

# School Counselors as Practitioners

Building on Theory, Standards, and Experience  
for Optimal Performance

SECOND EDITION



EDITED BY JUDY A. NELSON AND LISA A. WINES



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# School Counselors as Practitioners

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*School Counselors as Practitioners*, Second Edition, is a hands-on, practice-based, task-oriented guide to being an effective school counselor.

Thoroughly revised, this textbook continues to address the foundation of school counseling, the main duties of a school counselor, the skills needed to be successful, and what to expect as a school counseling professional. All these topics have been updated to include the current thinking, research and evidence-based practices, and challenges in school counseling. Additionally, interviews of principals, school counselors, and community leaders are included, which provide readers with the reality of how to navigate the waters of the comprehensive school counseling program. The chapter authors also highlight the necessity of designing, implementing, and evaluating the counseling program for continuous improvement. Online resources provide students with templates and handouts for on-the-job responsibilities, as well as quiz questions for every chapter.

This updated edition is essential reading for counselor educators, graduate students enrolled in a school counseling program, supervisors of school counselors, including administrators, and practicing school counselors.

**Judy A. Nelson** is a licensed professional counselor and supervisor in Tucson, Arizona, and the sole proprietor of Nelson Consulting located in Tucson, Arizona, USA.

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Building on Theory, Standards, and Experience for  
Optimal Performance

Second Edition

**Edited by Judy A. Nelson and Lisa A. Wines**

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We dedicate this book to our excellent authors who are school counselors, counselor educators, and leaders in the field of school counseling in their own rights. Once again, they have provided expertise, leadership, and the most current information for prospective, new, and seasoned professional school counselors. With all of our hearts, we honor you and say “thank you” for being the most important part of this project. Additionally, this book is for practitioners who have not a guide on “how to” successfully carry out the duties and professional responsibilities of school counselors across our nation. To those school counselors, who allowed us to attain their “*words of wisdom*” relevant to the various topics included in the book, during our interview process. Finally, this book is dedicated to those researching the role of school counselors, determining salary compensation scales, or investigating the value-added and demand school counselors have on our educational systems. We are thrilled you are looking for resources that authenticate and substantiate the global need for school counselors!

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**Judy A. Nelson and Lisa A. Wines**

Personally, I wish to acknowledge my former colleagues at Sam Houston State University in Houston, Texas, and everyone in the Texas Counseling Association from around the entire state. There are no words as to how much students, faculty, and members of TCA added to my growth and development personally and professionally. I feel so privileged to have included all of you in my circle of friends and co-workers. Thank you! And I want to acknowledge my friend and colleague, the creative genius behind our work, Lisa Wines. You birthed the idea for this book, and we grew it together. It's been a grand journey!

**Judy A. Nelson**

The specific year of 2023 has been personally transformative, convicting, and sobering—from a relational and religious perspective. GOD, through his son Jesus Christ, is who I give my life to, by professing it here, OUT LOUD, serving others (in editorship, authorship, and work), through the use of my spiritual gifts and assigned ministries. GOD has positioned people in my life who should be acknowledged. They ARE my system of support. To my mother Helen, son Austin Ellis, father Sam, and Pa-Pa Chuck, you were not asked to but chose to, regardless. To my church family and leaders—Pastor and Sister Upshaw— you brought me in and have helped confirm my life's direction. Your investment is solid and nurturing, in such a way that I know is biblically sound and supported. To my irreplaceable friend and co-editor, Judy Nelson, thank you for all the reasons shared and known between you and I ...

**Lisa A. Wines**

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## About the Editors

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**Judy A. Nelson** is a retired teacher, professional school counselor, counselor educator, and therapist in private practice. Currently, Dr. Nelson is a licensed professional counselor and supervisor in the state of Arizona and the sole proprietor of Nelson Consulting located in Tucson, Arizona. Through her company, she presents workshops and training in school districts and at universities, provides outside evaluations for grants, organizes assessments and surveys for school districts and other entities, and consults with organizations that are interested in systemic change. Throughout her career in the field of counseling, Dr. Nelson was honored by her peers in a variety of ways. She was the president of the Texas Counseling Association, the secretary of that organization, and a Board member. She was the recipient of the following awards: the *Counseling Outcomes, Research, and Evaluation* Visibility Article of the Year Award, the Texas Counseling Association Service Award over several years, the Texas Counseling Association Research Award, the Sam Houston State University College of Education Research Award and Service Award, the International Association of Addiction and Offender Counselors (IAAOC) Outstanding Professional Award, the Briggs-Pine Association of Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling Award, and was the Texas School Counselor of the Year. Dr. Nelson is the co-editor of three other books published by Routledge: *School Counselors as Practitioners: Building on Theory, Standards, and Experience for Optimal Performance*; *Responding to Critical Cases in School Counseling: Building on Theory, Standards, and Experience for Optimal Interventions*; and *Administrative Leaders and School Counselors: Building on Theories, Standards, and Experiences for Optimal Mental Health Collaboration*.



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## Online Companion Contributors

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**Asia Toney** is a graduate with her master’s degree in clinical mental health counseling at Lamar University. She has a bachelor’s degree in kinesiology from Sam Houston State University, where understanding the human body was significant to her education. Now with expanded knowledge on mental health, these attributes provide her with the tools to help patients succeed in their mental health therapy treatment. On her journey to obtaining a license as a professional counselor, she is a registered behavior technician and has always had a passion for working with adolescents and young adults. She believes her journey at L & A Professional Services, LLC has helped her to attain more knowledge and experience with private practice, counseling techniques, and creating a comforting and healing environment for all patients she is to serve!

**Crystal Wilson** is a dedicated graduate student pursuing a master’s degree in marriage and family therapy at Lamar University. She will graduate the summer of 2024. Crystal’s dedication shines through her work as she aspires to become a licensed marriage and family therapist and professional counselor specializing in working with adolescents and families. Her commitment to lifelong learning and her avid reading habit allows her to expand her field knowledge continually. She aims to empower individuals, couples, and families to unlock their inner potential through therapy. Crystal’s ultimate goal is to collaborate with adolescents and families to help them find genuine happiness and fulfillment in their lives.

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## Preface

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It is with great enthusiasm and pride that Dr. Lisa A. Wines and I offer this updated version of our school counseling textbook titled, *School Counselors as Practitioners: Building on Theory, Standards, and Experience for Optimal Performance*. We have added seven new chapters that capture much of the updated information in the counseling profession; have changed the language of the chapter titles and content to reflect the ASCA National Model (2019); and have updated all of the standards and proficiencies in each chapter. Additionally, each chapter has a section titled *Words from the Wise* (also known as *Words of Wisdom*, *Wise Words*, or *Voices from the Field*), in which we summarize an interview, conducted by our authors, with counselors from around the U.S. relevant to the content of their chapters. Those live interviews are located in the Online Companion.

World events have changed professional expectations dramatically since the publication of our first edition in 2019. Due to the pandemic beginning in late 2019, school personnel, parents, legislators, and communities-at-large have become acutely aware of the mental health needs of children and teens. Furthermore, we live in days of true human unpredictability. While the role of the school counselor has experienced new appreciation in some instances, that role has also been called into question by parents who want to make certain that they are the primary influencers of their children. Some parents have complained that social/emotional learning (SEL) should be within the purview of parents alone and have even accused school personnel of undermining parental beliefs and teachings, particularly regarding sexuality and diversity. These issues are addressed in **Section I** of the new edition where we discuss in three chapters how to decide to become a school counselor and then to know what the challenges and satisfying experiences are of that career path. These three opening chapters are all new and quite honest about the rigors of the school counseling profession.

The ASCA National Model (2019) prescribed a framework for school counselors to follow to deliver an excellent program systematically to all students that is data based. **Section II** of the book provides a world-view of the profession by describing the first steps in developing a comprehensive school counseling program (CSCP) and by defining the standards and proficiencies essential to the program. Additionally, we know that cases of an extremely critical nature will emerge and will not necessarily fit into the daily work of the counselor. Therefore, two chapters will discuss responsive services, crisis management, and trauma-informed school counseling.

**Section III** of the book shows school counselors how to manage a CSCP through program planning and program focus. In addition, this section provides ways for school counselors to advocate for their programs and their appropriate roles. Other management tools include knowing how to promote healthy and satisfying post-secondary options for

students and how to use technology to benefit the role of the counselor, the CSCP, and all of the stakeholders involved. There is so much that technology can provide for school counselors, but they need to know where to find applications and then how to use them.

**Section IV** focuses on the delivery of direct and indirect counseling skills. While counseling in schools might look somewhat different than in a private practice or agency, school counselors have the training and skills to counsel students individually and in small groups. They also provide a counseling curriculum that touches all students. Appraising and advising might seem like an overwhelming task in that all students must have individual plans for their futures; however, ideas for meeting with students to develop these plans are presented in this section. Last, the indirect services of collaboration, consultation, and making appropriate referrals are included here.

