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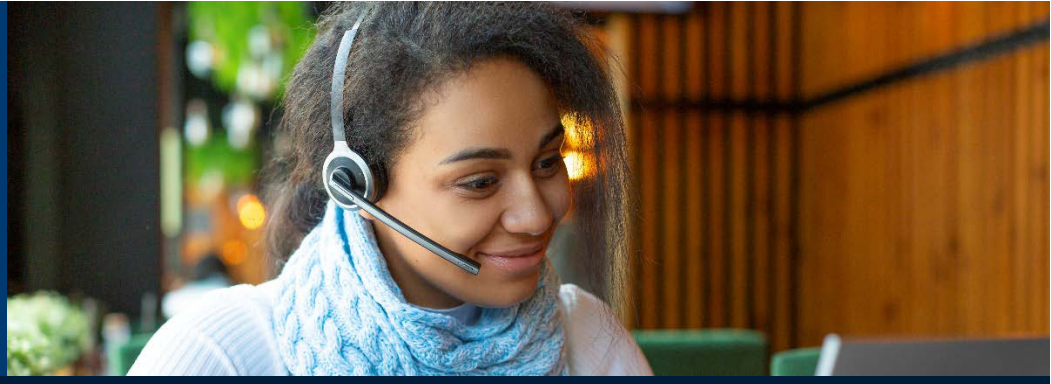
BRIEF



When Schools Go Dark, School Counselors Shine: School Counseling During a Global Pandemic

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Introduction

As educational digest and newspaper headlines can attest, COVID-19 is affecting the mental health and academic achievement of students across the country. Several recent articles have chronicled the challenges that schools are facing as they try to address the academic, social, and emotional support that students need during these unprecedented times (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2020; Jones, 2020; von Zastrow, 2020). Those challenges are exacerbated by the fact that families are struggling to meet not only the academic needs of their children, but also basic needs such as food and housing, as many people lost their jobs during the pandemic. Stress caused by financial challenges and grief due to COVID-19, coupled with broader community trauma and responses to police violence against people of color have increased the need for mental health support for students who are struggling to learn in these extraordinary times.

School counselors are uniquely positioned in schools and districts to provide access to many of the supports that help bolster the well-being of students and allow them to be present and succeed academically. For example, counselors may help identify organizations that provide housing assistance, listen to a struggling parent,

Takeaways

Findings

- Like other educators, school counselors initially responded to the COVID-19 crisis with confusion and uncertainty, which was followed by collaboration and innovation. In schools with strong school counseling leadership at the district level, school counselors were better able to collaborate and felt supported and respected for their efforts.
- The pandemic pushed school counselors to turn to virtual tools to engage with and track students and families. School counselors recognized the promise of specific technological tools, which many counselors believe will continue to enhance their work after the pandemic. However, they also offered some cautions about technology use, beyond the visible inequities that access to technology makes apparent.
- During the pandemic, school counselors were relieved of activities (such as lunch duty) that take them away from their expertise in providing comprehensive services to students and families. Instead, they stepped into leadership roles that allowed them to provide comprehensive, virtual, Tier 1 social–emotional learning and academic and career counseling services to students. Counselors also conducted wellness checks on students and families.
- The COVID-19 crisis forced school counselors to examine their policies and practices through the lens of student need. Policies and practices that served adult needs—rather than student needs—were set aside.
- School counselors acknowledged the toll that the pandemic has had on the social and emotional health not only of students, but of adults as well, including parents, guardians, and school staff. Counselors described the need for wellness checks for families and the importance of community partners who provided supports to families in need. School counselor leadership at the district level was critical in providing a variety of ongoing supports for school staff as well as students.

Implications

- School and district leaders should honor the unique professional knowledge and expertise that school counselors bring to their work. Rather than assigning counselors to lunch duty, administrative tasks, or reactive behavior counseling, leaders should provide ample opportunities for school counselors to offer comprehensive services that include academic, career, and social and emotional guidance and supports.
- Although technology filled some of the gaps that were created when in-person instruction was halted and provided expanded opportunities for communication, connection, and collaboration in counseling work, its use should be carefully considered once schools return to more traditional instruction. In addition to considerations about disproportionate access, technological solutions may not always be the best choice for younger children, youth living in confined or crowded spaces, or youth who struggle with social connection. However, large-scale events that require substantive coordination and resource sharing such as college and career fairs may be more manageable, accessible, and sustainable on virtual platforms.
- When schools return to "normal," district and school leaders should examine policies and practices that impact students such as graduation requirements, attendance, and disciplinary policies, and the methods students use to access counseling and support services should be reexamined to determine whether they truly serve the needs of students.

help students learn strategies to process grief and trauma, or reconnect with students who have disappeared from their classes altogether. This brief profiles efforts by two state school counseling associations, four districts, and 13 school counselors to meet the needs of students and families during these unprecedented times. With this review, we sought to understand how school counselors responded in the short term when schools were closed due to COVID-19, as well as the planning that ensued as schools prepared to open for virtual, hybrid, and in-person instruction in the fall of 2020. We also asked counselors about the practices and policies they have adopted during this crisis that they would continue to use even after schools return to consistent, in-person instruction.

