The Promise of School Counselors

Why They Are Essential for Students' and Educators' Well-Being

By Mandy Savitz-Romer, Tara P. Nicola, and Laura Hecht Colletta

Mr. Jerry Pham has taught sixth-grade English at Morningside Junior High for nine years but was never as concerned about his students' well-being as he was at the start of the 2021–22 school year. Between the continued stress and social isolation brought on by the pandemic, abrupt shifts to remote learning as COVID-19 cases were reported in his school, and a national reckoning with state-sanctioned racialized violence, he was not entirely surprised that many of his students were either acting out or putting their heads down instead of engaging in class. By the end of September, although Mr. Pham was still getting to know this year's students, he had been teaching long enough to realize that he needed to be better prepared to support them. Mr. Pham signed up for several professional development workshops on trauma-sensitive schooling and purchased books on social and emotional development, but still he felt unqualified to address what he could see was getting in the way of student learning.

Mr. Pham considered reaching out to Ms. Andrade. She and one other school counselor had recently been hired, and Ms. Andrade was supposed to cover grades five and six. However, Mr. Pham's experience with the previous school counselor gave him little hope that Ms. Andrade would help. The previous counselor had been so overwhelmed by the 900 students on her caseload, on top of what seemed like endless administrative responsibilities, that she rarely interacted with him. In fact, in his nine years at the school, he had only spoken with her when she joined his class to discuss electives. On a few occasions, Mr. Pham considered seeking her advice regarding a student who seemed to be struggling emotion-

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY ENRIQUE MOREIRO

ally, but he didn't know if school counselors were prepared to support students' mental health. From his own schooling experience, he recalled only talking to his school counselor about college planning. Still, the school had intentionally hired two counselors to make caseloads more reasonable, so perhaps things would be different with Ms. Andrade?

After overhearing two students talk about a social scenario game they had played with Ms. Andrade at lunch, Mr. Pham sent her an email asking for help. Although he tempered his expectations—she was new not only to the school but also to the counseling field—Mr. Pham recalled that she had made a point to introduce herself to all of the teachers. To his surprise, Ms. Andrade replied right away suggesting they meet during lunch so she could learn more about the situation. That conversation enabled Mr. Pham to articulate what he was seeing and separate his feelings of failure from what the students might be experiencing. Most importantly, Ms. Andrade helped him understand that some of his students' behaviors, such as putting their heads down, may actually be symptoms of depression, grief, and anxiety and are a normal response to high-stress environments and ongoing trauma. Together, they came up with a plan in which Ms. Andrade would observe three of his classes and then send him suggestions for developmental lessons she could deliver to his students. She also supplied some sentence starters for writing assignments to open a conversation between the students and Mr. Pham.

Within a few weeks, Mr. Pham noticed a difference in his ability to relate to his students. He felt more confident engaging them and began to see their behaviors in a new light. His students also were benefitting; after Ms. Andrade led sessions on self-regulation and mindfulness, Mr. Pham saw changes in their levels of focus and affect. However, he truly realized the value of these collaborations when a student told Mr. Pham that they have been feeling less anxious about coming to school because they now have space to process everything that is going on.

By the winter break, Mr. Pham and Ms. Andrade had developed a strong working relationship. He valued her unique skills and knowledge about mental health, and he readily welcomed the strategies she provided for promoting students' social and emotional development. One of the things Mr. Pham appreciated most was that Ms. Andrade recognized how deeply he cares about his students. Her conception of the school counseling role, as he eventually learned from her, was to support the success of both students and educators, which included consulting with teachers.[1]

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Teachers everywhere have witnessed the deleterious impacts of the pandemic on students. Soaring rates of youth anxiety and depression,[2] declines in college enrollment,[3] and worrisome results on achievement tests[4] are among the consequences of prolonged disruption to students' home and learning environments. Although schools are doing their best to ameliorate these issues, limited staffing and resources remain barriers to supporting student success. How can teachers do more when they are already stretched so thin?