Assessment, data collection, and reporting results is the last step in the ASCA National Model relevant to the development, management, and evaluation of the CSCP. We begin **Section V** with a way to assess the cultural competence of the school stakeholders, which we have found to be essential considering our diverse school populations. Next, we explore data collection and how and to whom it is reported.

In our last section, **Section VI**, the authors investigate the leadership, supervision, mentoring, professional ethics, and legal issues in school counseling. These chapters touch on the importance of the school counselor's relationship with supervisors and mentors, and how school counselors can ultimately become leaders in their schools and in the profession. Additionally, the ethical standards and legal responsibilities that school counselors have cannot be minimized, and we address those important issues here.

Our readers will also want to visit the Online Companion, where they will find resources for students, faculty, and district school counselors and counselor leaders. Some of the many resources include PowerPoints for each chapter, quizzes, and templates for forms and checklists. Each chapter folder in the Companion also includes a video interview with a school counselor or counselor leader relevant to the content of the chapter.

With kind regards,  
Judy A. Nelson and Lisa A. Wines

## Section I

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# Introduction to School Counseling

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School counseling requires a unique set of skills, knowledge of how to manage a large-scale program and its stakeholders, and determination to advocate for students and the profession. State legislatures, behavioral health boards, accrediting bodies, and universities provide the rules, regulations, and training required to become a school counselor. Before embarking on the journey to become a school counselor, prospective candidates should be aware of the challenges, satisfying experiences, and day-to-day operations of the profession that the three chapters highlight in this section. Section I, and its three chapters, provide an overview of the profession for prospective and current graduate students in counseling programs, along with learning the words of wisdom from professionals in the field of school counseling.

*“The rigors of school counseling are many. Choosing this career path offers great satisfaction and equal challenges. Those who are up to the task will be rewarded many times over.”*

Dr. Judy A. Nelson

*“The skills gifted to school counselors are not of their own doing. They are the epitome of an opportunity granted by God to serve others through every action taken.”*

Dr. Lisa A. Wines



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# Becoming a School Counselor

*Frannie Neal and Judy A. Nelson*

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## Introduction

Becoming a school counselor requires deep reflection and investment. Graduate school is a significant investment that includes, but is not limited to, financial contributions, family and personal needs, childcare if needed, time, energy, and resources for several years. Student loans and/or forgiveness are another resource to consider. An aspiring school counselor would benefit from doing research into the various counselor education programs and find one that fits their needs and interests. Meet with the professors, staff, and students to determine if the program is a good fit. Graduate school requires consistent reflection of one's motivation to become a school counselor.

At the end of graduate school, start preparing for certification and state licensure. When looking for a school counseling position, one must consider what characteristics of a work environment are most important. School counselors are always asked to go above and beyond the job title. It is important to consider what might be non-negotiable to you as you select a school or school district. It is also imperative to consider and understand what each school staff and principal views as important characteristics and qualities of a highly qualified school counselor. Then, it is important to see if the needs and desires of both the school counselor, the school, and the school leadership match.

School counselors must attain and always maintain ethical and cultural competencies. School counselors must always practice personal fitness and wellness, as well as uphold moral standards and background checks. School counselors must always check their bias and maintain cultural competencies throughout their experience to best meet the needs of the students and community in which they work. School counselors must also check to ensure that they are doing no harm but rather are benefitting the students, families, and school community at large.

Once new school counselors find a school that is a good fit, they must continue to seek continuing education units and opportunities to learn, grow, connect, and stay updated with the school counseling profession. School counselors would benefit from attending their local, state, and national counseling conferences to stay updated and connected with current topics and issues in school counseling. Additionally, school counselors must always seek consultation from trusted mentors and colleagues, as well as opportunities for collaboration. The following sections detail the process of becoming a school counselor and provide a glimpse into the role a school counselor plays in a school.



## **Theory of Operation**

As a school counselor, it is important to choose a theory of operation that matches your philosophy as well as your personality. Graduate programs teach the basic theoretical perspectives for all counselors, and school counselors must decide which of these are appropriate for themselves and the setting in which they work. One of the most fundamental and salient points of training in school counseling is identifying which theories of counseling are the best fit for your own professional practice. Given the setting, school counselors are more limited on time with their students than other settings and must take this into consideration when choosing theories of practice. There may be more frequent interactions, however most are brief and not always in great depth. Resources must also be considered, as resources are often limited in schools and may not be readily available. School counselors must always consider cultural needs and expectations when considering which theory of operation to implement with students. School counselors must be aware of each theory's benefits as well as limitations, and they must honor the student as a whole and what theory most supports the student's development.

### ***Solution-Focused Brief Counseling***

The first theory that is very successful in school counseling is solution-focused brief counseling (SFBC). In schools, SFBC is particularly successful due to the focus of the counseling theory on the solutions, strengths, goals, positivity, and time-based. First, school counselors can listen to the student's presenting problem and then guide the student to identify several possible ways to help solve the problem. A great example of how to use SFBC is in minute meetings with students. Minute meetings are brief, focused, dedicated check-in's with students where school counselors can gauge where the student is and what the student needs to meet their next goal or solve the current problem. Students are also empowered to start with small changes in SFBC to meet their end goal. School counselors may also ask the student the miracle question: what would you do if the problem did not exist? This empowers students to think outside of the box and reframe their current situation excluding the presenting problem. The miracle question may help the student focus on what is most important. See the following link in the Resources section for more information.

### ***Trauma-Informed Care Therapy***

Another critical theory of operation in school counseling is trauma-informed care therapy. School counselors must be well aware and knowledgeable on how trauma shows up in the schools and in the counseling relationship. School counselors must educate themselves, monitor, and apply trauma-informed care for all students and families. Due to critical mental health issues in children and teens, school counselors are encouraged to use trauma-informed care as an important part of their Comprehensive School Counseling Program (CSCP). See Chapter 6 for further information on trauma-informed school counseling.

### ***The Conscious Discipline Curriculum and Mindfulness-Based Therapy***

The Conscious Discipline curriculum is particularly successful in schools, as it takes into account the brain states model and what students need to reach each state. When implemented

across a school setting, this curriculum helps school staff better meet the student and family's needs. Mindfulness-based therapy is a theory of operation that is particularly effective across all areas of school counseling. Mindfulness-based therapy practices in schools include the zones of regulation, yoga, stretch, brain breaks, etc. Mindfulness-based therapy helps students regulate, focus, and apply techniques to meet their goals.

### ***Narrative Therapy***

Narrative therapy is another theory of operation that is very applicable in all levels of school counseling and various cultures. Narrative therapy allows and empowers students to write, own, and share their own story and journey. Every student is different, just as every story or journey is different. Narrative therapy allows students to express themselves in a way that matches their true, authentic selves. Students are allowed to frame their narrative as they see it and what is most important to them. This will also allow school counselors to better understand the student's perspectives and values.

### ***Play Therapy***

Play therapy is particularly effective for certain developmental stages and several levels of school counseling. Play therapy allows students to express themselves in the art and practice of play, as well as help the school counselor guide them through their experiences, reality, and aspirations to better understand the student and their journey. Play therapy is most effective for elementary school counselors, special education counselors, and behavior interventionist counselors. Play therapy helps counselors understand the student's needs and behaviors.

## **Standards**

### ***Educational and Training Standards***

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) outlines current 2024 standards for training and preparation for seven entry-level specialty areas, of which school counseling is one. The specific standards in the school counseling specialty that are important for those seeking credentialing in this career start with CACREP standard 5.H.6., school counselors as leaders, advocates, and change agents. Additionally, school counselors are responsible for addressing the students' academic/educational, career, and personal/social development through the implementation of counseling curriculum instruction, individual responsive services, and character education—often in the form of counseling curriculum lessons (5.H.5 and 5.H.15). Counselors also share the responsibility of helping to remove obstacles to individual student success with school principals and other administrators (Zalaquett & Chatters, 2012). Subsequent standard of 5.H.9. addresses the school counselor role in emergency crises, disasters, and traumas, and standard 5.H.12. focuses on the school counselor's ability and knowledge regarding detection of mental health and behavioral disorders affecting children in schools. These two standards are paramount given the fact that youth spend a majority of their day in a school setting, and this is often where the negative impact of mental health issues may be seen.

Due to a multitude of reasons, the front-line interventions by school counselors might sometimes be the only mental health treatment some students will receive. As more children

are diagnosed and receive treatment of mental health and behavioral issues, standards 5.H.13 and 5.H.14 underscore the importance of school-based interventions and strategies to assist students with complex mental health needs. Standard 5.H.10. addresses the increasing importance of school counselors holding knowledge of community resources available to diverse families with language, cultural, and economic differences. Standards 5.H.16, 17, 18, and 19 address the important issue of academic success, graduation rates, and post-secondary readiness.

