



# What Do Counselors Do?

*As programs face the budget ax, school counselors work to show how they promote student success*     **By Kathleen Vail**

**W**hen Judy Bowers heard in late March that her entire elementary counseling program was on the chopping block, the Tucson Unified School District's guidance coordinator vaulted into action.

As part of her campaign, Bowers sent e-mails to Tucson school board members, asking if she could provide information about the program. One board member replied with a question: "What do counselors do?"

Bowers was not surprised, despite the fact that Tucson has a nationally recognized counseling program and she is president of the American School Counselor Association. School districts across the U.S. are asking the same question as they search for ways to shave money from their already bare-bones budgets.

So what's the answer? In a nutshell, school counselors help eliminate social and emotional barriers to learning. Some students have trouble controlling their anger, getting along with other students, or obeying adults. Others have difficult issues at home, such as divorce or parents with alcohol or drug addictions. Without help, these children have little chance of academic success.

"If it's a school problem, counselors can work on it," says Jill Cook, ASCA's director of programs. "School counselors work with all students, not just the top 5 percent or the bottom 5 percent, and not just those in trouble."

Why don't more people know about the link between a good counseling program and increased student achievement? Some say it's the type of people who are attracted to the profession. School counselors tend to do their jobs without a lot of fanfare and noise, and they don't call attention to themselves, qualities that can be a disadvantage when programs and jobs are in danger.

"One of our big goals should be public relations," says Deborah Hardy, chair of the Guidance and Counseling Services Department in New York's Irvington School District. "A lot of counselors don't like to do that, but if we don't, we die as a breed."

## **THE CUTS START HERE**

School counselors see themselves as educators who work closely with classroom teachers and administrators to help students thrive. This vision is supported by a growing body of research showing that a comprehensive K-12 counseling

program can lead to improvements in student test scores. In one study, Seattle Pacific University's Christopher Sink discovered gains on state and national tests in schools with counseling programs.

"We found that when school counselors had a program in place for a number of years and kids have been in the school for a number of years, kids in schools with good programs outperformed kids in schools without programs," says Sink, chairman of the university's department of school counseling and psychology.

But when boards and administrators can't link the program to increased achievement, counselors are often viewed as extras rather than as necessities. Arizona, Michigan, Minnesota, South Carolina, Wisconsin, and a number of other states are seeing their counselor ranks thinned each year.

As jobs and programs are eliminated, remaining counselors struggle under heavy caseloads. "The budget monster is looming and is consuming any and all school personnel it can wrap its grip around," says Walter Roberts, a professor in the Department of Counseling and Student Personnel at Minnesota State University.

Scenarios like the one in Tucson, a 60,000-student district, are being played out all over the country. Facing a \$17 million deficit, the Tucson school board estimated it could save \$1.4 million by eliminating all 28 counselors at its elementary schools. "The board was looking at money," says Bowers. "We represent a lot of money."

Bowers mobilized parents, teachers, principals, and community members to tell the board how much they valued their elementary school counselors. She asked university professors—including Sink—who've researched the link between counselors and academic achievement to write letters. She even persuaded the commander of the nearby military base to weigh in with his support.

As for the board member who wanted to know what counselors did, Bowers arranged a dinner meeting to talk about her program. With two principals and a counselor also attending, Bowers and the board member discussed the counselors' impact on student achievement and attendance.

"The counselors in Tucson are the first line of defense for kids in elementary school," Bowers says. "In many schools, they work hand in hand with the principal."

Bowers' efforts won her staff a reprieve. The district received extra state money for an unrelated budget item, freeing up funds to continue the program. But counselors in other states haven't been as lucky.

## LOSING JOBS, ADDING DUTIES

Jeff Winter left the St. Cloud, Minn., schools last year after he discovered his elementary school caseload was to balloon from 450 to 1,500 students. "That ratio was asinine," says Winter, who now works as a middle school counselor in Willmar (Minn.) Public Schools. "It's impossible to do."

St. Cloud's entire counseling program eventually was cut, even though the staff and the community of the 9,700-student

district lobbied to keep it and sought donations from local businesses to save the program. In 2003-04, five and a half positions were cut; this year, the school board eliminated the remaining four positions.

