



LINDA METCALF

# COUNSELING TOWARD SOLUTIONS

A Practical, Solution-Focused Program for  
Working with Students, Teachers, and Parents

“An indisputable classic in the field—newly updated and more relevant than ever! This book should be read by everyone who works in schools.”

*Anne Hearon Rambo, professor/director of M.S. Graduate Certificate and Undergraduate Programs, co-author of Doing Well while Doing Good*

“As Dr. Metcalf says in her introductory note, using the solution focused approach with students and young people isn’t just the application of certain tools such as the Miracle Question but about ‘honoring the goodness in people’ and this attitude informs everything she writes. On practically every page we are treated to fascinating examples of work in schools that clearly demonstrate how we can maintain our hope and respect for our students regardless of the extent of their problems. Dr. Metcalf also puts considerable emphasis on systemic thinking (‘always, always, always involve the system!’), a valuable reminder as to the importance of connecting with teachers and parents. This excellent book will be of great value to everyone working in the field of education.”

*Harvey Ratner, BRIEF, London, co-author of Solution Focused Brief Therapy: 100 Key Points and Techniques and Solution Focused Practice in Schools: 80 Ideas and Strategies*



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# Counseling Toward Solutions

This book provides a solution-focused approach to working alongside students, parents, and teachers that decreases misbehaviors, encourages mental health and growth mindset in students, and provides social emotional learning opportunities.

Grounded in the notion that focusing on problems often leads to frustration when tried and true remedies fail, the book provides an efficient and simple three-step approach to having solution-focused conversations with students, parents, and in response to intervention (RTI) and team meetings. This systemic approach enlists the client rather than the counselor to conjure a preferred plan for success, consequently reducing future counseling visits and promoting independent success in students. Each chapter includes a specific topic that was developed from the issues and situations faced by school counselors today, including consideration for working with all students, including LGBTQ students, and those with traumatic experiences or substance abuse.

Complete with specific dialogues for students of all ages, and case studies, this text provides school counselors with a road map to looking beyond problems and seeking solutions with students, creating grit and resilience.

**Linda Metcalf, MEd, PhD**, is the director of Graduate Counseling Programs at Texas Wesleyan University. She is the author of 11 books and an international presenter on using the solution-focused approach in schools. She is a former middle school teacher and school counselor.



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# **Counseling Toward Solutions**

A Practical, Solution-Focused Program  
for Working with Students, Teachers,  
and Parents

**Linda Metcalf**

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*To educators everywhere, remember that the words you say to students will stay with them for a lifetime ... say them with empathy and kindness.*

*To my husband, Roger and our grown children, Roger, Kelli and Ryan, you are still my inspiration.*



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# About This Book

As the world and schools have evolved, so has this book evolved. In this third, revised edition, readers will find the same practical and simple explanations about what it means to become a solution-focused school counselor, but with the addition of new material on important issues.

Since the publication of the second edition, there have been school tragedies that have robbed students, parents and teachers of feeling secure in the classroom. The emergence of school violence has caused everyone in our country to take pause and wonder desperately: “why is this happening?” Social media has become a hallmark in the lives of everyone on a school campus and while many of the opportunities associated with social media have been positive, there have also been challenges. For students dealing with mental health issues, previous, healthier coping mechanisms have morphed into isolative, dangerous ones, leaving school counselors overwhelmed with questions and few answers for teachers and parents.

Yet, in spite of these current challenges, I think it is vital to see the strengths of today’s students, teachers and school counselors as they navigate today’s schools. Students are still growing, developing into creative generations that will push progress toward incredible outcomes. Instead of spending lots of time pondering over “why” things have been happening it seems more important to identify the missing links that can connect us together in communities that relate, respect and engage with each other.

You may notice the term, “school client” is used interchangeably with the words “student, teachers or parents.” That is due to the similarities of using the model with everyone involved in the schools. Additionally, I have added narrative therapy into the book, a result of my integration of the two models, resulting in a new model, *solution focused narrative therapy* (Metcalf, 2017).

No matter where you work in schools or who your students are, the ideas in this book will provide a launching pad for making things better for all of you. The approach is about honoring the goodness in people, the successes that occur spontaneously at times and being curious about how, systemically, those successes occur

With deep affection for you, your students, parents and school communities all over the world, I invite you to read this book and begin to feel that sigh of relief so that your day is filled with possibilities rather than distress.

## Reference

Metcalf, L. (2017). *Solution Focused Narrative Therapy*. New York: Springer Publishing.