### ***Mental Health Counseling in a School Setting***

School counselors and clinical mental health professionals receive the same foundational skills in graduate training programs. While time and setting generally place constraints on school counselors providing mental health counseling, they definitely are trained to do so and often must provide these services in immediate crisis situations or for students who do not have the means to access outside resources. The dilemma might be that school district administrators and state education agencies do not recognize that school counselors possess the necessary skills to be considered mental health professionals (Keys et al., 1998). We have seen this in a few states. For example, one state considers school counselors to be educators rather than mental health professionals. This implies that school counselors deal with academic and career issues, but not emotional or social issues. School counselor training includes training in the clinical skills that other mental health professionals receive, therefore, they do have the knowledge and skills to respond to clinical mental health issues. In another state in a university setting, the administrators hesitated to approve a clinic site because they did not think that school counselors would need a training site for practicing clinical skills. Clearly, there is a great deal of advocacy work to be done for school counselors!

An emphasis on clinical skills development to address mental health concerns for all professional counselors-in-training does not negate the importance of counselors understanding the influence of setting on the provision of services. There are legal and ethical implications specific to each setting. Standardization of clinical training models may continue to be encouraged given the stance of the American Counseling Association and most of its divisions that we are all first professional counselors who practice in a variety of settings (Kaplan, Tarvydas, & Gladding, 2014). This acceptance of various professionals working toward the same goal and definition of counseling does not include the differences within the scope of practice for each specialty (see CACREP, 2024). This also leads to questions of professional identity and how the roles of professional school counseling (Mau, Li, & Hoetmer, 2016) and mental health counseling can be best intertwined.

### ***Understanding Standards and Competencies***

As we examine the standards and competencies expected of professional school counselors (see ASCA School Counselor Professional Standards & Competencies, 2019b) prospective students should ask themselves if they are cut out for this type of rigor in the profession in which they are interested. The school counselor is leader, program manager, advocate, prevention and intervention specialist, consultant, collaborator, instructor, individual and group counselor, and confidante. Sometimes these multiple roles bump up against each other in ways that can create discomfort and even conflict. The people who are competent in

these roles are strong, knowledgeable, and confident in their abilities. Often new school counselors feel overwhelmed and overworked and feel like they are running in circles and putting out fires. With good mentorship and patience on the part of staff, students, and parents, these feelings can be mitigated and eventually overcome.

In addition to professional standards and competencies, school counselors adhere to a high code of ethical behavior (see ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors, 2022). In some university settings, prospective students are introduced to the ASCA ethical codes during the orientation period and asked to sign a commitment pledge to honor and uphold the ethics of school counseling. This is a great idea as some prospective students will find that their biases and tolerance levels are not a good fit for this profession. When counselors cannot push aside their own beliefs and attitudes when counseling an individual of a disparate mindset, they are not upholding the ethical behavior of counselors and are not a good fit for the profession. These are important issues for prospective counselors to consider.

## Experience

Once a person has decided that professional school counseling is a good fit for a career path, the process involves a timeline of several years. The following steps map out the journey to becoming a professional school counselor:

**Step 1** Choosing a university is an important decision for prospective graduate students to make. Not every university has a counselor education program with a school counseling track, and that will narrow down the field considerably. Also, some students might not live near a university campus and would possibly want to consider an online graduate degree. Many universities are now offering a choice of face-to-face classes, remote learning, or a hybrid format which includes both in-person and online classes. Checking out program accreditation, references from recent graduates, and the caliber of the faculty are ways to decide if a university is a good fit.

It is important for applicants to know if their chosen university offers the courses required by their state to become a school counselor. This information can be found on most behavioral health or education sites of state legislatures and is particularly important when considering a university in another state. School counseling programs can be a 48 hour program or a 60 hour program. Students in school counseling programs receive the same training as clinical mental health professionals; however, the electives they choose must be school counseling courses. The 60 hour programs allow for students to earn the required courses for licensure as a professional counselor as well as the school counseling certification or licensure.

The prospective student will need to know the specific requirements and qualifications to be admitted into a program. In some states, school counselor applicants are required to have at least a minimum level of teaching experience. This requirement has been changing, and there are now only a handful of states requiring teaching experience. University standards differ on expectations dramatically, and some programs require certain prerequisites such as Human Growth and Development, and others have no prerequisites. Many require a certain grade-point average from undergraduate work, and some require a particular score on the Graduate Record Exam. It is important to investigate thoroughly what the requirements are and to obtain any deficits before applying.

- Step 2 Once a prospective student has decided on a university and a graduate program, the next step is the application process. Again, counselor education departments differ widely on this process. In addition to the application itself, transcripts from previous universities are needed and perhaps recommendation letters and a personal essay. Because of the serious nature of being a helping professional, some programs conduct personal and/or group interviews, taking note of how prospective candidates relate to professors and peers. The actual choosing of new students again differs widely among universities. The faculty might invite a prospective student to an interview with a group of professors who will rate the interviewee on their responses to questions as well as their ability to relate to the people in the interview room. Some programs invite a group of applicants to work together on some small project to see how they relate to each other. There are also programs that require their new students to attend counseling sessions during the first semester of their program. Once the application process is completed, those admitted to their chosen programs will be invited to an orientation and registration for their first classes.
- Step 3 Graduate work involves substantially more time, energy, and complexity than undergraduate work. Generally a part-time load of classes is six hours or two classes while a full load will be nine hours or three classes. There are exceptions to these general guidelines, for example, students might take 12 hours or four courses if they are granted special permission from their advisor. Advisors are generally assigned early in the program and have expertise in the school counseling area of study. The first group of courses is foundational. If a program is CACREP accredited, the following courses are required of all counselor education students regardless of the track they are on: professional counseling orientation and ethical practice, social and cultural identities and experiences, lifespan development, career development, counseling practice and relationships, group counseling and group work, assessment and diagnostic practices, and research and program evaluation. Often programs that are not CACREP accredited often will mirror the requirements and standards so as to remain current and relevant in the field.
- Step 4 Once these foundational courses are completed, students are prepared for professional practice which includes fieldwork. Fieldwork begins with the supervised practicum of 100 hours. Some universities have community counseling centers located within the counselor education program, and other programs rely on off-campus sites for the supervised practicum. Students receive weekly supervision throughout the practicum and internship experiences. After completing the practicum successfully, students then enter the internship phase of their program. Internship consists of 600 hours at an off-campus site usually accomplished in two semesters. Most programs require students to locate their own internship sites which ultimately must be approved by the department faculty.
- Step 5 Students must demonstrate that they have earned the title of school counselor through their university. Most counselor education programs require students to pass a cumulative examination before graduating, and some might offer the submission of a thesis as an alternate culmination of the program.
- Step 6 Once students have graduated, they must apply for school counselor certification or licensure through their states. Each state has its own rules and regulations apropos to granting the graduate the title of school counselor. Depending on where you live,

graduates become either certified or licensed in their state. As mentioned earlier, each state has requirements for bestowing certification or licensure to graduates. Certain courses are required and usually there is a state examination that must be passed. While state programs for school counseling certification or licensure might be similar, it is wise to look at the exact requirements on the legislative or behavioral health website before choosing a university program.

**Other Considerations.** Most programs require approximately two years' full-time work to earn a Master's Degree in Counselor Education. Part-time schedules will, of course, take longer. Professional school counseling is one of the entry-level specialized practice areas offered in a CACREP (2024) accredited program. In addition to the course work, students in counselor education programs should be prepared for ongoing assessment of their knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions and to receive feedback regarding these periodically. Graduation is an exciting milestone because it requires hard work and commitment to achieve that status.

Unfortunately, there is usually not a requirement for clinical supervision for school counselors after graduation. Some school districts transition recent graduates to the school counseling profession by assigning mentors, offering workshops, and having training camps. When those are not offered, novice school counselors might want to find a mentor on their own. School counselors who have earned the graduate hours for state licensure as a professional counselor are required to have weekly supervision as they acquire the hours necessary to be licensed, usually about 3000 (half direct counseling and half indirect services). This is a good option for obtaining clinical supervision, but there are rules in each state that require a certain number of hours of supervised counseling (part direct services or face-to-face sessions with clients and part indirect hours such as treatment planning, attending conferences, consulting with other mental health professionals and so forth). Generally, supervisees and supervisors need to meet each week that a supervisee sees clients, most states that this process takes no less than two years and no more than five years. However, every state determines its own rules, so those graduates interested in licensure as a professional counselor must research the rules of their states.

### ***Types of School Counselor Roles***

Schools vary on how many school counselors they hire and what roles they expect of the school counselor. Sometimes a school counselor in a rural area or a very small district might work with grades PK through 12, while those in larger districts might have a team of counselors per school. When a team of counselors works together, their duties might be divided by the alphabet or grade level or by expertise. For example, in a suburban high school with four counselors each has a grade level and moves up the grade level with the students. The counselor has the benefit of knowing the students and their families very well by their senior year. In an even larger district where there are eight counselors in a high school, four of them divide up the alphabet to define their caseload, and the other four are specialty counselors (e.g., crisis, special education, post-secondary planning, and parent liaison). In many elementary schools, one counselor provides services to the entire student population. Some large districts have the opportunity and resources to hire specialized school counselor positions, and we discuss these next in this section.

