

Nashua schools enjoy Prime Time success

Rivier professor and alumna bring advances to school counseling

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(From: *Rivier Today*, Spring 2006)

The school counseling field has been undergoing a quiet revolution since 1997, when the American School Counselors Association (ASCA) first introduced National Standards for School Counseling. Prior to that time, counselors often operated in isolation, performing behavioral interventions or career counseling in short meetings with students.

“Guidance counselors were seen as separate from the academic process,” says **Dr. Andrew Gersten**, associate professor of education, who along with many others has been instrumental in changing the role of counselors in the Nashua School District.

Several years ago, Gersten co-authored a \$1.1 million federal grant, “Prime Time: Building a Solid Foundation for Learning,” along with Rivier alumna **Elizabeth “Betsy” Korn**, ’86G, then director of counseling for the Nashua School District. In simple terms, the three-year program was designed to expand and enhance the school guidance program at seven “inner city” Nashua elementary schools.

While Prime Time had many components—Responsive Classroom[®], Project SO Prepared, service learning and family-focused outreach services all played a role—one of the most tangible outcomes, according to Gersten, was the hiring of more guidance counselors in the Nashua School District. The ratio of 500 students to one guidance counselor at the target schools was reduced by 37 percent, to a ratio of 314 to one, during year two of the grant.

While those positions were eventually eliminated when grant funding ran out, Korn, who now works as a guidance counselor at Fairgrounds Middle School, says “When the extra counselors were in place, they were able to work closely with teachers to provide more comprehensive services in the classroom. The result was that teachers and counselors saw the impact they could have on student achievement by working collaboratively.”

Korn says many Nashua School District counselors today continue to work closely with teachers to teach time management, conflict resolution, and study skills, often tying their lessons to a project or problem in the classroom.

The Prime Time grant also provided a significant amount of training in the Responsive Classroom approach, which integrates a social skills curriculum with the academic curriculum. One of the goals of Responsive Classroom is to foster a feeling of safety and wellbeing. By the end of the grant period, students at four out of seven of the target schools reported a dramatic improvement in feelings of safety while in school.

“School counselors are essential for supporting the social, emotional, and academic well-being of all students,” says Gersten. “We feel fortunate to have had a positive impact on the role of counselors in the Nashua School District.”

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