Recent articles have documented the challenges that school counselors have faced in providing academic and social–emotional support during the pandemic (Morton, 2020; Savitz-Romer et al., 2020). For example, one article summarized findings from a survey of 948 school counselors (Savitz-Romer et al. 2020. The survey found that school closures affected the time that counselors spent in direct service to students' social–emotional health and their postsecondary and career planning. Counselors reported that they lacked clear guidance from school and district leaders, often filled logistical and administrative roles, and were not consulted about COVID-19 school planning. Counselors also encountered other challenges, such as engagement and privacy issues, which surfaced as support groups led by school counselors were moved online.

Although the challenges those counselors reported are concerning, we also found examples of school counselors seizing the moment and stepping into leadership roles as they provided critical services to students, families, and even the staff with whom they work. To understand how school counselors have adapted to meet the needs of their school communities during the pandemic, we explored school counselor leadership at the national, state, district, and school levels. We began by contacting the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) to learn about leadership efforts at the national level. We then conducted a scan of the State and Territory Associations listed on the ASCA website (50 total) for school counseling resources pertaining to COVID-19.

Following our state scan, we contacted the executive directors of the California Association of School Counselors (CASC) and the Wisconsin School Counselor Association (WSCA), both of whom provided extensive resources and leadership related to COVID-19. Both executive directors shared suggestions for specific school districts and school counselors we could contact; these districts and school counselors have demonstrated noteworthy leadership and resilience in their respective states. After interviewing administrators from two districts in California and two districts in Wisconsin, we interviewed 13 school counselors (eight from California and five from Wisconsin) at the elementary, middle, and high school (both alternative and traditional) levels who were recognized for their exceptional ability to meet the needs of their students and school communities. The following synopses are based on these conversations and are intended to provide insight into the importance of school counseling and guidance for other educational stakeholders striving to meet the needs of students and families during difficult circumstances, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our conversations elucidated several themes across participants as school counselors at various levels navigated the impact of the pandemic on schools. All of those with whom we spoke described their initial response to schools closing in March 2020 as reactive, including feeling a sense of shock and a need to "scramble." This period was characterized by chaos, uncertainty, and confusion that, over time, transformed into a collaborative effort to ensure that schools continued to meet the complex needs of students, families, and staff. Such collaborative efforts took multiple forms at various levels of leadership, but all participants prioritized student outreach, stakeholder collaboration, and comprehensive service delivery. The following sections provide an overview of the role of multi-level school counselor leadership during the pandemic. We also discuss the stages that participants experienced throughout the COVID-19 pandemic to date, including the initial stage when schools shut down, transitioning from

uncertainty to organized, intentional collaboration; then preparing for the fall school term; considering future policies and practices; and addressing ongoing challenges.

Multi-Level School Counselor Leadership

At individual schools and at the national, state and district level, school counselor leadership is essential to ensure that students' needs are met through current best practices in school counseling. In this section, we describe the important roles that national, state and district leaders have taken on during the pandemic.

National Level. Throughout our discussions, participants identified ASCA and Hatching Results as two helpful sources that provided national guidance during the pandemic for school counselors as well as district and state school counseling leaders.

ASCA is a national, nonprofit professional association that has provided leadership, advocacy, and guidance in the field of school counseling since 1952. ASCA provides a common voice and language for discussing school counseling and professional identity. According to ASCA, school counselors are licensed or certified professionals with expertise to support students through comprehensive services that foster academic, social, emotional, and career development. The ASCA National Model (American School Counselor Association, 2019) provides a framework for the development, delivery, management, and assessment of school counseling programs. In addition, ASCA provides extensive professional development and resources for school counselors, counselor educators, and educational stakeholders such as school- and district-level administrators. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, ASCA has offered open access to professional development and resources for both ASCA members and nonmembers.

More recently, Hatching Results—a consultation company established in 2003—has emerged as a leadership development provider for school counselors. This company offers training and consultation for schools and districts on transforming school counseling practices into intentional, data-driven services. Relying on a multi-tiered, multi-domain system of supports (Hatch, 2017), Hatching Results supports school counselors and school counseling stakeholders in using educational data to design and implement universal, targeted, and intensive interventions in academic, college and career, and social–emotional domains. Hatching Results is well known for its practical, intentional approach to school counseling and for its training on current trends in the field, such as antiracist school counseling practices.

