

Counselors See Conflicts in Carrying Out Mission

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Middle and high school counselors believe they have a unique and powerful role to play in preparing all students for good jobs or college, but they feel hamstrung by insufficient training, competing duties, and their own schools' priorities, according to a study released today.

The online [survey](#) of 5,300 counselors was conducted this past spring for the [College Board's Advocacy & Policy Center](#). One of the largest-ever surveys of counselors, it paints a picture of a committed but frustrated corps that sees a deep schism between the ideal mission of schools and the work that takes shape day to day.

Nine in 10 counselors, for instance, said that two objectives should top their schools' priority lists: ensuring that all students have access to high-quality education and that they graduate well-equipped for college and careers. But fewer than four in 10 said their schools actually operated as if those goals were central to their mission.

That disconnection was even sharper among counselors in public and low-income schools than in private and wealthier ones. Only 19 percent of counselors in high-poverty schools said college and career readiness was part of their schools' day-to-day mission, compared with 30 percent of counselors overall. Two-thirds of those in private schools said so, compared with one-quarter of those in public schools.

"We have more than 100,000 counselors in our [school] system, and yet they're not being strategically deployed," said John Bridgeland, the lead author of the report and the president and chief executive officer of [Civic Enterprises](#), a Washington-based public-policy group that includes high school improvement among its focus issues.

"Counselors are uniquely positioned to see the whole life of the child; to see their family circumstances ... their social and emotional needs, the nonacademic supports they may require, and their academic progress and challenge, not just in a given year, like a teacher can, but over time," he said. "That's an advantage that's extremely powerful. Not deploying counselors in a way that takes advantage of that unique role is a huge national loss."

Job Interference

Counselors reported that a broad and unclear conception of their role gets in the way of focusing on what they believe to be most important. Nine in 10 said they wanted to reduce their administrative burdens and have smaller caseloads so they could get more training and spend more time helping students with supports and preparation for careers and college. The average caseload of the counselors in the study was 368 students; 427 in schools with high poverty rates.

"Counselors' duties should be aligned to the needs of students, but that doesn't always happen in a school setting," said Patricia Z. Smith, who is now a counselor-consultant to the Hillsborough County school district in Florida, after three decades as director of guidance services there. "They get pulled into lunchroom duty and bus duty, into substituting for teachers, and proctoring tests. This is a shock to new counselors when they first get into schools."

The quality and focus of counselors' training is a problem, said Ms. Smith. Typical training programs—focusing on skills such as counseling technique, group counseling, crisis intervention, and human growth—are

stronger at preparing counselors for their roles as personal and emotional supports to students than they are for their work helping students plan for college and careers, she said.

The study reflects that appraisal. Although seven in 10 middle and high school counselors hold master's degrees, and half were teachers first, only 16 percent rated their training as "highly effective" in preparing them for their counseling work in schools.

"Despite the good intentions of many of these professionals, research suggests that little alignment exists among counselor training, work assignments, and school goals," the report says. "There seems to be consistent misalignment between the counseling field and the education system."

Creating Links

The counseling field has begun to grapple with such schisms and define the roles counselors should play in supporting students' all-around success.

The [Education Trust's National Center for Transforming School Counseling](#), for instance, developed a "[new vision for school counseling](#)," which advocates a role as "powerful agents of change" and "leaders" who create opportunities for all students to "pursue dreams of high aspirations." In April, the College Board's [National Office for School Counselor Advocacy](#) released [eight components](#) of work it considers crucial to schools' mission of promoting college and career readiness, including helping students see and create strong links between their academic programs and their future work and education plans.

School leaders don't always appreciate the role counselors can play in the school's academic-improvement plan, said Mel Riddile, a former principal of two Virginia high schools. Counselors are key in connecting the dots between the broad goals and the concrete, student-level changes necessary to reach those goals, he said.

"Principals who get it realize that when you have a school plan to implement, the plan is implemented when counselors sit down with students to schedule them [for classes]. That's the moment of truth," said Mr. Riddile, who is now the associate director of high school services for the National Association of Secondary School Principals, based in Reston, Va.

The report advocates key policies to bring about shifts in school counseling.

Counselors must be seen as "leaders focused on keeping students on track to graduate from high school ready for college and career," and their activities should be tightly tied to that vision, with "less expensive" and highly trained staff members redeployed to handle administrative functions, the report says.

More professional-development dollars should be aimed at counselors, and preservice training should be reworked to reflect the current demand for deeper skills in supporting students with college- and career planning, including college access issues such as financial aid. Additionally, states should enact or enforce caseload requirements. As of 2009, the study says, only five states met the American School Counselor Association's recommended ratio of 250 students per counselor.

Central to the study is the idea that counselors should be held accountable for student progress, a view that Mr. Bridgeland and others in the field planned to advance in a briefing today on Capitol Hill, where lawmakers have been working to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

Accountability Measures

Exploring counselors' views on accountability in the survey produced mixed results. Six in 10 said they "strongly or somewhat" support certain accountability and incentives for counselors to help students meet career- and college readiness goals. Support for the idea was especially strong among African-American counselors and those in urban and high-minority schools.

Queried about possible indicators that might be used to influence judgments about their performance, high school counselors expressed the strongest support for measures such as rates of high school graduation and college application, the completion of college-preparation courses, and students' access to college-level courses. More than half said using such indicators was "somewhat fair" or "very fair."

But more than half said it would be unfair to judge them on other factors, such as their schools' dropout rates, or how many students fill out federal financial-aid forms, gain acceptance to college, or graduate from college.

At the middle school level, most counselors said it would be fair to judge them in part on middle school completion rates, but not on a range of other indicators, including student attendance, promotion, success in Algebra 1, and high school graduation.

Some school districts have been experimenting with counselor accountability. Florida's Hillsborough County is well known for its work on teacher performance pay, but has also begun similar work with counselors. This is the first year that counselors' evaluations will be based in part on accountability for student progress, Ms. Smith said.

As part of its "EXCEerator" initiative, through the College Board, to get more students into higher-level courses, Hillsborough asked its middle school counselors in 2007-08 to help build a college-going culture and increase enrollment and success in Algebra 1, said Ms. Smith.

By the 2010-11 school year, 79 percent of 8th graders were taking the course, compared with 47 percent when the push began, and passing rates rose by 43 percent, she said.

The counselors collaborated on many strategies to accomplish that, Ms. Smith said, including producing and distributing brochures to families to raise awareness about the importance of completing Algebra 1 in 8th grade, and organizing tutoring sessions for students before and after school, and at lunch, with teachers or high school students to help them through the classes.

Counselors also began using data available to teachers to monitor students earlier and more closely, she said.

"They'd go into our online grading system, which counselors didn't really used to look at very much, and check those grades instead of waiting until report cards came out. They'd see if kids were doing their homework, and see how their grades were, and decide maybe it's time to call home or get a group together for some extra help."

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