.2
Racial diversity							
White (%)	52.3	65.0	69.1	70.9	73.4	71.7	72.8
Hispanic (%)	43.5	29.0	24.6	23.0	20.5	22.8	21.4
Black (%)	1.7	2.8	1.9	1.6	1.5	1.2	1.7
Asian (%)	2.1	2.8	1.6	1.3	1.5	1.8	1.7
English-language learners							
LEP Spanish (%)	41.8	28.0	25.8	22.8	19.2	21.2	19.7
LEP English (%)	57.0	72.0	74.2	77.2	80.8	78.8	80.3
Gender							
Male (%)	48.1	50.8	50.4	53.5	53.1	52.0	52.2
Female (%)	51.9	48.0	49.6	46.5	46.9	48.0	47.8

Note. LEP = Limited English Proficient

collaboration with stakeholders to create new programs—to illuminate the skills used to create and facilitate TAREA.

Method

We describe the process through an action research framework. Focused on both theory and research, action research is systemic inquiry by practitioners designed to investigate teaching and learning processes in schools (Mertler, 2017). Action research strengthens the link between research and practice and has been used to evaluate program development and school counseling initiatives research (Rowell, 2005). Rowell (2006) adapted a model grounded in the work of Kurt Lewin, the founder of action research (Smith, 2001), putting forth a cyclical process that includes the following steps:

1. Initial ideas about improving practice,
2. Fact-finding, observation—checking things out,
3. Planning to take action,
4. Taking action—the first steps,
5. Evaluating initial action,
6. Making modifications—improving the plan,
7. Taking second action steps, and so on.

Post hoc analysis of the leadership skills used within each step is integrated within the action research framework. The second author of the current study was a bilingual school counselor in the school, and all data for this case study were gathered from her professional records and communication with school staff.

Setting and Participants

This study took place at one elementary school (grades *K*–5) located in a suburb of a midsized Midwestern town, over a 7-year period from 2009–2010 through 2015–2016. The suburb had a population of approximately 10,000 residents and the median household income was US$75,000 in 2009. The school district had approximately 5,000 students drawn from the suburb itself and from an urban area 10 miles from the school. The urban area is separated from the suburb by a highway, with limited public transportation to the school. The school, 1 of 11 in the district, had an enrollment of approximately 400 students during the first year of the study; this increased to 584 during the final year. The student demographics in the first year included 52% Caucasian, 44% Hispanic, 2% African American, and 2% Asian American students. Forty-two percent of students in 2009 were both identified as Spanish-speaking English-language learners (ELL) and received free and reduced lunch. Due to redistricting, demographics shifted over the years of the study and are outlined in Table 1.

Procedures

The seven steps of the action research process are described as follows:

1. Problem definition: Initial ideas about improving practice

In 2009, I (second author) noted a clear achievement gap between our ELL and non-ELL students. School achievement test data indicated 6% proficiency for ELL students and 51.1% for non-ELL students in reading, and 14% proficiency for ELL students and 74.1% for non-ELL students in math. That year, our school received a US$5,000 government stimulus grant through the American Recovery Investment Act of 2009, which provided funds to schools to improve teaching and learning for students living in poverty. The principal assembled a team, including academic intervention staff, the school bilingual interpreter, teachers, and student services members, to focus on school improvement. During meetings held twice a month, the team brainstormed possible interventions by examining existing achievement data and best practices that focused on achievement for ELL students.

As the school counselor, I was a leader on the team and as our meetings progressed to interventions for our Latino students and families, I realized we were missing the critical voice of Latino parents in our meetings. Without the parent voice, we would not know if the efforts we wished to implement would be well received, considered valid, or utilized. We decided to include families in this brainstorming process. I was cognizant that we might make parents uncomfortable by asking entirely open-ended questions, particularly since many parents did not have familiarity with the complex U.S. educational system, and I advocated for creating a list of possible ideas to bring to parents for feedback.

The list of intervention ideas we created included:

(1) *Homework help.* We would utilize space in an apartment complex or other area in the urban neighborhood where many ELL students lived to provide homework assistance after school hours.
(2) *Access to technology*. We hoped to equalize the playing field by providing technology to students who might not have it readily available. For example, we would purchase iPods for families to check out to do math games, and so on.
(3) *Greater access to school staff*. We would have formalized home visits/access to school staff in the community or have school personnel stationed in a specific apartment building on the same day each month if parents had questions, complaints, or wished to connect.
(4) *Parent/family events*. We hoped to offer families opportunities to gather at school or in the community.
(5) *Other ideas*. We remained open to ideas put forth by parents. Although I was not aware of it at the time, this was the genesis of the community-based partnership of which I became a leader. I recognized a need for systemic change and advocated for the voices of all stakeholders to be included in the solution-finding process.

