Expanding support beyond the virtual classroom:

Lessons and recommendations from school counselors during the COVID-19 crisis

As children across the country grappled with the trauma of school closures and a global pandemic, school counselors faced unique barriers to delivering critical student supports. What have we learned about their experiences, and what can schools and districts do to ensure students have access to much-needed counseling programs?

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Report Summary

As schools are reopening their doors this fall, students are arriving having experienced significant learning loss, various forms of trauma, and overall disengagement. As licensed professionals trained in promoting students' social emotional, academic, and postsecondary development, **school counselors are key to supporting students' re-adjustment and learning**. Regardless of whether K-12 schools have opted for in-person instruction, a hybrid learning model, or are entirely remote, school counselors need to be trained and have access to the resources and organizational supports necessary for effectively assisting students, especially those most impacted by the pandemic.

With seemingly no end to the pandemic in sight, how can schools, districts, and states best support their counselors? How are counselors adapting their roles to best meet student needs, and what key lessons did they learn from the shift to online learning during the spring? To answer these questions, we launched the COVID-19 National Survey of School Counselors to document counselors' understanding of student needs, virtual counseling efforts, strategies utilized to support students, and the organizational conditions enabling their work. Between June and July 2020, 984 school counselors from 48 states and Puerto Rico completed our survey; these counselors also provided over 2,471 text responses to our open-ended questions.

The following research questions guided our study:

1. How did school counselors adapt to working with students remotely during COVID-19?
2. Are there differences in how school counselors responded to students' postsecondary and mental health needs in urban, rural, and suburban schools, and by grade level?
3. In what ways did school leaders, districts, and state departments of education enhance or constrain counselors' efforts during COVID-19?

Our findings suggest that **school counselors were not able to spend as much time as usual counseling students about social emotional issues, career development, or postsecondary plans**. Some of the barriers to counseling were logistical, such as limited privacy, reduced time in students' schedules for meeting with counselors, and missed opportunities for connecting with hard-to-reach students. Counselors were also tasked with tracking down students on attendance issues, supporting teachers, and delivering social service and technology information to families—all important activities that nonetheless detracted from counselors' ability to check in with students and provide necessary supports.

Counselors also reported **a lack of direction and leadership from school and district leaders.** While school counselors appreciated ongoing communication from administrative and district staff, they were rarely involved in school planning and often received restrictive guidance from leaders rather than additional supports. Finally, like all educators, school counselors struggled to adjust to remote schooling while simultaneously navigating personal stressors due to the pandemic.

We hope our findings and recommendations can inform education leaders and policymakers as they reimagine education systems and policies for supporting the success of all students in remote learning environments.

Background: School Counseling and COVID-19

Since the arrival of COVID-19 in the United States this winter, the lives of American children have been upended. Students became physically disconnected from their teachers, classmates, and key support systems. Media outlets have highlighted the unique challenges students faced in this new reality, calling attention to increased mental health concerns, low levels of motivation, fears about high school to college transitions, and the loss of connection to caring adults. A prominent theme in these stories is students' detachment from school counselors who provide essential academic, social emotional, and postsecondary counseling. Such accounts paint a dire picture of growing student needs and the myriad challenges educators face in responding to such concerns. The students most affected by the pandemic—particularly by the economic fallout it engendered—are also likely to be disproportionately impacted by the loss of school-based counseling.

In addition, the COVID-19 crisis is having an undeniable impact on students' postsecondary planning, particularly among first generation and low-income students as well as students of color, who tend to heavily rely on schools for college and career planning support (Cholewa et al., 2015; Holland, 2019). With schools closed, counselors are struggling to help students navigate the complex college process and have expressed concerns about higher than usual "summer melt" rates (Belsha, 2020; Wanneh, 2020) and possible changes to postsecondary plans (Quilantan, 2020). Although school counselors have worked diligently and creatively to continue supporting students, these growing concerns have raised questions about counselors' unique professional experiences during remote schooling.

Sample Characteristics

In total, 984 school counselors and educators in adjacent roles (e.g., college counselors, adjustment counselors, counseling directors) completed the COVID-19 National Survey of School Counselors, drawn from schools in 48 states and Puerto Rico.

