

**AUTUMN 2025**

# **LEGACY**

**TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION**

**Sweetie Patel**



**Fitting the Pieces Together:  
Student Services in the Big Picture**

**Watch the Interview!**



**Get to know Sweetie!**



**The Worthy Educator**

***theworthyeducator.com***



## Fitting the Pieces Together: Student Services in the Big Picture

Sweety Patel, Director,  
School Counseling Services,  
Carteret, New Jersey Public Schools



Sometimes convincing people of the truth behind an idea is the biggest challenge. As a Director of School Counseling Services, I spend a lot of time trying to see how support services can fit into the larger system. It is often like putting together a puzzle, trying to find where priorities match and fit together. Traditionally, communities see student services as separate from the larger system; an ever-evolving societal myth that keeps us all from benefitting from a complete picture. Divided. By who? Often by administrators who do not comprehend or understand our role because they have never had the need to use student services as a student themselves. Everyone wants everything to fit together in a tidy package, but if you want the puzzle to come together nicely, you have to see how all the pieces fit. Think about jigsaw puzzles, whether enlarged 24-piece puzzles or teeny-tiny 1500-piece puzzles, every piece means something. Missing even one and the picture is incomplete. And when we start puzzles, many of us start with the borders, creating a frame. We know from experience that without it, it can be harder to make sense of the rest of the picture. Also the perimeter pieces have at least one flat edge, so they are easier to figure out and piece together. This framing is fundamental to success. It's the context for all the rest of the pieces.

This is an excellent metaphor for support services, from social and emotional learning and mental health to college and career readiness and post-secondary planning. The ties to families, communities, cultures and social networks – the gravitational pull of relationships – are all pieces that fall into place in the student service realm. We often measure school and district success by graduation rates, test scores, grade point averages and other numerical data – which I understand - all of the data matters. But the reality is that, without the support services, a lot of those numbers can't improve - and some may not even exist. Take attendance, for example. Without the motivation to come to school, there are no test scores to measure, no performances to report. And that motivation can be the connection with a teacher, a counselor, a nurse, a social worker, an attendance officer, a dean, a case manager, anyone who makes a difference providing support that frames the picture for academic success and beyond.

Academic instruction is an important traditional piece of the education puzzle, but social instruction - the rise of wisdom in a child - needs love, attention and supports, too. Support services teams intentionally plan for this to happen. Although sometimes on the edges – the frame of the puzzle – it is so critical, and often the backdoor impetus for all these rates that people are looking to grow for their school and district success.







## Putting the Pieces Together

Consider these ways to maximize your student services department:

1. Make Student Services Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) just as urgent, data-driven and reviewed as those based in academic departments. There should be a schedule of meetings with agendas focusing on particular relevant topics, primarily geared towards proactive approaches. For instance, one of the major concerns that affect most schools is bullying. This is an area where a lot of preventative work can be done. Although schools have Climate and Culture Committees, it may behoove some districts to use the language and frequency of a PLC in exploring how to deter bullying. Consider the support staff that works on preventing as well as responding to bullying incidents for PLC meetings with bullying as the main agenda item. This can be extremely helpful to your school culture and climate. Perhaps this becomes multiple meetings that also include follow-ups for support staff and instructional staff with an administrator, as well. Meetings can also revolve around historical patterns, evaluating what has taken place in your school in the past and inviting PLC planning and agendas based on these issues and concerns. Thinking about instructional elements and curricula to enhance social emotional learning is another excellent use of PLCs. Looking at bullying on a global level instead of only by incidents is important – identifying national and international trends and finding creative ways to respond to them.
2. Make sure each student service department has a team element so that no staff member feels alone in their work:
  - a. Subcommittees and committees (maybe of various staff members, including instructional and administrative staff; you can even go so far as to invite a central office administrator or community member/parent)
  - b. Coordinators (perhaps a lead social worker who can also recruit the help of a community agency liaison)
  - c. Pair school counselors together: a veteran with a rookie
3. Summertime should include time to plan student service calendars of tasks and events (with responsibilities assigned – including deadlines) based on the vision of the department at the school level. Be proactive and positive! There are so many templates and milestone dates available online to serve as resources so you do not have to start from scratch. You just have to assess the priorities for your school and match them to the resources available.



4. Keep looking for professional development (PD) – use your supervisors and directors for this. Promote the PD – let support staff know they are not abandoning their work to go to PD – the PD is necessary for their work, for their practices to refine. PD *is* their work. There are many local, state and national associations for school counselors, school social workers, school psychologists, school nurses, child study team members and specialists and many other support staff personnel. Research these organizations and find out if there is a way to pay for (or a way to start paying for) memberships and conference registrations. There are also PD opportunities and targeted trainings connected to specific programs, such as restorative practices, peer leadership and mentoring. Figure out where your school needs the help and kick it off receiving and giving the training that is needed to make impact. Often, performance reviews are tied into professional development and growth, so strengthen your PD game and own it!

5. Support staff evaluations are just as important as teacher evaluations. Ensure that the right models and frameworks are in place with pertinent, updated rubrics and examples. Continue receiving training and remain current on standards in your field. Many districts already use existing frameworks, so subscribe to the communications channels of those in your role and learn from them. If there is some convincing that needs to be done through your central office or board of education, ask colleagues how they sought and won approval. Also, learn from the organizations that created the frameworks as baseline of competencies and then use your power of persuasion to develop strategic goals for your school and yourself.
6. Find likeminded stakeholders who love support services as much as you do and add them to your network! Social media, social media, social media. Even if you don't enjoy it personally, the professional gains are worth the time and effort. There are plenty of people watching your story and rooting for you, so seek their wisdom and find resources within the virtual universe.



### **Filling out the Puzzle**

We often hear that support staff work in silos and not always in conjunction with teachers. The key to alleviating this disconnect is to ensure that the administrators place just as much importance on support staff as teaching staff, implementing systems that centralize and streamline support staff functions. Do referral systems accommodate the needs of support staff and teachers for their ease of use? Are there PLCs that bring teachers and support staff together inclusively? Does programming synchronize and maximize the efforts of teachers and support staff? We often wonder why support staff work

in silos, but should we also wonder if teachers do, too? Teachers are on the front line because they see students more frequently and witness firsthand what students reveal, but are they handling this information and relaying it the best way possible through the established processes and protocols?

With the way the world is moving, it is clear to see that more and more families will continue to need support in the community (often played out at school), and that those needs will become more intricate. The school is an integral part of the community, so even if community agencies can do deeper work, the school has an essential responsibility for responding to calls for help and create pathways to healing and success. Sometime school is the most comfortable place for families to seek out help. Do we have the right training to handle all of this? Is our training updated and realistic? Are we really learning to work in teams?



These are critical questions we must answer in order to create the forms, procedures and protocols that help better identify and address the myriad of social and emotional needs that students experience in this day and age. Conduct a studious analysis of the past and a thorough review of the present so that we can begin hopeful, responsive planning for the future!



---

*Sweetie Patel is the Director of School Counseling Services for the Carteret, New Jersey Public Schools. Prior to this, she served as a School Counselor for the Jersey City Public Schools. Sweetie believes in the service of students and the community, in spite of all challenges that may come. Everything she does is in the name of social justice in schools and learning for all.*