2. Fact-finding/observation

In March 2010, the principal, bilingual interpreter, and I identified a cross section of parents of our ELL students to contact, including those who we perceived were and were not involved in the school in visible ways. The interpreter and I called 12 families to discuss our desire to gain their input and perspective on ideas we had to help their children. We offered options including talking at their homes or by phone, mailing the information, and opting out of the discussion. As school staff, we were worried about the process. We did not know what to expect and as such were concerned about the potential for rejection from parents and families. I wondered if parents would be annoyed or put out when we asked to enter their homes. As we continued making calls, we were bolstered by the warm reception and enthusiasm. Every one of the parents we contacted opted for a home visit. We were ready to collaborate.

The interpreter, principal, and I went together on every visit, starting during spring break in early April 2010. It became readily apparent that parents enjoyed and valued the opportunity to contribute to the decision-making process. The feedback gave our team a new perspective and new ideas to effect change. Very quickly, the word spread in the Spanish-speaking community that the principal and staff members were visiting homes. Parents called to inquire if they could be included in the home visits. We explained that we had scheduled the meetings in advance and were already booked; however, we assured families that we would contact them for future communication connections. Parents called with new ideas generated through informal conversations with their neighbors. As we moved through the fact-finding process, our team began to understand the power of word of mouth. Not only did staff gain confidence and courage in the collaborative process outside of the school walls, but parents also began to view themselves as having influence in the educational system. It was incredibly powerful.

From the beginning, I demonstrated leadership by taking risks to start new ways to engage in home/school communication. Specifically, I was willing to go on home visits and ask parents for feedback. I engaged in collaboration by serving as a leader on the school improvement team, meeting the goals for the group, and gaining buy-in from parents. I led a process that was transformative as it set the tone of creating reciprocal communication between parents and school staff that continues today.

3. Planning to take action

Utilizing parent feedback, our school-based team created a revised list of action items focused on intervention. For example, parents repeatedly expressed the desire to have a homework club close their homes. In fact, 100% of families interviewed indicated they would allow their son/daughter to participate in a homework club that was offered in a community room of an apartment complex. School staff, however, had lingering questions about the best location for the homework club. Specifically, staff felt strongly that this option would be best if offered at the local Boys and Girls Club because it was free, fully staffed, and located less than three quarters of a mile from family apartments. It also offered many resources: computers, space, snacks, and a gym. Parents, however, had shared concerns in our meetings that the Boys and Girls Club was further away from their homes and worried about their children getting there in a neighborhood with a higher crime rate. We honored both staff and parent voices by offering 2 days of homework club each week: a Monday night session at the Boys and Girls Club and a Wednesday afternoon session in the neighborhood.

As we moved forward, I took on a further leadership role, serving as the primary contact and setting up logistics. I was able to secure the Boys and Girls Club space; the organization was well versed and well equipped in partnering with schools. Finding a space in an apartment complex community room was

more challenging. Many of the apartment complexes did not have gathering spaces and others did not want school partnership. After a few weeks, however, I found an apartment manager who had children in the district, was community focused, and welcomed this opportunity. We used our government stimulus grant funds to rent the space once per week (US$55/week). This was another turning point in our project because the manager of the complex and parents were excited about the potential of the partnership.

In addition to the homework club idea, parents requested more entry points for participation in the school system during our visits. Parents indicated that they wanted more ways to communicate with school staff, with texting as one of the preferred methods. My level of proficiency in Spanish allowed me to serve as a point of contact with parents along with the interpreter. We learned that parents wanted access to technology and to the school through events, meetings, and volunteer options.

Throughout, I served as a leader in the planning process. I pushed myself to learn what was possible within the school and community frameworks and used my role in the school to explain the ideas and anticipated benefits to teachers and administrators. I was able to share the parent point of view with teachers as an invitation for collaboration rather than a perceived attack on them. I negotiated multiple points of view to bring an organization and individuals together. Throughout, I had to be patient, speak clearly to the goal, and follow through with the work for teachers, administration, and parents.

