

BEST PRACTICE

GUIDELINES FOR CALIFORNIA SCHOOL COUNSELORS



CALIFORNIA ASSOCIATION OF
SCHOOL COUNSELORS INC.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past several years, California legislators and other state decision-makers have grappled with how to address the mental health needs of today's students. **Currently, school children are experiencing record levels of depression and anxiety, together with multiple forms of trauma.** However, funding decisions to hire school-based mental health (SBMH) providers has been left primarily to local decision makers and has not kept up with societal demands.

School counselors are typically the first SBMH providers to interact with students when they are struggling. They not only have specialized knowledge in supporting students as they navigate the academic program, they also have training in establishing safe learning environments, monitoring and responding to behavior to improve school climate, and creating relationships between students, teachers and parents that promote greater interpersonal connections.

Nearly 60% of California schools report no school counselors employed on their school campus. While there are a number of California schools who are fortunate enough to employ school counselors, nevertheless state data indicates those schools are still grossly understaffed with ratios double and triple the national recommendations. **The national recommendation is to have at least one school counselor for every 250 students.** This reflects a minimum requirement, not as some have interpreted – “the ideal”.

Over the last several years, school districts have used Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) to increase the number of school counselors serving students in California schools. Despite these increases, California school counseling ratios rank **47th in the nation**, with ratios and employment patterns varying widely from county to county and district to district. According to a recent report from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), nearly 400,000 students in California attend a school with a police officer but no school counselor (Whitaker et al., 2019). While school counselors are trained to invest in student academic achievement, college and career readiness and social-emotional well-being, the role of the school counselor is all too often misunderstood by school, district or county educational leaders, resulting in ineffective practices and the underutilization of these highly-qualified staff members.

This report examines the role of school counselors in California schools, underscoring their unique contributions to the total educational program. An overview of current laws and resources is provided along with best practices, to assist school district administrators in understanding appropriate uses for employing school counselors and the potential responsibilities school counselors have in improving school districts' overall student outcomes. A large body of research points to the effectiveness of school counselors in supporting student academic achievement, college and career preparation, improving student engagement, increasing parent involvement, improving school climate, reducing discipline referrals, and reducing chronic absenteeism. These positive outcomes fall short if school counselors are not utilized in schools or in ways commensurate with their training and areas of expertise.

"We must arm school counselors across the country with the appropriate counselor to student ratio (1 to 250). School counselors, social workers and school psychologists [are] all on the mental health frontlines."

- Dr. Laura Hodges, Nationally Certified School Counselor, in a statement to the Federal Commission on School Safety

ROLE OF THE SCHOOL COUNSELOR

Excellent school counselors provide high quality services to ALL students in the areas of academic, career and social emotional learning. No longer are school counselors consider a resource for identified students – all students deserve and have the right to the fundamental resources and services provided by school counselors. The profession has evolved and adapted to the political, economic and social fluctuations in society over the past several decades. Changes in demographics, family structures, mental health concerns, expanding communication systems, advancements in technology and the ever increasing need to prepare students to enter the 21st century workforce are just a few of the issues that have had an impact on the school counseling profession.

School Counselors are trained and authorized to provide a comprehensive educational counseling program. As described in California Education Code, Section 49600, “educational counseling” means specialized services provided by a school counselor possessing a valid credential with a specialization in pupil personnel services who is assigned specific times to directly counsel pupils. Each school district with a school counseling program must also have an approved Board Policy and Administrative Regulation that defines the scope of the comprehensive educational counseling program in their district (BP/AR 6164.2).

School counselors:

- Develop, plan, implement, and evaluate a school counseling program that includes academic, career, personal, and social development
- Advocate for the high academic achievement and social development of all students
- Provide school-wide prevention and intervention strategies and counseling services
- Provide consultation, training, and staff development to teachers and parents
- Supervise a district-approved advisory program

School counselors are uniquely trained as educators and mental health service providers and as such are often the first point of contact for students and their families. School counselors use Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) as a comprehensive framework to address the mental health needs of all students within the educational system. This framework of service delivery ranges from preventive services and programs for all students to more intensive services for select students based on medical necessity. MTSS uses a three-tiered system of increasingly intensive interventions that are comprehensive in scope, preventative in design and developmental in nature. In Tier I and Tier II, rather than a “wait to fail” approach, school counselors frequent monitoring of student progress allows for early identification of academic and behavior issues at the first sign of trouble. Additionally, school counseling teams maintain a reflective Professional Learning Community (PLC) process to target a range of interventions extending from students in danger of failing to those with behavioral, attendance or social/emotional challenges and everything in between. When issues with students and their families are determined to be severe (Tier III), school counselors seek out licensed community-based professionals to refer families for intensive therapeutic interventions.