State Level. In addition to the importance of national school counseling leadership, state-level leadership is important for defining the roles and responsibilities of school counselors. For example, ASCA awards division charters to U.S. states and territories to provide state-level support for school counselors. State-level school counseling associations offer multifaceted services for school counselors including professional networking, annual conferences, resources, and professional development. State-level school counseling associations are helpful for establishing local school counseling communities and providing regional information to guide school counselors, counselor educators, and administrators. The two state-level school counseling associations featured in this brief, CASC and WSCA, demonstrated how state-level leaders can organize quickly to support school

counselors during times of crisis. These states mobilized to develop explicit recommendations, templates, and training to ensure that school counselors had the awareness, knowledge, and skills to engage in ethical, culturally responsive, virtual school counseling. One clear example of these efforts is the COVID-19 K–12 Counseling website, which is co-sponsored by CASC and WSCA. Although not featured in this brief, school counselor leadership in state departments of education is also helpful for clarifying and prioritizing school counseling policies and practices (Strear et al., 2019). Such state-level leadership provides advocacy and support for districts and schools as they actualize school counseling best practices.

District Level. District-level administrative positions that are focused specifically on school counseling are not a given in districts across the nation. However, our conversations clearly demonstrated the importance of these positions. All the districts that were identified as exemplars had clearly defined district-level administrators who were positioned to support school counselors. Although the number and titles of these positions varied, the four districts profiled in this brief (Corona-Norco Unified School District, Madison Metropolitan School District, Milwaukee Public Schools, and San Francisco Unified School District) had dedicated school counseling departments that provide expertise and support at the district level. These school counseling leaders described how their positions provided clarification for the roles and responsibilities of school counselors during the pandemic to ensure that their expertise was used appropriately and not reallocated for administrative support. For months, district-level leaders worked to ensure that school counselors had access to the necessary technology, virtual school counseling materials, coordinated services across school sites, legal guidance, and ongoing policy updates at both the K–12 and the postsecondary level. All district-level leaders also shared efforts to bring school counselors together for professional development opportunities and frequent (some weekly, some monthly) meet-ups that included opportunities for resource sharing and self-care. Another invaluable aspect of district-level leadership is a commitment to more equitable access to high-quality school counseling services. As one district-level leader described,

> "This is what we're all doing… our kids are transient so when they go from one school to the next, we want to see the same level of services so you can't have one counselor over here doing this and one counselor over there doing that, and that's the small way of looking at it, but if you look at it from an ethical standpoint, or an equity standpoint, it looks a lot different if we're doing different things. Because then the question becomes why are you doing that over there and not over here? So we try to make it the same level service across the board."

District-level leaders can help counselors provide coherent, consistent services and can communicate clearly about the roles and responsibilities of school counselors.

School Level. Although leadership is not a new aspect of the school counselor role, it is clear from our conversations that many school counselors stepped into leadership roles in invaluable ways during the COVID-19 pandemic. As one district coordinator pointed out, "I am so proud of them [school counselors] because they have not even wavered in the amount of time and their effort to help our kids." She added, "From the moment we went out, they have just said, what do you need, what can we do, how can we shift what we're doing to help our kids?" This commitment is evidenced by school counselors' immediate efforts to help ensure that students and families had their basic needs met; the technology needed for online learning; and access to academic, mental health, and postsecondary support services. Several counselors also spoke about their role in reviewing policies and practices in their schools through the student lens, as opposed to the lens of the adults in the system, as well as reexamining practices that might privilege some students over others. According to these counselors, the COVID-

19 crisis highlighted the importance of questioning existing policies and practices and establishing more equitable policies and practices. In the words of one school counselor,

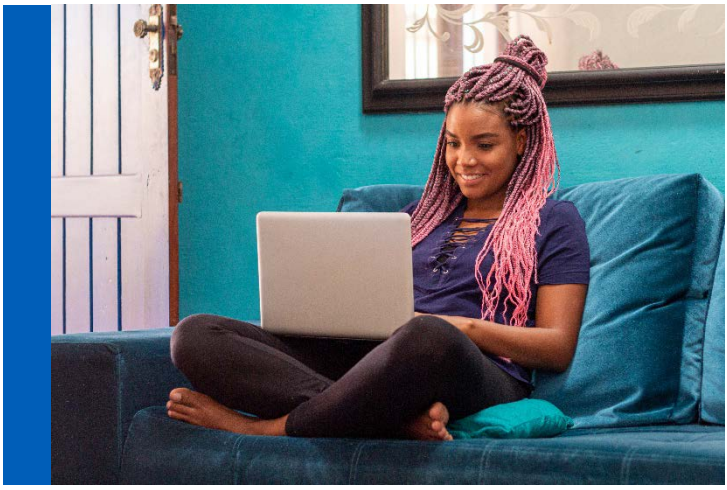
> "We had to go back and always remember that we need to be student-focused and student-centered. And [we] started to evaluate all these practices that we had and really see if they were problematic and not student-centered."

From their role in individual student and family outreach, to their efforts to interrupt patterns of oppression and systemic racism that contribute to disproportionate educational access and attainment, school counselor leadership is shining in what can be seen as a dim time for our nation's schools.

