

National Association of State Boards of Education

## ➔ Enabling School Counselors to Focus on Postsecondary Transitions

By Sarah-Jane Lorenzo

For students whose families and friends do not have college-going experience to share, applying to college can be challenging. School counselors can fill the gap, but in many schools—especially those serving students most in need—counselors are spread thin.

School counselor Teyanna Walker admits that the hardest part of her job is knowing there are students she will not be able to help. “That’s something that I have a very hard time swallowing,” she said. “But there’s just not enough time in the day.”<sup>1</sup>

At George Washington High School in San Francisco, Walker has a caseload of about 400 students, which is below the national average of 491 (see map). With large caseloads and competing responsibilities, counselors such as Walker struggle to provide individual support

and guidance that make it possible for students to achieve their college and career goals.

Students from low economic backgrounds often need more assistance with college applications than their peers. Yet many high-achieving, low-income students receive limited or no college access support, according to researchers Caroline Hoxby and Sarah Turner.<sup>2</sup>

Jonathan Amaya, a first-generation college student and recipient of a full scholarship at a Virginia university, credits his college plans to a college access program at his church rather than his school or school counselor.<sup>3</sup> Amaya is the first student to graduate from the Kids of Note program at Christ Church in Alexandria, Virginia. Kids of Note provided intensive one-on-one support in setting career goals, overcoming academic obstacles, and applying to college.

“Without the program,” he said, “I probably would not be going to college.”

While Amaya received some help from counselors at his school, he said it was limited. He never felt like his counselors knew him or understood his goals and challenges. His Kids of Note mentors helped him set higher goals than he previously thought he could, he said.

State boards of education can aid schools and school counselors by clarifying school counselors’ roles, amplifying learning and development opportunities, and addressing counselor leadership gaps. By doing so, they can better support student transitions after high school.

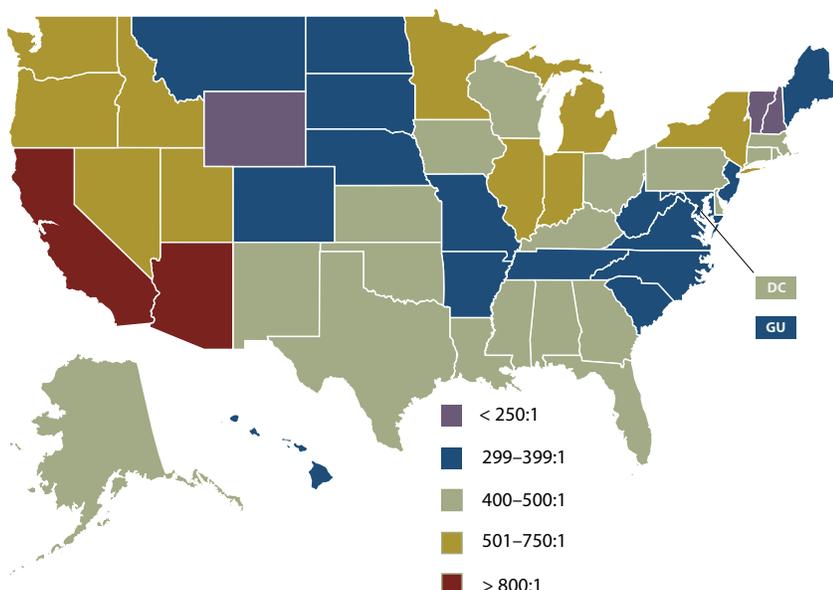
### CLARIFYING ROLES

In some schools, counselors balance responsibilities ranging from academic planning and college guidance to crisis counseling, test coordination, and even lunch duty. With so many roles and so many students to serve, counselors often cannot provide the help that each child needs in order to create ambitious, well-informed postsecondary plans.

Large caseloads and limited hours mean that every minute of a counselor’s time is valuable. When counselors are given secretarial or other noncounseling duties, students suffer from reduced opportunities to gain counselors’ time.

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) recommends that school counselors spend 80 percent or more of their time directly or indirectly serving students (see table), and several state boards have taken note. The **Tennessee State Board of Education** focused on clarifying school counselors’ roles in discussions at several of their meetings in 2016 and 2017 as part of board efforts to revise and improve the state’s school counseling model and standards policy. Based in part on ASCA recommendations, Tennessee changed its policy in October 2016 to include stipulations for enforcing requirements that counselors spend 80 percent of their time on direct student services

Student to counselor ratios by state, 2013–14



Source: American School Counselor Association, Student-to-School-Counselor Ratio, 2013–2014. The association recommends a student to counselor ratio of 250:1. The U.S. average is 491.