## About the Author

**Linda Metcalf, MEd, PhD**, is a former middle school teacher, a certified school counselor, a licensed professional counselor supervisor, and a licensed marriage and family therapist supervisor in the State of Texas. She is the director of Graduate Counseling Programs at Texas Wesleyan University, where she developed a solution-focused school counseling program for graduate students. She is an international presenter who has taught the solution- focused approach to educators and clinicians across the United States, Canada, Japan, China, Singapore, Thailand, Australia, Norway, The Netherlands, Scotland, England, and Germany. She is the author of numerous professional articles and the following books which have been translated into many languages:

*Teaching Toward Solutions, 1st and 2nd editions*

*The Field Guide to Counseling Toward Solutions*

*Solution-Focused RTI*

*Parenting Toward Solutions*

*The Miracle Question*

*Solution Focused Group Therapy*

*How to Say It to Get into the College of Your Choice*

*Marriage and Family Therapy: A Practice Oriented Approach, 1st and 2nd editions*

*Solution Focused Narrative Therapy*

*The Art of Solution Focused Therapy (co-authored with Elliott Connie)*

# Foreword

If you are a teacher, school administrator, or school counselor/psychologist, you probably remember the sense of excitement you had when you first decided to pursue your career. For some of you, it was a teacher who touched something inside you that inspired your choice. For others, it was a sense that you had something you could contribute to children, and this was a way to do it. But as you acquired more education, training, or experience, some of you might have lost touch with that original excitement or sense of possibility. You may even have become cynical and decided that kids were more unmotivated than you initially thought or that parents weren't that interested in their children's education or that school personnel were being asked to fix society's problems.

This book by Linda Metcalf is a powerful way to reconnect with your sense of energy and possibilities even in the face of serious challenges in schools. Reading this book can be like a massive injection of vitamins and minerals, full of hope and solutions for you.

Without minimizing the serious problems teachers, school counselors/psychologists, parents, and students face in today's schools, she gives a practical road map for rapidly solving these problems. This road map doesn't require massive infusions of federal funding or new students or any other pie-in-the-sky solutions. Instead, it relies on strengths and resources that are already available and dormant within students, parents, and the school.

A revolution is going on in the mental health field, which has for so long been a mental illness field. We are finally focusing on health. We have seen dramatic and moving changes in the people we counsel with the techniques and philosophies explored in this book. School is a natural place to use these ideas. Teachers, administrators, and school counselors/psychologists don't have time to do psychoanalysis with troubled students. Brief, pragmatic, and effective interventions are required. This book has more of those than you need. I got so excited when I read this book that I requested a copy for my son's third-grade teacher and the new principal of his school. I'll bet you'll get so excited; you'll end up buying and recommending this book to your friends and colleagues. But here's a warning: this book could be dangerous to your sense of burnout and discouragement. Reading it could cause persistent episodes of hope and enthusiasm in you and your students. Now you've been warned. Proceed at your own risk.

Bill O'Hanlon, MS, 1995

**Part I**

# **Basics Behind the Approach**



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# 1 Learning to Think with a Solution Focus

When I first met Nate, two weeks into the new school year, I saw a very anxious 15-year-old who was refusing to attend school. His father, a single parent, accompanied him to the session and was very concerned about Nate's school attendance. While I never ask why a client comes to counseling, Nate's father was so distraught that he blurted out his concerns immediately and talked nonstop for 20 minutes about many factors that he believed had caused his son to refuse going to school. He had a lot of theories: his job, Nate's mother's departure, social media, and more. He was desperately concerned that Nate's anxiety kept him not only from school but from having friends and getting out of the house. After listening to Nate's father, I thanked him for the information and asked them both what their best hopes were for the session:

*Nate: I want to go to school but I get this anxiety that makes me so nauseous, from the time I wake up. It won't go away. I try to go but I can't seem to get out of the car.*

*Father: I want the best for him and to me, the best is for him to attend a school with other students his age. I homeschooled him last year after we had this same issue come up in September. He seemed good with staying at home. But in the spring, we visited a private school that only has about 300 students in the high school and he liked it. But here we are again, with him not being able to go to school.*



## Go Slow to Be Brief

When school clients (students, teachers or parents) come into my office as distressed as Nate and his father, it is important at first to allow the school clients to feel heard. It has been my experience that sometimes school clients seem to need some time to talk about their concerns and recognize how the issue that brought them to therapy has intruded in their lives. This new addition to my solution-focused work is from narrative therapy, created by White and Epston (1990). Its addition seems to add a rich dialogue to conversations, especially when school clients are upset and not open to talking about a preferred future, yet. This addition to the approach, which I now refer to as solution-focused narrative therapy (Metcalf, 2017) also helps the school client to get a new view of the problem ... that it is not he who is the problem ... the problem is the problem. This is referred to as externalizing the problem, which allows the school client to step back and away from the issue, examine it and create a plan of action to defeat it.

