School Counselors: Emerging Vanguards of Student Safety and Success

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To learn. To be safe at school. These two major concerns for children are shared by parents, schools, and policymakers. Public concern about violence in schools has increased pressure on policymakers to do more to make schools safe, orderly learning environments. In response to high-profile incidents of school violence, policymakers have passed zero tolerance laws that impose mandatory expulsion for students who bring weapons to school, and many have adopted other measures to protect students, such as the use of metal detectors, mesh backpacks, and identification cards. The tragic proportions of the violence in Springfield, Oregon, and Littleton, Colorado, however, focused attention on a crucial, but often overlooked, component of violence prevention: attending to the mental health needs of children and adolescents.

In an address to the nation on the first anniversary of the Columbine shootings,[1] President Clinton announced new initiatives to provide schools with counselors and additional resources to help troubled children.[2,3] Other congressional actions have also supported elementary and secondary school counseling programs and mental health and student services.[4,5] Their common aim is to ensure learning and safety by solving students' academic, social, emotional, and personal problems before they cause failure, alienation, and violence.

By helping troubled students to address their problems, effective school counseling programs promote school safety. However, few realize their potential to boost school achievement as well. By helping students to build needed skills and overcome barriers to learning and healthy

development, school counselors can play a central role in achieving the dual goals of school safety and school improvement.[6,7,8,9,10,11,12]

What Problems Can Effective Programs Address?

Today's social ills -- violence, poverty, peer and family conflict, and drug use -- affect children and youth in schools and communities everywhere. As a result, many students have emotional, social, and personal problems that significantly impair their ability to learn and to relate positively with others. Experts estimate that more than 11 million children and adolescents in the United States have developmental, psychosocial, and mental health problems.[13] According to the Center for Mental Health Services, more than four million children between the ages of 9 and 17 have serious emotional disturbances,[14] and the Surgeon General reports that one in five shows signs of a mental disorder in any given year.[15] In many urban schools, "over 50 percent of . . . students manifest significant learning, behavior, and emotional problems" (p. 1).[11] Although the World Health Organization projects increases in the incidence of childhood disorders, the National Institute of Mental Health claims that fewer than 20 percent of affected children receive the treatment they need.[16]

Several factors contribute to the lack of sufficient care for mental health problems. Millions of children are uninsured and thus unable to access services. Even when families have private or public health insurance, mental health coverage is often inadequate: coverage has low lifetime limits, an insufficient number of counseling sessions is covered, reimbursement is restricted to certain diagnostic categories, or families are unable to maneuver the bureaucracy and paperwork of insurance and health-care systems. Service delivery may be fragmented or piecemeal, and in rural and economically depressed areas, mental health services may be unavailable.

The failure to provide mental health and academic support services to children who need them carries profound consequences for individuals, schools, and society. Students with emotional disturbances make lower grades, are less likely to pass competency tests, fail more subjects, and are more likely to be retained than children with other disabilities.[17] Only 42 percent graduate from high school

and over half drop out of school   the highest percentage of all disability groups; of these, nearly three-fourths are arrested within five years.[17,18] Some estimate that 50 to 75 percent (or more) of youth in correctional facilities may have emotional, behavior, learning, and developmental disorders.[19]

How Can School Counseling Programs Help?

School counseling programs can provide students convenient access to mental health and psychological services that otherwise might not be accessible or available in their communities. Because such services can be essential to students' success, the Institute of Medicine recommends that they be offered as mainstream school services.[20] School policymakers have a vested interest in seeing that all students get the help they need, since barriers to learning and healthy development can affect overall school safety and the attainment of school improvement goals.[21]

School counseling programs are "cost-effective, preventive medicine" (p. 2).[22] Research shows that counseling services can help to prevent violent and disruptive behavior, improve academic achievement and school attendance, and prepare students for successful transition into the world of work.[7,22] One study found that in schools with comprehensive counseling programs, students "rated the climate . . . as being more positive, . . . reported greater feelings of belonging and safety, [and] . . . indicated that their classes were less likely to be interrupted by other students and that their peers behaved better in school" (p. 300). These students also reported receiving more career and college guidance and earning higher grades.[23]

Counseling services are a key element in drop-out prevention.[24] School counseling programs can provide a wide range of services that support students to stay in school, such as helping them to solve personal and social problems that interfere with school attendance as well as with their ability to concentrate and learn. Studies report that just one caring adult can help an at-risk youth to overcome adversity and succeed against all odds.[25] Whether counselors work with students in guidance classes, small-group discussions, or individual sessions, they can be the adults who make a difference in children's lives.

