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AMERICAN SCHOOL COUNSELOR ASSOCIATION

JANUARY | FEBRUARY 2013

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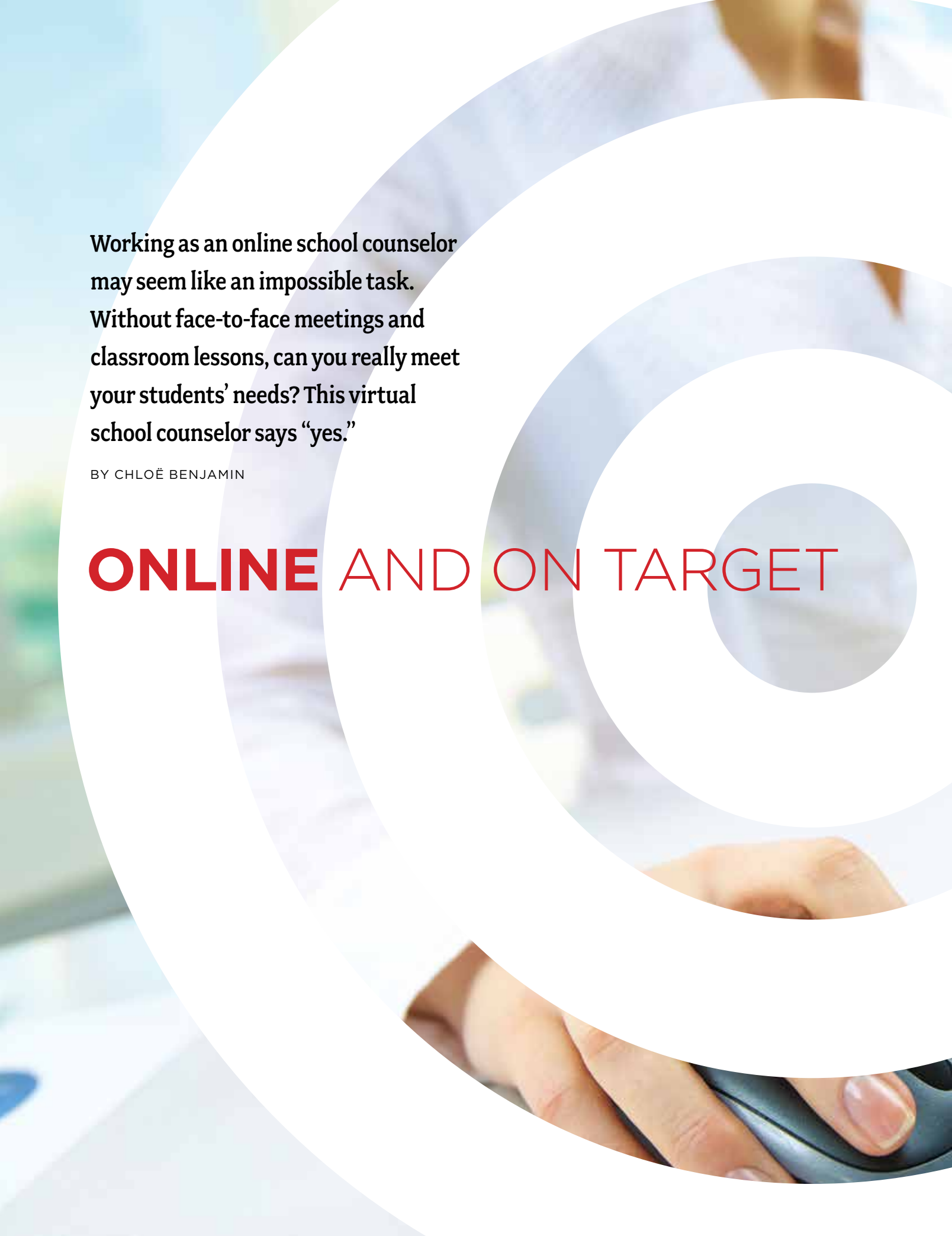
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A hand is shown holding a computer mouse, positioned in the lower right quadrant of the page. Overlaid on the entire image is a large, semi-transparent target graphic consisting of several concentric circles. The background is a blurred image of a person's hands and arms, suggesting a professional or educational setting.