When Schools Shut Down

When schools across the country began to close in response to COVID-19, the majority of our participants reported feelings of disbelief. Many spoke of this period of time as chaotic and overwhelming, as they navigated the immediate impact that school closures would have on students and families. One elementary school counselor described this chaotic time, sharing that, "as time went by, we just kept hearing about families without jobs, and just struggling to put food on the table. And that has been the hardest part of my work as a counselor, to help families survive." Although some similarities existed, not surprisingly, this time looked different for school counselor leaders at the national, state, and district levels than it did for school counselors in K–12 schools. According to ASCA's Director of Research and Marketing, "as soon as schools began moving to virtual learning, ASCA mobilized to create a wide variety of resources; this included hosting webinars and town halls, developing virtual school counseling toolkits, curating resources, and providing news stories in *School Counselor* magazine (numerous articles addressed the COVID-19 response) and in *ASCA Aspects*." Ethical issues were at the forefront of school counselors' minds, so ASCA made additional efforts to ensure that school counselors were able to transition to virtual school counseling while maintaining legal and ethical standards. Of particular importance was ASCA's initiative to promote the role of school counselors in supporting students' social and emotional needs as they adjusted to new restrictions, fear, uncertainty, and, in some cases, illness and loss. Similar efforts took place among state-level leaders, as CASC and WSCA brought together more than 200 school counseling experts to compile and create resources for school counselors who were transitioning to virtual school counseling services. In addition, both state associations developed online learning opportunities through synchronous and asynchronous webinars and panels.

> **"We had a lot of students going dark."**



At the district level, leaders described the urgency they felt to support their school communities. One district-level administrator said, "It was a lot of scrambling at my level of leadership around what are we supposed to do, how do we prepare our students to learn, and us as a department, how do we ensure our counselors have the tools that they need to be successful to outreach to students."

Staying Connected to Students. As national-, state-, and district-level leadership organized to ensure that school counselors had access to needed resources, school counselors turned their immediate attention to students' and families' basic needs (e.g., food, housing), wellness (e.g., mental health services), and technology. It was clear that these school counselors were committed to maintaining connections with students to support their holistic well-being. One high school counselor articulated how school counselors stepped into leadership positions: "Everyone was in this crisis mode and I think that's really where counselors stepped up. We were like, 'we got this, this is what we're going to do. We're going to game plan.' So, we immediately instituted a mentoring program, where…. we had every staff member adopt a couple students to check in with them weekly to see how they're doing socially/emotionally and what they needed for devices because it was a big push to get our students connected." Similar sentiments were shared by other school counselors as they immediately began outreach to students and families. An elementary school counselor said, "Our primary effort during the spring of 2020 was to establish family communication, simply to say, 'how are you doing?' and lend an empathetic ear."

Creating Online Tools. As school counselors tried to connect with students and families, they also began transitioning their practices to meet the immediate needs of their school communities. For example, an elementary school counselor spoke about the importance of ensuring that students and families had access to their school counselors: "My biggest concern was students being able to see me…so I wanted to make sure a check-in form was in place so kids knew they had access to me virtually." Many counselors began revamping their websites and establishing access to texts, calls, and video appointments with students and families. One high school counselor collaborated with other counselors in the district to develop a virtual calming room that the entire district is using, which has reportedly had a far-reaching impact. Similarly, another high school counselor shared, "We just had some time where we didn't know what was going to happen… so in that meantime, I created a website that I did share with the Wisconsin school counseling association as well and that was shared around the state… it was called Boredom Busters and it had academic things that you could do to strain your brain, puzzles, things like that, websites you could go and do virtual tours… I had some social/emotional stuff so like brain breaks, body things, exercise stuff you can do, artistic things you can do virtually, just some different ideas for students, a bunch of different links. I am really focused on college and career, so I did a whole planning page as well to use this time to explore." Another district leader described the need to move their crisis response team online to provide grief counseling.

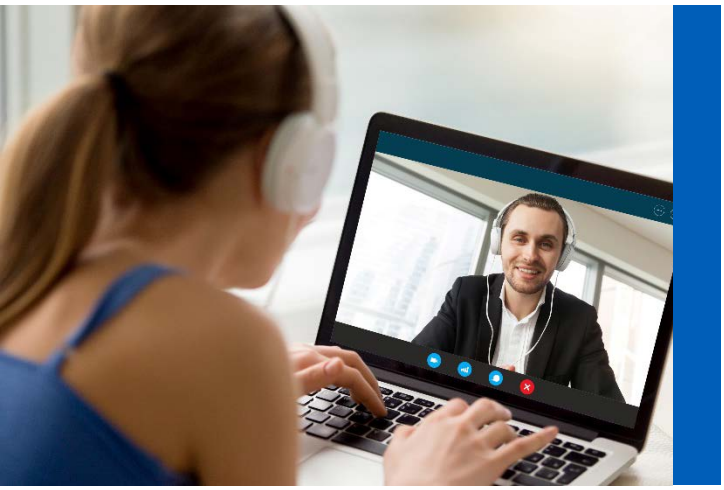
> **The CNUSD virtual calming room includes resources such as calming sounds and music, guided meditations, live animal cams, puzzles and games, coloring activities, exercises, and healthy cooking tips.**

These virtual tools, which addressed student academic, social, and emotional development as well as their readiness for a wide range of postsecondary options, are just a few examples of school counselors' leadership, expertise, and creativity, and they will be lasting contributions to the field. At the high school level, several school counselors and district-level leaders also began advocating for more manageable graduation expectations such as lowering credit requirements, providing elective credit for students caring for younger siblings, transitioning to pass/fail grading systems, and communicating with regional postsecondary access professionals to ensure that students would remain well positioned for college admissions.