Michael Swathwood understands. For the past four years, his job with Laker Schools in Pigeon, Mich., has been on the chopping block, and this spring, his position was cut. Swathwood's 450 elementary students will be served by the middle school counselor, who also has 350 of her own students.

"Her programs will be shorted," says Swathwood, who, at press time, was looking for another school counseling job. "It will water everything down quite a bit."

Already, counseling programs as a whole are understaffed. ASCA recommends a ratio of 250 students for every counselor; the national average is 477 to 1, with some states going way beyond that. According to the National Center on Education Statistics, California had the worst ratio at 994 students to one counselor in 1999-2000, the last year statistics were available; Minnesota had 800 students to one counselor that same year.

In an effort to save his position, Swathwood collected data from teacher surveys and asked parents and community members to show the school board that they supported the elementary counseling program. "That's how I've done it in the past," he says. "But it didn't work this year."

Counselors losing their jobs to budget cuts, such as Winter and Swathwood, worry about what will happen to their students without the support they provide. "They need conflict management and anger management," Swathwood says. "A lot of kids come from broken homes. They'll miss the one-on-one attention that they need with issues that come up."

Winter agrees. "Students will lose out on having someone to take time to listen, to be a mentor and a guide, to help them with decision-making skills," he says, pointing to a classroom lesson he did with his sixth-graders on alcohol and tobacco awareness.

As part of the lesson, Winter used beans to help students understand the dangers of smoking. Each bean represented one death from tobacco-related illness, car accidents, and mental illness. "I poured beans into a pan," he says. "Smoking is thousands of beans. I have a bucket and pour it into the pan. Kids' mouths would drop open."

Valuable life lessons like these are difficult—if not impossible—to teach when counseling positions are eliminated and programs are cut. Gay Mullinax of South Carolina's Edgefield County School District worked as a counselor at one elementary school until budget cuts required her to serve two.

"I'm fortunate to have a job I love," she says. "But I'm not being the best counselor I can be if I were at one school. The teachers suffer from it; the administrators suffer from it. You'd think it was just the kids, but it's not. They are being asked to do things that aren't their jobs."

Teachers, Mullinax points out, have a classroom of children to tend to, and administrators often are not comfortable dealing with children's emotional needs.

"There are so many things the children miss out on by not

having someone who's a steady base for them. You can't be the steady base," she says. "You can be a Band-Aid or Neosporin, but you can't be the school mom."

## A NEW GENERATION OF SCHOOL COUNSELORS

If counselors follow new professional guidelines, they would be less likely to be passed over when budget cuts loom, says Hardy, the counseling director in Irvington, N.Y. The new guidelines place an emphasis on data collection and educating others in the district on what counselors are doing.

For example, Hardy says, everyone knows what teachers need in terms of resources and training. But even when teachers' needs are taken care of, Hardy says that doesn't solve all of the problems students face daily.

"Why do you have so many dropouts, class cuts, suspensions? Why are there so many violent and emotional issues in school beyond the scope of academics? You don't have enough staff in place to reduce caseloads and do prevention programs to assist schools," she says. "It's a piece of the puzzle."

*The ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs*, published in 2003, is designed to address the confusion surrounding the counselor's seemingly amorphous role. Norm Gysbers, whose research and writings are the foundation for much of today's school counseling profession, says the programs have been around since the early 1900s, but have lacked structure. As a result, Gysbers says, many school counselors shaped their jobs in accordance with what principals wanted them to do.

"You would go into buildings in the district and find differences from one building to another," says Gysbers, a professor in the Department of Educational, School, and Counseling Psychology at the University of Missouri-Columbia. "We know that all buildings have uniqueness, but there was no common lan-

guage structure that connected K-12. It depended on the building principal and the counselor. There was good work done individually, but when you tried to aggregate it, it was difficult to see the overall impact."

While it provides structure for school counseling programs, the model's real key is accountability. Counselors are encouraged to collect data on the effectiveness of their overall program, rather than documenting random lessons and the number of children they see.

"There has been confusion about what the school counselors should be doing," says Minnesota State University's Walter Roberts. "We are undergoing what I call a new generation of school counselors."

While counselors say the model is changing how they are viewed in their districts, they still have to work to distinguish their role from those of school social workers or psychologists. In some states, counselors are being replaced by outside community mental health workers who set up offices in schools at no cost to the district, according to Jan Tkaczyk, counselor at Cape Cod Technical High School in Massachusetts.