**TABLE 1. SCHOOL COUNSELOR ACTIVITIES**

Appropriate activities	Inappropriate activities
individual student academic program planning	providing therapy or long-term counseling to address psychological disorders
collaborating with teachers to present school counseling core curriculum lessons	computing grade-point averages
providing individual and small-group counseling services to students	teaching classes when teachers are absent
providing counseling to students who are tardy or absent or who have discipline problems	performing disciplinary actions or assigning discipline consequences
analyzing and interpreting student data, student records, and cognitive, aptitude, and achievement tests	coordinating paperwork for new students, keeping clerical records, and serving as a data entry clerk

Source: American School Counselor Association, ASCA National Model.

(including implementation of their school counseling curriculum and individual student counseling) and student support services (including consultation, collaboration, and referrals). Tennessee’s policy asserts that no more than 20 percent of counselors’ time may be spent on program management and school support.

The board has been engaged with implementation as well. Board members have discussed opportunities to maximize the policy’s effect and responded to district feedback regarding the implementation timeline.

The revised policy provides a comprehensive framework that defines school counseling in Tennessee and articulates the steps counselors must take to ensure their school’s counseling program is strong, supported, effectively managed, and delivered in a way that addresses schoolwide and individual student needs.

Tennessee State Board Chair Fielding Rolston highlighted the policy’s alignment to ASCA national standards and the inclusion of input from hundreds of practicing Tennessee school counselors. “School counselors work with not only students and families but also school staff and communities to address issues that have a substantial impact on students’ academic achievement,” he said. “It was crucial to put this revised policy in place.”

### ENHANCING EVALUATION

Time distribution requirements usefully reinforce counselors’ primary responsibilities, but they are not the only policy tool for

supporting school counselors. Nevada, for example, created a uniform school counselor evaluation. Like teachers and other school employees, counselors are evaluated routinely by school administrators. Often, however, they are assessed with the same tools and criteria that teachers are, so the evaluations fail to reflect counseling roles.

In June 2017, the **Nevada State Board of Education** approved a pilot of school counselor-specific performance evaluations in select school districts during the 2017–18 school year. The board’s action was part of a larger effort, launched by a board motion in 2016, to develop more effective counselor evaluations based upon the ASCA model throughout the state by the 2018–19 school year. As part of this effort, board members discussed potential roadblocks to school counselors’ effectiveness and requested that school counseling policy continue to be included on their agendas in the future.

Evaluation tools and time distribution policies address not only the competing demands that drag counselors away from core responsibilities but also can help shape administrators’ understanding of those roles. Administrators’ leadership preparation programs typically have given only minimal attention to counseling roles. School counseling experts Mandy Savitz-Romer and Gretchen Brion-Meisels note that administrators’ lack of awareness can lead them to undervalue opportunities for counselors to participate in professional development or reduce the time counselors spend providing direct student support.<sup>4</sup>

Counselors note that school administrators almost always want to learn more. Counseling-specific evaluations provide an opportunity for counselors to share their goals and advocate for their counseling programs with school leaders.

### COUNSELOR LEADERSHIP GAP

While she feels her principals have been understanding and supportive, school counselor Walker identifies a school counseling leadership gap. “I would really like to have a supervisor who has actually been a counselor,” she said. “[Counselors] want people supervising us who know what our job is and who have had experience in our job. I have never had that happen before.”

While size and funding may prevent some districts from employing network leaders, states can offer support. The Missouri Department of Education dedicates a section of its website to school counselors, including information on continuing education opportunities and professional learning. The department has also partnered with the state’s school counseling association to create a two-year mentoring program that pairs new counselors with experienced mentors and connects them to a regional peer network.

School counseling is a lever for equity when it helps students from families unable to provide college-going support learn about postsecondary opportunities. By helping schools focus on school counselors’ agency to assist, state boards of education can ensure school counselors have the time, resources, and education to help all students set and achieve postsecondary goals.

*Sarah-Jane Lorenzo is NASBE’s research associate.*

### NOTES

1 Interview by author, July 2017.

2 Caroline Hoxby and Sarah Turner, “Expanding College Opportunities for High-Achieving, Low Income Students.” Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research Discussion Paper 12-014 (2013).

3 Interview by author, July 2017.

4 Mandy Savitz-Romer and Gretchen A. Brion-Meisels, “How School Structures Promote Holistic Student Support Services: An Exploration of Support Providers’ Perceptions,” presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Antonio, Texas, 2017.