In Transition

Innovation and Collaboration. As the summer of 2020 came and went, an overwhelming number of participants described the uncertainty they felt as they prepared for an undetermined (in-person, hybrid, virtual) fall semester. This period of transition was described well by an elementary school counselor who said it was "confusion and chaos in the beginning, but then it definitely turned into a very innovative, collaborative process." We heard about

innovation from all the districts and counselors with whom we spoke. As school counselors realized that they needed to prepare for uncertainty and longer-term disruptions, they came together to increase collaboration and build an infrastructure to support students and families. A majority of school counselors said they engaged in the various training opportunities provided by national (e.g., ASCA) and state associations (e.g., CASC and WSCA) to develop a foundation of current best practices for virtual school counseling. In addition, school counselors spent their summers creating websites, online referral forms, scheduling mechanisms, Google classrooms, and lessons for both counselor and teacher instruction. District-level administrators and school counselors partnered over the summer to transition existing materials to an online format and to create templates, training, and resources that were needed for the fall. For example, one district leader described how a core team of school counselors worked over the summer to adapt district school counseling materials and develop a virtual school counseling program, working collaboratively to create Google classrooms for counselors, tips for school counseling in a virtual setting, and a scope and sequence for school counselors such as core counseling and small group counseling curricula. Another district leader highlighted the fact that prior to the pandemic, school counselors did everything at their schools, including writing curricula, preparing resources for families, creating templates and forms that students could use to reach out for support, and tracking student contacts. However, since the pandemic, they have more intentionally coordinated these activities across the district by working in teams. Counselors then share the resources and tools that they developed with one another that tap into individual counselor strengths and expertise.



Honoring School Counselor Professional Knowledge and Expertise. At times, school counselors, social workers, and school psychologists have worked at cross purposes—with school counselors often relegated to the role of responding reactively to disruptive classroom behaviors, handling scheduling, and supervising students (e.g., lunch duty). Doing these activities takes time away from the kind of proactive, comprehensive school counseling approach that ASCA and Hatching Results recommend. With some of those tasks off the table during the pandemic,

> school counselors reported that they had time to conduct proactive activities and noted that principals were beginning to acknowledge their expertise and tap them to provide student and family support and resources.

One group of counselors reported that they prepared a video tour of their school as it would look when school reopened, with barriers between desks, different student traffic patterns, and locations of entrances and exits so that students would know what to expect when they returned. Another district leader described a core health team—composed of school counselors, social workers, nurses, and food service workers—that meets weekly to discuss responses to ever-shifting needs, indicating that, “Our listening skills really kicked into gear.” Other counselors noted that they asked students what they needed and, as a result, designed a weekly “vibe check” where students could drop in to meet virtually and learn about mental health.

The Importance of Supporting Adults. Also important during the pandemic was paying attention to the mental health of adults, including caregivers and colleagues. One district leader described activities that were designed to check in with families through monthly community conversations where families could discuss their needs. Another counselor pointed out, however, that, although those opportunities were offered, many families were overwhelmed and simply unable to add one more thing to their plate. Another district leader described several activities that were intentionally designed to support the counselors themselves: "I call a group of counselors every Saturday…for some, they're the only counselor in their building." Other activities included free concerts, book clubs, or a virtual happy hour every first Friday—sometimes with a comedian, or the Taboo board game, or "American Idol: school counselor edition."

Amplifying Equity and Antiracism. Many participants spoke about the importance of amplifying equity and antiracism and the ways in which school counselors can interrupt systems of oppression. All of the district leaders we spoke with outlined efforts to engage in antiracist school counseling work, including offering training, panels, book clubs, and materials for engaging students and stakeholders in conversations about antiracism. One administrator spoke of her role in "trying to get them [school counselors] to see the power of their programming, and the power of individual learning plans and academic and career planning. And seeing the impact those things will have on closing those disparities." Others discussed collaborative efforts with other service providers and teachers to intentionally address antiracism as they prepared for the fall semester. One high school counselor described the effort in her district:

> "The bulk of that work was really to help teams at all six high schools … to really hone in on what they need to shift for virtual learning, and where they're also causing harm. It was really trying to help teams…to examine their curriculum where they can infuse social/emotional learning and where they also see racist curriculum. It was really powerful for me to do that learning alongside teachers."