Demographic characteristics of survey participants are shown in Table 1, and largely align with prior work that has examined the school counseling profession. The vast majority of participants had earned at least a Master's degree, and the average years of experience in the school counseling profession was 11.4.

As shown in Table 2, participants worked in a diverse set of schools, serving students from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds and representing schools in different types of communities. [1]
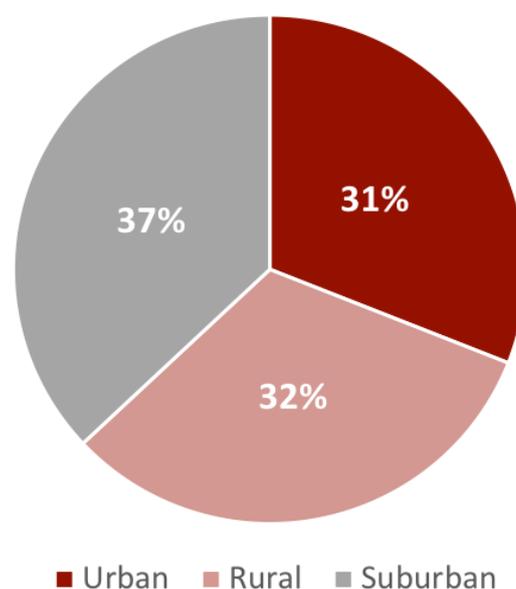
Table 1. Participant Demographic Characteristics

	Percentage
Race/Ethnicity	
American Indian/Alaskan Native	1%
Asian	6%
Black/African American	10%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0.5%
White	77%
Prefer to not answer	5%
Hispanic/Latinx	11%
Gender	
Female	84%
Male	15%
Genderqueer/Nonbinary	1%
Certified in Counseling	97%
Employed Full Time	94%
Tenured	66%
Union Member	73%
Highest Degree Earned	
Master's	84%
Doctorate	6%
Other	10%
Grade Levels Served	
Primary (K-5)	24%
Middle (6-8)	19%
High (9-12)	35%
Mixed	22%
Years of Counseling Experience	
0-2	11%
3-10	43%
11-19	25%
20+	20%

Note: N = 981

Table 2. School Demographic Characteristics

	Percentage
Urbanicity	
Urban	31%
Suburban	37%
Rural	32%
Free or Reduced Price Lunch	
0-25%	20%
26-50%	25%
50-75%	19%
75-100%	32%
Number of Schools in District	
1-3	25%
4-6	22%
7+	52%
Student to Counselor Ratio	
0-250	42%
251-400	32%
401+	26%
Region	
Northeast	48%
Midwest	17%
South	12%
West	23%
Puerto Rico	<1%

Note: N = 981

Like all educators, school counselors experienced personal stressors such as balancing work and family demands, managing their own mental health/anxiety, and adjusting to new forms of technology.

- Over half of the counselors in our study reported having children under 18 and over 90% of counselors with children were responsible for coordinating their remote schooling.

- Counselors were extremely worried about the future of their roles, over 50% feeling their job was vulnerable due to budget cuts.
    - This was especially true in urban districts—64% of counselors in urban schools felt their jobs were vulnerable compared to 51% and 50% of counselors in suburban and rural schools, respectively.

"It has been very difficult trying to work from home, while homeschooling my children, and taking care of a baby. Our household was full of stress and anxiety." [2]

Key Finding #1: School counselors lacked direction or clear expectations from school, district, or state leadership.

As school counselors shifted to remote schooling, they received little counseling-specific direction from school, district, and state leaders, leaving them unclear about expectations for their work. Most reported receiving less support from these leaders than during pre-COVID times.

- About 55% of counselors surveyed reported that their school and district leaders did not provide clear direction about their role in a remote environment.

- Only one-quarter felt their district had a clear overall vision for school counseling programs during this time, although a greater number (55%) received at least some resources or technical assistance from their district. By contrast, counselors generally felt their state departments of education and regional hubs neither had a clear vision for counseling during COVID-19 (72%) nor provided adequate resources to support their work (53%).