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So, together, Nate and I talked about the ways that the anxiety was robbing him of his desire to go to school. I made a long list which included the following:

The Anxiety:

- 1 Kept him from attending school
- 2 Robbed him of friends
- 3 Made him sleep too much at home
- 4 Kept him from talking to his father
- 5 Made him behind in his schoolwork
- 6 Isolated him
- 7 Made him feel badly about himself
- 8 Upset his father

Once the list was composed, I asked what their best hopes were, and the father said that his best hope was that Nate would attend school. Nate wanted the anxiety to stop happening. I then asked about times when Nate was able to stand up to the anxiety and go to school:

*Nate: During elementary school it was better. I was a little anxious, but the teachers took time with me and things weren't so busy in the hallways. That's really what makes me anxious. Once I got into a routine, it got better, and I made it through the year. Seventh grade was okay too. This year, I did go to the new school for two days.*

*LM: Really? How did you make it those two days?*

*Nate: There is this coach. He teaches history and he's really, really interesting. I like his class. My English class was okay too. It's at the end of a hallway and it's quiet down the hallway. Not many kids. She's really nice. She just lets us come in and start reading so that's good.*

*Father: I agree that elementary school was better. He can be a little shy sometimes but once he warms up to people he does well. I think I was different then too, because I made him go. His mother had just left us, and Nate had to go to school because I didn't have the flexible job I have now to homeschool him. I'm glad to hear that there are two classes that he likes.*

I asked Nate to scale where he was in regard to the anxiety, taking him over when he came in that day, using a scale of 1–10, with a 10 meaning anxiety was completely taking him over. He replied that the anxiety was at a 9. I asked how our conversation had possibly helped to lower the anxiety. He said it was then about an 8. We then discussed how he could go to school the next day and continue to stand up to the anxiety. He discussed taking breaks in the classroom, which were already set up by the school counselor. His father said he could be more insistent with Nate in the morning.

The next day, which was a Friday, I called to check to see how things had gone. His father answered and said things did not go well that morning. Nate refused to get up and get in the car. I then suggested that we try to meet on Monday with Nate's teachers, early, before the classes began. I asked Nate's father to call the school and arrange a meeting for all of Nate's teachers, his school counselor and principal to meet for 20–30 minutes. I then asked his father to tell Nate that he only needed to go to school on Monday for a short time, for the meeting.

## A Solution-Focused Conversation for School Refusal

The meeting on Monday was initially challenging for Nate. He did come into the school with his father, reluctantly, but when I approached him, he was physically trembling. He said he hoped he did not throw up in the meeting. I assured him that I would not ask much of him in the meeting and that I only wanted him to listen.

My plan for the meeting was to use a solution-focused conversation process consisting of three steps:

- 1 *Identify the best hopes* of everyone present, including Nate, his parent, teacher and administrator.
- 2 *Develop together a preferred future*, described by Nate's teachers, parent and Nate.
- 3 *Discuss exceptions* with the teachers, or, times when Nate seemed more comfortable in school.



When I greeted the teachers, I thanked them for their time and said that I had permission to talk to them about Nate and began by saying that I was interested in what their *best hopes* were for Nate. Even though they had only had him in their classes twice, I always like beginning conversations such as these with this viewpoint. It immediately takes us to destination building, which is essential in the solution-focused approach. Talking about the problems takes things sideways and often backwards. Talking about where we want to go propels us all forward with a clearer mindset toward building solutions together.

Nate was not in the room at that point. Often, when I make school visits for my school clients, I meet teachers first, to give me a sense of where they are with a student. Some students may have been disrespectful to teachers, and I always want to give teachers time to vent if needed and discuss what they would like to see happen. In other words, they become my school clients too. I wait until I sense that the conversation can become solution building, which includes what the teachers need as well as the student. Sometimes, it takes a while longer, but since the student comes in toward the middle of the meeting, it is essential to set the climate up in a solution-focused manner.

Fortunately, Nate's teachers responded to my initial question of "What are your best hopes for Nate?" well. They were quite positive in their remarks. I noticed though, that the coach spoke more. He described Nate as a student who seemed to be interested in his class which was a plus for him as a teacher. He said he liked Nate and noticed that he was sometimes nervous. At this point, with everyone having their turn to talk, I invited Nate into the meeting with his father. Nate was nervous.