Arguably, media, lawmakers and education leaders agree that California has not fully addressed rising student mental health needs, prepared the next generation of students adequately for a more competitive and complex job market, and has not sufficiently addressed the increasing societal stressors many of our students face today. Yet, school counselors continue to try to address these issues with ratios in many districts remaining disproportionately high and unmanageable.

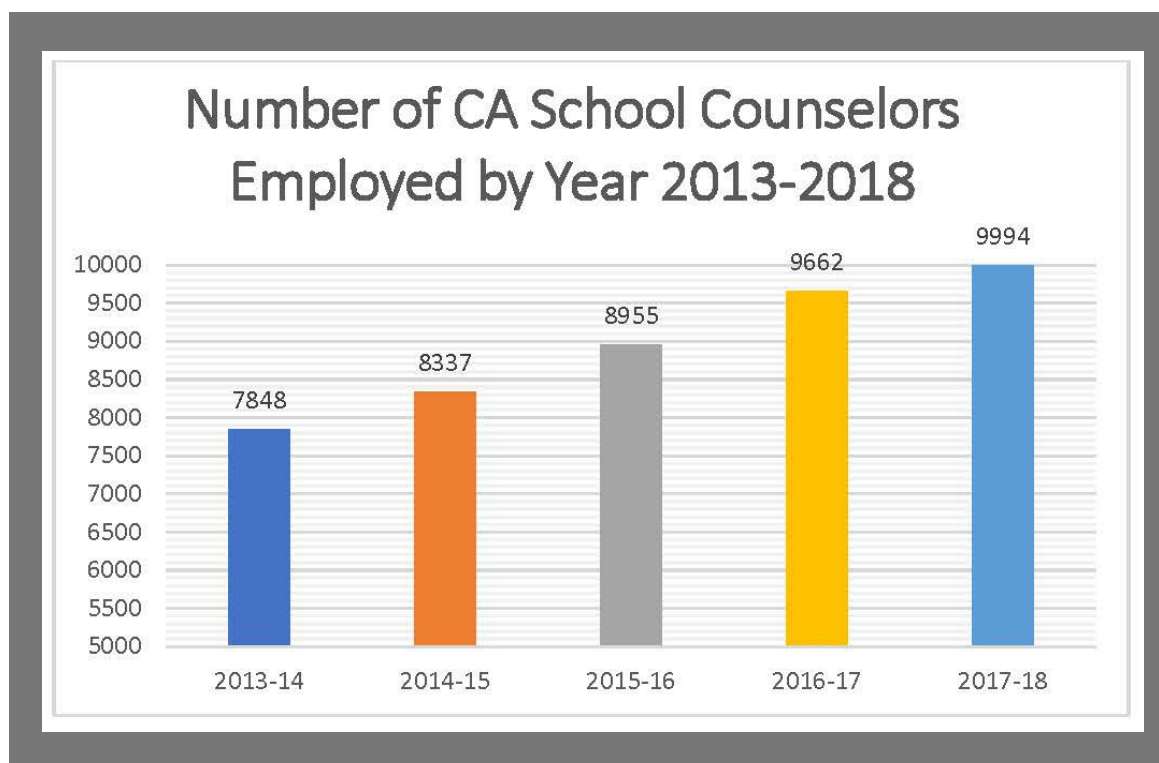
"Many school district leaders in California lack a clear understanding of appropriate uses for school counseling services, resulting in a lack of quality services, uniformity and accountability... all tied to student achievement. Unfortunately, the result is vast inequities across the state, which needs to be a strong consideration of law makers as a basic civil rights issue for all students."