Working as an online school counselor may seem like an impossible task. Without face-to-face meetings and classroom lessons, can you really meet your students' needs? This virtual school counselor says "yes."

BY CHLOË BENJAMIN

ONLINE AND ON TARGET



Have you ever noticed that when you meet someone new, one of the first questions they ask is, “What do you do for a living?” Because my role is so unusual, I try to answer simply: “I’m a school counselor.” Sometimes, the questions stop right there. But often, people want to know where I work. When I explain that I work for an online high school, the next questions tend to be along the lines of, “What? How does that work?”

Although it can require some creative techniques, online school counseling





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can be successful. I've discovered just that in my work as a school counselor at the Stanford University Online High School (OHS), which educates students in a grade 7-12 school based out of Stanford University.

Context is important here. Just like any brick-and-mortar school, no two online schools are the same. OHS is a private school that targets academically motivated students from around the world. We have two school counselors and two advisors serving about 500 students, most of whom, but not all, are in the United States.

Many of our students live unusual lives. They are actors or professional athletes, live in rural areas with few educational options or even on a yacht,

traveling the world. Some attend full-time, taking four-five classes per year to earn a diploma, and others part-time, preferring to take fewer classes with us.

Like any job, the job description varies from one online school to the next. The industry is new, and rules of the trade are in their infancy. In our fairly young school, I use the ASCA National Model to ensure development of a comprehensive program, and based on conversations with school counselors in other online schools, I think this is a common approach. I try to think of us not as an online school but rather as a school that happens to be online. When I realize a task will be difficult because our school is online, I try to stay optimistic. Rather than settle for, "I can't do that," I switch to, "We'll have to do that differently." The same goes for the ASCA National Model. We take what we can use, and it gives us a framework to start from, but we often have to apply it creatively.

Development of the foundation, management and accountability systems is similar to that in a brick-and-mortar school. It's in the delivery system where the nuts and bolts of online school counseling are most evident.

Delivering Via Technology

Being in an online school, technology is the lens through which most meetings occur. The classes are taught live, and participation is mandatory. All courses are currently offered on a software platform called Saba Classroom. In that environment, teachers can show slides, put up a whiteboard for students to write on or group students in what are called "breakout rooms." When a teacher or student talks, he or she can automatically go on video so that the classroom can see and hear what that person has to say. There are icons in Saba Classroom that allow students to raise their hand, give a green checkmark to agree, share a red "x" to disagree or click on a laughing face to express laughter. The settings can be tweaked to allow one person at a time to go on video or several. Due to bandwidth issues, we typically set up "auto

switching" so only one person at a time speaks. Otherwise, there can be significant lag.

Although our school uses Saba Classroom, there are many software options in this space.

SCHOOL COUNSELING CORE CURRICULUM: Saba Classroom is also where the school counseling department offers its curriculum. At the beginning of the year, to reach all students, we offer a brief online summer orientation to help new students acclimate to the school and to make sure everyone knows about the school counseling office. OHS has a director of student life, with whom we often collaborate. Among her many tasks, she develops an advisory-like curriculum for homeroom. We often share school counseling curriculum there, and we do teach a section of homeroom. Advisory curriculum we have submitted for homeroom has included course planning information, instructions on how to appropriately communicate with instructors about late homework or even a reminder about Daylight Saving Time, which can affect our students abroad who do not have their clocks change. We send slides to our director of student life. She writes most of the curriculum and covers things like current events, digital literacy, information on upcoming contests, student clubs and assemblies. She takes contributions not only from the school counseling department but also from students and staff. The curriculum is developed in PowerPoint and sent to all of the homeroom teachers for submission to Saba Classroom.