At that point, I again asked the teachers to start off with their best hopes and impressions of Nate, which included helping him feel comfortable in class. Several of them were very friendly and supportive. The coach said "Hey, you know, I am always in the hallway keeping things running smoothly. If you ever need to talk or just hang out with me, no worries! Just walk up to me."

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Next, the English teacher spoke up and said, “I usually see you fairly calm in my classroom. You are always polite and get right into your reading. I think my class being at the end of the hallway is helpful to you, right?” Nate nodded. “I thought so. I like a calm classroom too,” she said.

As the meeting continued, some of the other teachers jumped in with things such as: “I eat lunch in my classroom each day; you are welcome to join me. My son once had similar concerns, so I get it!” The school counselor suggested that anytime he felt anxious he could certainly come to her office to sit on her couch and hangout until he felt better. The principal was supportive in giving him some tasks to do in the office early in the morning so he could get comfortable before going to class. The meeting in all was quite a surprise to Nate, who sat rather stunned at what he was hearing. Before the meeting was over, I asked Nate, to scale for everyone where he was at that point. He said “At first when I came in here, I was really, really anxious, probably a 10. Now I am at an 8.”

When I left the meeting that day, I thanked the teachers and mentioned to Nate to just try to make it through the morning. He nodded and then walked off with the principal who was talking to him.

At a follow up meeting two weeks later, Nate shared that he had been to school every day since the meeting except for one day when he had a doctor’s appointment. He smiled throughout our session and told me that he had eaten lunch with the teacher who offered that option to him for several days but after that, he decided to go to the cafeteria where he

continued to eat for the rest of the time with friends. He then said his new friends wanted him to try out for football and he was thinking about it. When I asked him about the meeting we had at school, he smiled and responded: “Well, it was really different...it was good.”

A month later, I called the school to check on Nate. The principal said at that very moment he was working with some other students in the hallway, putting up decorations for a dance. He was coming to school regularly, seemed quite happy, engaged and was doing well academically.



### **The Helpfulness of Using a Systemic Approach**

This first case illustrates a very different way of approaching school refusal. It illustrates the way students can be perceived and assisted with a solution-focused approach. If Nate had seen a problem-focused counselor individually, he might have made progress in understanding his anxiety and might have recognized how it was holding him back. A counselor seeing him on his own certainly could have provided some coping mechanisms for when he was the most anxious and if things worsened, even referred him to a psychiatrist for medication. These measures are typical treatments of situations such as school refusal, where professionals apply researched interventions that are said to work to the individual needing help.

Yet, the solution-focused approach provides another avenue for resolution, and when the system is involved, such as Nate’s teachers, everyone in the system has the chance to learn what would be helpful to Nate and then join together to escalate change. In this case, there were no meetings where staff brainstormed how to help Nate. Instead, Nate’s input

from the “exceptions,” or, times when things were slightly better, gave me and the teachers the clues to the solutions Nate needed. The teachers’ job and my job then became one of simply listening and recognizing that the exceptions could become new strategies to help Nate. Since the staff agreed to try out the strategies, Nate received consistent support and change was easier and, long lasting.

### **An Elementary Student Makes Her Mark!**

Across town on that same morning, an elementary school counselor was meeting with a parent who had called her late on Tuesday afternoon and was very upset. The parent had told the school counselor that her daughter’s teacher had sent a note home with her daughter describing how she was not working up to her potential. Apparently, the daughter had always done well in school, and now the mother was frantic. She admitted that there had been changes with her daughter recently. She was having stomachaches in the morning and complaining about school in the evening. The conversation started as follows:

- SCHOOL COUNSELOR:* *What can we talk about today that would be helpful to you?*  
*MOTHER:* *Somehow, I have to figure out what’s going on with Megan. This has never happened to her before. She has always been such a good student.*
- SCHOOL COUNSELOR:* *How will that help you?*  
*MOTHER:* *I guess if I know what’s behind this, I can help her.*  
*SCHOOL COUNSELOR:* *You mentioned that you have never had this problem before. Take me back to a time when this problem was much smaller or didn’t happen at all.*
- MOTHER:* *Well, she attended a different school last year. We moved to a different neighborhood during the summer, and I had thought things were working out. She did have trouble making friends at first, but now she plays with the other children quite well in the neighborhood.*
- SCHOOL COUNSELOR:* *How about at school last year? What was different in any way that made it better?*
- MOTHER:* *I didn’t work last year. When we moved, I took a part-time job in the evening to help with the new house payment. Now her stepdad helps her with her homework. Come to think of it, she did better when I helped her with her homework. Her teacher was different last year too. Megan needs to be prompted rather often. She is bright and will do the work for you if she gets praise and encouragement. She needs help to stay on task because she has a tendency to daydream. A few times this year, she has told me that her teacher rarely asked her if she needed help. Megan tends to be shy, and if she doesn’t understand the work, she will just stop doing it.*
- SCHOOL COUNSELOR:* *So, when you helped Megan with her homework, how did that make a difference?*
- MOTHER:* *We did it early in the evening and when she completed it, we would watch a movie together before bedtime. We had a routine. With my working now, I’m not sure that the routine is in place.*