  - Only 15% of counselors reported receiving more support from their districts after the shift to remote learning than they did before the pandemic. Notably, about one-third reported receiving less support from district staff since the outbreak.

> *"I believe that the role of a school counselor in remote learning needs to be clearly defined and shared. There was a lot of confusion as to what we should and/or should not be doing and we spent a lot of time trying to figure out exactly what our role should be during this time that could've been spent supporting our students, families, and staff."*

- Compared to their experiences pre-COVID, about 27% of counselors received less support from both school leaders and state education officials during the spring 2020 semester.

Figure 1. Counselors' Perceptions of State and District Support for Counseling During Spring 2020 Remote Schooling: Vision and Resources

A. Articulated a Clear Vision for Counseling
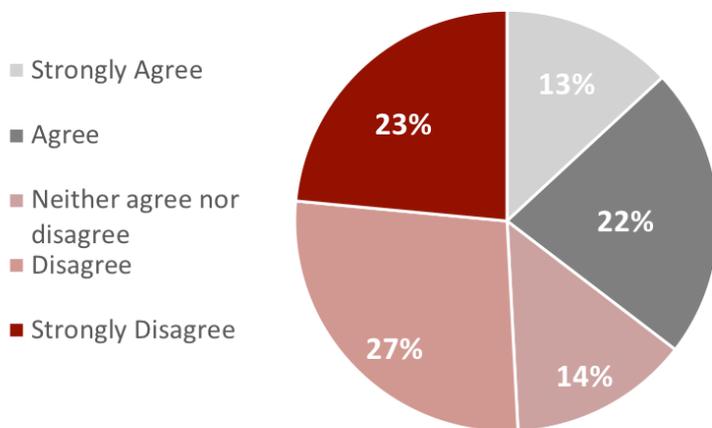
B. Offered Resources and Technical Support
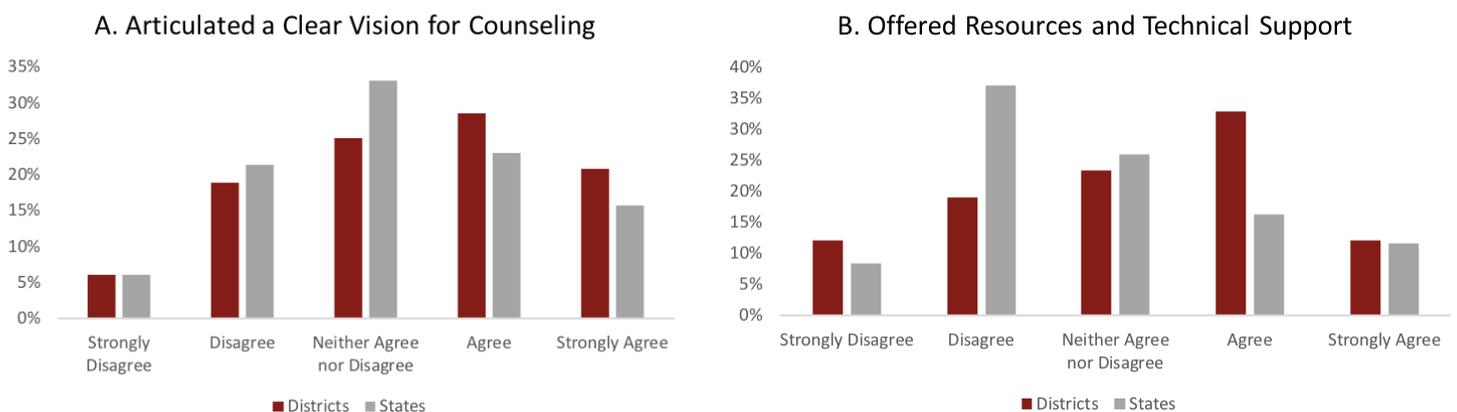
Key Finding #2: School counselor voices were notably absent from COVID-19 planning processes.

School counselors appreciated regular, ongoing communication from school and district staff, while communication from state leaders varied. Unfortunately, counselor input was rarely solicited regarding how to structure virtual counseling practices or on how to integrate time into students' schedules for support services.

