BUILDING HIGH-QUALITY SCHOOL COUNSELING PROGRAMS TO ENSURE STUDENT SUCCESS

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This brief is one in a series aimed at providing K-12 education decision makers and advocates with an evidence base to ground discussions about how to best serve students during and following the novel coronavirus pandemic. Click here to learn more about the EdResearch for Recovery Project and view the set of COVID-19 response-and-recovery topic areas and practitioner-generated questions.

CENTRAL QUESTION

How can schools and districts ensure that all students benefit from school counseling programs?

KEY INSIGHTS

Breaking Down the Issue

- Access to school counselors improves academic outcomes, social-emotional development, and postsecondary enrollment.
- The students who could benefit the most from counselors typically have the least access to them.
- During COVID-19, virtual work and added non-counseling duties have further limited students' access to school counselors while student needs have accumulated.

Strategies to Consider

- The most effective counseling programs focus comprehensively on academic, social-emotional, and postsecondary domains in addition to being preventative and using data to better target student needs.
- When designing a comprehensive counseling program, schools can rely on existing, validated, counselor-led interventions in all three counseling domains.
- Lowering student-to-counselor ratios improves student outcomes and promotes counselor efficacy.
- When school and district leaders understand the scope of the counselor role, build strong relationships with counselors, and support their professional growth, counselors are better positioned to fulfill their jobs.

Strategies to Avoid

- Supplemental college access programs run by community organizations can actually increase inequities in access when they are not well integrated into school-based programs.
- Assigning counselors non-counseling tasks deprives students of critical counseling support.
- Simply hiring more counselors without clarifying their professional roles is insufficient.

BREAKING DOWN THE ISSUE

Access to school counselors improves academic outcomes, social-emotional development, and postsecondary enrollment.

- **School counselors' work centers on promoting student academic, social-emotional, and postsecondary development.**
  - Counselors foster academic success through hosting study skills workshops, identifying and supporting struggling students, and reducing barriers to accessing rigorous coursework.
  - Counselors promote students' social-emotional development through conducting individual and group counseling as well as offering classroom lessons and school-wide programming concerning suicide prevention, substance abuse, consent and healthy relationships, and racial/ethnic identity development.
  - Counselors also shape the postsecondary trajectories of students through building college-going cultures, strengthening students' college aspirations, and providing assistance with all facets of the college application process.
  - What counselors do varies by grade level. Counselors in high schools tend to devote more time to postsecondary preparation whereas elementary and middle school counselors tend to focus on social-emotional development.

- **Research has consistently linked access to school counselors and the programs they offer with positive outcomes across these three domains.**
  - Numerous studies demonstrate that the social-emotional learning programming counselors implement can lead to improvements in both students' wellbeing and their academic performance.
  - Students who engage with a counselor are more likely to consider college as a possibility, complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), apply to a four-year institution, and ultimately enroll in postsecondary education.
  - Several descriptive studies have identified associations between access to the counselors and improved attendance, suspension, and disciplinary rates.

The students who could benefit the most from counselors typically have the least access to them.

- **Access to school counseling is not tightly regulated.**
  - Only 30 states require schools to hire counselors.
  - Despite growing evidence linking caseload size with student outcomes, the average student-to-counselor ratio nationally is 424:1.
  - Just 16 states have mandated minimum student-to-counselor ratios, which range from 250:1 to 750:1.

- **Schools that serve marginalized students often lack the resources to ensure students access high quality counseling.**
  - One in six of the lowest-income school districts have a student-to-counselor ratio below the 250:1 ratio recommended by the American School Counselor Association.
  - Over 1.6 million students attend a school that employs a sworn law enforcement officer but no school counselor. Latinx and Black students are 1.4 and 1.2 times as likely as White students, respectively, to attend such schools.

During COVID-19, virtual work and added non-counseling duties have further limited students' access to school counselors while student needs have accumulated.

- **As the pandemic has swept the country, student needs have increased across the academic, social-emotional, and postsecondary domains that counselors focus on.**
  - School closures and shifts to remote and hybrid learning led to declines in achievement, particularly math.
  - The share of adolescent ER visits that were mental health-related increased by 31% from 2019 to 2020. Rates of anxiety, depression, and suicide ideation and attempts also increased.
  - Fall 2020 undergraduate enrollment decreased by 3.6%, or by about 560,200 students, from fall 2019. FAFSA completions also dropped by 4%, with the class of 2020 submitting 2.01 million FAFSAs—about 84,000 fewer than the class of 2019.
- **Working virtually constrained school counselors' ability to connect with students, both technologically and interpersonally; taking on non-counseling duties further limited their availability.**
  - Disparities in access to computers and the internet meant counselors were not able to connect virtually with all students.
  - The absence of informal spaces and interactions with students who do not actively seek help inhibited counselors from assessing the wellbeing of students and identifying those most in need of additional support.
  - Even counselors who were able to meet virtually with students reported struggling to make meaningful connections as students were disengaged and felt detached from their school support networks.
  - Counselors were also enlisted into non-counseling work, especially in schools with staffing issues due to COVID-19. A survey of 7,000 counselors found that one in three took on administrative tasks they did not previously oversee such as hall or bus duty. One in five assumed health-related duties such as temperature checks, and one in six substitute-taught.

