

Connecticut School Counselors:

Helping High Schools Improve Student Outcomes

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Executive Summary

Results of a statewide study on the nature and scope of work of Connecticut school counselors and their impact on student outcomes found that smaller student-to-

school counselor ratios and more intensive college and career counseling services were each associated with significant reductions in suspension rates and in the total number of disciplinary incidents in Connecticut high schools for the 2008-2009 school year. The study was a collaborative effort among the Connecticut State Department of Education, the Connecticut School Counselors Association, and the Center for School Counseling Outcome Research (CSCOR) at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Findings will be presented at the American School Counselor Association National Conference this July in Boston and then submitted for publication.

In determining results of this study, we examined the level of implementation of comprehensive school counseling programs in Connecticut high schools and also differences in student outcomes in schools with better implementation levels. The evaluation study used three types of data to examine the contribution of school counseling programs and practices to student outcomes. School-level outcome data (e.g., student-to-school counselor ratios and suspension rates) were obtained from the Connecticut Department of Education website, as was school-level demographic data (e.g., per pupil expenditures and the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced lunch). Information about each high schools' school counseling practices and programs was obtained through an internet-based "Principal and Counselor Survey" (Lapan and Carey, 2007) that has been used in previous state-level school counseling evaluations, supplemented with items specific to the state of Connecticut that were developed in consultation with members of the Connecticut School Counselors Association. This online survey was sent to principals and school counselors at all Connecticut public high

schools. A total of 96 schools participated in the study and 72 school counselors, 24 guidance directors, and 52 principals responded to the survey.

The American School Counselor Association recommends a 250:1 student-to-school counselor ratio (<http://www.schoolcounselor.org>). Ratios higher than this recommendation have been cited in recent studies as plausible explanations for the failure of effective guidance and counseling services to be provided to all students (e.g., *Can I Get a Little Advice Here*, Public Agenda, 2010). While the average student-to-school counselor ratio across the state of Connecticut is 409:1, the mean ratio in this study was 205 high school students for every 1 school counselor (with a range of 70 to 340 students for every school counselor). After removing the effects of influential school factors (such as the percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch, per-pupil dollar expenditures, and enrollment size), lower student-to-school counselor ratios made a unique, value added contribution in explaining an additional 6% of the variance in suspension rates across Connecticut high schools.

Further, after removing the effects of influential school factors that predict suspension rates and discipline incidents (as above for student-to-school counselor ratios) Connecticut high schools in which school counselors provide more extensive college and career counseling services for students reported lower suspension rates and fewer total number of disciplinary incidents. Providing students with college and career counseling services explained an additional 3% of the variance in suspension rates and 4% of the variance in total number of discipline incidents in Connecticut high schools.

These findings are very meaningful, statistically significant results. School counselor ratios and work tasks matter to the success of Connecticut high schools. For example, Figure 1 graphs the relationship found between student-to-school counselor ratios and suspensions per every 100 high school students. On average, high schools in our sample reported 14 suspensions for every 100 students. Schools with 158 to 204 students per school counselor had 12 suspensions for every 100 students. Schools with 205 to 251 students per counselor had 15 suspensions. Schools with 252 to 297 students per counselor had 18 suspensions and schools with more than 298 students per counselor had 26 suspensions for every 100 students.

Suspension rates are a significant obstacle to the success of any high school. In our sample, increased suspension rates per 100 students and total number of disciplinary incidents were strongly associated with poorer student attendance rates; lower high school graduation rates; lower SAT scores; and higher dropout rates. While we do not have the necessary data to make a causal link between school counselor ratios and suspensions and discipline incidents, the findings are very suggestive of a meaningful connection and are consistent with findings from leading meta-analytic studies (e.g., Whiston & Quinby, 2009) and related research carried out in other states (e.g., Lapan, Gysbers, & Kayson, 2006).

Of concern was the clear finding in our sample that as per pupil expenditures decreased, the student-to-school counselor ratios significantly increased. Connecticut high schools that spent less money for each student in attendance were also very likely to have substantially higher ratios of students-to-school counselors. In these schools, students attempting to be successful in school and move forward with their educational

and career plans are likely to be served by school counselors who are in the very difficult position of trying to meet the needs of increasing numbers of students.

Results from high school principals' survey data about their perceptions of the roles and responsibilities of school counselors in their school building supported the link between the work of school counselors and reduction in suspension rates and discipline problems. In addition, findings from principals' data suggested that better school counselor ratios and providing students with college and career counseling services were associated with higher high school graduation rates and better school attendance. These findings are consistent with results from multiple studies that point to positive benefits for students when effective school counseling and guidance services are provided in schools and negative consequences for students when such supports are either not available or done poorly.

A very strong relationship was found between school counselors spending their work time carrying out non-guidance work tasks and school counselors who were able to use 80% of their work time performing activities that were a direct benefit to students. On average, school counselors estimated that they spend about 11% of their work time carrying out activities not related to the role of the school counselor (with almost one-quarter of our sample of school counselors reporting that they spend from 15% to 50% of their work time on these non-counseling work tasks). As counselors reported that more of their time was encumbered by these non-counseling duties, they were much less likely to feel that they were able to use at least 80% of their work time in ways that were of clear and direct benefit to students. As one consequence, students in Connecticut high schools were much less likely to receive extensive college and career

counseling services when their school counselors indicated that they were not able to spend 80% of their time working directly with them. This finding is very consistent with prior research studies that have found a detrimental impact for students when their school counselor's time is spent carrying out a wide range of tasks such as: excessive clerical and low level administrative duties like copying transcripts; coordinating the administration of state standardized tests; bus duty; lunchroom supervision; and substitute teaching (e.g., Lapan & Harrington, 2009).