Counselors emphasize that they are educators—not mental health professionals—who serve all students, not just those who have the most obvious and or most immediate problems.

"We are facing a minimization of positions when the budgets are tight until we demonstrate that we are an essential part of the educational team," says Tkaczyk, whose own position is being eliminated after she retires this summer. "That's what we have to be doing to see change."

## OTHER DUTIES AS ASSIGNED

One reason counselors' roles are ill defined is that principals view them as free agents, with flexibility in their schedules to take on assignments no one else in the building will cover.

## Learn more

■ The American School Counselors Association, based in Alexandria, Va., is the school counselors' professional organization. Its website—[www.schoolcounselor.org](http://www.schoolcounselor.org)—has a great deal of information about the profession. Important links include:

The Role of the School Counselor: [www.schoolcounselor.org/content.asp?contentid=240](http://www.schoolcounselor.org/content.asp?contentid=240).

Why Elementary School Counselors?: [www.schoolcounselor.org/content.asp?contentid=230](http://www.schoolcounselor.org/content.asp?contentid=230).

Why Middle School Counselors?: [www.schoolcounselor.org/content.asp?contentid=231](http://www.schoolcounselor.org/content.asp?contentid=231).

Why Secondary School Counselors?: [www.schoolcounselor.org/content.asp?contentid=233](http://www.schoolcounselor.org/content.asp?contentid=233).

Effectiveness of School Counseling: [www.schoolcounselor.org/content.asp?contentid=241](http://www.schoolcounselor.org/content.asp?contentid=241).

■ The website for the Center for School Counseling Outcome Research at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst,

contains executive summaries and compilations of the body of research done on school counseling: [www.umass.edu/schoolcounseling](http://www.umass.edu/schoolcounseling).

■ Greg Brigman, a professor with the College of Education at Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, did research on counselor-led lessons that increased student achievement. Read about his research at [www.schoolcounselor.org/files/7-2-91%20Brigman.pdf](http://www.schoolcounselor.org/files/7-2-91%20Brigman.pdf).

Brigman's study was based on a program called Student Success Skills: [www.studentsuccessskills.com](http://www.studentsuccessskills.com).

■ Christopher Sink, chair of the Department of School Counseling and Psychology at Seattle Pacific University, compared student achievement scores in schools with comprehensive K-12 counseling programs to scores in schools without such programs. Sink found that students in schools with counseling programs outperformed students without them, even when controlling for socio-economic differences. Read about his research at [www.schoolcounselor.org/files/6-5-350%20Sink.pdf](http://www.schoolcounselor.org/files/6-5-350%20Sink.pdf).

Counselors say the situation is common, but disconcerting, considering their education level (most have master's degrees) and pay grade (often on par with administrators).

"Some principals think nothing of assigning the counselors to all three lunch periods," says Bowers, the ASCA president. "I can't get them not to do that."

With the advent of high-stakes testing, many counselors take up to a month out of their regular schedule to be test administrators. Bowers says counselors shouldn't be counting out tests and pencils and placing student names on test booklets.

The problem is in part exacerbated by counselors' personalities. Swathwood of the Laker School District says he took on more responsibilities to save his job. In addition to his counseling duties, he wrote grants and did lunch and recess duty, to no avail.

"School counselors are nice people, and we are cooperative people," Roberts says. "That can come at the expense of direct student contact. If I'm out cleaning tables in the cafeteria after the kids leave, I can't be in the office helping them."

Consider what schools are confronting: One in every 33 children and one in eight adolescents may be suffering from depression, according to the federal Center for Mental Health Services. Up to 70 percent of children with diagnosable mental, emotional, or behavioral disorders are not receiving mental health services, according to the Surgeon General's Report on Mental Health. Those conditions and a myriad of other problems prevent students from doing their best academically. Take away school counselors, who are uniquely qualified to help students with social and emotional issues, and those problems still remain.

The counselors who are losing their jobs or facing increased caseloads are worried about their students. As middle school counselor Tanya Sager of the Merrill Area Public Schools in Merrill, Wis., says: "It's a frustrating time to be a school counselor. It doesn't feel like there's a lot of support out there."

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