

Chapter One

Setting the Stage for Success

*You cannot solve a problem with the same
kind of thinking that created it.*

—Albert Einstein

Imagine for a moment how different the job of an educator would be in a solution-focused school rather than a problem-focused school. Imagine going to work each day knowing that the following occurrences were routine:

- Staff meetings focus on priority school goals, and all members of the staff strategize together on the steps to accomplish them.
- Students become part of the solution for their own academic or behavior issues by identifying times when they are slightly more successful. By identifying their own solutions, students are more likely to follow through with tasks to change their behavior and academic status.
- Parents are more prone to work with the school regarding their child's education because the school counselor and administrator use the parent as a consultant rather than tell the parents what is wrong with their child.
- Teachers see themselves and their students as competent individuals and deal with challenges in the classroom on their own, using solution-focused conversations that result in respect between both parties.
- The community sees the school as a place where the atmosphere is supportive of both parent and student ideas and flexible enough to think creatively for a variety of student needs.
- A mentor program develops the at-risk student into a promising student by pairing the student with a faculty mentor who aims to build a new relationship with the student.



Any school can achieve these outcomes.

To begin using the ideas in this field guide, a change in mind-set is necessary: school staff must make a shift in their thinking from problem focus to solution focus. Chapter Two provides school counselors and administrators with ample information on training the school staff effectively. But first this chapter serves as an assessment tool to help you measure whether your school is problem focused or solution focused.

Evaluate Your School First

On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being problem focused and 10 being solution focused, where would you place your school? The School Strategies Survey is designed to help measure how solution focused your school is at this time. It will be helpful to take the survey as a school counselor and randomly give it to teachers and administrators and compare their responses. Many of the answers will not be surprising; some may be. At the end of the survey, tally up the scores, and compare your score with those of others who have taken the survey. Use the results to help persuade your administrator that it's time for a change in regard to how problems are addressed. Let the survey "do the talking" in regard to how collaborative and solution focused your school staff really is. It's time to take a hard look at things and see if they are working. If they are not, it's time for a solution-focused approach.

School Strategies Survey

Circle the answers that show how incidents are *currently* handled at your school.

1. When a teacher is upset with a student's disrespectful attitude toward another student, first, the teacher:

- a. Sends the offending student or students to the administrator.
- b. Scolds the offending student and tells the student to reread the class rules.
- c. Talks to both students, relaying concern, and then brainstorms with the students ways to get things to work better between them in the classroom.
- d. Calls the offending student's parent to let the parent know what is happening and threatens that the student may not make it through school with this attitude.

2. When a student begins to have difficulty learning a new concept, the teacher takes the following action first:

- a. Asks the student what the problem is and tells the student that in order to pass the class, he or she must try harder.
- b. Waits to see if the student improves on his or her own.
- c. Tries other methods to reach the student and checks with the student's other teachers to learn about their success with him or her.
- d. Calls the student's parents, describes the problem, and tells them that they are responsible for changing the student's behavior.

3. When a student shows unacceptable behaviors, the teacher takes the following action first:

- a. Gives the same consequences consistently even if the consequences do not work.
- b. Contacts the parents and has a parent conference to get home support.
- c. Talks to the student privately in a respectful manner, tells the student that the behavior is unacceptable, and together they create an agreed-on plan designed to stop the behaviors.
- d. Informs the parents of the consequences if the behavior continues.

4. When a parent conference is held regarding a student's poor academic performance, the following occurs the most often:

- a. The teacher tells the parent that the school has done all that can be done, and now the student must put forth effort.

School Strategies Survey (cont.)

- b. The student is not present, and the teacher tells the parents about the problems that the student is having in school.
 - c. The teacher asks the parent to look at past teachers and classes where the student was successful and builds interventions with the parent based on those ideas.
 - d. The teacher discusses tutoring options for the student.
5. When a teacher meets with an administrator to discuss a student or parent he or she is struggling with, the administrator first tells the teacher to:
- a. Call the parents and tell them what the problems are and what the consequences will be if the problems are not solved soon.
 - b. Refer the student to the school counselor for testing.
 - c. Deal with the issue initially and think how she was able to deal with challenging students in the past. The administrator compliments the teacher by saying that he knows she is competent and can find some answers. When she does, she is to let him know as a follow-up.
 - d. Set up a behavioral plan and to report after six weeks.
6. In February, a student is identified by his teacher as having difficulties in math. Until February, the student's math grades were in the 80s. The student also appears very sleepy in the morning. If you were an administrator, what would you suggest the teacher do first?
- a. Speak to the boy and let him know what is expected of him during the school year, listing consequences for sleeping in class.
 - b. Contact the parent and find out if something is happening at home to cause the problem.
 - c. Speak with other teachers regarding the student's performance in their classes before February and then talk to the student about what might need to happen to get back on track in math.
 - d. Suggest that the student be placed on a behavioral plan with the counselor.
7. A student comes to school upset and storms into her first class, slams down her books on the desk, and glares at the teacher. When the teacher asks her to quiet down, she talks back disrespectfully. Which dialogue is more likely to happen in your school first?
- a. "Charlotte, it looks as if you need to reread the classroom rules on the bulletin board. Coming in as you did is not appropriate, and you have just lost five points on your citizenship grade."
 - b. "Charlotte, you need to go into the hall because your behavior this morning is disturbing other students, and it is not acceptable."