4. Taking action

After the spring and summer of planning, we piloted the homework club in fall 2010. We determined that the target population would include second- through fifth-grade students because homework is typical for students in these grades. From the beginning, we compensated teachers who worked at the homework club, using grant funds and recruiting teachers through requests at staff meetings and e-mail communication. I sent a letter to all Spanish-speaking parents living in the neighborhood providing details about the homework club options. We called the parents who had provided feedback over spring break, thus activating the word-of-mouth communication. I included my personal cell phone number in all of these communications based on parent feedback from our home visits.

Our first homework club at the community center was held in early October. We soon discovered that location impacted attendance. The homework club in the apartment community room was widely popular, with 30–40 students attending per session. It was so full that students sat on the floor and used clipboards to complete homework. The homework club at Boys and Girls Club was not popular. In fact, during our 4-week pilot, no students attended. Even though the facility was superior in many ways, parents did not feel the resources outweighed the real and perceived hurdles. In that moment, I learned the power of listening to the parent voice. During the initial visits, families indicated their concerns about that site—we needed to listen to their concerns and act accordingly. As such, we ceased offering homework support at the Boys and Girls Club and used additional grant funds to offer it 2 nights/week in the apartment complex. We continue to partner with the Boys and Girls Club throughout the years in ways other than homework club, such as registration and back to school events.

We wanted to offer ways beyond the homework club for parents to connect with school staff through parent engagement nights. I was a leader of the planning team and I again looked to the input from parents to plan successful activities. I integrated the "chocolate cake and vitamins" approach or using fun activities to entice parents for the educational component. I found both to be necessary for a truly successful event. For example, I approached a parent who worked as a DJ to provide music, asked a parent who owned a traditional Mexican restaurant to cater food, and opened up school spaces such as the gym and art room for fun family activities. Equally important was setting up learning spaces, which included an iPod/technology sign-up in the library, a communication sign-up where parents could share how they wished to receive information, and tables dedicated to homework club where parents could ask questions and gain information. Similar to our approach with the homework club, we sent flyers to all Latino families and made personal contacts (e.g., phone calls, teacher invitations, and texts) to ensure parents were invited in culturally responsive ways.

5. Evaluating initial action

We examined process and perception data during the first year of our intervention work. We found that approximately 45 students attended homework club with an average of 34 students participating regularly. Data indicated that 80% of the second- through fifth-grade students who lived in the neighborhood attended homework club at least twice. Parents responded positively through feedback surveys distributed at the end of that year. Parents responses that focused on what they liked about TAREA included: "We can't help with English homework at home, so it's really useful for the children," "[I have] Access to teachers who help with work and the kids have more enthusiasm for their work," "My child has increased motivation for doing work," "The school has done the most that you can and hasn't left anything out," and "The homework is just a small part of what you do for us."

Over the course of the year, communication increased between parents of our ELL bilingual students and teachers. In the past, most communication happened through the student/child. With the addition of the homework club, parents were able to access teachers who worked at the school. The power dynamic related to communication shifted as students saw parents and school staff working together. Similarly, classroom teachers who had students attend homework club reported lower frustration levels related to parent communication. We

also noticed increased student and parent attendance at school events over the course of the year.

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Establishing a community-based program of this nature required the ability to develop genuine relationships with parents, school staff, and community members. I, along with other school staff, built successful relationships by asking parents what they needed, following through on action items, and recognizing the reciprocal nature of communication. I specifically gained trust by being present at homework club and talking with parents about their needs. I found texting to be a critical component of parent communication. Parents contacted me regularly, on average 10–20 times/week, to ask school- and/or TAREA-related questions.

6. Making modifications

Our success in the first year led to our continuation of TAREA and family nights in subsequent years. In the second year, we solidified the targeted student outcomes to include increases in homework completion, reading and math proficiency, and engagement in community programs (e.g., soccer club). We made minor modifications to the TAREA club time frame, reducing from 1.5 to 1 hr, 2 times each week because students finished their homework during that time. I partnered with a school psychology intern from a local university who was doing her internship at our school. We recognized that a partnership between the university department and TAREA could bring an academic intervention program to our students and assist the school psychology students to fulfill practicum requirements. School psychology students provided reading intervention (guided nonfiction reading groups focused on language development) to approximately 12 students each semester. Our focus moved beyond homework help to include systemic interventions to affect the achievement gap. We offered additional family nights at the school and in the community, which varied in topic and purpose. For example, we celebrated *Dia de los Niños*, which included traditional Mexican dancers, food, and games/piñatas, and connected families to local community organizations (e.g., local soccer programs, university-based summer activities).