Elementary counselors generally work with PK through fifth grade. If there are two counselors in an elementary setting, one might work with the lower elementary grades while the other works with the upper elementary grades. Social and emotional learning is particularly important in elementary schools where the school counselor spends more time on classroom instruction than in secondary schools. Sometimes principals invest in a specialized counselor to teach the social and emotional counseling curriculum. Secondary counselors work with middle school students or high school students. Examples of division of labor in a high school were provided earlier. In middle schools, there are often three counselors, one for each grade level.

Special education school counselors are experts in working with students with disabilities. They work closely with the diagnostician, teachers, and parents. Their main role is to provide academic, career, and social/emotional counseling to students who might struggle with self-esteem issues, mental health challenges, and general problems associated with being diagnosed with a disability. Many special education counselors are not based in one school but rather travel around to a number of schools. This requires a great deal of flexibility and the ability to work with large numbers of students, staff, and parents.

Large suburban school districts might have the resources to hire very specialized school counselors such as career counselors or crisis counselors. A career counselor generally works at the high school level helping students with post-secondary planning. These counselors have expertise in college and university application and enrollment, trade schools and internships, induction into the military, and other areas of career planning. Crisis counselors respond to unforeseen events in the school setting that are considered crises. These counselors have training on creating a crisis team, teaching students and staff what to do in the event of a crisis, debriefing after a crisis, counseling students and other groups after a crisis, and referring students to outside counseling when necessary.

Other areas of counselor specialization include behavior interventionist counselor who works with children who have challenging behaviors, a counselor for homeless students, a counselor for new arrivals or English as a second language students, a parent liaison, and a counselor who organizes and manages the school or district welcome center. Counselors who work at discipline alternative education programs (DAEP) have smaller caseloads; however, their clients have a multitude of needs. Most of them are behind in their academics because they have missed school due to expulsion or school avoidance. They also have behavioral challenges which accounts for why they are in a discipline school. The school counselor in this setting often takes care of scheduling classes, keeping track of grades and attendance, counseling individuals and small groups, conducting classroom instruction, and working with staff and parents to help students matriculate back to their home campuses.

## **Optimal Performance**

### ***Searching for a Position***

Once students in a school counseling master's degree program graduate and are fully licensed or certified, they are ready for the job search. This search might entail answering many questions such as: Am I willing to move to another city or state for a job? How will a new job impact my family? With what grade level do I want to work? What type of school district would be a good fit for me? Urban, suburban, or rural? What should I look for in the administrators of a school in which I might work? What is the staff like and how do the facilities look?

Often the principal of a school has a great deal of control over who is hired. In some large districts, those applying for a counseling position must first go through a district interview made up of assistant and associate superintendents who might supervise school counselors. Once a candidate passes this interview, then interviews with principals ensue. In addition to the principal in these campus interviews, often teachers and other staff are a part of the search committee. If there are other counselors on the staff, they would certainly be involved in the hiring process.

During a campus interview, not only are the interview committee members sizing up the school counselor candidate, but the candidate has the opportunity to get a feeling about the people at the school and the environment that they create. It is appropriate to ask questions in order to determine if this is a place you would want to work. Since candidates are often novice school counselors, they have had the most up-to-date training and probably have many ideas about how they would want to build and maintain a CSCP. It is important to ask the questions that will help a candidate determine if the leadership of the school is open to using the school counselor in appropriate ways. For example: Do the school leaders know about and support the ASCA National Model or the model of the state in which they reside? How have counselors been used previously and what programs or tasks have they been charged with? Has the school counselor been seen as an advocate for students and a leader of an important program? These are all important details to know.

As an interviewee, what artifacts or completed projects do you have that demonstrate your learning, grant proposals completed, or show any programs you created or wrote while in school? These artifacts may be program evaluations, group projects, resume, or a professional website you built—all of which display skills and understanding of comprehensive school counseling programs. These artifacts may aid in garnering the confidence of the interview panel and their ability to select you as a candidate.

The student body of a school is another consideration for candidates to think about. Some people are just not their best with certain populations such as teenagers, middle schoolers, or very young children. Generally by the time a candidate is job hunting, they have already decided the grade levels with which they would like to work. Taking a job just because it is offered is not necessarily a good way to begin a career as a school counselor. Thus, taking into account the type of school environment, the fit of the staff, and the demographics of a school are important considerations for the novice school counselor.

### ***Maximizing Job Roles and Responsibilities***

Novice school counselors have experience and knowledge on the most current practices in school counseling. Sharing this expertise with the administrators and teachers as an introductory staff development session can pave the way for a good understanding of the appropriate roles of the school counselor. If a new counselor will be a part of a counseling team, it probably would be more appropriate to put a session together with all of the counselors involved. Additionally, it will be helpful to listen to the years of experience of seasoned school counselors regarding the school environment, the relationship with administrators and teachers, how involved parents are, and a host of other important pieces of information that drive the school counselor's role and functioning.

Utilizing ASCA (2021) Student Standards: Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success, the ASCA (2019b) School Counselor Professional Standards and Competencies, and the ASCA (2022) Ethical Standards for School Counselors encompass the role of the school counselor and should be used to establish the role that the school counselor will play. New



school counselors will contend with a history of previous school counselors and how they operated. Being respectful of “how we have always done things” and the desire to implement new procedures and protocols has the new school counselor walking a fine line. If there has not been a CSCP in place previously, perhaps the new counselor can enlist the help of the other counselors (if there are any) and the administrative team. If the CSCP is created as a team project, it is more likely to be accepted by those who have been there for many years. The counselor might not get everything they want at first, but changes can be made over time. Also, school counselors should meet with the principal to create a letter of understanding aligned with both administrative and counselor goals for the benefit of the CSCP and the students. When tasks are called into question, the school counselor can refer to the letter of understanding.

School counselors wear many hats, and this can be a bit overwhelming at first. One suggestion is to not say “yes” to everything that staff, students, and parents ask of the new school counselor. Asking for time to think about a request makes perfectly good sense and gives the school counselor ample time to decide how to respond. For example, teachers might ask if they can send misbehaving students to the counselor’s office for a cool-down or if students who need independent working time can do this in the counselor’s office. Counselors should tactfully explain that the school counselor is not available to monitor students whenever teachers need that kind of help. Administrators should address these issues. Publishing the CSCP and the Counseling Calendar will be helpful in educating the staff on the many roles that school counselors play. According to ASCA (2019a), the school counselor is responsible for defining, managing, delivering, and assessing the CSCP and to include all students in the program. Providing services that are not appropriate for the school counselor will take valuable time away from the students who need academic, social/emotional, and career assistance. Please see Chapter 8 for more information on advocating for the school counselor’s appropriate roles.

Some graduates have natural leadership abilities and will grow into leadership positions. For example, in a very large school district one director for school counselors might not be able to attend to all of the needs of the entire staff of school counselors. In this situation, experienced school counselors with leadership abilities might be asked to be in charge of a group of counselors created by grade levels, by location, or by other similar characteristics. These counselor leaders might be tasked with meeting once a month with their group for support and information sharing, mentoring new counselors, and responding to those who need answers to an ethical dilemma. School counselors can also become leaders in local, state, and national professional organizations. Starting as a committee member at the local level is a great way to learn and to become involved in advocating for the profession.

### **Words from the Wise**

We interviewed, Mary Margaret, a first-year school counselor who works in an elementary school in Virginia. She talked about her motivations for becoming a school counselor and how her motivation aligned with the interview that she had for the job. The principal seemed to be the type of person who would support counselors and honor their work. She also discussed the many challenges of being a first-year school counselor and how she needed to be kind to herself when strategies or interventions did not turn out as expected. It was very helpful to have a knowledgeable school counselor partner to model professional behaviors for her and to collaborate with when she needed help. Watch the entire interview in the Online Companion.

## Conclusion

School counselors play a critical role in the lives of students. Because they do not have to issue grades or evaluate a student's academic progress, school counselors have a unique relationship with students, can provide important guidance to parents and teachers, and act as consultants to teachers. School counselors design, manage, and assess an essential program in the school setting. This program, known as the CSCP, helps the counselor avoid spending too much time putting out fires and helps the counselor focus on the academic, social/emotional, and career domains of the CSCP. Service delivery of the CSCP entails a counseling curriculum, appraisal and advisement of students, individual and small group counseling, and consultation and collaboration. Understanding that being a school counselor is a rigorous position that requires a specific set of skills that are taught in graduate programs of counselor education.

## Activities

- 1 Write a resume for your job search as a school counselor. Remember that experience can include any jobs that require people skills or any work with children.
- 2 Interview an administrator to find out what they are looking for when hiring a school counselor and what types of questions they ask in an interview.
- 3 Based on the information from your interview with an administrator, divide into groups and discuss interview preparation and questions that you should prepare for.
- 4 In pairs, take turns being an interviewer and interviewee for a school counseling position.
- 5 Write an essay that is a self-reflection on how fit you believe you are as a school counselor candidate.