- About 60% of counselors received communication from either their schools or districts at least once a week. However, nearly 22% of counselors reported receiving no communication from their state or regional hub since COVID-related school closures began.

> *"Bring in your counselors and get their insight. Do not make decisions before consulting. Be open to modifying the procedures in order to help each community based on their needs."*

Figure 2. School and District Leaders Asked for Counselor Input about Contingency Plans

Legend:
- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Pie chart values: 13%, 22%, 14%, 27%, 23%

- Approximately 35% of counselors reported that their school and district leaders explicitly asked them for input about contingency planning.
  - Elementary (35%) and high school counselors (33%) were slightly less likely to be included in these planning conversations than middle school counselors (42%).

- Counselors often received restrictions about what they could not do in a remote learning environment—including conducting individual counseling sessions, using videoconferencing to meet one-on-one with students, and providing group or classroom instruction—rather than receiving information on best practices for supporting students.

> *"Discuss what counselors should be focusing on, do not assign clerical duties thinking that counselors are unable to provide services remotely."*

Key Finding #3: As school counselors took on administrative responsibilities to support the transition online, they had less time for counseling students.

School counselors reported spending less time offering individual and group counseling for students than they did pre-COVID. School counselors were often tasked with tracking down students on attendance issues, supporting teachers, and delivering social service and technology information to families.

Figure 3. Time Spent on Counseling Responsibilities Compared to Pre-COVID
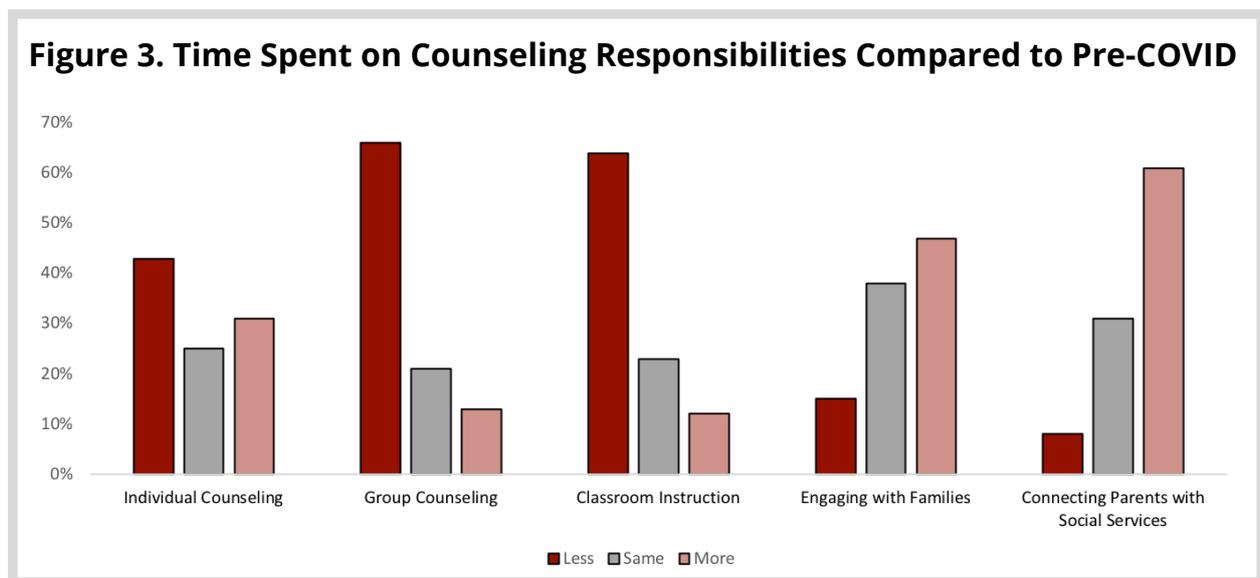
- Overall, 43% of counselors spent **less time providing individual counseling** than pre-COVID.
    - Counselors in rural (48%) and suburban settings (46%) tended to spend less time meeting one-on-one with students compared to counselors in urban schools (33%).

- Nearly 70% of counselors also reduced their time spent on **group counseling** and **classroom instruction**.

