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Lack of Funds Leave School Counselors Struggling to Find Balance

School officials say a lack of counselors hurts students academically and mentally

By Allie Bidwell

Eric Blanco, a counselor at Ernest Righetti High School in central California, says his job is a juggling act. Coordinating college information sessions, acting as a crisis intervention counselor, and balancing a number of other clerical duties, Blanco says, take away from his direct counseling time.

"I have to deal with whatever's the most pressing," Blanco says. "If I get a call about a student who's suicidal I have to deal with that immediately, which means I may have to drop the letter of recommendation I'm writing for a student, which means I may not get that grade check to the student who's at borderline, that sort of follow-through."

That's because Blanco is the only counselor in a school with 2,200 students, and is sometimes unable to see each student more than once throughout the year, if at all.

"One of the things that has made me step back a couple times is I've had students come and say, 'We know you're our counselor, but you're so busy that I don't come by,'" Blanco says. "And I always tell them if there's something they need to talk about, I'm available to talk. But they see how overwhelmed I can be in terms of work, and it makes me feel bad that a student would say that."

Although counselors' case loads have decreased in recent years, the national average remains nearly twice the recommended rate set by the American Counseling Association, with each counselor seeing 471 students on average. Only two states have ratios that meet the recommended case load of 250 students for each counselor: Vermont, at 1:235, and



High school guidance counselor Roslyn Wagner, talks with Jessica Hujber, 15, at Cooper City High School in Cooper City, Fla. Budget cuts have made the student-to-counselor ratio nearly twice the recommended rate nationwide.

Wyoming, at 1:200, according to data from the American School Counselor Association.

The situation is much worse in California, which at 1:1016 has the highest counselor-to-student ratio in the nation. But the numbers have spiked because

California, like many other states, has no set mandate for student-to-counselor ratios.

When school districts face financial pressures due to state budget cuts, flexible jobs such as librarians, nurses, and school counselors are often on the chopping block, according to Art Terrazas, the grass-roots advocacy coordinator for the American Counseling Association.

"Counseling, when compared to teaching, is still a much younger profession," Terrazas says. "When school districts are looking at areas where they might be able to save a dollar ... those are easy programs to justify a cut if you don't know what it does.

As other positions are cut, not only do counselors take on heavier case loads, but they are also expected to pitch in with other administrative and clerical duties, such as scheduling and event coordination, Terrazas says.

"People do not recognize there are already a lot of things a school counselor does," Terrazas says. One area that can be impacted by the added burden counselors take on is students' mental health, Terrazas says.

"We've seen a lot of great tragedies that have occurred in schools over the last few years," Terrazas says. "We would hope when we're talking about how to solve this problem, how to keep our kids safe and create a healthier society, that this is one of the tools we could use to be proactive about taking care of our communities in a holistic fashion."

In a recent call with reporters, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said he expects legislators to continue to talk about mental health issues as they relate to school safety. Duncan said that although it is not the sole cause, the link between

mental illness and school shootings is "huge," and that the Department of Education plans to push legislators to invest more in schools that do not have the resources to hire more counselors.

"We have to make sure our children are safe, we have to make sure there isn't such easy access to guns, whether it's in school, whether it's in the community," Duncan said. "Some neighborhoods are more like Iraq or Afghanistan than something that resembles what America can and should be. [There is] a lot of unfinished business there, a lot of hard work we need to do."

On Aug. 16, the department announced it will give \$12.3 million to 35 school districts across the country to fund counseling programs in "targeted" elementary schools. Congress is also considering the [Student Support Act](#), a bill that would set minimum ratios for school counselors, psychologists and social workers.

Kirsten Barnes, president of the California Association of School Counselors, says the growing concern and acknowledgement of a need for more counselors are encouraging, but legislators and other leaders need to make sure any changes are sustainable.

"We have a tendency in education to, because it's a hot thing at the moment, only keep some programs for a year or two," Barnes says. "It's frustrating because who suffers are the students. If we're going to do these things, I would hope that it's something that's ongoing and permanent."