

# Addressing Mental Health Needs in Our Schools: Supporting the Role of School Counselors



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School counselors are a well-positioned resource to reach the significant number of children and adolescents with mental health problems. In this special school counseling issue of *The Professional Counselor*, some articles focus on systemic, top-down advocacy efforts as the point of intervention for addressing child and adolescent mental health. Other articles investigate improving child and adolescent mental health through a localized, ground-level approach by developing school counselors' competency areas and specific school counseling interventions. Article topics include school counselors' professional identity, training, self-efficacy, supervision, burnout, career competencies and cultural competencies, as well as how to measure the impact of school counselors' interventions. The author discusses the importance of school counselors' role within schools, and hindrances to school counselors' ability to perform their role as counselors.

**Keywords:** school counselors, professional identity, role, competencies

A significant number of children and adolescents experience mental health problems in the United States. Between 13% and 20% of children experience a mental disorder in a given year (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013). Because school counselors have access to these students with mental illness in our nation's school systems, they are a well-positioned resource. School counselors improve the mental health of children and adolescents, thereby improving the students' overall functioning, personal/social development, career development and educational success. Students need mental health services; however, confusion exists as to how to utilize their most easily operationalized resource—school counselors (Gysbers & Henderson, 2006).

## Overview of the Special Issue

In order to improve child and adolescent mental health and the efficiency of mental health services, the function of school counselors within the school system must be examined. I am pleased to introduce this special issue of *The Professional Counselor* focusing on school counseling. The collection of articles combines systemic, theoretical explorations with assessments of school counselor preparation and competencies. Some articles focus on the point of intervention (i.e., place for needed improvement and change) as systemic, top-down advocacy efforts. Other articles cover school counselor training, self-efficacy, supervision, and burnout versus career sustainability. A few articles in this special issue investigate improving child and adolescent mental health through a localized, ground-level approach by developing school counselors' competency areas and specific school counseling interventions.

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### **School Counselor Professional Identity**

Over the last 100 years, school counseling has evolved from *vocational guidance* to the current concept of comprehensive school counseling. The first article in this special issue provides a historical perspective, describing the progression of school counselor professional identity (Cinotti, 2014). Cinotti (2014) discusses the conflicting professional identities (educator and counselor) that school counselors have experienced for the last century and the effects of role ambiguity concerning the utilization of school counselors and the assignment of duties. School counselors receive conflicting obligations and messages from counselor educators, school administrators and other stakeholders. However, research has found that among usual school counselor duties, direct counseling services are the most unique role of school counselors (Astramovich, Hoskins, Gutierrez, & Bartlett, 2014). Counseling services are often underutilized.

Bardhoshi, Schweinle, and Duncan (2014) explore school counselor professional identity on a more practical level by examining the impact of school-specific factors on school counselor burnout. The authors describe a mixed-methods study that expands on previous research indicating that role conflict is related to burnout in school counselors (Wilkerson & Bellini, 2006) and examine organizational factors such as student caseload. Bardhoshi et al. include a telling statement from a study participant who shared, “When we are allowed to focus on the social and emotional needs of the whole child, we are best positioned to clear away the barriers to academic achievement” (p. 434). These authors emphasize the importance of comprehensive training in school counselor programs and counselor educator advocacy efforts.

In a third article involving school counselor professional identity, Duncan, Brown-Rice, and Bardhoshi (2014) describe the ways that inadequate supervision for school counselors contributes further to disordered professional identity development and insufficient support for school counselors. Appropriate clinical supervision provides professional identity development, proficiency in ethics and improved clinical abilities. However, school counselors often receive only administrative supervision conducted by noncounselors, and rural school counselors face additional challenges in seeking clinical supervision (Duncan, Brown-Rice, & Bardhoshi, 2014).

### **School Counselor Training**

In 2012, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) published the third edition of *The ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs*, which contains the following four elements for comprehensive school counseling programs: foundation, delivery system, management and accountability. In this special issue, Martin and Carey (2014) describe their examination of the National Model and subsequent development of a logic model for use in evaluating the success of the National Model. They suggest that future research could examine the outputs and outcomes outlined in their logic model before and after implementation of the National Model. Assessing school counselor preparation and student change provides insight into the effectiveness of the current guidelines for school counselor training.

After completing their graduate program, school counselors must apply knowledge associated with professional identity, ethical practice and sound counseling interventions. Schiele, Weist, Youngstrom, Stephan, and Lever (2014) present their research on counselor self-efficacy and performance when working with students in schools, focusing on the impact of counselor self-efficacy on the quality of counseling services and knowledge of evidence-based practices. Relatedly, Schiele et al. found that counselor self-efficacy plays an important role in the effective assessment and treatment of students’ mental health needs.

**Career Counseling Competencies.** Morgan, Greenwaldt, and Gosselin (2014) studied school counselor perceptions of competency in career counseling, also comparing Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) counselor preparation versus non-CACREP preparation. Their

participants, practicing school counselors, consistently shared feelings of incompetence and inadequacy in their ability to provide sound career development programming to their students. The results of this study indicate that feelings of unpreparedness upon leaving graduate school, along with feelings of incompetency, significantly impact school counselors' ability to address the needs of their students.

**Cultural Competencies.** Several articles in this special school counseling issue examine school counseling interventions or approaches for working with diverse populations. A 2010 Department of Defense report revealed that approximately 1.85 million children have at least one parent serving in the U.S. military (see Ruff & Keim, 2014). In this issue, Cole (2014) provides a guide for working with children from military culture. Culturally competent school counselors must be knowledgeable about the unique complexities of this population, along with other culturally distinctive populations. Van Velsor and Thakore-Dunlap (2014) describe working with South Asian immigrant adolescents in a group counseling format. Additionally, Shi, Liu, and Leuwerke (2014) offer insights into Chinese culture in their study examining students' perceptions of school counselors in Beijing.

While the aforementioned articles discuss students from certain cultural groups, this special issue of *The Professional Counselor* also provides an article about a specific population of U.S. students—those in need of anger management. Although anger is a common emotion experienced by both females and males (Karreman & Bekker, 2012), Burt and Butler (2011) noted that most anger management groups are gender biased, focusing excessively on adolescent males. In this special issue, Burt (2014) describes his investigation of gender differences in anger expression and anger control in adolescent middle school students, providing a foundation for practical applications and future research.

## Concluding Comments

School counselors are well positioned within the school system to provide short-term clinical-based interventions to improve child and adolescent mental health. Proper identification, evaluation, and treatment of child and adolescent mental illness contribute to students' well-being, productivity and success in various areas of their lives (National Institute of Mental Health, 1999), including academic success. With student academic achievement receiving national attention, school counselors have been challenged to provide interventions that contribute to increased student achievement (ASCA, 2005). Villares et al. (2014) continue this initiative by establishing the validity of an assessment tool that can be used to measure the impact of school counselor-led interventions on student achievement. Outcome research can be useful in responding to the systemic concerns regarding school counselor professional identity and role within the schools. When counselors stay true to their roots—as counselors first and educators second—they are in the most useful position to improve student achievement by first fighting the war on student mental health.

Ninety years ago, Myers (1924) warned about interferences that would prevent the “real work of a counselor” from occurring (p. 141). This 90-year-old forecast echoes today, as contemporary school counselors need support in receiving robust training and preparation in professional identity and competencies, resolving administrative and systemic issues, and obtaining efficient supervision to guide the course of the counseling profession in the school system.

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