Unfortunately, however, schools across the nation are facing a critical shortage of school counselors. Instead of the 250:1 student-to-counselor ratio recommended by professional counseling organizations, the current national average is more than 500:1.[22] Some elementary schools do not employ counselors or they lack full-time counselors. More than 100,000 new counselors are needed by 2005 to meet recommended ratios and growing student populations.[22]

The American Counseling Association cites three primary reasons for the current shortage, each of which makes counseling a less appealing career option for educators:

- **Tight school budgets.** Counseling positions are often the first targets of budget cuts and staff reductions.
- **Misconceptions about the counselor's role.** Administrators and policymakers may not realize that counselors can play a major role in violence prevention and in early intervention for learning and behavior problems
- **Current focus on test scores.** Policymakers may be so focused on test results that they overlook the impact created by contributing factors such as barriers to learning.[22]

In many schools, counselors are burdened with large student caseloads and administrative tasks such as student and class scheduling, test administration, and record keeping, leaving them little time to work with troubled students. The new federal initiatives aim to expand students' access to needed services by helping schools hire more counselors and provide effective counseling programs.

What Are Effective Practices for School Counseling Programs?

Policymakers' focus on school reform and accountability over the past two decades has caused practitioners to reconceptualize what constitutes effective practice for school counseling programs.[7,8,10,11] Traditionally, counselors have assumed a limited role that is peripheral to the overall mission of schools, providing instead discrete, targeted-and to some-nonessential services. However, the

pressure on schools to see that students meet performance standards despite significant emotional, social, personal, and learning needs has brought to light the relationship between counseling and school improvement efforts.[7,10,11] By addressing barriers to learning and healthy development, counseling programs can help bridge the gap between student needs and expectations for learning.

In keeping with this shift in thinking, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) endorses "comprehensive school counseling programs that promote and enhance learning"[6] and "enable all students to achieve success in school and to develop into contributing members of society."[26] To help states and schools establish effective counseling programs, the association has developed national standards and a list of related student competencies that are focused on academic, career, and personal/social development. (Table 1.) The effectiveness of programs based on the standards is determined by how well students demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and attitudes related to specific learner outcomes.[6,10,26] Because they support learning and healthy development, such programs can play a central role in school improvement efforts.

Table 1
American School Counselor Association
National Standards for
School Counseling Programs

The National Standards for School Counseling Programs focus on three broad areas of student development: academic, career, and personal/social development. A set of standards defines each area:

Academic development includes helping students to

- acquire skills, attitudes, and knowledge to learn effectively complete school with the academic preparation essential for a choice of postsecondary options, including college
- understand the relationship of academics to the world of work and life at home and in the community

Career development includes helping students to

- acquire skills to make informed career decisions
- employ strategies to achieve career success and satisfaction
- understand the relationship between personal qualities, education and training, and the world of work