## Resources

### **Solution-Focused Brief Counseling**

[https://www.counseling.org/resources/library/vistas/2010-v-online/article\\_81.pdf](https://www.counseling.org/resources/library/vistas/2010-v-online/article_81.pdf)

### **Trauma-Informed School Counseling**

<https://www.schoolcounselor.org/Newsletters/March-2022/The-Basics-of-Being-a-Trauma-Informed-School-Couns?st=NJ>

### **Conscious Discipline**

<https://consciousdiscipline.com/>

### **Narrative Therapy**

[https://positivepsychology.com/narrative-therapy/#:~:text=is%20Narrative%20Therapy%3F-,A%20Definition,\(Narrative%20Therapy%2C%202017\)](https://positivepsychology.com/narrative-therapy/#:~:text=is%20Narrative%20Therapy%3F-,A%20Definition,(Narrative%20Therapy%2C%202017))

### **Association for Play Therapy**

<https://www.a4pt.org/>

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# Satisfying and Challenging Experiences of School Counselors

*Judy A. Nelson*

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## Introduction

We wanted to know what was on the minds of school counselors across the nation, and we wanted school counselors-in-training to know as well. Similar to private investigators, we conducted a preliminary review of school counselors' experiences in the field. We were looking for trends, similarities and differences among counselors, satisfying experiences, and difficult challenges. We reviewed posts on social media and school counselor websites, and we queried school counselors we know who are working in the field. We did not formally collect data or posts from school counselors via social media through an approved Institutional Review Board (IRB) but rather just read the posts and noted some themes that appeared often and were also evident in the school counselors we contacted. In some instances we posed questions on social media asking school counselors to weigh in on certain topics. We explained that we were looking for ways to describe in a textbook the challenges and satisfying experiences of school counselors today. Social media such as Twitter and Facebook offer attitudes and beliefs about innumerable topics and are user generated rather than a compilation of survey responses (Townsend & Wallace, 2017).

To underscore the importance of social media to school counselors, we looked for research relevant to this topic. In one study on school counselors' use of technology (Mason et al., 2019), the researchers reported that:

School counselors were least likely to use social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) to reach out to students, followed by families. However, the majority of the school counselors indicated using these tools to communicate with staff, educators, school counselors, and outside groups every month or more frequently. Participants reported using social media most often and at much higher rates with their fellow school counselor colleagues, with nearly one quarter reporting daily contact.

Mason et al., p. 5

While only 6% of the participating school counselors used social media to communicate with students daily, 62% reported that they never communicated this way with students. However, 24% of the participants communicated daily with other school counselors through social media, and 24% communicated weekly with other school counselors using social media sites.

***Limitations of Our Review***

The limitations of reporting these types of themes using social media, websites, and brief interviews are not lost on us, and we discuss those here. First, we have very limited information about the persons who posted on the social media sites that we were reviewing, and, to be honest, we were not really interested in who they were or where they lived and worked. That would, however, be a great study someday! While some of the sites specify that participants should be working with certain grade levels such as elementary, K-8, or high school; we did not know the race, ethnicity, age, gender, years of service, and so forth, of those who posted. Also, we did not seek out information about counselors who uploaded websites to the Internet but basically reported on the purpose of these sites.

Secondly, we were looking for trends in our investigation, and the posts and websites that we saw were just a small number of school counselors' thoughts about their work. As noted earlier, former researchers suggested that there are significant numbers of school counselors who do not use social media professionally, so it is important for our readers to understand that these trends that we identified cannot be attributed to school counselors in general. However, the themes that we identified appeared over and over again in these posts and, therefore, hold some importance in the lives of some school counselors. Because our outreach to school counselors was on social media and counseling websites and because we conducted a review rather than a research study, our results cannot be generalized to all school counselors or any sub-groups of school counselors.

Lastly, we understand that the nature of social media allows those who post to do some code-switching regarding their identity. For example, a person who normally might not complain about a particular issue could post a rant about it feeling secure in the anonymity of this particular medium. These limitations could be addressed in formal research inquiries and future studies.

***Ethical Issues in the Use of Social Media to Generate Themes***

While our use of social media, websites, and interviews was not research-based data collection, we felt compelled to address ethical issues that might be relevant to our gathering of information on certain topics. We first were committed to assuring that we approached this project using the basic principles of respect, beneficence, justice, and integrity (LinkedIn using AI, 2023). Townsend and Wallace (2017) point out the key ethical issues in using social media for data collection: private vs public, informed consent, anonymity, risk of harm, and research methods. While we were not conducting a research study, we addressed these areas of concerns to insure that we were adhering to professional ethical standards. We first contemplated the private vs public issue. While these sites are groups in which school counselors have to request membership, we still considered them public as there was no password or code required once you were admitted, and to be admitted, one simply had to request admission. As for the issue of informed consent, we could not ask the entire group for such consent as some of these groups hosted hundreds or thousands of participants. However, we did not use any person's individual posts, their specific work situation, or any identifying information about any of the participants who posted on these sites. Thus, anonymity was guaranteed. Counselors who posted on these sites did not use any identifying information in their usernames, so we had no knowledge of who they were, where they resided, or where they worked. We did not refer to any specific situation but rather noted

themes that emerged by reading hundreds of posts over time. Risk of harm was not involved as we were not looking at posts made by children or persons with disabilities. The posts we read were from adult professionals who posted on a public forum.

Our reviews of these posts involved reading them and making note of trends rather than the exact wording of posts. We were not interested in what individual counselors posted but rather in the trends that we saw in the posts that we read. We looked for trends by noticing keywords, hashtags, and the volume of the posts on a single topic (LinkedIn using AI, 2023). For example, writing down popular words in a given thread such as administrator, teacher, student, caring, toxic, hostile, and so forth was one way that we identified themes. We studied conversation sentiment by looking at what feeling words were linked to people, places, or situations (LinkedIn using AI, 2023). And we were able to understand what school counselors were interested in by noting the words that were written repeatedly. We also reached out to a seasoned counselor with experience in school counseling, crisis counseling, and counselor education. She was able to give us some impressions she had about our findings, and you can read a summary of her interview in *Words from the Wise* and watch the interview in the *Online Companion*.

### **Theory of Operation**

Constructionist theory (González et al., 1994) has to do with the meanings that people make about the world around them. Often the meanings that emerge in constructionist theory center around gender, race, and social class. The importance of language is highlighted and how meaning is made through language and the ways in which humans interpret language. In therapy, the client is an active participant in the process, and the therapist follows the client's lead without suggesting that the client's interpretations are wrong.

The posts that we read on social media were attempts by the person posting to interpret the situation and try to make sense of it in order to respond appropriately. The importance of language in these posts cannot be overstated. Some of these situations were about relationships between counselor and student, counselor and parent, counselor and administrator, or counselor and teacher. Other posts were reflections of a counselor's relationship to work, stress, self-care, and boundaries. The responses to a counselor's initial post were generally supportive, and often fellow counselors provided ideas as to how to interpret and respond to the situation. Together, the participants co-constructed their narrative of what each situation meant to those who responded and how it fit into the picture of the school counselor's view of his/her/their role in the situation.

### **Standards**

As with any type of investigation, our interest in what school counselors are experiencing in real time requires that we address certain ethical issues and professional standards in our study. The following American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics (2014) standard is relevant to this chapter:

H.6.d. Use of Public Social Media Counselors take precautions to avoid disclosing confidential information through public social media. (ACA, 2014:18)

Additionally, we include several standards from the latest guidelines for counselor education programs, the 2024 Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs Standards. The following standards are in Section 3: The Foundational Counseling Curriculum, and the curriculum area that is most salient to this chapter is career development. These particular standards shine a light on the many counselors who appeared to be overworked, asked to engage in more than their fair share of non-counseling duties, and feeling like they were not supported by their administrators or that they were in a toxic work environment. The following standards address the content that should be included in a training program for school counselors relevant to career satisfaction and professional development:

3.D.4. approaches for assessing the conditions of the work environment on clients' life experiences

3.D.7. developmentally responsive strategies for empowering individuals to engage in culturally sustaining career and educational development and employment opportunities

3.D.8. strategies for advocating for employment support for individuals facing barriers in the workplace

3.D.9. strategies for facilitating client skill development for career, educational, and life-work planning and management

(CACREP, 2024, p. 14)

It should be noted here that district policy can have an important role in the tasks that school counselors are required to perform throughout the school year. For example, in many districts school counselors are the test coordinators which at certain times of the year can take up all of their time for weeks, perhaps even months. Test coordination consists of mostly clerical tasks and is a drain on the important role the school counselor has in the vision and mission of the school. School counselors can also be required to perform a host of other inappropriate non-counseling duties which cause burnout (Falls-Holman et al., 2019).