- Counselors instead reported devoting much of their time to helping students and their families navigate remote learning as well as access critical resources to support student success.
    - This was especially true at schools serving large populations of low-income students. For example, nearly 70% of counselors at schools where 75-100% of the student population received free- or reduced-price lunch reported spending more time connecting parents with social services.

- Counselors were asked to assume even more administrative tasks as schools shifted online. In fact, nearly 50% of counselors reported spending more time than they did pre-COVID on course scheduling and overseeing the master school calendar.

Key Finding #4: The focus of school counseling shifted to meet students' immediate needs due to the remote learning environment and the COVID-19 pandemic.

School counselors described changes in the division of time they spent on social emotional, academic, and postsecondary development. The emphasis of counselors' time to a particular developmental area varied by grade levels and geographic area. Ultimately, given pressing issues facing students and their families, school counselors prioritized targeted supports and those that were most time sensitive.

- Nearly 50% of counselors reported spending more time supporting students' **social emotional needs** and **personal development**.
  - This was especially true at the elementary level. For example, about 60% of elementary counselors allocated more time to providing personal development supports compared to 40% of high school counselors.

"My students and their families were in much greater need of emotional support... So many families fell apart because of illness, loss of jobs, and fear."

Figure 4. Time Spent on Counseling Domains Compared to Pre-COVID

- Twenty-five percent of counselors spent less time on **college counseling** post-COVID and an overwhelming 50% devoted less time to **career planning**.

- One-quarter of counselors reported spending less time on **academic counseling**. Many of these counselors tended to have high caseloads, overseeing close to 400 students.

- The academic counseling work of elementary school counselors was especially disrupted, about 40% devoting less time to this domain of their role compared to pre-COVID while middle and high school counselors devoted more time to academic counseling.

Figure 5. Time Spent on Academic Counseling Compared to Pre-COVID, by Grade Level Served
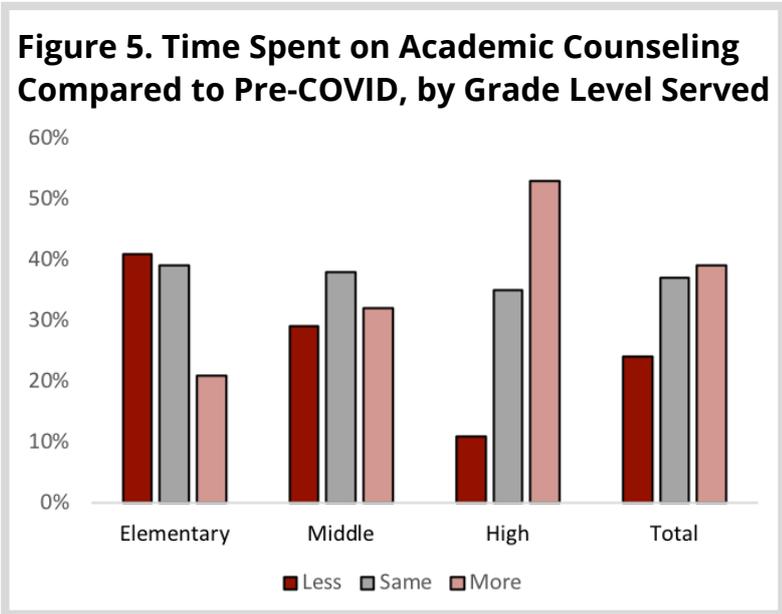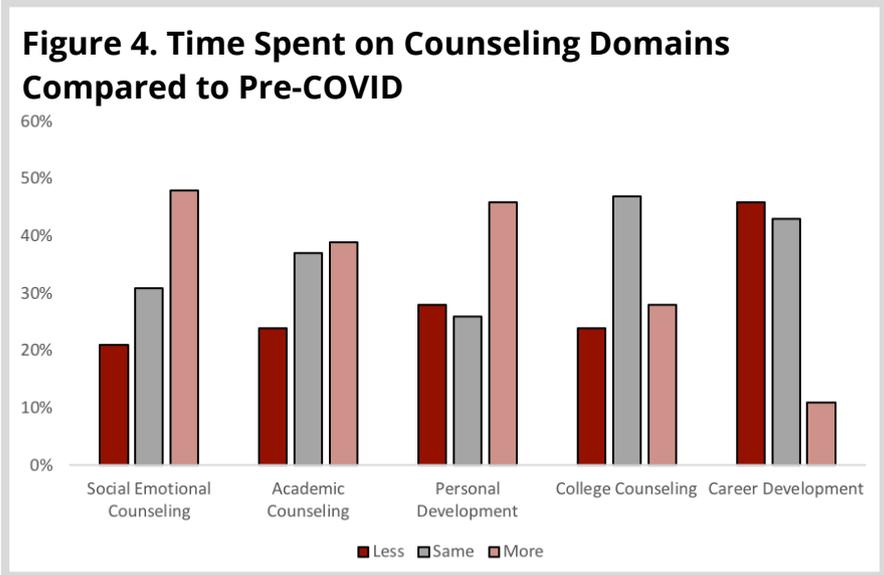
Key Finding #5: School counselors faced unique challenges while lacking sufficient role-specific professional learning.