Additionally, the school counselors co-teach a highly popular study skills course targeting online learners. For this, we develop our own curriculum, drawn from evidence-based practices, journal articles and books. For the study skills class, we use an online learning management system called eCollege. There we can post our course syllabi and assignments. Students can submit their homework in eCollege, and we can grade assignments within that software.

Individual student counseling: To meet with students or their parents, we can gather on Saba Classroom but often prefer to use non-proprietary software

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such as Skype. Due to bandwidth issues, Saba Classroom works best when only one individual at a time is on camera. As such, when the school counselor talks, he or she cannot see the student's reactions. On Skype, however, we can have an interactive video conference, and we can see body language. In comparison with pulling students from their brick-and-mortar classes, meeting students online is much easier. Online schools tend to operate on a collegiate schedule, thus we don't need to pull students out of classes to meet. We just schedule a time when they are not in class.

Of course meeting students online is not as good as meeting them face-to-face. We miss some nuances in body language. The use of an intentional prolonged silence can be too awkward to pull off skillfully. When I first began working in the field, this felt so challenging that I was not sure about whether we should provide individual student

counseling. However, younger generations can be quite comfortable online. Some will open up more in text chat than by video. And leaving a student in need with no school counselor would be wrong. We can't ignore student needs just because they aren't in our office, face-to-face, especially not populations who are in an online school full time. Often the very reasons they are in such a school can necessitate counseling. Over time, I've come to believe that the role of online school counselors is essential and that best practices are in their infancy but will develop stronger programs for our students over time.

Sometimes providing students and families with local referrals can be extra challenging. This is especially the case when we work with students in foreign countries. If we need to find a local therapist for a student in Korea, where there is a stigma on mental health and where even the characters in the

language are different, this can be difficult. By being resourceful, we can come up with solutions, such as contacting American schools in the region, but getting help can be more time-consuming. Also, if a student is at risk of harm, it is more difficult to protect the student in an online school. In instances where we might need to report an issue to authorities, such as with child abuse, we contact staff members at the social services department near our offices, and they help figure out next steps.

SMALL GROUPS: So far, we have not offered any small groups at my school but hope to do so in the near future. If we do, we are likely to use Saba Classroom. We surveyed our students at the beginning of the semester to learn about their interests. For surveys we use either Survey Monkey or Qualtrics. From our survey, we learned our students' top interests are making friends in an online school, dealing with stress and test anxiety.

Common Challenges

Just like any other school counselors, we have challenges, although some of them are different from those of our colleagues in traditional schools.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Often when I meet with students, their parents may be present, even if I cannot see them. Also, anything that happens online can potentially be recorded. As a practice we are mindful of this and don't record our counseling sessions. When we have forums that must be recorded, we let students and families know about this. As such, there are some additional limits to confidentiality. That being put out there, we do try to establish confidentiality within the limits of the law.

TIME ZONES: Because our classes are taught live and aren't self-paced, students in foreign countries taking classes can face challenges with instruction occurring at inconvenient times. For example, a student in Japan could wind up with a mathematics class at 2 a.m. Our school is learning how to handle these instances, and our school counselors and advisors are increasingly advising foreign students to consider part-time enrollment to avoid

needing classes that interrupt their sleep patterns.

Running groups: In our software, running a group could potentially be quite challenging. For one thing, although one can never guarantee confidentiality in a group, online it is extra difficult. People could be standing behind students who are in a group. While unlikely, students could surreptitiously record the sessions. And in our Saba Classroom software, we have had difficulty with multi-video, and a group feels awkward when only one person at a time can talk. These barriers have led me to consider running something more akin to a “workshop.” Nevertheless, I understand school counselors in other online schools have successfully run groups without any video and felt students may even open up more when no one can see their face.

SCHOOL COUNSELING CORE CURRICULUM AND TEACHING: There are pros and cons to this medium for teaching. On one hand, it is easier to minimize distractions in the classroom. On the other hand, it is difficult to tell whether students are, as a whole, engaged. A few students may be very active, while others are so quiet you wonder if they are actually paying attention at all.