## **Experience**

The following paragraphs describe the themes that emerged as we read through hundreds of posts on social media regarding school counselors and their thoughts, problems, need for assistance, and sharing of experiences with other school counselors. Some of these sites specifically help school counselors access resources for counseling curriculum lessons, behavior contracts, activities for staff and students, and help for specific situations. Other sites encourage school counselors to vent, to ask for help for their own mental health, and to find out if anyone else has the same issues as they do. Both of these types of sites are valuable, particularly for new counselors, for counselors in small districts with few resources, and in districts with no leadership designated for school counselors. The following sections of this chapter enumerate the themes we found as we read the posts of many school counselors from all levels and from around the country.

### ***Experiences of School Counselors with Other School Counselors***

One of the benefits of school counselors participating in these online social media groups is that they can share counseling curriculum lessons; data tracking ideas; contracts for various

behavioral problems; and ideas on how to handle various situations with students, parents, and staff. There is no reason to *reinvent the wheel* in planning lessons for classrooms and small groups when many lessons are available in these groups. Also, because each post generates many additional posts, school counselors receive a broad cross-section of ideas from which to choose. So, if a counselor presents a problem situation to the group, he/she/they might hear from 10 to 20 other school counselors about how they handled a particular problem. In addition, many school counselors post websites, books, and other resources that can assist their colleagues in any number of issues. These posts are particularly relevant to new school counselors who might feel overwhelmed with the demands on their time and the severity of some of the problems they are asked to mitigate.

### ***Experiences of School Counselors with Administrators***

Many posts described the important and collaborative relationship between counselors and their principals. These posts described counselors being an integral part of the leadership team, being used regularly for staff development, and how administrators leaned on counselors for advice about staff and students. A number of posts suggested to other counselors that if they did not have a good relationship with their principals, they should seek another position.

One of the most troubling aspects of our online search was to find posts of school counselors struggling in toxic work environments. This included being micro-managed by the administrators, feeling like they were being ganged up by the administrators and made fools of as if their work were superficial and non-important, and feeling like the administrators had no respect for the role of the counselor or for the Comprehensive School Counseling Program (CSCP).

Some situations included not being recognized during National School Counselor Week, being made to feel that the counselor was responsible for school-wide problems, and even getting an unexpected pink slip near the end of the year with no prior warning. One of the ways that school counselors felt that the importance of their role was diminished was the hiring of staff with no degree or experience to be a student support specialist, family partnership advocate, or SEL specialist. These are roles that the school counselor has the training and the desire to implement, and, yet, some districts appear to be hiring other non-degreed persons to take on these roles and to free up the school counselor for inappropriate roles such as test coordinator, registrar, disciplinarian, record keeper, substitute teacher, and so forth.

These posts also reported that the work of the school counselor was also called into question many times over. Counselors were frequently asked to perform duties that are designated by ASCA as inappropriate tasks (Stone, 2017) for school counselors. These included being the campus testing coordinator, being in charge of 504 including record-keeping and following up with teachers regarding the student's progress, and substitute teaching when teachers were absent or attending other meetings in the school. School counselors who were assigned these non-counseling duties felt frustrated that they were not being used to their full potential.

School counselors reported being asked to provide weekly counseling services or to be a one-on-one aid to a student written into a student's Individual Education Plan. In some situations, the school counselor, who was not present at an Admission, Review, and Dismissal meeting, was assigned these tasks without consulting her/him/them or considering



what their schedules might already entail. Once these tasks were written into the accommodations of a student, the school counselor had little recourse to change them. In some cases, the counselor had plans for group counseling or classroom instruction that had to be changed to accommodate the newly assigned tasks.

On the other end of this continuum of school counselor duties, some principals assigned the school counselor to be in the classroom rotation of art, music, PE, and now Social-Emotional Learning (SEL). In other words, the school counselors were to spend most of their time in the classroom providing teachers with a second conference time during most days. One of the major problems with this rotation plan is that it puts the school counselor in the role of a regular teacher and disciplinarian, sometimes ruining the counselor/student relationship. This plan was also typically done without input from the school counselor who, of course, had many other duties to somehow fit into their daily schedule. While almost every school counselor promoted SEL and valued classroom instruction time, none of them believed that they could act as a teacher on most days and still have time to conduct groups, see individual students, meet with parents and teachers, and the myriad of other tasks in which school counselors are engaged.

What is the end result of these toxic work environments and misinformed view of what a school counselor's role is? Unfortunately, counselors reported their own health and mental health being at risk, and some were considering leaving the school counseling profession for something more supportive and less stressful. Often these were counselors who were in their first year in the profession. Some posts were by counselors who complained that school counselor pay was the same as teacher pay, and, yet, the demands seemed to be much greater. There were posts advertising open school counseling positions in situations where the school counselor had resigned unexpectedly. The plight of new school counselors was obvious in posts from those in their first year as a counselor. Many felt that they were drowning, could not possibly live up to the expectations of their administrators, or wondered if they had made a mistake entering the profession.

### ***Experiences of School Counselors with Teachers***

Many school counselors posted SEL lessons, tricks to managing students during these lessons, and how to get teachers to buy into the counseling curriculum. There were suggestions of ways to treat teachers either during special holidays and also just as a surprise to honor the hard work they do. Some school counselors posted ideas for sharing the teaching of the counseling curriculum with advisory and/or academic teachers and also how to manage a classroom instruction schedule without taking away too much academic time. They said that teachers really appreciated being involved in the scheduling, so they could make their plans accordingly.

On the other hand, administrators are not the only ones who misunderstand the role of the school counselor; some posts indicated that certain staff behaved inappropriately during SEL lessons. While the school counselor was teaching, the teachers were either in the background talking loudly and laughing, or they left the classroom to take a break. Some counselors discussed the resentment certain teachers felt when they had to make accommodations for SEL lessons with the counselors even when these lessons were supported by the administration. Counselors reported hearing some teachers bullying students and yelling at their entire class and were not sure how to approach the teachers without ruining their relationships with the staff.

On the other hand, counselors believed that teachers need a great deal of support as they deal with students who have behavioral problems and parents and certain political groups wanting oversight on what teachers say and how they teach certain topics. Teachers also in many states are dealing with the banning of books and topics that are now forbidden by legislatures that want to give more control to parents. School counselor posts indicated that they wanted to assist teachers as much as possible and understood how much stress teachers experience.

### ***Experiences of School Counselors with Students***

Some of the most satisfying posts were about the school counselor's relationships with students. They wish they had more time to give to students who needed a great deal of support and felt badly when they were not able to assist because of other duties. While most posts seemed to indicate that counselors understood that all students needed and deserved an excellent CSCP and the counselor's time and attention, they still had a handful of students who seemed to need a lot of ongoing attention. This was one of the areas where the counselors in the chat groups were able to really help each other by providing suggestions for dealing with specific student issues. The forums were like having many mentors and supervisors!

There were substantial numbers of posts asking for help with students who had behavioral problems or diagnoses that were beyond the scope of the school counselor's expertise. Some posts described students who did not listen to the counselor during counseling curriculum presentations or even to their teachers during academic lessons. The schools in which these students exhibited such behaviors were described as chaotic, lacking in leadership, unsafe, and with no real academic learning being taught because all of the teachers' time was spent on discipline. Some of the posts indicated that school counselors would be looking for other work, either in a different school or in a new career path.

### ***Experiences of School Counselors with Parents***

Posts having to do with parents included parents who were especially demanding. These parents wanted the counselor to provide long-term counseling sessions to their child and refused to consider outside counseling which would have been more appropriate. Some parents demanded to know what their child talked about in group counseling, and some even wanted to observe the small group counseling sessions. Other posts simply contained a lot of negativity on the part of parents regarding school counselors in general and some specifically called out SEL (please see Chapter 3), which is one of the hallmarks of the CSCP. Other posts indicated that school counselors felt helpless regarding the many dysfunctional families residing in their school's boundaries.

### **Optimal Performance**

One of the benefits of being able to post anonymously on school counselor social media sites was that other counselors responded with encouragement, ideas for change, and general support. In some states, school counselors can be a part of a union, and often new counselors were encouraged to contact their union representative for advice on any given negative conditions. For school counselors who were treated badly by administrators, this

was often the suggestion. While going outside of the school building to complain about a situation seems like an extreme response, most counselors had tried a variety of other options with no results. Therefore, asking for help from someone outside of the immediate situation could be productive.

The situational challenges that were posted time and time again concerned us, and we offer some insight into coping with these in this section titled Optimal Performance. We also believe that prospective school counselors should know about these challenges as well as the upside of being a part of the school counseling profession. Some of the suggestions are unique to the role of the school counselor and can be included as part of the CSCP. Other suggestions are more systemic addressing school-wide or district-wide problems that impact all students. The school counselor is in a position to advocate for systemic change by using counseling collaboration and consultation skills that could change the *way things have always been done*. Our hope is that by including this information, new school counselors will have insight into some possible pitfalls of being a school counselor and will be able to manage and cope with these situations. They might even be able to determine if an administrative team believes in the value of the school counselor before agreeing to a contract. In this section, we take each of our major themes and offer suggestions on how to deal with these issues.