School Strategies Survey (cont.)

- c. "Class, begin reading silently. Charlotte, come out into the hallway with me, please. (In the hall) It seems that you are having a tough morning. I enjoy your company in class and know that others are concerned about you. What can I do to help you settle into the class routine this morning?"
- d. "Charlotte, it looks as if you need to see the counselor. Here is your pass."
8. A parent calls a teacher and requests a conference to talk about his son's science grade, which had been declining. At the conference, a teacher in your school is likely to do which of the following?
- a. Tell the father that the son belongs in a lower science class since he obviously is not interested in school work.
- b. Provide the father the course requirements and tell him which assignments his son has not completed, citing his poor performance on incomplete work and inattentiveness in class.
- c. Invite the father and the son to attend the conference. He would then tell the father how glad he was that he called because during the beginning of the year, his son was a top student. The teacher would then listen to the father and focus on the grades that were passing, suggesting that the son must have done something different during those times. The teacher would next ask the son what was different. As the conference ends, the teacher would ask what he could do to help.
- d. Tell the father about tutoring possibilities outside school.
9. A teacher becomes concerned about a student who she thinks has a lot of academic potential but does not do assignments. She calls his home and leaves many messages that are never returned. Frustrated, she talks to her team. Which advice that follows would the team give first?
- a. Don't try so hard. Without parental support, there is only so much that a teacher can do. Stop trying harder than the student.
- b. Continue calling the family, and visit the home if necessary.
- c. After brainstorming how to assist the student, the team members advise bringing the student into the meeting and asking how the team can help. The teacher then feels supported by her colleagues and decides to try some new ways of reaching the student based on what the student discussed in the meeting. After a few weeks, the team will meet again with the student.
- d. Refer the student to the counselor to see if she can figure out what can be done with community resources.
10. A student has great difficulty sitting in his seat. He is a good student but tends to fidget so much that he distracts the other students. He is polite and respectful but absolutely cannot control his tapping pencil and rattling papers. In response to numerous requests by the teacher to be quiet in class, the teacher decides to try the following first:

School Strategies Survey (cont.)

- a. Send the student to the administrator for detention since the student "refuses" to comply with classroom rules and be quiet.
- b. Call the parents and suggest that they consult a physician about giving him medication for an attention disorder.
- c. Ask the student how he or she (the teacher) can help with the "excess energy" that seems to control his every move in class. When the student suggests doing errands for the teacher after his work is completed, the teacher agrees.
- d. Talk to the student and tell him that life will be hard if he cannot learn to control his attention deficit disorder. Bosses will not tolerate such defiance.

Score: List the number of responses to the following letters:

- a _____
b _____
c _____
d _____



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After you collect the surveys from others, add up the scores together and apply your results to the following guidelines:

- a = If the majority of the numbers are in this category, your school staff are very problem focused.
- b = If the majority of the numbers are in this category, your staff are problem focused and try to tell students how to solve their problems in a noncollaborative manner.
- c = If the majority of the numbers are in this category, congratulations! Your staff are likely to be open to the solution-focused approach.
- d = If the majority of the numbers are in this category, your staff tend to take the least responsible route to helping the students.

What to Do Next

School surveys that have higher scores in a, b, and d will benefit from every exercise suggested in Chapter Two. The staff will also need to hear from the principal how supportive the administration is in achieving a solution-focused atmosphere in your school. But how do you get the administrator on board?