During the third year, we elevated our focus on parent engagement. Through leadership activities of advocacy and inclusion, I developed and facilitated a parent group called *Correr la Voz* ("Spread the Word"), built around the concept of conversation. The group, which I conducted in Spanish, emerged from the parents' desire to connect and communicate in different ways. We met approximately once every 6 weeks at school or in the community to discuss historically misunderstood education-related topics (e.g., grade point averages [GPAs], accessing school resources). Participation in the group helped parents build confidence and a knowledge base within a typically closed and complicated school system. School psychology graduate students attended a meeting and subsequently made a video of parent interviews highlighting perceived outcomes (http://getarea.weebly.com/parents.html). Responses included: "We communicate about things that we didn't know before and that benefits our children;" "Before I started working with the school like this, I didn't understand things like GPA. This has, above everything, helped me be more responsible for my children's education and to be able to better help them;" "She (the counselor) came to talk to me in my home and asked about what would parents like from the school. What would be most interesting for parents;" and "There are many benefits to being involved with school like this. In the beginning, I didn't know how the district worked and now I can participate. I like doing the communication through word of mouth." The outcomes of the group included capacity building and resilience for parents.

I became more purposeful about collecting data and feedback from parents, students, and staff during the second and third years. I tracked participation and utilized exit surveys after school and community events. I also tracked student participation in community activities that parents and students learned about through our events (e.g., how many joined soccer or went to the college summer programs) whenever possible.

During the program development and implementation, I made modifications to the program while maintaining a vision for the desired outcomes, thus displaying leadership attributes. I demonstrated persistence and adaptability upon learning the stimulus grant was no longer available to fund the program during the third year. I took it upon myself to solicit area businesses for funding, securing a US$3,000 donation that allowed the program to continue for another year. The next year, I applied for an Innovation Grant, a district grant program designed to encourage new ideas and programs. After a competitive application and interview process, TAREA received district grant funding, allowing the program to continue.

7. Taking action—again

While the objective of TAREA has remained the same—to impact Hispanic student achievement and family engagement through community-based efforts—the process has been reviewed and revised as an ongoing endeavor. Table 2 highlights modifications made through the 7 years that TAREA has been in existence. While I was the point person and the primary contact for much of the program development, many individuals helped sustain, expand, and improve the TAREA program. The bilingual secretary, teachers, administration at the school and district level, and the interpretation team invested time and

Table 2. Teaching and Reaching Every Areas (TAREA) Program Highlights and Outcomes.

Year	Partnership/Program Description	Outcomes
October 2010 to present	Homework club • Homework support offered by school staff in the community apartment complex • Two times/week • Attendance varies year to year; an average of 20 students attending each week	Approximately 33 students and six teachers attended on a weekly basis on average during Year 1. A 2011–2012 survey of 35 of the students who attended indicated: • 84% of students always or most of the time liked coming and • 80% of students reported that homework club always or most of the time helped them feel excited about school A 2011–2012 survey of 8 of the 10 involved teachers yielded the following results: • 100% of teachers strongly agree/agree that the club helps students practice skills learned in school and • 75% strongly agree or agree that homework club has helped parents and students be more engaged in school Qualitative responses from parents indicated they felt more at ease that students could get the help needed
2010–2011 to present	Family engagement nights • Opportunities to gather together are offered at least 2 times/year • Offered at school and in the community	Attendance is typically more than 200 individuals. Exit survey from a 2011 event indicated 95% of attendees found the events useful. Ten of the 13 organizations that attended indicated it was "much better" or "better than expected." The other three indicated it was "as expected." A representative from one organization indicated that they had more English-language learners students sign up and follow through to attend their summer program as a result of our nights than any other recruitment effort.
October 2011–2017	UW reading program • Reading intervention provided to students by PhD students • Free; 2 times/week • The reading program is systematized with the university; school psychology PhD students acquire practicum hours to fulfill program requirements, making the partnership mutually beneficial	Twelve to 15 students were nominated by teachers to receive reading support each semester. Counselor routinely gets requests from parents to have their child participate. Ten of the 11 students who participated in the reading club completed a feedback survey: • 80% of students indicated they always really liked coming to reading, • 100% indicated that teachers always really helped kids, and • 90% reported that the group always or most of the time helped them feel more excited about reading and school
December 2012 to present	Correr la Voz • Parent group led by school counselor and conducted in Spanish; focused on topics related to the U.S. school system • Meetings every 6–8 weeks	Average of 10 parents attend each meeting; the parents share information with neighbors or contacts. Communication is two way in that parents share feedback with the school staff. Parent feedback video on TAREA website (http://getarea.weebly.com/parents.html). The group continues today. Many guests from the district (e.g., the superintendent) and community have provided information to parents and learn from them. Parents who participate remain involved in the district as students move onto middle and high school. A reporter visited the group this year to collaborate on ideas and a name for the Spanish section of the local newspaper (see below).
2014–2015 to present	Nuestras experiencias "our experiences" • Student-produced newsletter in Spanish; focuses on events in the district, what students are participating in and how they do it Facilitated by school counselor in the apartment community room typically on weekends/nonschool days	Between 5 and 10 middle and high school students participate in writing articles for the newsletter and/or stuffing envelopes. The goal is to mail once per quarter to the 500 Spanish-speaking homes in the district. The newsletter is shared with many staff and is read by community members. Students who have written for the newsletter have visited the school board and are collaborating with a local newspaper reporter. The newspaper did a Spanish section of their paper and utilized the student authors to help with ideas, translation, and getting the word out to their parents. A stand-alone newspaper in Spanish, entitled "Correr la Voz," is distributed by the paper on a monthly basis.

