



Improving Students Mental Health Through School Counseling

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Mental health, academic burnout, anxiety, and depression are growing challenges that have become increasingly prevalent in schools in recent years. School counselors are often the main source of support students can get, however many schools do not provide a sufficient amount of counselors to meet their needs. This brief argues that California should increase access to school counselors by making statewide counseling staff standards and provide schools with enough funding to meet them. Giving students more access to counselors would improve their mental health, academic performance, and create a more sustainable school environment.

II. OVERVIEW

The mental health of students has become an increasing issue across the United States. Many students experience feelings of anxiety, depression, academic stress, social anxiety and many other challenges that can negatively impact their performance in school. As these issues worsen, schools have become one of the most important places for students to gain support. School counselors play a large role in supporting students to manage their well being, academics, and their future plans. The issue is that many schools do not have enough counselors to meet the needs of their students. When one counselor is responsible for an excessive amount of students it makes it difficult for them to have meaningful conversations with them and it can make the students feel unvalued. If we were to expand the access to school counselors it could help students not only thrive in school but personally as well.

A. Relevance

As a highschooler I have been able to witness first hand how much students struggle to balance grades, extracurriculars, and their social lives. The pressure from balancing all of this can result in academic stress, burnout, and anxiety. Although mental health is discussed more now than in past years many students still lack support. This is for many reasons, some being the stigma behind asking for help and schools not having enough counselors to provide students with the support they need. Since students spend most of their time at school, schools are a crucial place for support systems to be and they should have accessible mental health outlets for all students. An increase in school counselors could give students faster support when they need it, provide them with one on one help, improve students academic performance as well as create an overall healthier school environment.

A. Current Stances

In the past, school counselors' mainly took over the role of handling class schedules, attendance, college applications and more. Their role was more executive rather than emotional. However over time their role has changed to include mental, social, and emotional support for

students. As the needs of students change, the role counselors play needs to change as well. Although now there is a greater amount of awareness on youth mental health, several schools are still understaffed making it difficult for them to meet the needs of students. The ASCA has recommended a ratio of 250 students for every counselor, however the national average from 2024-2025 was 372:1. California has acknowledged that this is a growing issue and some districts have made a change to improve current support programs, however many have not. California's ratio was 421:1, highlighting that students lack the right access for counseling support. There are still no consistent statewide staffing requirements, leaving many students with an inadequate amount of support.

III. POLICY PROBLEM

A. Stakeholders

The primary stakeholders are the students, counselors, teachers, parents, school districts, as well as the California Department of Education. Students in particular are the group most impacted because they rely on their counselors for emotional support, academic guidance, as well as their future plans. Parents and teachers are affected because if students have poor mental

health it can have negative influences on their moods, attendance, as well as grades. School counselors are impacted because of the excessive workload they are being given due to the inaccurate ratios of students given to them. School districts as well as the government play a crucial role because they are responsible for not only funding but also implementing counseling programs.

B. Risks of Indifference

If schools continue to overlook the lack of access to counselors, students' mental health issues may worsen over time. Students that experience anxiety, depression, or academic burnout will struggle even more since they don't have the proper support systems given to them. A lack of counselors can also contribute to an increased amount of absences, lowered academic performance, issues in behavior, as well as students experiencing feelings of isolation or helplessness. In more drastic situations mental health struggles that remain untreated can result in self-harm, drug abuse, or long term emotional disabilities. Overlooking this problem can also add additional pressure onto teachers and families that may not have the expertise or resources needed to support the mental health needs of their

students. If California schools continue to ignore this issue it could not only negatively impact the well beings of students but also educational outcomes across schools.

C. Nonpartisan Reasoning

Since student mental health doesn't only impact individuals but also school communities, nonpartisan action is crucial to address the inadequate amount of school counselors. Increasing access to counseling services benefits students, families, and schools. The benefits of this intervention include but are not limited to the following:

- 1) Improved academic performance and school success: Students that have access to counselors are more likely to receive academic support, emotional support, and help managing anxiety and stress. When students are supported mentally and physically they are able to perform better academically and be more engaged in school settings. Increasing counselor access could positively impact graduation rates, academic performance, and better learning environments for students and teachers.
- 2) Stronger mental health support and safe

school environments: School counselors play a large role in assisting students with managing their anxiety, depression, emotional stress, and personal conflicts. Increasing access to counseling resources could help schools reduce behavioral issues, emotional crises, as well as feelings of isolation among the students. Giving better mental health support can create healthier and more safe learning environments for the staff and students.

- 3) Long term community and economic benefits: Supporting students' mental health is an investment in future communities. Students that receive emotional and academic support have higher chances in succeeding in getting higher educations, stable careers, and contribute positively to society. Early mental health intervention can also lower unemployment, possible future healthcare costs, and social challenges.

IV. TRIED POLICY

California has already begun taking some steps to improve mental health and counselor support access in schools. Some school districts have

created wellness centers, hired more counselors, and created peer support programs. Programs like the California Community Schools Partnership Program have tried to increase student access to support systems by incorporating mental health resources directly in schools. The goal of these programs is to create safer and healthier school environments while ensuring students can gain emotional and academic support more easily.

Though these efforts have helped the support systems of some schools they have not fully fixed the statewide issue of inconsistent access to counselors. Typically wealthier districts can provide more mental health programs and higher more mental health professionals. While schools that are underfunded struggle with limited resources and unbalanced ratios of students to counselors. A lot of policies now depend more on district funding than statewide requirements. Since this is the case students can receive unequal access to mental health support just because of where they live.

V. POLICY OPTIONS

Statewide counselor-to-student ratio requirements

California should implement a statewide

requirement that schools move towards the ASCA's recommended ratio of 250 students per counselor. Creating a statewide standard would ensure that students from different communities can receive equal access to support systems. This policy could especially benefit students in underfunded communities where counselors are managing large workloads.

Implementing this in local communities would enforce schools to hire more counselors and receive financial support from the state. A challenge could be the cost of hiring and recruiting more staff in areas that are already having budget crises. However things like state grant programs could help the transition be much more smooth and prevent districts from drowning in finances.

Increased Mental Health Funding For Schools

California could give additional state funding that is specifically dedicated to school counseling services and programs focused on mental health. This funding can help schools hire more counselors, improve wellness centers, and improve mental health training for staff. The funding could also help make more secure support systems that are equipped to meet the needs of students. This could also allow districts

to make programs based on the needs of their communities. Some schools may focus more on burnout while others focus more on crisis intervention.

Partnerships with community mental health organizations

Schools could partner with local mental health organizations, mental health experts, and community programs in order to give students additional support services on campus. These partnerships could help schools overcome the issue of counselor shortages by providing students with access to support groups, therapy, and crisis intervention services. They could also reduce the stigma around mental health by making it more accessible in schools.

Implementing this could be difficult in underfunded communities because of limited resources, limited staffing, and transportation issues. Schools would also need to set up scheduling with outside organisations to ensure students are getting constant support.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

Student mental health has become a large issue in schools across California. Students struggle with anxiety, depression, burnout and a shortage of

counselors. While some schools have expanded counseling programs many underfunded districts are still struggling a lot leaving students with less resources and support. Creating statewide staffing standards would ensure students receive the support they need. Increasing access to counselors can improve students' mental health, academic performance, and school environment in general. Addressing this issue would create healthier school environments and stronger communities for the future.

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