School counselors reported spending approximately one-third of their work time carrying out college and career counseling job tasks as specified in the Individual Planning component of *Connecticut's Comprehensive School Counseling Program* (www.schoolcounselor.org/files/ConnModel.pdf). However, only 57% of school counselors and 51% of principals said that it was either *very accurate* or *extremely accurate* to say that "the education and career planning process (currently being carried out by school counselors) involves collaboration with students and parents/guardians to assist students in developing a four-year plan."

Our results also suggested that school counselors who use data to meet demands for accountability and program improvement were more effective in helping their high schools reduce suspensions and increase high school graduation rates. In our sample, 21% of the school counselors said it was either *accurate* or *very accurate* to say that "the school counseling department uses data from student results reports to evaluate program effectiveness." Twenty-nine percent of the sample said that this was accurate. However, approximately 50% of the school counselors in our sample indicated that using data to evaluate the effectiveness of their programs was something

that they did not do. Using data for accountability and program improvement would be a very important strategy school counselors could employ to promote student success.

And finally, the length of time that schools in our sample had been working to implement a comprehensive school counseling program as recommended by the Connecticut School Counselor Association and the American School Counselor Association was quite variable. Forty-two percent of the school counselors reported that their school had been implementing the Connecticut Comprehensive School Counseling Program for more than seven years. Almost 33% of the counselors said that their schools had been working to implement a comprehensive program over the past 3 to 7 years. Whereas, 25% of the school counselors indicated that their school either was not attempting to implement such a program or had just begun the process over the past 1 to 2 years. In our sample, schools that had been working for longer periods of time on implementing a comprehensive school counseling program as recommended by the Connecticut School Counselor Association had lower suspension rates than schools that were just starting to move in this direction.

Recommendations – Five major recommendations identify specific actions school leaders, policymakers, and school counselors can take immediately to ensure that all students receive the benefits of effective school counseling services.

1. Reduce Connecticut's student-to-school counselor ratio from the current state average of 409 students for every 1 school counselor, so that no high school in the state has more than 250 students for every 1 school counselor. This is the ratio recommended by the American School Counselor Association. Reasonable ratios can quickly lead to better relationships between adults and youth in every

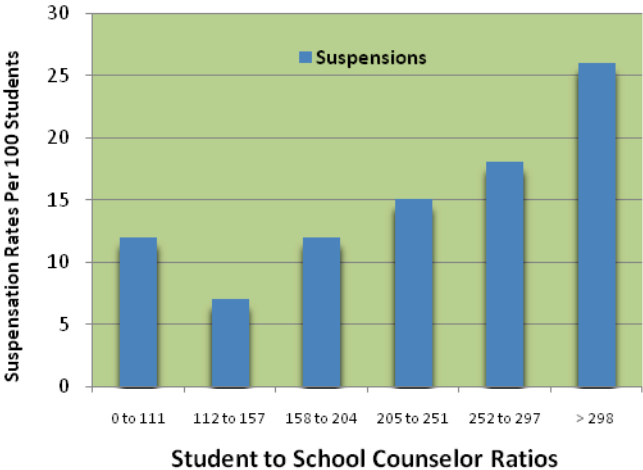
high school in the state. These trained professional school counselors should be instructed to establish a personalized, working alliance with each and every Connecticut high school student. These relationships have the efficacy to motivate youth to set high expectations for themselves, regulate their behavior, and embrace with pride and purpose success-oriented educational and career futures. Relationships with students are the cornerstone for meeting the academic achievement and college readiness goals of major educational reform initiatives such as *Race to the Top*.

2. Eliminate work tasks for school counselors that are not related to their primary role and function, and those activities that stop counselors from spending 80% of their time working directly with students. These essential work tasks for counselors are already articulated in the comprehensive program model published by the Connecticut Department of Education (2008).
3. Hold Connecticut high schools and school counselors accountable for providing all students intensive, comprehensive, and well designed college and career counseling services. These counseling services should be anchored in an understanding of what is required for young people to become ready to succeed in postsecondary education and training and qualified for high skill, high wage careers in the global marketplace.
4. Require Connecticut school counselors to use available data to both implement practices that are supported by evidence and improve their counseling program.
5. Close the implementation gap in comprehensive school counseling programs across Connecticut high schools. Two things are required for school counselors

to be of greater help to Connecticut youth. First, reasonable ratios need to be created and maintained to enable counselors to create meaningful relationships with their students. And second, what the counselors do with these students matters greatly. To enhance effectiveness, counselor work tasks need to be structured around best practices and research-supported activities that have the best chance of helping students. These activities move school counselors from what are often marginal positions in a school to one that is central to the community building efforts characteristic of the most effective high schools. One place to start would be the activities already outlined by the Connecticut State Department of Education and the Connecticut School Counselor Association.

The current implementation gap in school counseling programs across Connecticut high schools advantages some students and unfortunately disadvantages far too many others. All students should have access to the benefits of these programs as a consequence of attending high school in Connecticut.

Figure 1. School Counselor Ratios and Student Suspensions



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