School counselors are often under-utilized, but they can be a huge asset as schools embark on the long road to recovery from COVID-19. Research repeatedly finds that when school counselors deliver comprehensive programming, student outcomes improve.[5] In schools that allocate counselors' time wisely, counselors may spend their days providing individual and group counseling sessions, leading developmental lessons in a classroom, consulting with parents or caregivers on an intervention, analyzing attendance data to develop outreach plans, or offering

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To support educators who are giving their all to engage students throughout the pandemic, EdResearch for Recovery is a new initiative aimed at delivering essential resources. Working with practitioners, policymakers, and researchers, the Annenberg Institute at Brown University and Results for America joined forces to develop research briefs that answer educators' most pressing questions. More than 20 briefs have been published so far, covering topics such as academic interventions, trauma-responsive practices, and engaging families—and all are online for free. This article is based on the brief "Building High-Quality School Counseling Programs to Ensure Student Success" by Mandy Savitz-Romer and Tara P. Nicola, which EdResearch for Recovery published in January 2022. To learn more, visit annenberg.brown.edu/recovery.

early college and career awareness programming. However, poor working conditions—including enormous caseloads and extensive noncounseling tasks—often compromise counselors' abilities to deliver on what students need most.

School Counselors and Student Success

While school counselors are typically associated with their college counseling work at the high school level, they are actually trained to support K–12 student development across three domains: academic, social and emotional, and postsecondary planning.[6] School counselors foster students' academic success through hosting study skills workshops, working with teachers to identify students who may benefit from academic support, and reducing barriers to accessing rigorous coursework. Counselors promote students' social and emotional development by providing individual and group counseling and offering classroom lessons and schoolwide programming on a wide range of topics, including substance abuse, healthy relationships and consent, mental health, and racial and ethnic identity development. In their role as college and career counselors, they promote career exploration, cultivate college-going cultures, assist with all facets of the college application and financial aid processes, and broker connections with local employers. Although the scope of counselors' work is quite broad, they tend to prioritize certain areas of their role based on the grade levels they serve and their school community's needs. For example, while one counselor may emphasize supporting students who are struggling with their sexual identities, another may not be called on to engage in that work at all.

Studies have linked access to counselors with improved attendance and lower disciplinary and suspension rates.

Research consistently finds that school counselors have a positive influence on students' academic, social and emotional, and postsecondary development. For example, studies have linked access to counselors with improved attendance and lower disciplinary and suspension rates,[7] as well as higher levels of student well-being.[8] Other studies have found that students who engage with a counselor are more likely not only to have college aspirations but also to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, apply to a four-year institution, and ultimately enroll in postsecondary education.[9] The impact of counselors is pronounced for minoritized and marginalized students, who tend to especially benefit from the resources and supports that counselors provide.[10]

Despite consistent evidence of counselors' positive influence, several obstacles constrict students' access to school counseling professionals and high-quality comprehensive counseling programs. One of the most significant is that not all schools offer school counseling. Limited policy at the state level is partly to blame, as school counseling is not as tightly regulated as other professions like teaching. Currently, only 29 states mandate that schools offer school counseling programs to all students in grades K–12; even fewer require that licensed professional counselors administer these programs. Furthermore, even in schools that employ counselors, high student-to-counselor ratios make it difficult for students to receive the wide array of services that counselors are trained to offer. Despite evidence linking lower caseloads with improved student outcomes,[11] the average counselor caseload nationally is 415 students, with the typical caseload exceeding 700 students in some states.[12] Caseload sizes are especially high in districts serving marginalized students—only one in six districts with predominantly students from low-income families and students of color have ratios below the 250-to-1 threshold recommended by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA).[13] Limited regulation of counselor caseload sizes at the state level, combined with budget and resource constraints, makes it difficult for school and district leaders to prioritize bolstering counselor staffing levels.