### **Supporting School Counselors in Counselor Education Programs**

One theme that struck us as we pooled our information together is that school counselors need support! Many of them clearly did not have a CSCP in place with a calendar outlining the events of the academic year, nor did they have buy-in from their administrators. Planning up front for what the school counselor will be doing day-to-day and having an agreement with the principal regarding these activities will make it less likely that school counselors will be driving a fire truck to the nearest and most recent fire needing to be extinguished! Additionally, if the counselor posts a calendar each month, she/he/they will be less likely to be asked to engage in inappropriate activities (see Chapter 8). How do novice school counselors know how to develop a CSCP and create an annual calendar and gain the support of administrators?

One solution to this conundrum is to step up the goals, objectives, and activities in school counselor education programs that actually prepare students for the appropriate roles of school counselors. Students leaving their graduate programs should be ready to take on the role of a school counselor without feeling that they are not prepared or that they are *less than* and not fit for the job. Students must know how to design a CSCP, how to reach an agreement with their principal about the role, how to develop a calendar with the appropriate activities on it, and how to collect data that will reinforce the importance of the CSCP to the vision and mission of the school. This textbook, *School Counselors as Practitioners*, second edition (2024), is an example of a hands-on day-to-day school counselor job description that prepares students for their very first year as a counselor and beyond. If school counselors in training are required to design a mock-up of a CSCP, that document can be part of a portfolio that prospective interviewers would be interested in seeing. Applicants to school counseling positions can begin advocating for their appropriate role in the interview and can ask salient questions about how the administration of a school views the role of the school counselor, if the administration would support the CSCP, and if a principal/counselor agreement would be amenable.

Learning never stops after graduation! Training should continue during the first two years of employment to help new school counselors transition into their new jobs, and the school district should provide that continuation of training. Large school districts usually have the resources (funding, a district administrator in charge of the counselors, and access to speakers) to conduct new counselor camps or even training for aspiring school counselors. Rural school districts might have to be more creative in training new counselors such as relying on other agencies to conduct training. In either case, assigning every new counselor a mentor is one way to make sure that there is an information conduit for the new hires. Universities can also assist novice school counselors by being available to consult with graduates particularly on ethical dilemmas. Some universities offer *come home* days at the school to bring former students back to learn how they are doing, what they wish they had learned in their program, and what learning experiences they are grateful their program provided for them.

### **School Counselors and Administrators**

Clearly one of the most important relationships that school counselors will forge is the one with the principal of the school. This relationship begins in the interview process! While it might be tempting to say *yes* to the first offer that comes to a new recruit, getting a feel for the school's leadership is critical. If there is a counseling team at the school, the interviewee should ask many questions about how their duties are divided, do they work as a team or mostly in isolation, and what is the culture (accepting, working for all students, hopeful, collaborative, and so forth) of the school. If there is only one school counselor at the school, it might be prudent to talk to the person who is leaving that position and find out why there will be an open position (retirement, moving up to another position, dissatisfaction, and so forth). It is important to remember that the new recruit is interviewing as well as being interviewed. Working for a warm and caring, service-oriented school principal can help ease a new counselor into the rigors of the school counselor role while a demanding, authoritarian principal can create roadblocks to the counselor's appropriate role.

### **School Counselors and Teachers**

School counselors should be good communicators which is the key to obtaining the support of the teaching staff. An indirect service to students is providing important information to teachers that will impact students. For example, staff development presentations for teachers can help them with the following: (a) understand the role of the school counselor, (b) keep current on state and district policies and programs, and (c) provide information on challenging students including those with behavioral problems or with serious mental health issues. Providing teachers with real tools to help them manage students can go a long way in gaining their trust and appreciation. Tools such as behavioral charts, lesson plans for specific classroom challenges, and directions for incorporating class meetings into the weekly lesson plan.

Additionally, teachers might want one-on-one conferences regarding individual students or classroom management challenges. Offering to observe a student or a class of students is often a good starting point to help teachers manage difficult situations. There are numerous forms for quickly ticking off student and/or teacher behaviors that

can be helpful when working with a teacher after an observation (see Chapter 15). Sometimes teachers simply want someone to listen to their own personal challenges and how those impact their teaching. It's possible that a teacher might ask for a referral for counseling which is why counselors must know how to help teachers access mental health coverage on their insurance plans as well as having a substantial resource list not only for child counseling but also for adults. Having the attitude that the school counselor is ready and willing to help teachers with a variety of issues is important in managing good relationships with them.

### **Words from the Wise**

I interviewed Linda, a school counselor, crisis counselor, and counselor educator who worked in a variety of settings and asked her about her most satisfying and most challenging experiences over her career. Her comments aligned closely with the findings of our investigation in chat groups, in blogs, and on various counselor Internet sites. Working with students was the highlight of this counselor's experiences like so many other counselors. Often she would tolerate bad behavior on the part of other adults in the building in order to make the appropriate and ethical choice for students. Administrators who did not understand or appreciate the role of the school counselor could interfere with students' emotional and social needs, but Linda has always been determined to do the best for students. See the entire interview in the Online Companion.

### **Conclusion**

We consider the toxic workplace and undermining of the school counselor's role by administrators to be one of the most salient findings of our investigation and believe that a closer, more research oriented look at that phenomenon to be critical. In Chapter 8, Dr. Brown describes ways in which school counselors can advocate for their appropriate roles and show administrators with data on how the CSCP is critical to students' success in academics, career awareness and choices, and social and emotional learning.

### **Activities**

- 1 Interview a counselor in your area and ask that person to describe the most satisfying experiences and challenges in their professional experience.
- 2 Role-play a discussion with your imaginary principal who does not believe that the school counselor's role is critical to students' success. Bring hard data and anecdotal data with you to discuss what you do and the difference your program makes to students.
- 3 Discuss in class the steps a school counselor can take to forge a trusting relationship with teachers. Then do the same for parents.

### **Resources**

#### **Blogs**

<https://www.elementaryschoolcounseling.org/marissas-blog>

<https://savvyschoolcounselor.com/>

<https://counselingessentials.org/>

**Websites**

<https://www.schoolcounselor.org/>

<https://www.thecounselinggeek.com/>

<https://forhighschoolcounselors.blogspot.com/p/high-school-counselor-websites.html>

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# Social Trends Affecting School Counselors

*Judy A. Nelson*

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## Introduction

Mental health and social and emotional learning (SEL) have become more important to educators and school leaders since the COVID-19 pandemic from around 2019 through 2022. The pandemic sheltered most children at home for a year or more resulting in isolation, learning difficulties, and a decline in grades and academics. Some students experienced abuse from family members, and others were traumatized by the whole experience. Depressive symptoms are pervasive among children and teens in the aftermath of the pandemic (Zablotsky, et al., 2022). The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) recently released the 2021 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) which reports data on drug and alcohol use, substance use, substance use treatment, mental health issues, and the use of mental health services among the people aged 12 or older in the United States. These data collected annually via surveys help teaching and counseling professionals and the general public gain a better understanding of our nation's behavioral health of its children. The findings that the SAMHSA chose to highlight from this most recent survey were the following:

- Among adolescents aged 12 to 17, 20.1% (or 5.0 million people) had a past year major depressive episode (MDE), and 14.7% (or 3.7 million people) had a past year MDE with severe impairment.
- Among adolescents aged 12 to 17 in 2021, 12.7% (or 3.3 million people) had serious thoughts of suicide, 5.9% (or 1.5 million people) made a suicide plan, and 3.4% (or 892,000 people) attempted suicide in the past year.
- People were classified as needing substance use treatment if they had an illicit drug or alcohol use disorder in the past year or if they received substance use treatment at a specialty facility in the past year. Among people aged 12 or older in 2021, 15.6% (or 43.7 million people) needed substance use treatment in the past year.
- Among the 5.0 million adolescents aged 12 to 17 in 2021 who had a past year MDE, 40.6% (or 2.0 million people) received treatment for depression in the past year.
- Among the 842,000 adolescents aged 12 to 17 in 2021 with a co-occurring MDE and an illicit drug or alcohol use disorder in the past year, 56.1% (or 471,000 people) received either substance use treatment at a specialty facility or mental health services in the past year. Among adolescents aged 12 to 17 with a co-occurring MDE and an illicit drug or alcohol use disorder in the past year who received either service, most (93.5%) received only mental health services.