- Dr. Loretta Whitson
Executive Director,
California Association of
School Counselors

INEQUITY OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS INVESTING IN SCHOOL COUNSELORS

General education funding through the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) is the primary source of funding for school counselors in California schools. LCFF dollars are decided at the local level. Recent trends seem to indicate that school district leaders are hiring more school counselors to work within six of the eight State Priorities in the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP): **Student Achievement, Course Access, Pupil Engagement, Parent Engagement, School Climate and Other Student Outcomes**. Likewise, many school districts understand that school counselors directly impact the majority of the measurable accountability outcomes in the California DashBoard - Academic Performance: College/Career; Academic Engagement: Graduation Rate and Chronic Absenteeism; and Conditions and Climate: Suspension Rate.

While school districts have used LCFF to increase school counselors, others have not because LCFF funds are provided proportionally to school districts based upon the number of students identified as low income, English learners or foster youth. Yet, the services provided by school counselors are for ALL students, regardless of the risk factors. California's current student-to-school counselor ratio is 622:1, far exceeding the national average of 482:1, and 75% greater than the ratio of 250:1 recommended by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) and the American Counselor Association (ACA).



As seen in the chart above, California has seen an almost 30% increase in the number of school counselors working in California schools since the 2013-14 school year (Dataquest, 2019). However, the understaffing of school counselors for the past 40 years is so stark that even with a 30% increase, it is still not enough, falling far short of the national and recommended averages! In order for California to reach the recommended ratios, it would take nearly doubling the number of school counselors currently working in California schools. However, most would agree, California must do more to address the increasing societal stressors many of our students face today. We cannot continue to ignore the growing need for student mental health services, and the support needed for students in the college and career transition process. From the lens of developing California's workforce, robust college and career counseling is an essential element often missing from California schools.

RESEARCH SUPPORTS THE EFFECTIVE USE OF SCHOOL COUNSELORS

Research demonstrating the effectiveness of school counseling is compelling and needs strong consideration from a policy perspective. Several studies point to the benefits associated with regular access to a school counselor, particularly with students most in need of interventions and support in high-poverty districts (Carrell & Carell, 2006; Dvorsky, 2014; Lapan, Gysbers, Stanley & Pierce, 2012; McIntosh, 2010; Wood, 2013). Another study showed the value of staffing school counselors at the elementary level. Students in districts with the assistance of school counselors beginning in kindergarten, produced higher graduation rates, higher college entrance and persistence rates, lower chronic absenteeism rates, and fewer out-of-school suspensions when compared to schools with schools counselors beginning in 6th grade (Parzych, Donohue, Gaesser, & Chiu, 2019).

School counselors are extensively trained to oversee comprehensive college and career preparation programs in California schools. Several studies underscores the value in providing individual college and career student planning sessions with school counselors, leading to the increase in Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) applications and college attendance-critical gateways to postsecondary access. (Dunlop Velez, 2016; Radford, Ifill, & Lew, 2016). Economists have found that hiring a school counselor was three times as cost effective in increasing academic achievement and reducing student misbehavior as hiring an additional teacher to reduce class sizes (Carrell & Hoekstra, 2014) Together these studies provide important insight into the impact of school counselors on student success when allotted the time and resources

CALL FOR STATE LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOL COUNSELING

Despite the growing body of research on the effectiveness of utilizing school counselors in schools, the increasing need of students and the expanding school counselor workforce, there is no representative school counseling leadership in the California Department of Education and sparse leadership for school counselors in county offices of education.

The leadership at CASC maintains that “School counselors’ job responsibilities need to be protected so that they can do the important tasks they are trained to do. Given the complexity and ever-increasing societal pressures, school counselors need high-quality and consistent professional development along with structures, support and oversight at the district, county and state level, in order for them to fully realize their potential to equitably help all students achieve and flourish”.

Besides advocating for a full-time school counselor in every school at a ratio of 250:1, the California Association of School Counselors calls for California lawmakers to establish clear, equitable and sustainable approaches to usher this generation of students into the 21st century.

BEST PRACTICES IN SCHOOL COUNSELING

This section describes nine areas school counselors can effectively be utilized to improve student behavior, academics and access to post secondary career options.

1 CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

School counselors understand the best way to get in front of chronic absenteeism is to ensure that schools are a place where students feel happy and safe, both physically and emotionally.