In addition to existing school counseling practices to support student transitions such as individual academic planning, transcript reviews, postsecondary admission lessons, and bridge programs, another district administrator explained how school counselors provided extra support for students transitioning into postsecondary spaces, acknowledging the disproportionality of the pandemic's effects and the difficulty of significant transitions: "In the pandemic we know that college has been a struggle for a lot of students so during the summer we hired 10 counselors to call all the African American, Latino, and Newcomer students in the district, which was about 1500 students… to help the students with their transition to college."

These efforts also led the local community college to provide additional assistance for students who were transitioning to college during this difficult time. These examples provide evidence of district-wide leadership that connects school counselors and teachers in a way that establishes comprehensive school counseling services that foster more supportive, equitable, and liberating places to learn.

The Fall

Uncertainty and Flexibility: "Flexing Our Endurance Muscles." As one high school counselor said, fall 2020 was "the hardest start to any school year I've encountered in my 10 years of doing this just because there was so much uncertainty and every time you would do something it would come back, okay we're changing this… we're not doing it this way, you're going to have to go back and redo everything you did." These difficulties were echoed by many, with uncertainty becoming the new norm, while students, families, and educational stakeholders at all levels were resigned to the fact that the 2020–2021 school year would not have the predictable ebbs and flows

of a typical academic year that school communities are accustomed to. Although the fall looked different for our participants, many school counselors spoke about a continued increase in student and family outreach efforts, with far more counselors relying on email and text messaging than ever before. With new technology-based infrastructure in place, many counselors reported an increase in student meetings and a need for social and emotional learning and mental health services. One counselor shared, "My team has really shifted to the mental health and how to be really holistic. So whereas before, school counseling in general may have been a little more academic, because they have so much they have to do, but now they're like, 'how do we do this more efficiently so we can do more mental health work….,' while still managing their huge caseloads. They really are my heroes right now."

This shift in service delivery and intentionality was described by others, as many school counselors reported an increased focus on using data to determine which students were attending school and/or struggling academically.

As school counselors identified which students needed additional support, they developed interventions at all levels of service delivery. For example, many of these school counselors rolled out a greater number of counseling lessons across all three ASCA (2019) domains—academic, social/emotional, and career—with a greater focus on Tier 1 supports. In addition, district leaders and school counselors worked collaboratively to transition college and career fairs, student clubs, graduation celebrations, caregiver education/outreach, and newsletters to online platforms. Although school counselors successfully delivered counseling services in innovative and creative ways, many counselors also pointed out the importance of returning to the foundation of counseling. "Even in these unprecedented times, basic tenets of counseling such as building relationships and empathetic listening are key to delivering a counseling program. If you've previously established good relationships with students, staff, and families…then it is more likely that you'll reach or get responses back from students or parents for individual or small group options and generate collaboration with staff to deliver curriculum or other forms of school support. If you're new to a building, then regularly visiting teachers' virtual classrooms, being active in staff meetings, and getting to know other support staff should help get you there."

Many school counselors rolled out a greater number of counseling lessons across all three ASCA (2019) domains—academic, social/emotional, and career—with greater focus on Tier 1 supports.

Similarly, a high school counselor recommended that counselors,

> Go back to that core of remembering why we do what we do, and that we're here for our students, and that we're here to be advocates for them, and sometimes it means having hard conversations and uncomfortable conversations but ultimately if we can keep our students in the forefront of our minds, that's going to help with all of those pieces, that's going to help you remember to check in on the mental health of your kids and that emotional support, and how they're doing, that's going to help you with looking at academically how are our kids surviving, looking at equity, when you're looking at access to technology and transportation equity kind of screams at you…

Many school counselors also shared the importance of instilling hope for students, offering stability during a time of uncertainty, and encouraging both students and families to give themselves grace and compassion as they navigated this tumultuous time.

Future Policies and Practices

When asked how the pandemic has changed school counseling, participants at all levels listed technology integration, intentional universal service delivery, increased collaboration, and a renewed emphasis on social and emotional wellness.

Recognizing the Strengths and Limitations of Technology. As one high school counselor said, "Technology has really improved our school counseling programs." At all levels, school counseling leaders described increased creativity, innovation, and investment in technology integration. From Smore™ newsletters that can translate content into multiple languages, to streamlined scheduling and extensive school counseling websites and Google classrooms, school counselors have demonstrated how technology can make school counseling services more accessible for all students and families for whom digital access is available. Several participants recounted how college and career fairs and large-scale district events were executed so well virtually that these events will remain online in the future. Although these resources were built under duress, they will remain as integral pieces of school counseling programs, and as a milestone in the history of school counseling. Enhanced use of technology also allowed school counselors, particularly at the elementary and middle school levels, to shift their service delivery from a traditionally reactive position in which school counselors were responding to the more urgent needs of students and families, to a more proactive space in which counselors could focus on providing universal support for all students. Hosting activities online also allowed counselors to extend clubs and other extracurricular activities to students from schools across the district.