STRATEGIES TO CONSIDER

The most effective counseling programs focus comprehensively on academic, social-emotional, and postsecondary domains in addition to being preventative and using data to better target student needs.

- **Research has linked comprehensive school counseling programs with positive academic and behavioral outcomes.**
  - Comprehensive school counseling is a framework that organizes counselors' practice across the academic, social-emotional, and postsecondary domains. It emphasizes a proactive approach that shifts the counselor role away from solely reacting to immediate crises in an isolated manner and instead encourages counselors to implement preventative programming that is aligned with whole school improvement plans.
  - Descriptive studies have found positive associations between implementation of a comprehensive program and student outcomes such as attendance, graduation, test scores, and students' sense of belonging.
  - Comprehensive counseling programs, including those based on the ASCA National Model, align with all three tiers of the multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) model.
- **Collecting and analyzing data about student outcomes helps counselors reach all students, refine programming, and advocate for the reform of policies, systems, and practices that perpetuate inequities.**

- School counselors advance educational equity and opportunity by examining and acting on student outcome data such as attendance, graduation, achievement, and participation in advanced classes, gifted programs, special education, and enrichment programs.
- When school counselors use data to examine differences in these outcomes across gender, race/ethnicity, income level, disability status, and other intersectional identities, counselors can better target their services to meet student needs.
- Studies have shown how counselors have used data-driven decision-making to improve the delivery of mental health interventions and counseling.

- **Implementing multicultural counseling approaches supports students' identity development and contributes to inclusive school cultures.**
  - School counselors build the multicultural awareness of students by integrating content from different cultures into classroom lessons, constructing meaningful service-learning opportunities that address diverse communities' needs, and implementing prejudice reduction curricula.
  - Cross-cultural programming can especially support the needs of immigrant youth.
  - Multicultural education practices can improve students' racial attitudes as well as academic achievement.
  - Counselors can assess their multicultural competencies and identify areas for growth via validated tools such as the Multicultural School Counseling Behavior Scale (MSCBS), Multicultural Counseling Competence and Training Survey-Revised (MCCTS-R), and the Multicultural Counseling Inventory (MCI).

When designing a comprehensive counseling program, schools can rely on existing, validated, counselor-led interventions in all three counseling domains.

- **Student Success Skills (SSS), a counselor-led program that promotes cognitive, social, and self-management skills, strengthens student achievement.**
  - One randomized controlled trial examining the use of SSS in 5th grade classrooms found improvements in students' behavioral engagement, cooperation, and levels of test anxiety after participation in the program.

- **Screening tools can ensure that students who need targeted, specialized support are identified.**
  - Universal mental health screening is an effective way to identify students who may benefit from intensive mental health support.
  - Some screening tools have been validated for assessing the emotional wellbeing of children and adolescents, identifying bullying behaviors, and evaluating substance use.

- **Countless social-emotional tools and interventions show evidence of positive impact on school climate and student behavior and wellbeing.**
  - Examples of evidence-based social-emotional interventions include counselor-led classroom lessons focused on strengthening social behaviors and school-wide programs such as wellness days for improving school climate.
  - Emerging evidence suggests that mindfulness interventions may improve student wellbeing.

- **Culturally responsive interventions can bolster outcomes for historically marginalized students.**
  - Emerging evidence indicates that hip-hop and spoken word therapy, an innovative counseling approach involving the writing, recording, and performing of hip-hop music, may improve the emotional self-awareness of African American and Latinx youth.
  - Observational evidence suggests culturally responsive academic interventions may be particularly important for strengthening the achievement of students of color.
  - Qualitative studies have found that immigrant-origin students especially benefit from interventions that both recognize their existing community cultural wealth and build their social and cultural capital.

- **Proactive summer outreach to graduating seniors, individualized learning plans, and early career exploration help students prepare for postsecondary success.**
  - Providing targeted one-on-one college counseling to graduating students in the summer months post high-school graduation has been shown to reduce summer melt, increasing college enrollment rates.
  - Individualized learning plans that help students identify career interests and necessary skill requirements are a promising practice for bolstering college and career readiness.
  - Classroom-based career readiness initiatives in early grades are one avenue for jumpstarting career exploration.