- Nearly half of adolescents aged 12 to 17 with a past year MDE (45.1% or 2.2 million people) perceived that the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic negatively affected their mental health “quite a bit or a lot.” In comparison, 12.4% of adolescents aged 12 to 17 without a past year MDE (or 2.4 million people) perceived this level of a negative effect on their mental health because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

(see SAMHSA Announces National Survey on Drug Use and Health [NSDUH] Results Detailing Mental Illness and Substance Use Levels in 2021 <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/release/2021-national-survey-drug-use-and-health-nsduh-releases>)

Additionally, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently released the results of the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance (YRBS) from 2021. The most salient reported adolescent behaviors and experiences during the pandemic were as follows:

- More than one in three high school students experienced poor mental health during the pandemic and nearly half of students felt persistently sad or hopeless.
- Female students and those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, other or questioning (LGBQ) are experiencing disproportionate levels of poor mental health and suicide-related behaviors. For example, in 2021, 12% of female students, more than 25% of LGB students, and 17% of other or questioning students attempted suicide during the past year compared to 5% of their male peers and 5% of their heterosexual peers, respectively.
- The range of impacts on youth’s daily lives was broad—including difficulties, family economic impacts, hunger, and abuse in the home.
- More than half of students experienced emotional abuse in the home and more than 10% reported physical abuse in the home.
- Lesbian, gay, and bisexual students were far more likely to report physical abuse, with 20% reporting that they had been physically abused by a parent or other adult in their home, compared to 10% of heterosexual students.
- Black students were most likely to report hunger, with nearly a third reporting that there was not enough food in their home during the pandemic.
- More than one third of all U.S. high school students felt they had been treated badly or unfairly at school because of their race or ethnicity.
- Asian, Black, and Multiracial students reported the highest levels of experiencing racism.
- Students who reported racism were also more likely to experience poor mental health and less likely to feel connected to people at school.

(CDC, 2023, <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/abes.htm>)

While the results of the most recent NSDUH and the CDC surveys clearly provide a rationale for more mental health help and SEL in the nation’s classrooms, there has been an outcry among certain groups of parents, politicians, and religious leaders that some topics have no place in education outside of the home. Some of these groups have been successful in takeovers of the school boards that have resulted in the following: prohibited SEL in classrooms; canceled teacher workshops on trauma and SEL; banned large numbers of books of select topics from the history of racism to any book that discusses gay, lesbian, or transgender issues; forbidden diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training; created fear



among teachers that certain topics are off limits in the classroom and could result in punishment or dismissal; accused teachers and school counselors of teaching inappropriate content to their children including critical race theory and LGBTQ topics; and threatened school personnel, including teachers and school counselors, that everything a child says to school staff must be reported to the parents immediately if it is personal in nature.

In addition to the unsettling statistics from the SAMHSA survey in 2021, we know that students have access to large quantities of information on the Internet, television, social media, and among their peers. It would be naive of teachers and parents to think that students, at least in middle and high school, are not aware of the racial unrest in our nation, discrimination and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, critical race theory, transgender issues, gay and lesbian issues, abortion laws, sexting, virtual relationships, addictions, and other topics that are frequently in the news, on social media, and are being discussed by students. Without trusted adults to help students to discern factual information, problem solve, and make healthy decisions regarding some of these topics, students will most certainly receive disinformation, conspiracy theories, and personal biases from peers and adults alike. Therefore, vigilance is necessary. Teachers, counselors, and other school staff have their own experiences, beliefs, biases, and attitudes and must be aware of these when talking to students. Developing trust with students and parents is essential if school counselors expect parents to feel comfortable with the role of the school counselor in their children's lives.

Researchers (Twemlow et al., 2002; Mori et al., 2021) have demonstrated that children must feel safe and secure in order to learn and perform their best academically. If teachers and counselors cannot help students learn about emotional regulation and good decision-making, which is what SEL is all about, children will not learn important skills that will determine their success in school, out of school, and as developing adults. This chapter provides some guidance on navigating the needs of students and the misconceptions that parents hold regarding SEL, positive mental health for students, and the ability for students to understand information with a critical approach. Additionally, we include a discussion on confidentiality and the dilemmas that often arise from that ethical stance.

### **Theories of Operation**

The humanistic counseling approach assumes that people, even children, already possess the qualities they need to thrive. This theory is based on empathy, altruism, creativity, humility, and curiosity and is an excellent example of how school counselors might approach students ... with respect and admiration for their abilities and an acceptance that is unconditional (Rogers, 1961). School counselors can also use this unconditional regard to work with parents who are challenging the counselor's role in the school curriculum and the topics on which school counselors focus. Assuming that parents want the best education for their children is a good starting point and assuring parents that school personnel want the same thing for all of the children in the school can be effective. Inviting parents to work with the school counselor to generate ideas for SEL, to observe the lessons, and to be an important voice in what is appropriate for their children can decrease a great amount of tension that will ultimately hurt the development of their children.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) [Beck, 2019] is another theory that might ease parents' fears about SEL because some of the strategies are teaching everyday skills that will help their children be successful in school and in life. For example, social skills training and

problem solving are life skills that everyone needs. Including these skills in the counseling curriculum might be a way to assure parents that SEL is not some political plot to brainwash their children or a way to impose certain values on them. The main premise of CBT is that what a person thinks determines how that person feels. Teaching children that having a positive repertoire of social skills and problem solving skills (new ways to think) will help them be more confident (new feelings) and will lead to making good choices in any given situation (new behaviors). Group skills training, such as lessons the counselor presents in class, is one way to help students and their parents feel less apprehensive about the content of these lessons. Always extend invitations to parents to be present during lessons.

### **Counseling Standards, Federal Regulations, and State Laws**

The following standards from the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) Ethical Standards for School Counselors (2022) provide evidence of the dilemma school counselors face regarding their roles in the school and parental rights and expectations. For example:

#### **A.2. Confidentiality**

School counselors:

- f Keep information confidential unless legal requirements demand confidential information be revealed or a breach is required to prevent serious and foreseeable harm to the student or others. Serious and foreseeable harm is different for each minor in schools and is determined by a student's developmental and chronological age, the setting, parental/guardian rights and the nature of the harm. School counselors consult with appropriate professionals when in doubt as to the validity of an exception.
- g Recognize their primary ethical obligation for confidentiality is to the students but balance that obligation with an understanding of parents'/guardians' legal and inherent rights to be the guiding voice in their children's lives. School counselors understand the need to balance students' ethical rights to make choices, their capacity to give consent or assent, and parental or familial legal rights and responsibilities to make decisions on their child's behalf.
- h Collaborate with and involve students to the extent possible and use the most appropriate and least intrusive method to breach confidentiality if such action is warranted. The child's developmental age and the circumstances requiring the breach are considered and, as appropriate, students are engaged in a discussion about the method and timing of the breach. Consultation with professional peers and/or supervision is recommended.

(p. 2)

There is no question that parents have rights regarding their children's development and education, and the parental role and support for academic success is of the utmost importance. It is also important to understand that leaving the comfort and safety of the home environment to attend school is one of the first steps children take to become less centered on their parents and more independent, gradually increasing their exposure to new people, places, ideas, beliefs, and attitudes. It is often a difficult transition for both parents and children.

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) [20 U.S.C. § 1232 g; 34 CFR Part 99] gives parents the right to review their child’s school records, ask for a hearing to review information in the school’s records that the parents believe is not accurate, and keep records confidential unless parents sign a document giving permission to release information to another party. In some instances, such as compliance with a judicial order or certain state laws (see <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/index.html> for a full list), written permission is not required. If counselors keep records of student visits, test scores, and other student information, they must comply with these regulations. In general, these rules help school counselors keep student information confidential from parties who do not need or should not be privy to student information.

On the other hand, there are increasingly more state laws that dictate what must be reported to parents regarding their child’s education. These laws make it difficult for teachers and school counselors to honor any semblance of confidentiality for students. For example, *Arizona, House Bill 2161* allows parents to sue educators who “usurp” their parental rights to “direct the upbringing, education, health care and mental health of their children.” Jerod McDonald-Evoy (2022) reported in the *Arizona Mirror* (April 18):

The bill in its current form prohibits a school, political subdivision or government from ‘usurping the fundamental right’ of a parent in raising their children, allows a parent to bring a civil suit against any government entity or official that violates the Parents’ Bill of Rights in Arizona law, gives parents the rights to all written or electronic records from a school about their child — including a student’s counseling records — and requires schools to notify parents before a survey is conducted of students, among other changes.

Legislative mandates such as these tend to make teachers, school counselors, and other school personnel feel threatened and less able to make good educational decisions about students’ learning. Teachers are in charge of maintaining good classroom management and teaching a curriculum that has been state approved. Having to worry whether or not a turn of a phrase or an honest answer to a student’s question might jeopardize a teacher’s job is placing school personnel in a very difficult position. Additionally, it is not unusual for students to feel very close to their teachers and school counselors and feel comfortable confiding in them regarding any number of feelings about school, their families, their friendships, and other topics. Having to report these feelings to parents would be burdensome to teachers and counselors, would jeopardize the trust needed between students and school personnel, and are not necessary unless the student is in danger himself or to others. In the next sections of this chapter, we address the issues of parents’ rights, confidentiality, and social/emotional learning.

## **Experience**

### ***Parents’ Fears about Their Children’s Education***

According to Bethany Bray (2021) in an article in *Counseling Today*, the pandemic brought to the public’s attention the importance of the mental health of children and teens and highlighted how many school-aged students suffer from depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues. Teachers, administrators, and school district leaders reached out to