CLASSROOM ACCOMMODATION: The classroom modifications you would make in a traditional school become different online. Rather than place a distracted student front and center, a teacher might send the student a private message in text chat asking him or her to stay focused. Because students can access the slides from class, that can help for students who benefit from note-taking help. For students who would normally record their classes, conveniently, our classes are typically recorded. For testing, we give students a letter to share with their proctors to explain what modifications should be made.

Sometimes it's Easier

Some things are easier for school counselors in an online school.

ARRANGING STUDENT MEETINGS: As previously mentioned, pulling students for meetings tends to be easier in


my online school. Of course there are limits. Some students might forget our meetings or be hesitant to meet. But for those who are willing and eager, setting up meetings can be quite easy. I also make myself available on Skype so students can find me whenever I'm free to set up appointments or ask impromptu questions. Additionally, having so many Internet resources at my fingertips while I'm in a meeting is useful.

COUNSELING RESOURCES: We are working to create a school counseling library of online resources. We expect this to include mini-videos on topics of interest to students, parents and instructors. For example, we might make videos for students on preparing for finals, for parents on helping with time management and for instructors on working with anxious students.

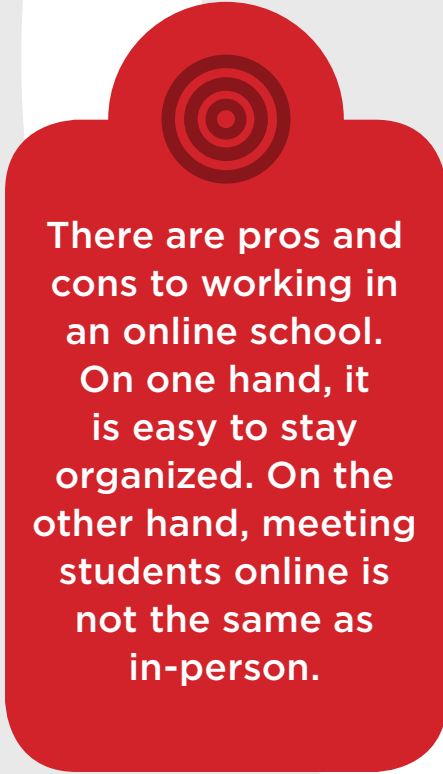
SURVEYS: It is fairly easy to do needs assessments. We can issue them to part- and full-time students in our homerooms, as well as invite them in our news bulletins and e-mail blasts. Finding out about our students' needs or collecting data on student perceptions is quite easy in an online school.

COLLABORATING WITH INSTRUCTORS: Many of our staff work in the same building but not all. Either way, the OHS school counseling office works closely with the instructors. We use e-mail, the phone, Skype and Saba Meeting for our remote communication. Almost every Friday the school counseling office facilitates a grade-level meeting where instructors can talk about issues they are facing with students in their classrooms. The school counseling office encourages instructors to give each other advice, to work from a strengths-based approach to figure out what works for a student who is struggling. We also chime in with guidance, advocating for our students and helping instructors identify solutions that are developmentally appropriate within the context of an online learning environment.

Although our school is online, we have offices on the Stanford University campus. Many of our staff members work onsite, which has its benefits. It is easy to have a face-to-face meeting with colleagues to discuss an issue or to sit down and go through projects together. Based on conversations with school counselors in other online schools, it seems like most do work onsite.

There are pros and cons to working in an online school. On one hand, it is easy to stay organized. On the other hand, meeting students online is not the same as in-person. We don't get Jenny coming in to our office excited that Bobby is going to take her to the prom. And when times are tough for a student, the distance in distance-counseling can feel too large. Also, people who are drawn to school counseling tend to crave human interaction, which makes the online interaction a little harder. Nevertheless, the work remains rewarding. Whether face-to-face or online, all students can use a school counselor, and our work feels important. 

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