Misaligned expectations between counselors and school leaders about the counselor role is another constraint that hampers counselor efficacy. Research has found that principals are more likely than counselors to identify student registration and scheduling, test coordination, and record-keeping as significant counseling tasks—duties that the ASCA identifies as inappropriate for counselors.[14] Counselors at urban schools, as well as those serving students from low-income families and students of color, are more likely to spend time on these inappropriate duties. When counselors are asked to carry out extensive noncounseling tasks, it compromises their ability to provide critical direct services, such as implementing social skills lessons, meeting with a student struggling with the loss of a family member, or reviewing attendance data and identifying appropriate inter-

ventions. Not surprisingly, 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.[15]

Another factor that impacts counselors' ability to provide high-quality, comprehensive programming is low support among district and school leaders for in-service professional learning.[16] Professional development is important because many counselors have reported that their pre-service training did not adequately prepare them for their roles.[17] For example, counselors have voiced a need for more training in recognizing manifestations of student trauma in school settings,* implementing college and career readiness counseling, and using data to inform their practices.[18] When school leaders provide access to meaningful professional development, counselors are better prepared for the unique demands of their jobs.

Noncounseling work limits counselors' availability at a time when students' needs are escalating.

The Impact of COVID-19

COVID-19 exacerbated many of the challenges that school counselors face in fulfilling their professional roles. Notably, because of pandemic-induced staffing shortages, counselors have reported taking on additional noncounseling work in their schools. One survey of 7,000 counselors found that many have been required to serve as substitute teachers, perform new administrative tasks, or assume health-related duties such as temperature checks.[19] These responsibilities have further limited their availability to meet with students at a time when students' needs are escalating.

School closures and shifts to remote and hybrid schooling have also stymied counselors' ability to effectively support students. In our research, which involved documenting the experiences of hundreds of counselors during the pandemic, a recurring theme was counselors' struggle to connect with students.[20] Many counselors reported that just meeting with students was a challenge, as disparities in access to computers and the internet meant that not all students could connect virtually. Even counselors who were able to reach students online or by phone reported struggling to form meaningful connections, as students were disengaged and felt detached from their school support networks. Some students were also reluctant to speak openly while in their own homes.

The return to in-person schooling this academic year has allowed counselors to begin cultivating the personal relationships with students that weren't possible during the height of the pandemic. However, it also has placed great demand on counselors to devise systems and programs to support large student populations that have faced significant challenges on account of COVID-19. Many counselors already felt burned out before the pandemic started, and the additional stress and responsibilities of the last two years have made their jobs harder.

A New Vision for School Counselor Engagement

As schools consider how to promote the academic, social and emotional, and postsecondary success of their students, especially as they continue to recover from the pandemic, school counselors are a critical resource. Here, we outline three possible strategies for teachers and administrators: clarifying counselors' roles, building teacher-counselor relationships, and advocating for improved counselor working environments.

1. Develop a Shared Understanding of the Counselor Role Within Schools

To ensure school counselors are well positioned to meet students' developmental needs, *school leaders and teachers need to develop a shared understanding of the counselor role that is aligned with professional expectations.* Leaders looking to unlock their counselors' potential might begin by collaboratively developing clear priorities for the counseling program and how counselors' time can best be allocated to support student needs. Reviewing ASCA's copious resources about the counselor role and establishing strong counseling programs is a good place to start.[21] It is also essential that administrators, teachers, and counselors talk about counselors' duties and see if certain responsibilities could be distributed to other staff, thereby enabling counselors to have more time for direct contact with students. As school leaders increase their expectations of school

*The AFT offers a remote course, "10 Trauma-Informed Strategies to Help Students Heal," to boost resilience and promote mental health. For more information, AFT local leaders should contact Chelsea Prax: cprax@aft.org.

counselors, they also need to make sure counselor caseloads are reasonable and then hold their counselors accountable to these updated professional standards.

Once school counselors' capacities and roles have been agreed upon, school leaders, teachers, and counselors should ensure that the whole school community understands the scope of the counselor role across the academic, social and emotional, and postsecondary domains. Like Mr. Pham, too many teachers have known counselors whose caseloads are too high and who lacked the capacity to embrace an updated role. Teachers likely would engage differently with their school's counselors if they understood the school counseling role today. School leaders have an important role to play in setting expectations. For example, a principal can set aside time at the beginning of the year for the counseling department to present to teachers on the types of classroom lessons they can collaboratively deliver, discuss how to refer students in need of additional support, and outline possible classroom strategies for integrating social and emotional skill development in academic content areas. School leaders can also encourage teachers to have counselors sit in on lessons, as counselors often benefit from learning about instructional content and classroom dynamics firsthand.

