

Education Week

COMMENTARY

The Troubling Student-to-Counselor Ratio That Doesn't Add Up



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As students plan for what comes after high school, they need more support

By Alanna Fuschillo

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Nationwide, public school counselors are overworked and under-resourced. The average student-to-school-counselor ratio is 482-to-1—nearly double the 250-to-1 ratio recommended by the American School Counselor Association. In fact, only three states—New Hampshire, Vermont, and Wyoming—have statewide averages that fall at or below the recommended ratio.

The impact—or lack thereof—that school counselors have on students is easiest to understand in the high school context, where students face an increasingly dizzying array of choices about what comes next after high school.

There are more types of colleges with more specialties than ever before. For students looking for something other than the four-year college track, apprenticeships are gaining prominence once again. According to some, credential-based or technical-skill-focused modules are the new ticket to the middle class.

But even if high school students settle on a traditional college path, more questions follow: If they choose college, what kind of college—community or four-year? Is there a scholarship for that? And does anybody know how to fill out a FAFSA? (That's Free Application for Federal Student Aid.) And would a 16-year-old know she needed one without a counselor?

Without knowing their options, students inadvertently may miss out on the best path forward or simply make no choice at all. Unfortunately, some counselors are so overworked that they themselves may struggle to stay abreast of the latest trends and programs available.

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Students fortunate enough to have engaged parents or other trusted adults in their lives to help them navigate their school years may not be harmed by a lack of in-school supports. Not every student needs the same level of attention. However, as is too often the case when it comes to school resources, the students who most need assistance often attend schools with the fewest supports. For low-income students or those who are the first in their families to attend college, the availability of good counseling can determine if they understand their options and are prepared to make informed choices.

To top it off, while many believe the school counselor's core function is to shepherd students into either college or career, counselors are also responsible for helping students manage their social-emotional health throughout their school years. Yet only a fraction of the up to 1 in 5 children who exhibit symptoms of a mental-health disorder receive help.

Professionals, such as school psychologists, dedicated to addressing mental-health issues are in short supply in school districts across the nation and often work across two or more schools. That means the average school counselor is often the first point of contact for addressing students' social-emotional concerns, academic readiness, and career- and college-counseling needs.

Counselors help students navigate a laundry list of issues that need to be addressed if students are going to make a successful transition to "what comes next." They might discuss students' interests and reviewing class schedules, help students cope with issues at home, and connect students in need of long-term mental-health support to the appropriate outside resources.

All of that requires time—the one thing that the average school counselor must severely ration. Many school counselors do their best, but no number of early mornings and office night shifts can fully make up for too little money and a lack of administrative support. The fact is that even the most dedicated, high-quality professionals can't give every student the necessary attention when juggling an unmanageable workload.

What steps, then, should we ask our school leaders and policymakers to take?

Starting at the district level, one option is for school leaders to monitor how existing counselors use their time. Advocates for the school counseling profession find that some counselors' time is monopolized by data entry and administrative tasks that could be handled by office personnel. Freeing counselors' time so they can focus more on providing the counseling they were trained to provide might not lessen their workload but would ensure they have more time to devote to students.

At the state level, legislators could mandate manageable caseloads for counselors and ensure a minimum level of access to counselors. Not every state requires that school counseling be available to students (particularly at the elementary level), and even fewer have instituted a cap on student-to-counselor ratios.

A mandate, of course, requires additional state resources. Some schools have adequate funding to support a more robust counselor workforce if they reallocate existing resources. But that is not true for all schools, some of which are severely resource-constrained.

Federal policymakers can help fill that resource gap. Currently, federal funding for school counseling is funneled through the Student Support and Academic Enrichment, or SSAE, program, a flexible block-grant program that replaces several targeted grants, including one for elementary and secondary school counseling. It is up to states to decide if they will prioritize school counseling programs when distributing funds to schools.

Earlier this year, the U.S. Department of Education's 2019 budget proposed eliminating the SSAE, which would have left states with no choice in the matter. Thankfully, Congress instead increased SSAE funding, providing \$1.1 billion for the grants in this fiscal year's omnibus spending bill, a drastic improvement from the \$400 million appropriated for the previous year. But ensuring school counselors have the time, money, and support they need to be an effective resource for their students requires sustained funding, which is why the Education Department's budget request remains alarming.

State legislators and the federal Education Department should allocate more resources to schools, not fewer. If you're looking for evidence of this fact, just ask a school counselor—if you can find one.

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