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**SCHOOL COUNSELOR:** *And you said that when her teacher prompted her, that made a difference.*

**MOTHER:** *Yes.*

**SCHOOL COUNSELOR:** *I know Megan's teacher rather well, and I would like to share your suggestions with her. Would that be all right with you?*

**MOTHER:** *Absolutely.*

**SCHOOL COUNSELOR:** *Would it also be all right if I went to get Megan out of class for just a few minutes so that we could talk with her?*

**MOTHER :** *Sure.*



The school counselor went to get Megan from her classroom. She told the teacher that she had been talking with Megan's mother and that she needed to speak with Megan briefly. Together, Megan and the school counselor walked back to the meeting room where her mom was waiting.

**SCHOOL COUNSELOR:** *Hi, Megan. It's good to see you. Your mother and I have been talking this morning about how things are going here at school. Your mother told me some ideas that I would like to share with your teacher, and I wanted you to know about them first.*

**MEGAN:** *Okay.*

**SCHOOL COUNSELOR:** *Your mother said that last year, your teacher helped you differently than your teacher this year is. Can you tell me what she did?*

**MEGAN:** *Well, we had these bookmarks that we had made, and if we had a question, we were supposed to put them on our desks, and she would see it and then come help us. She was really nice. I liked her.*

**SCHOOL COUNSELOR:** *Your mother mentioned that you did your homework with her last year. Is that right?*

**MEGAN:** *Yes, but she works now to get money.*

**SCHOOL COUNSELOR:** *If you could teach your stepdad to help you like your mother did, what would you teach him?*

**MEGAN:** *(smiling) Me teach him? Well, we would have to do homework at the same time each night because sometimes he forgets until it's almost time for bed, and sometimes I forget what my homework is.*

**SCHOOL COUNSELOR:** *All right. And what would you be willing to do in return for your teacher if she tries to help you more in class just for this week?*

**MEGAN:** *I would be really good. I might not talk as much. Sometimes I talk when she is talking.*

*SCHOOL COUNSELOR:* Would there be a better place for you to sit in class to help you do that?

*MEGAN:* Last year I sat up in front next to the blackboard. That is where she wrote the homework assignments down, and I would always remember to write them down that way.



*SCHOOL COUNSELOR:* Okay. You have both given me some great ideas. Megan, it sounds like it might help if you and your mother could work with your stepdad on a time to do homework. When I walk you back to class this morning, I would like to share with your teacher what worked for you last year. Would that be all right with you?

*MEGAN:* Yes.

*MOTHER:* That would be great.

Megan and the school counselor walked down to her classroom and spoke with Megan's teacher briefly in the hallway. The teacher was told that the school counselor was working with both Megan and her mother to help get Megan back on track with her schoolwork. The school counselor shared the ideas that both Megan and her mother had told her about the classroom that Megan was in last year. The teacher was receptive but unsure how to use a signal like the bookmark. Megan said that she would try and come up with something. The teacher was also told that Megan was going to try to behave more in class in response to the teacher's helping her more in class. The teacher was surprised that she had not been helping Megan enough. The school counselor thanked both Megan and the teacher and promised to check in with both of them the next day. On Thursday, the school counselor sent Megan a note:

*Dear Megan,*

*It was nice to visit with you and your mother yesterday. I learned a lot from you both. I learned that when you get the help you need in class, you do extremely well. I appreciated the way that you volunteered to help your teacher come up with a way to get her attention when you need help. I look forward to seeing your idea when I visit with you on Friday.*

*Warmly,*

*Ms. Johnson, School Counselor*

On Friday, Megan's teacher came to see the school counselor to compliment her on Megan's new enthusiasm in class. She said that Megan had made a bookmark for her language arts book out of some magazines that the teacher had used in an art project. When several of the other students saw Megan's bookmark, they asked to make one too. The teacher asked Megan to show everyone how she made the bookmark, which instantly resulted in her getting along better with her classmates. Megan's mother spoke with her