

Intersecting Themes for School Based Counselors – Mental Health *AND* Academic Equity - Cultivating Partnerships in the Community

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August 17, 2019**

Murry Schekman is a full-time lecturer in the San Jose State Counselor Education Program. He is also a trainer for the Santa Cruz County Office of Education's Tier II (now Act II) program, providing hands on training for new administrators. During his career, he served as principal of three different middle schools, one continuation school and two large high schools, including serving as the first Principal of Everett Alvarez High School in Salinas, Ca. He retired from the world of K-12 as Assistant Superintendent in charge of Secondary Ed in the Pajaro Valley USD and along with teaching, he enjoys his wife, three grown kids and their three grandchildren.

It excites me each year to greet our new students in the Counseling Education program at San Jose State University. We teach to a diverse group of graduate students who generally are already in the workforce, most in some sort of educational/*counseloresque* position. The exciting part is in meeting each student and realizing that our students are generally warm hearted, optimistic and clear on their mission with young people. They do learn about the pressures and realities of the job and they learn about the pathways to building successful outcomes for their future counselees.

The pressures on school-based counselor begin with large caseloads and limited resources. The national counseling-to-student ratio, according to Education Week (February 2018), is 482 to 1. In 2015, a report released by the U.S. Department of Education reported that California ranks the lowest in terms of providing guidance counselors for students. According to the American School Counselor Association, a recommended student-to-counselor ratio is 250:1. In reference to the most recent data from 2010 to 2011, the Association reported California's estimated ratio as 1016:1. Most of the schools where I supervise Counseling Interns have a ratio of around 450:1.

The continued rising mental health issues combined with the absolute need to provide academic access for all students intersect through the school counselor. The continued achievement gap between Asian/White and students of color in our state and our nation must be a target for all schools and districts. Some districts are having success in closing that gap but too many are not. As I travel through the four counties where I supervise Counseling Interns and as I continue to collect data about schools (Successful A to G Completion Rates and Graduation Rates), I see a correlation to some specific evidence of success with the schools and districts who subscribe to the simple adage that *It Takes A Village to Raise A Child!* I worked as a teacher, counselor, principal and district administrator in quite a few of the schools and districts that I now get to visit each semester. I've maintained ongoing communication with many of my former colleagues and my students who've graduated and now are in the trenches doing the real work! I continue to serve as Chair for WASC Accreditation visitations continuing to learn about the work being done in other schools and communities. Simply put-the schools whose school cultures have open doors to the community have a better chance at dealing with mental health

issues and opening the doors of academic success to all students. The intent of this article is to highlight two flourishing community-based agencies working directly with students and schools in addressing the two significant issues. Are mental health and closing the achievement gap two disparate issues? Sit with a school counselor for an hour and you will see how the two issues intersect in the real world of counseling.

Boldly Me is a local non-profit founded in 2012 by Alanna Powell. Alanna enjoys a fascinating background having suffered from Alopecia Universalis or total baldness. She experienced firsthand the enormous difficulties of being different from the other children around her. She developed a repertoire of compassion in her life and applies some incredibly effective strategies to get Boldly Me off the ground and into schools and the community. The organization's curriculum, practices and strategies are now providing support in a variety of communities in the East Bay of the San Francisco Bay Area, Santa Clara County and even in some other countries including Brazil and Haiti.

"Don't try to be anybody you're not.... cause it doesn't help. Be yourself. Be original!" a young voice shares in one of the introductory videos about Boldly Me.

This theme of "Be Yourself" is but one aspect of the program. The mission of Boldly Me is simple:

- Boldly Me educates, mentors, and supports those who feel different, so they learn techniques for answering difficult questions, responding to cruel criticisms or ridicule, self-evaluating their current state, communicating what they need, and being resilient.
- Boldly Me helps people build healthy self-esteem, healthy interpersonal relationships, emotional regulation, distress tolerance, and mindfulness.

There are courses offered online and "live." The courses are directed at educators and others in the helping profession but there are also courses and direct services to elementary, middle and high school children. Boldly Me K-12 Social Emotional Well-being programs were created in collaboration with K-12 educators, school district administrators, licensed psychologists and other medical experts to ensure that the methods are effective for school-age students and followed mandated government standards. The creativity and compassion of the founder, Alanna Powell, her very small staff and the Board of Boldly Me show through in every aspect of the organization and the programs. The large caseloads of school-based counselors combined with the heightening of mental health issues faced by children and their families require that school leaders go beyond the school site for help. I was a principal of six different schools in my career – two large high schools, three middle schools and a continuation school and all of them with large populations of English Learners and kids of color. My school communities, from Salinas to San Mateo with Castroville and Watsonville in between, were fortunate to have organizations that provided counseling services for students and their families. It was never enough. Boldly Me's vision and services are proactive in providing support and ideas for students and their families BEFORE difficulties worsen. Students, parents and educators are provided important tools and strategies that help students deal with negative or ineffective thoughts, injury to others, self-injury, academic performance

and stress management. The proactive approaches taken by Boldly Me can help a group of educators and parents with the overall school culture.