Several participants recounted how college and career fairs and large-scale district events were executed so well virtually that these events will remain online in the future.

However, school counselors also pointed out some of the challenges of technology. For example, one counselor described the shift that his counseling department had made as the department assessed online policies for students through the lens of student need and support. Although this counselor acknowledged that teachers want to "see" students online to assess engagement and learning, counselors also understand that some students might be uncomfortable with having teachers and peers view their homes, siblings, and other family members—feelings that are exacerbated for students who are homeless or in foster care. As a result of their internal conversations and their willingness to examine whether policies exist primarily to support adults or students, these school counselors worked with teachers to provide some flexibility in the requirement that all cameras needed to be "on."

Collaboration. Another essential lesson learned during the pandemic is the power of collaboration. As one state association leader said,

> School counselors have had to really think creatively to get things done… they have had to look at all kinds of structural pieces to the work they do. Different districts have done different things. Some that have really come together and some that haven't…. I think the biggest change is that… we all got the fire hoses out and began to put out the fire and there was no collective property, this is mine… it became everything is an our…not only school counselors, but we bridged with the school social workers and school psychologists like we never have before… and now it is very strongly connected and we feel very much more partnerships with them. We feel an identity as school-based mental health professionals and began to frame it that way… I think the world of school counseling at the state level has changed collaboratively.

Not surprisingly, the districts and counselors that we spoke with were actively engaged in collaborative partnerships with other counselors, district leaders, teachers, administrators, and other student service providers such as school psychologists, school social workers, and school nurses. One district counseling services coordinator said, "They [school counselors] will never ever go back to their silos." In all the districts that are profiled in this brief, counselors came together to share knowledge and resources in unprecedented ways. As school counselors came together, they received encouragement, reinforcement, and empowerment as experts, advocates, and leaders. School counselors also discussed the importance of knowing what resources are available in your school community to "build your village." Although school counselors provide a substantial number of resources directly to students and families, integrating service providers and community resources is essential for meeting the complex, diverse, and holistic needs of students and families.

Renewed Commitment to Social and Emotional Wellness: Working Closely With Teachers. As the pandemic persists, so, too, does the strain of ongoing uncertainty; illness; grief and loss; social isolation; and employment, food, and housing insecurity. Students, families, and educational stakeholders alike are struggling in various ways, and school counselors are stepping up to promote the importance of mental health and social and emotional wellness. As one middle school counselor described, "We are trying as counselors to get more involved in staff meetings to have that PD for teachers of the social/emotional, why is it important that we devote five minutes maybe a class period to doing circles and creating that community… trying to provide them with the tools and strategies to use that in the classroom… shifting the learning process, let's look more at building community, let's build relationships with your students this year… really making that the focus because the social/emotional is going to be so hard and such a deficiency right now." Although the emphasis on social and emotional wellness is not new for school counselors, the pandemic has illuminated the importance and urgency of this integral aspect of students' lives. In addition, some school counselors are also providing resources and supports for their colleagues who are also trying to manage the stress and trauma brought on by the pandemic.

Although the emphasis on social and emotional wellness is not new for school counselors, the pandemic has illuminated the importance and urgency of this integral aspect of students' lives.

Ongoing Challenges

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2019), one in six students was chronically absent from school during the 2015–2016 academic year, with chronic absenteeism disproportionately affecting American Indian, Pacific Islander, Black, and Latinx students. The pervasive problem of chronic absenteeism was further amplified as schools closed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic with some communities reporting that nearly a third of their students stopped attending school (Blume & Kohli, 2020). Moreover, many of the students most impacted by these educational disruptions were those who were already marginalized and struggling in K–12 schools. For example, students living in low-income communities were impacted more substantially by the transition to virtual learning, as many did not have consistent access to technology, quiet learning spaces, and basic needs and resources (Goldstein et al., 2020). In fact, a recent survey about returning to school indicated that racial/ethnic minorities and parents and guardians with lower annual incomes are less likely to send their children back to school (Susan B. Meister Child Health Evaluation and Research Center, 2020). The disproportionate impact of the pandemic was a clear challenge described by participants. As one high school counselor noted, "It [COVID-19] has really illuminated the disparities with our students and our families. We're really seeing the discrepancies with our students of color being affected by this, our students that are on free and reduced lunch are really struggling…so I

think for some groups of people it has been fine and they have been able to stay home… but not so many people have been able to work from home."