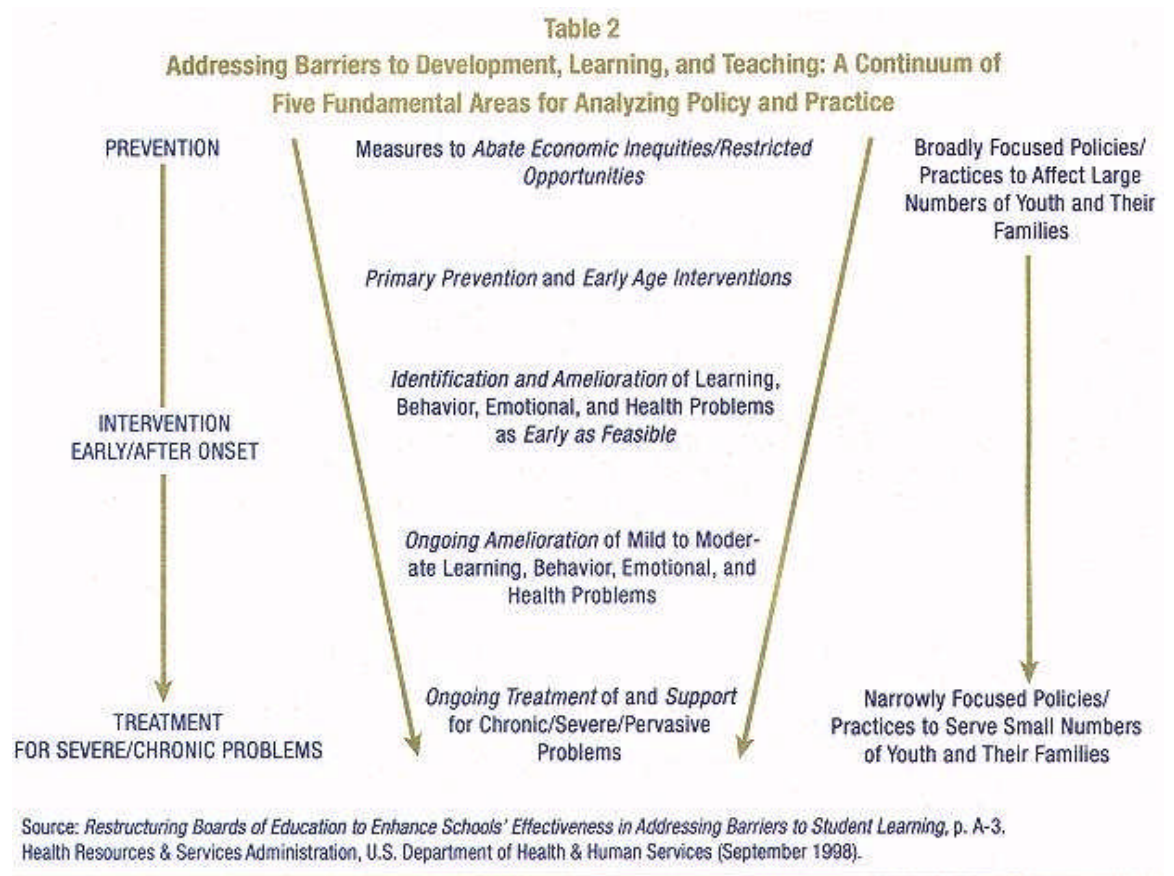**Personal/social development includes helping students to**

- acquire skills, attitudes, and knowledge and interpersonal skills to help them understand and respect self and others
- make decisions, set goals, and take necessary action to achieve goals
- understand safety and survival skills

Adapted from National Standards for School Counseling Programs of the American School Counselor Association: Executive Summary. http://www.schoolcounselor.org/national.htm. (10 November 2000).

Programs are more likely to be effective when they provide a comprehensive system of supports that enable all students to meet challenging standards; take a proactive, preventive, and multifaceted approach; offer a continuum of interventions and services to address the range of emotional, social, personal, and learning needs; are geared to students' developmental levels; respond to cultural and individual differences; are coordinated and fully integrated with other education programs, school improvement plans, and services; include accountability and evaluation components based on student outcomes; and build strong connections to families, communities, and appropriate agencies.[6,7,10,11,26,27] To ensure that personnel have the skills and knowledge to implement the programs successfully, schools should employ credentialed, professional school counselors and afford them the time and resources to reach all students.[6]

Today, most states support the concept of comprehensive school counseling programs in their schools. Although they share common student goals, principles, and philosophies, these programs vary significantly in how they are implemented across schools, districts, and states. To help schools and policymakers implement effective programs, the Center for Mental Health in Schools has developed a framework for integrating school and community resources to provide a full continuum of interventions and services that address barriers to learning and support school reform efforts. (Table 2.)

Table 2
Addressing Barriers to Development, Learning, and Teaching: A Continuum of Five Fundamental Areas for Analyzing Policy and Practice

PREVENTION

Measures to *Abate Economic Inequities/Restricted Opportunities*

Broadly Focused Policies/ Practices to Affect Large Numbers of Youth and Their Families

Primary Prevention and *Early Age Interventions*

INTERVENTION EARLY/AFTER ONSET

Identification and Amelioration of Learning, Behavior, Emotional, and Health Problems as *Early as Feasible*

Ongoing Amelioration of Mild to Moderate Learning, Behavior, Emotional, and Health Problems

TREATMENT FOR SEVERE/CHRONIC PROBLEMS

Ongoing Treatment of and *Support* for Chronic/Severe/Pervasive Problems

Narrowly Focused Policies/ Practices to Serve Small Numbers of Youth and Their Families

Source: *Restructuring Boards of Education to Enhance Schools' Effectiveness in Addressing Barriers to Student Learning*, p. A-3. Health Resources & Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (September 1998).