efforts as engaged participants. The collaboration with the university school psychology program and parents was critical in making the program a success.

School Counselor Leadership Skill Analysis

Throughout the stages of action research, the school counselor utilized essential leadership skills to create the relationships and subsequent partnership that developed. In particular, this project highlighted the need to use social justice advocacy and systemic collaborative leadership skills (Young & Bryan, 2015); these were at the heart of how the school counselor built the school–community partnership. In fact, if the school counselor had not taken on a leadership role, this program might neither have been implemented nor sustained.

Systemic Collaboration

School counselor leaders must use collaborative skills in their roles such as rapport building, communicating, and negotiating. In the creation of TAREA, the school counselor was actively involved in collaborating with a variety of audiences—parents, students, staff, and community members. This allowed authentic connection to develop between parents and school staff while providing academic support to students. The counselor used collaborative opportunities in school and in the community to build trust and mutual understanding between teachers and parents, allowing them to see each other through more accurate and collaborative lenses. For example, if teachers expressed worry or frustration that a parent never returned e-mails or responded to notes in the planner, the school counselor was able to say, "I know this mom really cares about education; let's look into it." Conversely, if a parent heard from their child, "I did it but the teacher doesn't like me," the school counselor could respond, "I know this teacher cares deeply about student success; let's look into this." The school counselor offered professional development on communication differentiation and translation to foster collaborative relationships between teachers and families. In the absence of collaboration, individuals fill in the blanks with inaccurate assumptions, thereby derailing the teamwork needed to help children succeed.

Further, once the TAREA structure was in place, teachers commented on the value of having a space in the community to connect with families. As the school staff and Spanish-speaking community became more connected, teachers began to hold conferences in the community room and enjoyed 95–100% conference attendance. Teachers stated that the conversations with parents were much richer as parents provided more feedback on topics important to their child's well-being. The apartment complex community room became a space for mutual engagement and understanding. This authentic collaboration allowed school staff to see the district equity gaps more clearly and, as a result, staff saw that they had the responsibility to be present in the community and that all parents and students are important contributors to the school.

Social Justice Advocacy

At the core of the program is advocacy, an essential dimension of a school counselor leader (Young & Bryan, 2015). The counselor recognized that parents who live near the school and speak the dominant language have multiple entry points for school participation due to the proximity, language, and access. These small points of contact led to vital connectivity and building of mutual trust between school staff and parents. In contrast, Latino parents who lived in the neighborhood separated from the school did not have these opportunities. The TAREA program focused on equity and how the school could provide support and opportunities to all families, leading to school success. In the role of social justice advocate, the counselor first helped school staff examine which parents accessed school services and were engaged in school leadership/participation. She supported school staff to understand multiple ways to view parent involvement beyond traditional parent/teacher organizations, and she provided new ways in which they could engage in with Latino students and families.

The school counselor talked with Latino students and families who were not utilizing school services as much as other families and allowed them to be part of the problem-solving process. To that end, she created a community-based homework club for students and a parent group that gave parents the opportunity to be engaged in their child's education in new ways. The TAREA forum allowed parents the opportunity to challenge or question school assumptions and provided a way in which their voices could be heard by multiple district stakeholders. For example, school staff, school board members, and the superintendent were invited to TAREA meetings, which allowed for the exchange of information and new understanding.