It may be helpful to show the administrator the resource companion to this field guide, *Counseling Toward Solutions*, and discuss the following ideas that will help teachers, parents, and the administrator to become more solution focused:

- The program will serve everyone and will promote positive self-esteem and competency among students, parents, and school staff.
- The program will offer teachers alternative ways of reaching at-risk students, lessening the load on vice principals and increasing capacity in teachers.
- The program will assist teachers in dealing with classroom management more effectively by creating new relationships with students.
- Students will become partners in their educational process rather than receivers of cookie-cutter intervention, making them more responsible and motivated.
- The program may lessen the dependence of teachers on the school counselor and free up the school counselor to provide more programming.

You may want to add other options that your school would like to promote once it begins the solution-focused school program. Additional ideas for groups, staff meetings, parent conferences, and teams are just a few that will benefit from becoming solution focused at your school.

To be even more prepared to get administrative support, consider using the Buy-In Questions worksheet with the administrator at your school. As you read through the questions, notice that they are solution focused. Just by asking them of your administrator, you can see how the process can work.

Buy-In Questions

1. If you had your way, what would you want to achieve in the next school year?

What else?

What else?

2. Let's say that in the near future, your ideas begin to happen. What would be different? What difference would that make for you, your teachers, and your students? If the administrator says your ideas won't happen or seems negative, ask him or her to brainstorm briefly.

On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 meaning you have achieved each of these goals and 1 meaning you haven't even approached it yet, where would you put yourself and the school? _____

Where would you like to be in the next few months? _____

Ending: I would like to tell you about a program that might begin to achieve what we are talking about. I am willing to lead the program if you will endorse it. I also have a survey that I gave a few colleagues. Here are the results. Can I leave you some information and check back next week?

Imagine the answers that you will get! By preparing in advance to ask these questions, you can try out the model with the administrator. The questions also embrace the vision of the administrator, giving you a better opportunity to present the school program. While *buy-in* is a business term, it is also a core component of the solution-focused approach because it goes where the school client is and therefore motivates him or her to try something new. And no matter what the goals and vision of the administrator are, the school program can begin addressing it. Suppose the school administrator tells you that her vision is a new school building. Go with it! Become the solution-focused school counselor. Here's how that dialogue might go:

COUNSELOR: What a great idea. What would that do for you, the students, and the teachers?

ADMINISTRATOR: We would be able to be state of the art, and the cracking ceilings and old computers would be history.

COUNSELOR: How would that make a difference?

ADMINISTRATOR: Our students could learn more technology, feel more comfortable, and be ready for the workplace in a few years, and our teachers could try new teaching methods.

COUNSELOR: What else?

ADMINISTRATOR: We could be more creative by having new equipment. I think it would excite the teachers and let them know the district is investing in education.

COUNSELOR: And when your teachers are more creative, what would you see them doing?

ADMINISTRATOR: Trying out new projects with the students.

COUNSELOR: And when your teachers know that the district is investing in education, what would that do?

ADMINISTRATOR: It might improve their morale. It might make them think they were important, and their attitudes would be different—more positive.

COUNSELOR: These are terrific ideas. What have you done before with this staff or even other staff members that helped them to be more positive and creative?

This dialogue is not that far off from what could happen as you begin to explore what your administrator sees as a real vision. The key is to ask this question: “How would that make a difference for you?” This question takes a goal that is a bit hard to accomplish because of logistics, finances, and other situations and helps people to go within their vision and see where it realistically could still take them. The means to get to the goal may be different from a brand-new school building, but the alternative means that are generated can be priceless.

Open Your Door to Solution-Focused School Counseling

As you begin to engage your administrator in the solution-focused approach, become more solution focused in everything you do at school. Since the solution-focused counselor thinks differently about school clients, meaning students, teachers, staff members, and parents, the method of

helping others will be different. This counselor is not a problem solver; he's a solution investigator and collaborator. This often comes as a surprise when school staff members walk into the counselor's office asking for advice or a parent calls and demands a class be changed to accommodate her child, only to be asked, "How do you want things to be different?"

Kermit the Frog once said, "It's not easy being green." Neither is it easy for the counselor to stop giving advice and start putting responsibility back onto school clients. Yet when that happens, dynamic changes occur that make them self-sufficient. To start changing the approach and identifying goals and exceptions, the counselor has to set the stage first. There are several ways to do this. Here is one from the book *Narrative Counseling in Schools* by Winslade and Monk (2006). This note on the school counselor's door not only sets the stage, it also ignites curiosity:

Problem Busters

Services offered include:

- Lingering suspensions exterminated
- Bad reputations reversed
- Youth-to-adult conversions undertaken
- "Boredom" alleviated
- Trouble silenced
- Treaties with parents or teachers drawn up
- Miscellaneous problems neutralized, terminated, or otherwise gotten rid of

OUR MOTTO: The problem is the problem. The person is not the problem.