The abrupt shift to remote schooling left school counselors working harder than ever to connect with students and provide consistent support. However, despite their best efforts, counselors encountered a myriad of other barriers to their work such as limited privacy, reduced time in students' schedules for meeting, and difficulties connecting with hard-to-reach students. As a result, counselors were hard-pressed to engage with students and implement the programming or interventions students needed.

- Although counselors utilized a variety of means to remain in touch with students, they were not always able to connect with children and adolescents who most needed their time and care.

  - This was in part due to students' limited access to the internet—about 20% of counselors reported that half or more their school's student body did not have any access to the internet at home; this was particularly a concern for counselors in urban and rural schools.
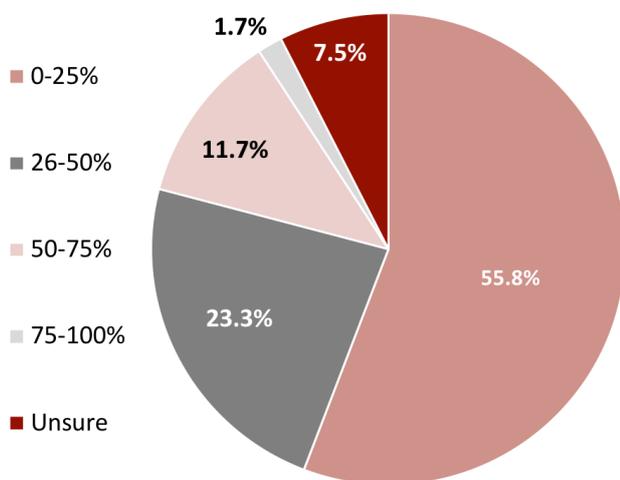
"Being able to get a hold of my students has been the biggest challenge. I would say that 65-75% of the phone calls made to parents went unanswered, regardless of trying to call every week. This made it difficult to meet State mandates (i.e. mandated counseling) when unable to engage the parent."

- Counselors faced the unique challenge of creating confidential virtual spaces to connect with students in order to support their mental health needs. A lack of privacy prevented some students from fully engaging in counseling.

- Counselors participated in generalized professional learning aimed at preparing educators to use online platforms. Seventy-four percent received some type of professional development in spring 2020. However most training focused on supporting students' social emotional needs and navigating learning platforms and technology, with little attention to virtual counseling or related practices.

"Our district in particular was so frightened of invading families' right to privacy they heavily restricted our use of using any app to virtually meet with students in any capacity and out right banning one-on-one meetings between students and teachers. This hamstringed the school counselor's role..."

  - Most counselors received training from their district (50%) and their state education agency (57%). By far, the largest source of professional development training was the American School Counselor Association (67%).

  - Access to training differed by school type. For example, 34% of rural counselors reported receiving no training, compared to 20% of urban counselors and 23% suburban counselors.

Key Finding #6: Technology both supported and posed barriers to school counselors.

- About 60% of counselors had access to a school-owned laptop pre-COVID, while 37% used their own personal device to carry out their work.