Finally, because the school counselor shared the program outcomes with the school board and other district leaders, funding was allocated in the central budget for the program after the fourth year. The school counselor worked as a change agent to enhance the engagement of a group of parents and students who reside outside of the majority culture, demonstrating social justice advocacy outcomes and lasting systemic change.

Discussion

This article highlights the essential relationship between leadership skills and advocacy outcomes. The school counselor cocreated and maintained the TAREA program that focused on the goal of increasing student achievement for ELL, answering the call to be a multicultural leader (Evans et al., 2011). She used her expertise and knowledge to create an entry point for Spanish-speaking parents that minimized barriers and maximized communication with school staff. The comprehensive nature of the homework club component, family engagement nights, and *Correr la Voz* created spaces that ensured parents, university interns, and school staff worked together to affect student achievement. The school counselor created systemic change by providing differentiated accessibility to school resources for students and families separated from the school

by geographical, language, and cultural barriers (Gonzalez et al., 2013).

Post hoc analysis illustrated how the school counselor leader used systemic collaboration and social justice advocacy skills (Young & Bryan, 2015) to help the school system adjust to meet the needs of students and families rather than making them adjust to the school system (Gonzalez et al., 2013). She acted as a cultural broker, engaging Latino parents by being flexible in approach and making use of community resources. Rather than holding meetings at school, the school counselor and other staff met in the community and even within family homes. In this way, the school counselor used collaboration skills to build bridges between all partners (staff, parents, students, administration, and community agencies) and to gain support from administration at school and district levels.

Throughout, the school counselor leader focused energy on engagement among and between families, communities, and educators. This engagement increased student and parent voice and participation in the school and expanded cross-cultural understanding and support between school staff and families. Teachers changed how they thought about families and were interested in learning more about Hispanic families, while parents became comfortable sharing their time, talents, concerns, and voices. The *Correr la Voz* group became the foundation of the partnership and has continued to grow through the years to include Latino parents of middle and high school students. To this day, parents continue to attend parent engagement events offered by the school even after their students leave the elementary school; two of the first parents who were involved in *Correr la Voz* now have children in college. School counselors can serve as leaders in creating educational change (DeVoss & Andrews, 2006).

School Counselor Implications

As evidenced in this program, school counselors with backgrounds in leadership and collaboration are poised to be multicultural and systemic change leaders. School counselors wishing to build new partnerships to increase student and parent engagement should consider the following leadership strategies:

- *Replace judgment with wonder*. School counselors can serve as leaders to assess how and which parents and families are currently involved in the school. Educators sometimes make judgments regarding which parents are involved in their child's education. Instead, school counselors can help staff to wonder: What hurdles exist to traditional involvement (e.g., location, language, work schedules)? Where are the points of entry for parents? How can we change structures to engage more parents and families? How can we utilize parent strength to build new partnerships?
- *Consider your commitment.* As school counselors consider taking leadership in creating partnerships, they first need to consider their own commitment level. From the start, avoiding overpromising and underdelivering is important. Parent and partner confidence is built when school counselors follow through on ideas. What can you do that is sustainable? What small changes can you start that will lead to systemic change?
- *Engage in collaboration.* School counselors can lead the systemic collaboration process by serving as a bridge to colleagues who wish to engage in outreach with families and to families who wish to access resources inside and outside of the school.
- *Utilize reciprocal communication*. Similarly, systemic collaboration must include reciprocal communication. In all interactions, school counselors should serve as models in how to interact with families. Treat parents as adults—they know how to say yes or no when presented with information or ideas and they know their children. Further, be genuine in interactions—if you don't know the answer, tell the truth and get back to them.
- *Get involved.* School counselors should model to school staff ways to engage with families by offering to meet in a parent's home, at the school, or at a site in the community. Further, they should find reasons connect to families in the community—the more counselors know, the more they can connect families with meaningful information.

Conclusion

This action research case study focuses on one school counselor's effort to create meaningful change and partnership within a leadership framework. As such, the results should be interpreted with caution in that the study is descriptive in nature and connections between the partnership interventions and outcomes were not tested empirically. Despite this, the implications for school counselor leadership are far reaching. School counselors who wish to work as advocates for students and families within an equity framework must display leadership skills, knowledge of program development, and the ability to communicate and build relationships among and between individuals. School counselors who engage in the roles of leadership, advocacy, collaboration, and systemic change (ASCA, 2012b) can enhance equitable outcomes for diverse groups of students.

School counselors who wish to work as advocates for students and families within an equity framework must display leadership skills, knowledge of program development, and the ability to communicate and build relationships among and between individuals.

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