Up front, students, parents, and teachers know that this counselor is different. There is no blaming or complaining allowed in his office because it is not productive. Instead, people leave competent, with a direction for improvement.

Get Started in August

Once the administrator is on board, the solution-focused counselor should ask for time to meet with teachers at the first in-service in August, offering some tips for the classroom as school begins. Ideally the counselor should also let teachers know that he will be approaching issues differently this year on all levels. He should also mention that occasionally he will send e-mails requesting teachers to watch students differently, in addition to e-mails that (with student permission) describe student progress. Thereafter, a constant reminder that the approach is "going to last" can be given at faculty meetings, where additional solution-focused training can happen throughout the year.

To summarize setting the stage, these are the steps that have proven to be the most useful when solution-focused school counselors get ready to implement a solution-focused school program:

1. Take the School Strategy Survey, and study the results.
2. Talk to the administrator about the solution-focused approach and get buy-in.
3. Introduce the idea to teachers early in the year, sharing that it will help them with class management and teaching methods, in addition to helping their students become more responsible and more responsive.

4. Keep the approach going through faculty training. Give monthly rewards for faculty members trying the approach. Consider a “solution-focused teacher of the month” award, where the teacher gives a brief synopsis to the staff of what he or she did that was solution focused. Then, provide a certificate for the teacher, and hang a copy in the faculty lounge.
5. Send e-mail commendations to teachers who try the approach.
6. Send weekly e-mails (see Chapter Six in this book) that inspire and allow teachers to brag on the progress that they see with the approach.

Pitfalls and Safeguards: Cooperate with the System First

The most important lesson I learned when working as a school counselor was to use the solution-focused approach with teachers as well as students. It took over a year to get started, but my perseverance and belief in the process paid off. The moral of this pitfall is to remember that everyone in the school is part of a large system. Everyone is your school client: teachers, students, parents, and school staff. As you begin trying new ideas such as those in this book, the system will become uncomfortable because change is not always welcomed. People in systems like to maintain their same roles because they know them. Asking them to change roles is anxiety provoking. Learn how your system reacts to change, and tread softly—but steadily.



This approach needs you to trust and believe in the model and stick with it even when the story and problem are more interesting to pursue. When I began working with the solution-focused model, I looked for exceptions too quickly, bypassing the need to clarify and specify what the school client wanted to achieve. I also forgot to explain my approach to teachers. I learned to inform school staff so that the system could collaborate with the student for success. I learned to wait, build the relationship with school clients, and get to know them and their abilities. Then I could inquire with lots of curiosity about what the school client wanted to achieve. That helped immensely. Then whenever I got stuck, I would ask myself:

“What do I need to do to cooperate with the school client more?”

“What does the school client want to accomplish, and is that different from what his teacher wants him to accomplish?”

“Am I letting my goal prevail instead of cooperating with the student’s goal?”

These personal questions led me to ask the school client the same questions. On many occasions, I would say, “You know, we have been meeting for a few weeks, and I am curious about what you find helpful. Tell me what is helping.” Their answers often surprised me and helped to get us back on track.

I learned that not everyone in my school would appreciate thinking in this new manner. As I developed the mentor program, a small group of teachers refused to work with me on the project, thinking that I was giving too much to the “offenders.” Their thinking was steeped in pathology, consequences, and rewards, and they made comments like this one: “Why give a kid like him a chance? He didn’t earn it.” I soon learned to respect the fact that most teachers rarely, if ever, had learned problem-solving skills in their education classes. With that in mind, I resolved to see the teachers too as “without skills” at the moment to see the value of the program. Then when I saw them in the hallway, I would find something kind to say to them based on my honest observations of their classes, classroom decoration, or their dedication. When one of their students came to me for help, the student and I approached the teacher together with caution and respect. And when I asked the teacher to try something new, I always prefaced the request with, “I am as concerned about how this student affects your classroom as I am his success. What can I do for you as I work with him?” That brought cooperation from the teacher on many occasions.

Find a way to cooperate, and your program can get started.

Action Plan: Full Speed Ahead

This entire chapter is an action plan. As you begin contemplating how or when to begin, take a personal inventory about what works for you as well as your school staff:

- When am I at my best to sell this program to my administrator?
- What do I need to do for my school staff to let them know I am invested in this program?
- What would my school staff say that they need from me to begin implementing this program?
- How have I orchestrated the implementation of other programs?

No matter how small you begin, by thinking and viewing staff and school clients differently than in the past, you will start the ripple effect that will eventually reach everyone on your school campus. The time is now.