- While counselors generally were able to access devices and sufficient internet connection, they faced a number of technology-related hurdles.

Figure 6. Counselor Estimates of the Percentage of Their Students Without Access to the Internet at Home

- 0-25%
- 26-50%
- 50-75%
- 75-100%
- Unsure

1.7%
7.5%
11.7%
55.8%
23.3%

"Lack of communication has impeded my ability to counsel in all areas. Many students do not have internet due to the rural setting and others quit checking electronic communication."

- About 20% of counselors were unable to virtually connect with their students, either due to school policies prohibiting the use of video conferencing software or because of students' limited access to the internet and/or a device. Those counselors able to video call with students typically used platforms like Zoom (66%) and/or Google (78%).

"It was difficult getting in contact with certain students who definitely needed support. I had to give up my rule of not giving students and parents my cell number because this turned out to be the only way I could connect with some families."

- Many counselors reported frustration with not having school phones to conduct calls; counselors were hesitant about distributing their personal phone numbers to students, and others who opted to block their phone numbers had difficulty reaching families who were wary of answering calls from unknown numbers.

Figure 7. Counselor Device Access to Conduct Work During COVID

- Used Personal Device
- Used School-Owned Device
- No Access to Device

1.5%
37.0%
62.8%
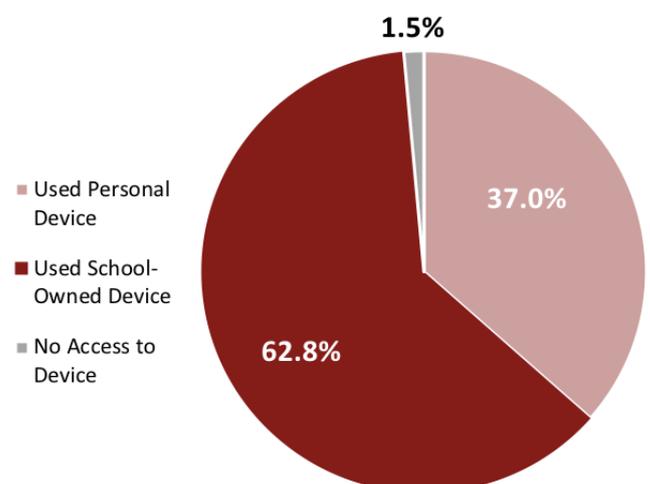
Recommendations

Our findings suggest that the shift to remote schooling left school counselors very much in the dark about their role and limited their ability to deliver school counseling services. In the midst of the pandemic, school counselors did their absolute best to maintain relationships with students and continue to carry out their responsibilities, getting creative in the process. However, many of the challenges they faced were exacerbated by a lack of support from schools and districts, something we hope can be remedied in the future. To support school and district leaders who want to maintain their commitment to student wellness and postsecondary readiness when schools may need to be remote, we offer the following suggestions:

1. Articulate a vision for school counseling and define expectations with input from counselors

- **Establish a clear plan for counseling services and supports and communicate it widely.** The lack of guidance provided to counselors resulted in losing time in the transition to an online support system and resorting to asking counselors to fill in logistical gaps for school administrators, such as attendance tracking and other tasks that fail to leverage counselors' unique expertise in mental health or trauma-informed student support. Placing clear policies and strategies to access counseling on school and district websites and communicating such a plan to families and other members of the school community will articulate how counselors can be a source of support in an online format and signal the value the school puts on well-being, postsecondary readiness, and academic support for the curriculum.

- **Solicit counselors' input.** One of the top recommendations that counselors provided for going forward was to ask for counselors' input to help develop school counseling plans. Counselors want to help shape the work that their schools do and create effective policies, and schools need their help. At a minimum, they can identify counseling-related policies and practices that transfer to a virtual or hybrid context. More likely, they will creatively find ways to integrate their services into the hybrid or remote plan for instruction. School counselors can join morning meetings to connect with students and remind them that they are available as a source of support. Teachers might partner with counselors to integrate strategies for well-being into classes. And school counselors can use screening tools to identify depression, trauma, and other student insecurities.

