

Case Study: School Counseling Program of Distinction Saint Francis Preparatory School, New York

the program

St. Francis Preparatory School, in Fresh Meadows, N.Y., has honed its recipe for creating a strong and vibrant program. The largest private Catholic secondary school in the United States, St. Francis has earned Programs of Distinction for Music, Visual Arts, and School Counseling.

The school enrolls approximately 2,500 students annually, and more than 25,000 alumni have graced its halls.

Within St. Francis' guidance department, students have access to an array of services, including academic, career, college and personal counseling. These opportunities include the following:

- Academic Counseling: Students may request or be referred for individual counseling aimed at improving academic performance or tutoring in a specific subject.
- Personal Counseling: St. Francis offers personal counseling to help students better understand themselves or address personal issues and mental health challenges.
- Group Counseling: Small group counseling sessions are available to students dealing with specific issues. Groups are built around the following topics:
 - Bereavement
 - Living with an alcoholic and/or addict
 - Sexual identity
 - Divorce and separation
 - Illness at home

There is also a group for international students.

Staff in the school's College Office, which is part of its school counseling program, organize annual events such as a college fair, financial aid information session, and an alumni day.

Every year, admissions officers from New York area colleges are invited to the school's campus to interview seniors. Many of the students who are interviewed earn same-day college admission offers; some receive merit-based scholarships.

In addition, college advisors help students schedule college visits, complete application forms, register for the SAT and ACT, and apply for financial aid or scholarships. The results speak for themselves: 98 percent of graduating seniors go on to attend the college of their choice.

St. Francis employs 10 guidance counselors and four support staff for a ratio of one counselor to every 250 students.



the process

The guidance department at St. Francis is focused on continuous improvement, as evidenced by some of the changes it has undergone over the past decade.

With funds secured through a school-wide capital campaign, the offices that house the guidance department were recently renovated, resulting in a space that is more functional and welcoming to students.

The department shifted recently to become a lateral system, where each counselor's caseload is divided by homeroom. This means that students remain with one counselor all four years they are at St. Francis. Continuity in these relationships allows counselors to become close with students and recognize when someone is experiencing a challenge in his or her academic or personal life.

All St. Francis counselors have a Master's degree in school counseling and have completed the required 700

internship hours. Department meetings are held monthly. The team works closely on a day-to-day basis. Counselors are encouraged to attend conferences and to pursue professional development opportunities.

St Francis has made strides in recent years in supporting students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), a population that can be difficult to serve due to the capacity challenges many schools face.

In 2012, St. Francis contracted with an outside group that provides Special Education Teacher Support Services. In addition, the school now has two full-time special education specialists to work with students who need accommodations.

To ensure students with IEPs receive adequate support starting on their very first day of school, families of prospective students can visit the school to speak with a counselor about their child's IEP prior to enrollment.

Finally, staff members have made a point of developing relationships with college admissions counselors and inviting them to campus. For example, each fall, St. Francis hosts the largest private school college fair in the region. More than 150 colleges come to the school to meet with juniors and seniors and connect with St. Francis' staff. Hosting admission days, which give prospective students the opportunity to be interviewed by college admissions counselors, also deepens ties between St. Francis counselors and area colleges.

schools where staff have strong ties to college admissions counselors are more likely to get a second look when it comes time for admissions decisions to be made. Families are eager to send their kids to a school that provides extensive support throughout the college application and admission process.

- Give counselors opportunities to attend professional development classes and seminars, particularly when they are held at area colleges. The challenges facing students are always changing; counselors are better positioned to meet those challenges when they are current on training. Staff at St. Francis are allocated two professional development days per year.
- Attend conferences. St. Francis sends counselors to several annual conferences sponsored by the following groups: Catholic School Counselors Association, Western Nassau Counselors Association, New York State Association for College Admission Counseling Board, and the National Association for College Admission Counseling.

program of distinction benefits

Much like the Music Program of Distinction, highlighting the School Counseling Program of Distinction helps St. Francis attract new students to the school. Faculty and staff share this during college nights, open houses, and other school-wide events. The Program of Distinction benefit reassures parents who take comfort knowing that their children are well cared for on all levels during their time at St. Francis, from the academic to the personal.

lessons learned

- Recognize the need for services for students with IEPs or learning styles that are different from mainstream students. When given adequate support, these students can thrive.
- Ensure that counselors are trained in group work and mental health. Providing comprehensive mental health services for teens is a key way to create a student population that is healthy and able to benefit academically and socially from the high school experience.
- Ask guidance personnel to acquaint themselves with admissions staff at nearby colleges. Those positions often revolve, so continuity is key. Students from high

for more information

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To learn more about Middle States Programs of Distinction, visit www.msa-cess.org.



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