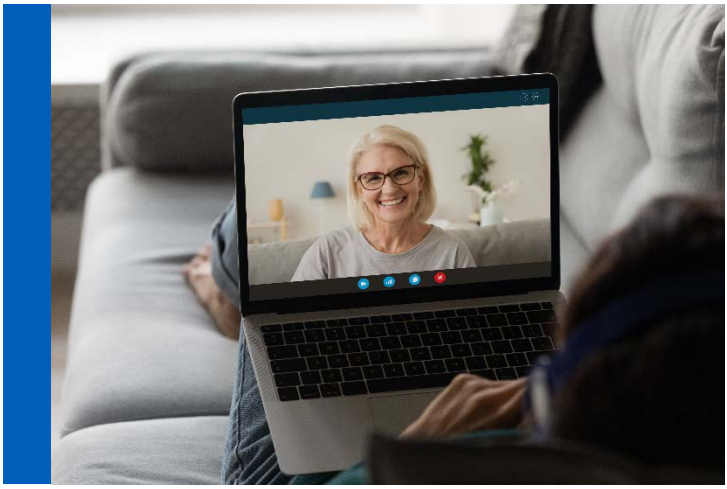
As student and family challenges with food and housing insecurity, grief and loss, and social isolation are exacerbated by the pandemic, school counselors are positioned to link families with community partners who are poised to provide assistance.

Reengaging Students. As educators navigate reopening schools and ongoing virtual learning, they are faced with the difficult task of connecting with students and families who may have already disengaged or who have become disengaged due to COVID-19-related stressors. Although many participants spoke of increased success reaching out to students, school counselor after school counselor shared how many students "have gone dark." Further, many of the school counselors in this brief reported an alarming increase in failing grades and students losing motivation. As schools adapt to a post-COVID-19 landscape, effective and efficient outreach and a commitment to more equitable policies and practices are essential to ensure that K–12 schools meet the diverse needs of students and families. This need was further articulated by a district leader who said,

> "We have a lot of kids that are not connected right now to their learning. And a lot of kids that are struggling and losing family members and we know that's impacting our Black population more than anyone else and they're not answering our phone calls, they're not answering our texts, they're surviving right now. So, when we do come back together, we're going to have to look at some systems change for these kiddos to get them where they need to be academically and to get them to graduation."

In addition to providing comprehensive Tier 1 supports, when given the time and support necessary, school counselors have the professional knowledge and expertise to reach out to these students, assess the challenges they and their families might be experiencing, and provide support and/or referrals to reengage those students.

Providing Tier 2 and Tier 3 Supports. Another challenge identified by participants was the capacity to provide individual and small group counseling for students, and in particular, concerns about confidentiality. An elementary school counselor shared that, "There is always someone in the room… I get less information about their real situation. They have their parents, or their sisters, brothers in the back and they don't want to talk about their real problems. So, I see that, it's bothering me that I have to talk to them through the screen."



Similar concerns were conveyed by other participants as students resisted turning on cameras or stopped attending counseling entirely. Although some variation was present across districts, the three districts with whom we spoke were providing legal guidance and protocols for virtual counseling.

Self-Care and Boundaries. As school counselors navigate the most effective ways to connect students and families with resources, engage disengaged students, support students who are struggling academically, interrupt racist policies and practices, and provide comprehensive services for all students, they must also remember to engage in their own self-care. All the school counselors we spoke with focused first on the needs of their school community, but they, too, are navigating the stressors of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to their own stressors, many spoke about

how boundaries have become more blurred throughout this time, putting school counselors and educational stakeholders at risk of physical and emotional fatigue. In the words of one state association director,

> "What we're seeing a lot from counselors is, how do you shut off? …having people access you after hours, what are your legal and ethical responsibilities to respond to somebody if they reach out to you and you happen to read that email… I think it is a bit more exasperated in this online environment."

Similarly, another state leader described boundaries as being one of the ongoing challenges of school counselors, as she recounted an example from a school counselor in California: "Counselors are having boundary issues because nothing stops… you know they're on at 10:00 at night. We had a child that wrote her counselor… and said she was hungry and there was no food in the house and she [the counselor] sent out Grub Hub."

As similar stories emerged, participants also provided recommendations to the field, reminding school counselors that they need to prioritize their own well-being so that they can be fully present for their students and school communities. In congruence with this need, many district-level leaders provided opportunities for school counselors to come together to focus on self-care, wellness, fun, and virtual connection.

Conclusion

As educators reflect on lessons learned thus far and make decisions about how to proceed as the pandemic progresses, school counselors have risen to the challenge of keeping students and families connected to their school communities. With expertise in education, mental health, and career exploration, school counselors are well positioned to meet the diverse needs of students even in the midst of a global pandemic. In the words of one district leader, "The pandemic has shown our [school counselors] value… I think we understand and value our grocery store workers, our gas stations, and I think it just gave you a greater appreciation for what they provide. Like some things, you might want your hair done and your nails done, but you can't live without the grocery store and that for me is what counseling is, we, education, can't live without it… it's needed. It's necessary. We do a lot of stuff behind the scenes that people don't realize and now I think it is at the forefront… And I think the way policy is going to change, I am hoping that every decision we make, we think about the social and emotional well-being of a student. Because a lot of times in education, it's always about the academic, and the graduation rates, and how this is going to happen, but not really looking at how it impacts the student."

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