One aspect of Boldly Me that impressed me is the recognition that schools and school cultures are different. Boldly Me can be tailored to meet the specific needs of a school or district community but the mission remains the same. Data has been collected since 2012 with service contacts and some specific, representative data:

24,349 Children served (Parent/Toddler – 25 years old)

193 Suicide Ideation Cases Resolved – (asphyxiation, pills/chemical use, cutting, & creating a plan)

8 Homicide /Mass Shooting Ideation Cases Resolved (repurposed & sent to medical attention)

Regions Served: Burbank, Campbell, Fremont, Hayward, Oakland, Pleasanton, Sacramento, San Jose, Sunnyvale, Sunol, Santa Clara, Los Angeles, Palo Alto, Newark, Union City

If you get to meet Alanna or see one of her educational videos, you'll understand the nature and foundation of Boldly Me. As mentioned earlier, Alanna experienced alopecia beginning at the age of two. She had hair then lost it. She dealt with the difficulties of being different beginning at a very young age. Her passion for helping those who have differences is ongoing. Her zealous nature courses through every aspect of the Boldly Me approaches, whether they are training adults or working directly with kids. I recall how often there was a need to help a child with his/her "inner strength", a term I used often with kids and their parents. Resiliency is a more academic and measurable term. Some folks began using the word GRIT to help students survive and then thrive during the middle school years. Boldly Me does all of the above and with a passion that Alanna demonstrates 24/7.

As already written, the program is customizable and is tailored to meet the school's unique need. It fulfills & aligns with MTSS- Multi Tier Support System. It Aligns with California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) research & requirement and provides critical support needed for wrap around services. The program provides prevention and early intervention programs that is aligned with LCFF (Local Control Funding Formula) requirements including the following specific LCFF areas:

- 1) Student Engagement
 - increase attendance rates & graduation rates, decrease dropout rate
 - decrease chronic absenteeism & suspension rates
 - implement arts integrated learning
- 2) School Climate
 - increase CHKS school connectedness ratings & feeling safe at school ratings

- increase effective counseling service
- 3) Parent Engagement
 - Social-Emotional Training Curriculum in English & Spanish
 - Multi-Tiered Program addressing Tier 1 (every student), Tier 2 (targeted classes), and Tier 3 (small group/individual mentoring)
 - 1) Social & Emotional Well Being
 - 2) Safety
 - 3) Parent Engagement

In 2013 then Principal, Abra Motta, from Westmont High School, in Campbell, California shares that “Our students today are faced with so many challenges, whether they come from social expectations, academic pressures or socio-economic hardships. Boldly Me provides one more layer of support for students as they grow up in these unprecedented times.” Other relevant testimonies from a variety of individuals can be found at the Boldly Me website.

Boldly Me, in order to provide the kind of services needed in schools in the State of California, has aligned itself with the state and federal initiatives related to counseling including the Multi-tiered Support System, the use of the California Healthy Kids Survey and the requirements posted on the California Dashboard. This alignment is essential but the more important part of Boldly Me is less tangible. Only reading about it is simply not enough. One must meet the founder, Alanna Powell, or see her presentations online (www.boldlyme.org) to realize that this organization has soul and really works for all those who have experienced Boldly Me, young and old. The organization also has attracted licensed, talented individuals in education, mental health, physical health to provide ongoing leadership. For mental health, Boldly Me utilizes psychologists, neurologists, psychiatrists, marriage & family therapists, social workers, and neuro-behavioral health experts, all serving as volunteers! The program closely collaborates with educators such as district administrators, site administrators, school counselors and health teachers.

Counselors and site administrators are more successful when the school culture invites and eventually partners with agencies, organizations, non-profits, businesses and other educational institutions, all on behalf of student learning. Dr. Joyce Epstein’s research about schools, families and community partnerships provide the empirical link to student success and working with the community. Counselors work at the intersections of mental health issues and academic equity issues. Many middle school and high school counselors go into the profession hoping to return to their communities and help students get into college. Schools’ A to G rates (UC/CSU Entrance Requirements) are found online (Dataquest query) and indeed, many high schools are working to improve access to college required classes. The State of California’s average A to G success rate for the graduating class of 2017 was 46.8%. The pattern in the areas where I work (Central Coast of California) closely relate to socioeconomic factors but there are several schools where more than 85% of the students qualify for Free and Reduced Lunch and their results are

well above the state average. Two of those high schools include Pajaro Valley High School (51.6%) and Watsonville High School (48.9%).