> *"Communicate that counseling activities have to be supported by teachers and admins, as part of the curriculum not in addition to it."*
>
> *"I would encourage the state and districts to actively include their school counselors. School counselors have a wealth of knowledge regarding the school as a whole that is valuable in helping identify best practices and potential impacts of plans."*

2. Protect counselors' time with students and support creative approaches to maintain counseling programs

- **Create structured time for counselors to meet with students (and families).** More than ever, school leaders have to reconcile concerns about learning loss with meeting students' increased needs for mental health support. Whether over Zoom or in-person, time spent engaging with students will be precious and limited, and the demands on students' attention will be high. Unfortunately, the days of counselors popping into classes to pull a student for counseling or taking over a class to lead a social emotional lesson are behind us. As a result, schools will need to be intentional about scheduling time for students to meet with counselors and for counselors to provide Tier 1 supports to whole classes, grades, or schools. Schools might also adopt advisory classes or other scheduled time with counselors. School counselors might also be given flex time to meet with students during non-school hours. Offering this work option might offset demands on counselors' time, while also leveraging students' and parents' availability during non-class time.

- **Spread out student tracking responsibilities.**
Obviously, school leaders will need to call on all members of the staff to track down students, monitor their attendance, and intervene with students who may not be showing up. However, spreading those responsibilities across the school community or hiring retired staff or paraprofessionals to assist in this task will be necessary if schools hope to use counselors to address barriers to learning or address reasons for not showing up to in-person or virtual classrooms. Doing so will enable counselors to use their time to check in with students, deliver resources for managing anxiety, communicate new college admissions policies, and conduct other counseling-specific activities.

> *"Counselors are not the homework police to students and families. Please do not treat us as such."*

- **Seek creative solutions to promote virtual counseling while considering issues of confidentiality.** Although counselors share administrators' concerns about confidentiality and privacy, they did not agree with school policies that restricted them from using online platforms to carry out counseling. School counselors need flexibility to meet with students one-to-one within expectations to identify workable solutions. Counselors can be supported to set up outside space to meet with students individually or in small groups, conduct home visits, especially with elementary-school aged children, or even explore other online tele-counseling platforms or wellness apps that counselors can use with older students.

3. Ensure counselors have access to training, resources, and support

- **Ask counselors what type of support they need to facilitate connecting with students and to provide counseling via virtual platforms.** School counselors regularly reported frustration this spring in trying to contact students. This ranged from having to use their personal phone number to parents or students not answering calls from unknown or blocked numbers. Access to a school phone, Google Voice number, or other way to communicate with students will be critical if counselors are going to conduct confidential conversations with students. Counselors also wanted further guidance on how to navigate issues of confidentiality in virtual spaces, given that counselors and students alike were connecting from their homes with limited privacy. Having a dedicated space on virtual platforms for counseling resources and tools could also facilitate students' ability to access support.

- **Provide counselors with resources and opportunities for training on counselor-specific topics.** Administrators should make sure counselors have time to engage in professional learning throughout the academic year, and especially in times of crisis and rapid change. They also need training that is distinct from what is offered to teachers— many counselors desired additional training on topics such as trauma and grief. Counselors need time to keep up with the changing policies in higher education, such as test optional policies, and they will need training in effectively using virtual platforms that support counseling relationships.

- **Prioritize time for recharging.** Finally, make sure you build in time for all educators, and especially counselors, to recharge. As carriers of students' stress, trauma, and loss, they too need a break. School counselors reported that they found that consistent check-ins with supervisors and school leadership, flexibility in scheduling, mindfulness tips, and grief processing sessions were all valuable ways that they felt energized and supported in their roles. We suggest that school administrators establish email-free blocks and other dedicated time for breaks to support educators' mental health.

> *"Provide us with necessary technology training when needed. Stay consistent throughout the district. Share resources throughout the district. During this time, it is not a competition on who does more. It is a time to collaborate and share with each other what is working and what is not so we can all learn and provide [the] best support services to our communities."*

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. The level of school urbanicity was self-reported by counselors.
2. All quotes were pulled verbatim from the open response portion of the COVID-19 National Survey of School Counselors.

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