

What is a School Counselor: A Resource Guide for Parents and Students

Who Are School Counselors?

Professional school counselors, formerly referred to as “guidance counselors,” are professional educators who have a master’s degree or higher in school counseling (or the substantial equivalent), and are certified or licensed by the state in which they work. Professional school counselors possess the qualifications and skills necessary to address the full array of students’ academic, personal, social, and career development needs.

Professional school counselors advocate for and care for students, and are important members of the educational team. They consult and collaborate with teachers, administrators and families to help all students be successful academically, vocationally and personally.

Today, there are over 100,000 highly trained professional school counselors working in America’s public schools. School counselors are on the front lines helping all young people succeed, impacting their futures on a daily basis.

“The responsibilities of counselors have increased tremendously over the years. Counselors are an integral part of the whole school community working to help children, teachers and other school personnel and parents. Counselors help children face challenges, tough classes, peer pressure, friendship problems, depression and more — all that can be roadblocks to future success.”

— Angela, a school counselor in New York

School Counselor Qualifications

School counselors are certified or licensed professionals who possess a master’s degree or higher in school counseling, or the substantial equivalent, and are uniquely qualified to address the developmental needs of all students.

Professional school counselors are required by most public school systems

to have taken advanced-degree coursework in the following topics:

- Human growth and development
- Counseling theory
- Individual counseling
- Group counseling
- Social and cultural foundations
- Testing/appraisal
- Research and program evaluation
- Professional orientation
- Career development
- Supervised practicum
- Supervised internship

What Do School Counselors Do?

Professional school counselors provide a wide-range of services in the schools, based on individual student

needs and student interests, including, but not limited to:

- Mental, emotional, social, developmental, and behavioral services to students and families;
- Academic guidance and support services, including organizational, study and test-taking skills for students;
- Special education services, including serving as integral

member of the student’s Individual Education Plan (IEP);

- Career awareness, exploration and planning services, including goal setting and decision making assistance for students;
- School crisis intervention and response services;
- Collaboration and coordination of more in-depth services needed through community agencies.



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How Do School Counselors Contribute to Student Achievement?

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) brought academic achievement for all students to the top of education reform priorities. The new emphasis on achievement for all coincides with a movement among school counselors to move from the periphery to the center of a school's mission. Counselors can help individual students do better in school and make better choices for life after school. They can also help schools move beyond antiquated systems to real reforms that benefit the entire school community.

Numerous research studies show that professional school counselors, implementing a comprehensive school counseling program, can serve a vital role in maximizing student achievement.

- A 2003 research study of Florida students in the 5th through 9th grades found that students in schools with a comprehensive guidance program scored significantly better on the state's standardized test for reading and math.

—*Does Implementing a Research-based School Counseling Curriculum Enhance Student Achievement?*

(Center for School Counseling Outcome Research, 2004)

“Studies show that high-quality counseling can prevent students from turning to violence, drug, or alcohol abuse, as well as improve grades and reduce classroom disruptions.”

—*Former U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige*

- Another 2003 study of elementary-age students in Washington State found that students who had spent several years in schools with strong, comprehensive counseling programs did better on standardized achievement tests.

—*Improving Academic Achievement in Primary Students Through a Systemic Approach to Guidance and Counseling* (Washington School Research Center, 2003)

- School counseling increases students' ability to concentrate, study, and ultimately learn. Students who attend schools with counseling programs earn higher grades.*
- Counseling decreases classroom disturbances. Counseling services support teachers in the classroom in order to enable teachers to provide quality instruction designed to assist students in achieving high standards. Students in schools that provide counseling services indicated that their classes were less likely to be interrupted by other students, and that their peers behaved better in school.*
- School counselors are trained to recognize “early warning signs” in at-risk youth. School counselors work with principals, teachers, and other staff to develop and implement school safety, and to prevent school violence. Students who have counseling programs reported being more positive, and having greater feeling of belonging and safety in their schools.*

* *The Impact of More Fully Implemented Guidance Programs on the School Experiences of High School Students: A Statewide Evaluation Study*, Lapan, Richard T., Gysbers, Norman C., and Sun, Yongmin, *Journal of Counseling & Development*, March/April 1997.

Resources

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