Now let's move away from Boldly Me but travel to another realm of the school counselor's job-helping students get into college! Specifically, I wish to highlight another committed group of adults, but this organization is dedicated to exposing students at two high schools to Ivy League colleges. Some background info - The State of California's average A to G success rate for the graduating class of 2017 was 46.8% , with generally lower rates in schools with socioeconomic challenges. However, I work with several schools where more than 85% of the students qualify for Free and Reduced Lunch and their results are well above the state average. Two of those high schools include Pajaro Valley High School (51.6%) and Watsonville High School (48.9%). **The Ivy League Project of the Pajaro Valley** is run by two retired school administrators, Dr. Lorraine Sandoval and Ron Sandidge. But the idea began in the Fresno area in 1992.

From the website - <https://ivyleagueproject.org/>

The Ivy League Project (ILP) was founded in 1992 by Martín Mares to encourage economically disadvantaged students to apply to the most prestigious universities in America.

The folks in the Pajaro Valley follow the model and have taken 12 to 18 students each year to Ivy League colleges for the past 12 years. The students get incredible exposure to the real world of East Coast colleges. They meet students and staff from the colleges and usually get to stay in the dorms of several of the colleges. As the former Principal of Watsonville and Assistant Superintendent for Secondary in that district I was able to meet the students but equally important, see the "trail of their comet" on each of the high school campuses. The conversations on each campus added to the "going to college" culture. Each student needs to raise \$2000 and they work their butts off doing so. Other initiatives in the community support the Ivy League Project such as the Rotary Club of Watsonville. The local project has run from 2007 and presently has 14 students working for the trip this year – September of 2019. Before that 127 students participated and are now attending or have graduated from some of our top universities in our country. This list includes but is not limited to - Stanford, Brown, Yale, Harvard, UCLA, UC Berkeley, UC Davis, University of Santa Clara, Boston University, UCSD, Williams, UCSC, MIT, Cornell, Williamette, Holy Names, CSU Pomona, Cal Poly SLO and more. Many of the students do come back and help. Equally important they serve as role models for the other students on campus for all of the travelers are in the 10th or 11th grade. The ILP website describes the project and is an excellent resource for any community wishing to help provide this important exposure.

What do the Ivy League Project and Boldly Me have in common? - The school counselor. School counselors begin to develop their counseling repertoire by knowing the resources in their local community. The results of the two high schools' A – G rates, compared with the state's

and county’s average, including a comparison of all graduates to Hispanic/Latino graduates is as follows (<https://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>):

	All Students			Hispanic/Latino		
	2015	2016	2017	2015	2016	2017
California	43%	45.4%	46.8%	26.4%	37.2%	39.4%
Santa Cruz County	55.3%	54.5%	57.7%	45.9%	49.5%	50.8%
Pajaro Valley High	62.4%	67.6%	51.6%	62.1%	68.7%	52.1%
Watsonville High	55.3%	52.6%	48.9%	54.5%	51.6%	48.4%

The two Pajaro high schools each are well above the state average when compared to ALL other high schools. The Class of 2016 for PVHS rose to 67.6% of the graduates successfully completing A to G requirements, a superb outcome for a school with so many students, like Watsonville High, who qualify for Free and Reduced lunch. The Ivy League Project contributes to this success combined with many, many other factors. But the Ivy League Project, just like Boldly Me, move individual students, families and communities forward in life and are valuable assets in their communities. The Ivy League Project is but one factor in helping a school provide access and support for students in successfully completing the A to G requirements. Research shows us that the family and the quality of the teaching in the classrooms are the key contributors. Beyond these essential ingredients some other factors contributing to successful A to G rates include the following:

- The Master Schedule of Classes- Are students able to access high level classes? Is there equity in the design and implementation of the master schedule?
- Academic Support – Do students have academic support in and outside of the classroom to master difficult content? Some of this achieved locally and sometimes schools are able to utilize programs such as Gear Up, Puente and AVID.
- Is there a consistent and well-planned K-12 curriculum preparing students appropriately for college and careers?
- Quality of Counseling Program – Are the counselors part of the school’s leadership for planning? Is there a counseling curriculum that provides important college and career learning for each of the grade levels, with a heightened focus in middle and high school?

Dr. Sandoval, when asked about working with the counselors from PVHS and WHS, added during an interview:

Our WILP could not exist without the collaborative relationship we have with the high school counselors from both PVHS and WHS. Over the years, our chaperones have been the counselors. It is a win/win experience for both the students and many of our

counselors who are not familiar with colleges on the east coast. When the counselors come back, they realize how much more they can add to their counseling toolbox!

The Ivy League Project started in the Fresno area of California and this article's example highlights one local community's efforts to emulate the original program on behalf of local students. The intent again is to show how school counselors need to balance the guidance and support of students as part of a collaborative effort with the community.

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