SCHOOL COUNSELORS:

- Work as a team to create an engaging calendar of events designed to motivate students
- Implement school-wide student support programs like Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), social and emotional learning, and other student support programs
- Identify students with attendance issues and intervene early to prevent small problems from becoming big problems

2 EQUITY & ACCESS

School counselors are student advocates and serve to protect the equitable treatment of all students in school and in the community. They recognize and celebrate individual and group differences.

SCHOOL COUNSELORS:

- Use data to identify gaps in achievement, opportunity and attainment
- Advocate for rigorous coursework and higher education for underrepresented groups
- Promote school policies leading to equitable treatment of all students
- Promote equity and access to rigorous standards-based curriculum, academic courses and learning paths for college and career for all students

3 STUDENT BEHAVIOR & SAFETY

School counselors collaborate with administrators and teachers to develop positive school and classroom behavior plans.

SCHOOL COUNSELORS:

- Offer short-term mental health counseling services to help students resolve personal and interpersonal problems
- Counsel students when returning from a mandatory suspension or expulsion
- Facilitate restorative practices protocol and coordinate student-led judicial councils to address infractions
- Provide solution-based counseling to tackle recurring behavioral and social-emotional issues

4 COLLEGE & CAREER READINESS

School counselors utilize their knowledge of course planning, career development, and data to create systems to maximize students' future college and career opportunities. They consider college and career preparation through the perspective of equity and access for ALL students.

SCHOOL COUNSELORS:

- Hold education information nights for parents and caregivers in dual-enrollment course, Advanced Placement and Honors course
- Develop programs to promote parent and student awareness of Career-Technical Education (CTE) career pathways
- Teach workplace and employability skills on topics such as collaboration, problem solving, self management, planning and organization, professionalism in the workplace, interviewing skills, and resume writing

5 SPECIAL NEEDS

School counselors understand and assist with the special education accommodations and referral process.

SCHOOL COUNSELORS:

- Advocate for students with special needs to have access to the general education curriculum and resources that enable students to reach their full potential
- Collaborate with teachers to develop evidence-based interventions to meet the individual needs of students
- Help students with special needs identify postsecondary opportunities and transition services to which they are eligible

“The school counselor’s job comprises much more than just academic services. School counseling is one of the most effective ways to mitigate children and adolescent behavioral and mental health barriers to learning,”

- Dr. Caroline Lopez-Perry
Assistant Professor of School Counseling
California State University, Long Beach

6 STAFF CONSULTATION

School counselors work with teachers, parents and other classified and certificated staff members to provide consultation and support to help identify gaps and opportunities to help students reach their greatest potential.

SCHOOL COUNSELORS:

- Offer professional development workshops for faculty members on such things as student stress, trauma, suicide ideation and coping strategies
- Consult with teachers and staff to identify the root cause of an issue and identify a plan of action for setting and accomplishing targeted goals

7 PARENT INVOLVEMENT

School counselors foster two-way communication between parents and schools taking into consideration parents’ schedules, language barriers, and literacy abilities.

SCHOOL COUNSELORS:

- Utilize needs assessments to determine student and family needs
- Provide information on child and adolescent development, parenting strategies, and tips and information on how parents can support their student’s education
- Organize and coordinate activities, resources, and services in the community that benefit students and their families

8 MENTAL HEALTH

School counselors utilize research-based methods to provide mental health services for students.

SCHOOL COUNSELORS:

- Utilize early warning systems to identify students exhibiting at-risk behaviors
- Provide crisis counseling and short-term individual and group counseling
- Conduct initial phases of appraisal and remediation and provide referrals to parents when additional therapy is needed
- Apply trauma-informed strategies
- Conduct mental health awareness training for teachers, parents and staff

9 SCHOOL CLIMATE

School counselors are in a unique non-administrative leadership position that offers school-wide perspective. They are often the “eyes and ears” of a school and view school climate as an opportunity to create a “Climate of Care”.

SCHOOL COUNSELORS:

- Implement advisory systems and schoolwide programs that focus on social and emotional learning that encourages positive peer and student-faculty relationships
- Facilitate conflict mediation strategies, including working with victims and offenders
- Develop parent education programs and host student assemblies to increase overall well-being and address pressures students face

COORDINATION OF COMMUNITY-BASED MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Some California school district leaders have turned to contract services to provide counseling to students with intensive mental health issues, supplementing their school-based school counseling program. However far too often it is a piecemeal approach, rather than a coordinated and comprehensive program. Licensed mental health professionals are utilized effectively in a MTSS model working within Tier III. Their services ought to be limited to chronic mental health and behavioral problems and for students who need prolonged counseling interventions based on chronic and acute situational need. Offering these services on school campuses allows students to receive therapy in a convenient, less restrictive environment.