Teacher-counselor partnerships can amplify the impact of both counselors and teachers on student success.

2. Build a Culture of Teacher-Counselor Partnerships

Teacher-counselor partnerships can amplify the impact of both counselors and teachers on student success. However, these partnerships are not always fully leveraged.[22] Assuming school counselors' working conditions support their efforts at partnering with teachers, there are three factors to consider for cultivating these collaborations.

First, *clear, open, and consistent communication is an essential foundation for teacher-counselor relationships*, as it establishes mutual respect and trust. Many teachers, like Mr. Pham, are unsure where to turn when they see their students struggling. Yet counselors are eager to collaborate with teachers. They are trained to be data-driven interventionists, and teachers are key to providing the data that counselors need to best target their interventions. Both teachers and counselors have valuable insights on the challenges that students face inside and outside the school building; openly sharing this information is essential to supporting student success. As with any organizational culture, intentional relationship building among staff leads to better outcomes for all. These relationships are especially valuable in enabling teachers to be vulnerable when they are struggling.

Second, allocating *more time for counselors and teachers to meaningfully connect is needed to build strong teacher-counselor relationships*. One strategy is to invite counselors to join grade-level team meetings or serve on school leadership teams. Doing so not only creates more lines of communication but also signals to the whole school community (including students and families) that counselors are leaders whose input is valued. Collaborative relationships can also serve as the starting point for consultations to review student data, identify and address concerns, and share information.

Third, counselors are eager to *help students engage more deeply with instructional content*. As postsecondary advisors, counselors help students contextualize their learning in the "real world" and think about how their academics can help them reach their future goals. Distributive counseling, a practice in which school counselors provide teachers tools and resources to implement counseling-like practices in their classrooms, is one way to achieve this. For example, counselors could bring social and emotional learning into everyday practices or embed career exploration into STEM courses.[23]

3. Advocate for Improved Counselor Working Conditions

Improving students' access to school counselors and the quality of the supports they provide requires systemic change to the US education system. Educators and school administrators can play an important role in bringing about those changes by advocating for improvements in counselor working conditions. The school counseling field has actively lobbied district, state, and federal policymakers for decades to reduce counselor caseloads, develop comprehensive counselor evaluation systems, and improve counselor certification requirements, among many other things. Having the full support of their school colleagues will amplify the outreach efforts of counseling professionals.

In the short term, school leaders, teachers, and counselors can advocate for improved conditions by urging district and state policymakers to use money from the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund to hire more school counselors. Several states have already used ESSER funding for this exact purpose. For example, Washington state has allocated $1.88 million for implementing comprehensive counseling programs across grades K–12,[24] and Oklahoma is using over $35 million for its new School Counselor Corps.[25]

Teachers have a special role in advocating for improved working conditions for counselors. Because there are far fewer counselors in schools than teachers, counselors are often not well represented at the bargaining table when union contracts are negotiated. Through collective bargaining, teachers and their union representatives can ensure that counselors' needs are met by advocating for lower student-to-counselor ratios and increased access to professional development that is specific to counselors' practice.

When counselors are well positioned and supported to carry out their responsibilities, everyone benefits.

Although Mr. Pham thoughtfully engaged with a qualified and collaborative school counselor, this is not the reality in many schools. Too often, counselors and teachers work in silos or limit their collaboration to team meetings. Unless we rethink how teachers and education leaders leverage counselors' unique potential and reduce the barriers counselors face in fulfilling their roles, schools will not maximize the value of school counselors. All educators can play a part in bringing about a new way to draw on school counselors' professional skillsets. When counselors are well positioned and supported to carry out their responsibilities, everyone benefits. Ensuring that this is a reality for all students is long overdue. □

Endnotes

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