What Is the Role of the Counselor?

The counselor's role in effective school counseling programs is to help students achieve success in school and to help schools create safe, supportive, and positive learning environments for all. Because they have an education background, a master's degree, and graduate-level coursework in counseling and guidance, counselors are trained to address students' comprehensive needs and to enhance learning in their schools.[28] Counselors in effective

counseling programs carry out specific tasks related to these concerns.[6,8,29,30,31]

Coordinating programs and services. Counselors are responsible for organizing, implementing, coordinating, and evaluating the effectiveness of counseling programs in their schools. To ensure that programs are effective, counselors must engage in a continuous process of assessing students' needs, constructing programs and interventions to address barriers to learning, and evaluating their success in terms of student results.

Collaborating with key players. School counselors must work collaboratively with families, teachers, administrators, communities, and other agencies to support students. Counselors can assist families in helping their children, enhance home-school communication and family involvement, and provide families with information about school programs and policies as well as child-development and disability issues. They can help identify and connect students and families to available community resources and facilitate collaboration among schools and agencies to provide needed services. They can also consult with teachers to design classroom interventions and work with teachers, administrators, and other staff to implement programs and create school environments that support children, learning, and healthy development.

Counseling students. The primary role of school counselors is to provide direct services to students. They may work with students individually, in small groups, or in whole classes; provide educational and career guidance; or perform crisis-intervention and case-management services.

Because they have frequent, meaningful contact with students every day, counselors become attuned to the difficulties and stressors that students encounter at school and in their communities. They are trained to spot potential emotional, social, and learning problems; make appropriate referrals for evaluation and treatment; and develop interventions that help students to succeed in school. Counselors may also be in the best position to recognize and address problems such as substance abuse and other self-destructive behaviors.

During elementary school, students begin to form attitudes about school, peers, and social groups and develop critical life skills and character values. Beginning in the earliest grades and continuing throughout the school years, counselors can assist students in developing skills that improve decision making, communication, and interpersonal relationships. They can help students cope with stressful events or situations, solve academic and peer problems, and resist negative peer pressure. As certified teachers, they can work in classrooms to deliver drug and violence prevention curricula that help students avoid drugs, respect diversity, and solve conflicts peacefully.

Skills deficits in young children e.g., the inability to solve problems, empathize, and manage anger can begin a trajectory of antisocial behavior that leads to violence in adolescence.[32] Elementary school counselors are able to address these deficits and teach strategies and skills that decrease impulsive, aggressive behavior; increase appropriate behavior; and build social competence.

By providing comprehensive services that address needs and promote learning and healthy development, school counselors not only help students to succeed in school but also make schools safer, more positive places for children to learn. Without such assistance, students' academic, social, emotional, and personal difficulties can become more serious, intransigent, and expensive to treat, and may ultimately lead to school failure, social rejection, antisocial behavior, and violence.[33]

What Can Policymakers Do to Support School Counseling Programs?

Since school counseling services can improve students' mental health and academic achievement and promote safe learning environments, increasing students' access to counseling is an appropriate, effective use of education resources. By addressing academic, social, emotional, and behavioral barriers to learning, counseling programs can help all students meet standards for performance and become contributing members of the community and workforce.

As school counselors face the challenges of providing a more comprehensive program, they need tremendous

support from policymakers, local boards and administrators, teachers, and parents. Concerned local, state, and federal policymakers can take steps to ensure that all students have the opportunity to benefit from school counseling programs.

1. Support legislation and funding to provide all K-12 students access to comprehensive school counseling programs that meet national standards.
2. Establish lower student-to-counselor ratios so that all students and families can get the help they need.
3. Make sure that job descriptions for school counselors focus on providing comprehensive services to students.
4. Consider ways to address shortages of certified school counselors, such as defining job descriptions, providing financial incentives, and boosting recruitment efforts.
5. Promote and fund comprehensive systems of student support as a key component of school reform efforts.
6. Make sure that policies promote consolidation and integration of resources to address barriers to learning, both within schools (e.g., compensatory programs, improvement plans, safe schools grants) and between schools and communities (e.g., health and social services).
7. Support more funding for prevention and early intervention efforts that address children's emotional, social, personal, and learning problems.
8. Fund research that advances the understanding of barriers to learning and leads to more effective school policies and practices.

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