Before undertaking this model, school administrators need to consider the difference between credential (school-based) mental health service providers and community-based counselors including licensing restrictions. Outlining division of responsibilities and triaging of services can save time, staff consternation and prevent individuals from working outside of their authorization. For example, licensed professionals are not trained to conduct classroom lessons, provide prevention services and are not qualified to provide academic, college and career advising. Similarly, school counselors are not trained to provide long-term therapeutic interventions and diagnosis.

While the licensed mental health services providers may have the training to provide mental health services, if they do not have a PPS Credential, contracted licensed mental health services providers have to be supervised by an individual with a PPS Credential while performing school-based mental health services (California Code of Regulations, Title 5 [5 CCR], Section 80049.1, subdivision [c]). Non-PPS Credentialed mental health personnel do not necessarily understand the public school system and the differing ethical and legal requirements governing student confidentiality.

Good communication between the contracted agency and school district can improve the effectiveness of the services and reduce misunderstandings between the parties involved. One particularly difficult area is district and agency information sharing under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPPA). For example, clear expectations must be agreed upon for releases of information, email communications, and authority to access district student data systems. When establishing a partnership with a community mental health provider, seek advice from your legal department and ensure the agency contract includes such things as: communication practices, personnel clearances, identification badges, emergency procedures, provider liability insurance coverage, counseling and confidentiality expectations.



The terms school counselor, guidance counselor, college counselor, at-risk counselor academic counselor are various terms used to refer to those working in Pre-K-12th grade settings that provide educational counseling (CEC 49600) to students. The word school counselor is the preferred term and is represented in statute. In some instances, the term student support service coordinators are intended to include school counseling program administrators. They often have had prior experience as school counselors and are working in a Local Education Agency (LEA) leadership position with both a PPS and Administrative Service Credential.

STANDARDS, POLICY AND GUIDELINES

Provided in this section are links to foundational documents relevant to the school counseling profession in California.

Annual Performance Evaluation: American School Counselor Association. (2015). The school counselor and annual performance evaluation. https://www.schoolcounselor.org/asca/media/asca/PositionStatements/PS_Evaluation.pdf

California Education Code 49600 - Educational Counseling:

This statute outlines requirements associated with California's comprehensive educational counseling programs in schools: <https://tinyurl.com/yp2e2c2>

California Education Code 49602 - Confidentiality:

California School Counselors have specific confidentiality requirements when working with students, 12-years old and older. https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=EDC§ionNum=49602

Position Statements:

Several national position statements encompasses information topics on various areas relevant to the school counseling profession. Of the 32 position statements available, several are important to note. These include position statements on: Career Technical Education, Credentialing and Licensure, Gun Violence, Identification, Prevention and Intervention of Behaviors that are Harmful and Place Students at Risk and Student Mental Health. All can be accessed from the California Association of School Counselors website: <https://www.schoolcounselor-ca.org/position-statements>

Project Cal-Well:

A federal grant to increase mental health awareness and promote wellness among K-12 students in California <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/cg/mh/projectcalwell.asp>

Pupil Personnel Services School Counseling Standards:

Accreditation and pre-service training requirements https://www.ctc.ca.gov/docs/default-source/educator-prep/standards/pps-pdf.pdf?sfvrsn=5b1ecdd6_2

Supervision by PPS Credential Holders of state licensed mental health professional requirements:

Title 5 CCR 80049.1(c) <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/cg/pr/title5.asp>

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



This resource was developed through the California Association of School Counselors (CASC), and in partnership with key contributors. California Association of School Counselors is the largest state school counseling association in the nation, representing the needs and interests of the 10,000 school counselors working in PreK-12th grade schools in California. In addition, this resource would not be possible if it were not for the generous contributions of individuals who have worked in California public school systems as school counselors and administrators. This paper reflects the first-hand knowledge and experience of the power and positive changes that can happen in schools and in students' lives through the efforts of school counselors. CASC would like to give special thanks to the following individuals:

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