

Making a Family Connection in High School

By Melissa Beverly (AzSCA Research Chair)

School Counseling is about connection and partnerships because we work in a system. Our relationship with our students grows and becomes stronger when we partner with their families. Parent involvement can decrease as students enter high school. Developmentally, many of our students are in the process of differentiating from their parents. They want to work on their own, be individuals and be unique, yet cognitively they are not fully developed. They face the danger of making poor choices, which may impact the rest of their lives. They need the guidance and support of their parents whether or not they will admit this need. School Counselors are in an excellent position to encourage and support parental involvement that is healthy and conducive to growth. How and when do we make this connection with parents?

Keeping prevention in mind, early is better than late. My goal for the past two years has been to meet with all of my freshman families. I invite participation to these meetings through e-mail and phone calls. Our counseling secretary assists in scheduling the meetings. I share with families how excited I am to meet them and work with them. I chose to schedule these meetings for second semester following our classroom guidance lessons on study skills and four year planning, which were presented to freshmen during first semester. I want students to have experience with high school prior to the meeting. This experience makes goal setting more realistic.

When parents are curious as to why we are meeting, I share with parents that we will be reviewing their students' transcript, four year plan and post-graduate plans so I can learn how I can best assist with the students' goals while partnering with the parents. I begin our meeting by encouraging the families to ask me any questions they might have. During the meeting I review my role in working with their family and the services our comprehensive counseling program offers – academic, personal/social and career guidance. I use a form I adapted from Poway Unified School District to guide our meeting. The form (attached to this article) reviews the number of credits the student has completed and what they need to complete. I have students use their transcript to assist me in completing the form. We talk about the purpose of the transcript, who sees it and what information can be gained from reviewing the transcript. This information includes credits, types of classes the student is taking (regular, honors, AP/IB) and of course GPA. Next we discuss AIMS and how this test impacts graduation. I use this time to review the AIMS (ABOR) scholarship and the brochure found on the ADE Website. All families should know about this option. If the student I am meeting with is off track, we review ways for the student to catch up and we document this strategy on the form. We review the course, GPA and test requirements for our in-state colleges and how to find information on the out of state colleges. We talk about the students' current attendance and discipline, if applicable. We then discuss the student's post-graduate education and career plan. I document this and have the family sign that we have reviewed the information on the form. I keep this so I can track the number of families I meet with. If students do not have a plan, I let them know our guidance lessons sophomore year will focus on career exploration and re-assure them it is not necessary that they have an exact plan at this time. I encourage students in this situation to aim for a four year university so they can have the highest number of options available no matter what they decide.

After finishing the form, we review and discuss the student's four year plan that was created first semester. We talk about how the plan relates to the student's education and career plans. I talk about course options the student and parents may not be familiar with. We discuss the importance of course rigor and I educate parents on the research, which suggests that course rigor is the best predictor of school success, a better predictor than GPA, which surprises many families. We also discuss the difference between success in college and college admissions. While we know course rigor is a predictor of college success, students need to focus on GPA for admission to college. When we design the four year plan our goal is to find a balance between course rigor and a high GPA.

The family meetings are one of the most satisfying parts of the work I do with students. I am giving students and their parents the information they need to make good choices and access a wide variety of post secondary options. I am making connections so that students and parents are more likely to contact me, and utilize and access the services I provide. For the past two years I have met with 70% of my 100 freshman families. I am looking forward to reviewing data in a couple years to analyze the possible effect this intervention has had. I will use GPA, SAT/ACT scores, college admissions and scholarship information to measure the success of these meetings.