

## **MVLA Continuum of School Counseling Services - Key Enhancements Executive Summary**

### ***Current State of the MVLA Counseling Model:***

The current counseling model employed by both Los Altos and Mountain View High School consists of a single individual, grade-level appointment for each student and their family per year. As our populations have grown and their needs have changed -- expanding mental health needs, a constantly evolving college application process, a growing at-risk population, etc. -- the model presents a number of challenges and limitations to our ability to best meet the diverse needs of our students.

While the individualized nature of our model has always been highlighted as a positive, the math behind it equates to 30 minutes per student, per year and a total of two hours throughout high school. Furthermore, it does not utilize our time most effectively and leaves us with an inflexible schedule with limited opportunities to support students in other ways; indeed, much of the information conveyed in college-focused meetings is identical for every student and thus not an optimal use of our limited time. Additionally, our current model is not aligned with the comprehensive model for school counseling identified as best practice by our national organization, the American School Counselor Association, which identifies not only academics, but career and social/emotional development as critical domains within a school counseling program.

### ***Call to Action:***

Our goal is to refine and enhance our current counseling model to create a more equitable, responsive, whole-child focused model, one that is grounded in research and the American School Counselor Association's national standards for excellence in our practice. With the support of the district, the counseling departments at both comprehensive high schools have engaged in a process of examination, research, and reflection to present a model that better supports the needs and interests of our diverse students and continues to provide the kind of outstanding service MVLA families have come to expect from us.

### ***Expanding on Two Key Enhancements to the MVLA Counseling Service Model:***

#### ***Enhancement #1: Small-group counseling sessions at the 10th grade level***

Our first key enhancement to the counseling model would be a shift from individual counseling appointments to small-group counseling sessions at the sophomore level. These sessions would focus on social/emotional learning curriculum, enabling counselors to effectively address a key component of the national model for school counseling that is currently not systematically addressed in our existing model. Small-group delivery of social/emotional curriculum allows

counselors to address essential elements of student development and the ASCA standards, including, “belief in the development of the whole self, including a health balance of mental, social/emotional, and physical well-being...[creating] positive and supportive relationships with other students...[and creating] relationships with adults that support success” (ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success; standards M1, B-SS 2-3).

Per the American School Counselor Association, “Group counseling is an efficient and effective way to meet students’ academic, career, social/emotional developmental and situational needs. Group counseling makes it possible for students to achieve healthier academic and personal growth in a rapidly changing global society. Group counseling is an integral part of a school counseling program and should be included in school counseling programs and supported by school administrators and school districts. The school counselor’s training in group process benefits students, families, school staff and administration. Group counseling has a positive effect on academic achievement and personal growth” (ASCA Position Statement on Group Counseling). ASCA identifies group counseling sessions as “an efficient, effective, and positive way of providing direct service to students with academic, career, and social/emotional developmental issues” and notes this fosters “developing supportive relationships in a group setting” (ASCA Position Statement on Group Counseling).

In addition to the endorsement of group counseling by our national governing body, research conducted by the Hanover Group at the behest of MVLA provides further support for use of this method of delivery of services. The Hanover Capstone report recommends increasing the delivery of counseling services through small-group formats, while ensuring that students continue to have access to their individual counselor (6). The exemplary high schools interviewed by Hanover utilized group lessons to cover more standardized topics (i.e. - graduation and college requirements, general college and career readiness, time management, social/emotional learning activities) while leaving time for individual conversations about post-graduation planning and the college application process. A 2018 survey of MVLA stakeholders revealed that “parents and staff are most supportive of a mix of one-on-one and small-group delivery models.”

In proposing this shift, we are also mindful of the continued need to provide the parents and families of our students with the kind of information they are accustomed to receiving during individual counseling appointments. Because the information at the sophomore level is currently standardized and essentially identical for all students, we will present this information at a designated 10th grade parent evening to ensure our families continue to be fully informed.

A significant additional benefit of this enhancement is that the structure will create flexibility in our schedules to engage in other interventions with students of all grade levels. Those include working more closely with our at-risk students, students who are in danger of failing courses, and students who may need drop-in support when we had previously been unavailable due to our grade-level appointment schedule. Thus, the enhancement not only benefits our

sophomore students, but offers great potential in benefiting more students, including those we are not currently serving as well as we could be.

### ***Enhancement #2: Junior Interview at the 11th grade level***

Our second key enhancement to the existing counseling model would be to transition to an 11th grade appointment between the student and counselor only, instead of our current model, which extends an invitation to families as well. By providing such an appointment at a critical time in the student's high school experience, counselors can continue to nurture the trusting relationship with their students, help them build the self-advocacy skills that are critical to future success, and allow them to express deeply and freely their aspirations for the future. On the eve of their application to college or other post-graduation programs, knowledge of a student's character, goals, and details of their experience will prove invaluable to counselors in writing recommendation letters in the senior year. Per the National Association for College Admission Counseling's *State of College Admission Report* from 2017, counselors' letters are considered *the* top priority outside of student work in the college admission process (13). And while we appreciate our parents' and families' active engagement, their presence may sometimes limit students' abilities to have candid, deep, and thorough conversations with their school counselors.

Just as the ASCA National Model endorses and recommends group counseling as one service delivery method, so does the model support opportunities for counselors and students to have solo individual appointments. The 4th edition of the ASCA National Model notes that "parent involvement is considered collaborative and having a mixture of student appointments with and without parents allows for meeting the expectation of both direct and indirect services to students."

Similarly, research conducted by the Hanover group and a survey of MVLA stakeholders indicate support for this proposed enhancement. Based on a literature review of best practices and exemplary schools, the Hanover Capstone Report recommends we shift to a model that invites parents to attend some but not all meetings (7). Within the district, the majority of all stakeholder groups surveyed prefer this approach including staff, parents and students. 75% of students and 77% parents surveyed by Hanover would like a "parent or guardian [to] attend some but not all individual meetings between [the student] and a counselor." This is the preferred approach for 90% of staff as well.

Just as junior year is a critical one for students and counselors, we recognize it's also a critical year for parents and families to get timely information about many things, especially the college application process. To ensure that students, parents, and families continue to have access to the high-quality information they expect, ongoing and expanded collaboration with our College and Career Centers and college counselors will be critical. Not only will our college counselors continue to provide classroom lessons on the college application process to juniors, our departments will also provide additional parent resources to this effect. Furthermore, parents

and families will be invited to attend the junior appointment conducted by the college counselor so they have opportunities to get student-specific questions answered regarding the application process by a professional with specialized knowledge and training therein. This collaboration will also include lunchtime or tutorial workshops for students on topics such as essay writing, recommendation writing, and the like.

### **Conclusion:**

Through diligent research, reflection, and collaboration, the counseling departments at both comprehensive high schools are able to present a refined continuum of services in support of our students and their families. With the two principal enhancements and a host of other refinements to our practice, we are proud to put forth a framework that provides all students with more touchpoints with their counselors, that incorporates all three domains of the ASCA model, that includes improved collaborative efforts between academic and college counselors, that is more focused on the needs of the whole child, and that continues to provide rich outreach to parents and families as they navigate the high school experience alongside their students.

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