Lowering student-to-counselor ratios improves student outcomes and promotes counselor efficacy.

- **High counselor caseloads contribute to poor student outcomes and school climate.**
  - Descriptive studies have found that high caseloads are negatively associated with student outcomes, including academic achievement and postsecondary enrollment. Quasi-experimental studies have specifically linked caseload size with school climate and postsecondary outcomes.
  - Compelling descriptive evidence from Colorado's School Counselor Corps Grant Program suggests that the state has saved $20 on social safety net services for every dollar spent on lowering counselor caseloads.

- **Lower caseloads help counselors build relationships with students and reduce burnout and job dissatisfaction.**
  - High student-to-counselor ratios are a barrier to implementing comprehensive school counseling programs.
  - Large caseloads make it hard for counselors to build meaningful relationships with students that lay a foundation for instituting interventions and programmatic support.
  - Given studies identifying a relationship between high caseloads and occupational burnout and low job satisfaction, lower student-to-counselor ratios can promote counselor efficacy.

When school and district leaders understand the scope of the counselor role, build strong relationships with counselors, and support their professional growth, counselors are better positioned to fulfill their jobs.

- **Strong principal-counselor relationships built on a shared understanding of the counselor role ensure that counselors' working conditions are aligned with professional expectations.**
  - Clear, open, and consistent communication is an essential foundation for these relationships as it establishes mutual respect and trust. It also signals to other educators, parents, and students that counselors are leaders whose input is valued.
  - Research has consistently found that principals and counselors have misaligned expectations about what the counselor role encompasses. For example, principals are more likely than counselors to identify registration and scheduling, test coordination, and record-keeping as significant counseling tasks.

- **When school leaders provide school counselors with meaningful professional development, counselors will be better prepared for the unique demands of their jobs.**
  - Low support among district and school leaders has historically limited counselor access to in-service professional development opportunities.
  - In-service professional development is important because school counselors have reported that their pre-service academic training did not adequately prepare them for entry into the counseling field. One national survey found that 84% of school counselors felt somewhat or not at all prepared for their roles.
  - Counselors have especially voiced a need for more training in college and career readiness counseling and in using data to inform their practice, in part because many counselor educator programs do not provide training in these areas.

STRATEGIES TO AVOID

Supplemental college access programs run by community organizations can actually increase inequities in access when they are not well integrated into school-based programs.

- **Partnerships with community-based and push-in programs designed to compensate for weak counseling programs rarely result in reaching more students unless there is strong collaboration and coordination of services with counselors.**
  - Community-based and federally funded college access programs reach only a small percentage of eligible students each year. As such, these programs are not a replacement for within-school comprehensive counseling programs.
  - Research indicates that community-based programs increase students' access to college planning support, but these opportunities can inadvertently be implemented inequitably across neighborhoods and unnecessarily duplicate services. One such study found that supplemental college access programs were distributed unevenly across neighborhoods and overwhelmingly focused on upper grade levels with little attention to early college awareness and planning.
  - Rigorous research on the impact of these programs is limited. Existing studies typically are short-term impact evaluations of specific programs rather than large-scale analyses of their long-term benefits or potential for replication.

Assigning counselors non-counseling tasks deprives students of critical counseling support.

- **Counselors at urban schools, as well as those serving low-income and students of color, are more likely to spend time on inappropriate, non-counseling duties.**
  - An in-depth qualitative study of high school counselors found that school leaders expected them to devote much time to tasks falling outside the scope of their role. As a result, counselors had limited bandwidth for conducting individualized counseling.
  - Studies indicate that counselors who spend less time on direct counseling work tend to have lower levels of job satisfaction and struggle to deliver comprehensive counseling programs.

Simply hiring more counselors without clarifying their professional roles is insufficient.

- **Studies find that school counselors experience substantial role ambiguity because of unclear job descriptions, differing expectations among school stakeholders about what the role encompasses, and the presence of other school-based mental health professionals.**
  - Research suggests that a lack of role clarity is negatively associated with job satisfaction and diminishes the potential impact of the counselor role.
  - Updating counselor job descriptions to align with professional expectations, clearly delineating how counselors' responsibilities differ from those of other student support personnel, and ensuring counselors' time is appropriately allocated are concrete ways that school leaders can reduce role ambiguity.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

More evidence briefs can be found at the EdResearch for Recovery website. To receive updates and the latest briefs, sign up here.

Briefs in this series will address a broad range of COVID-19 challenges across five categories:

- Student Learning
- School Climate
- Supporting All Students
- Teachers
- Finances and Operations

This EdResearch for Recovery Project brief is a collaboration among faculty and researchers from the following organizations and institutions:

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