

OPINION

SCHOOL CLIMATE & SAFETY OPINION

How Ready Are We to Support Kids Through This Trauma?

By Mandy Savitz-Romer, Heather Rowan-Kenyon, Tara P. Nicola & Laura Hecht — September 16, 2020

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— Robert Neubecker for Education Week




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As the global pandemic threatens students’ academic progress, recent [reports](#) have also raised alarms about students’ mental health. Fear, loss, and the anxiety brought on by uncertainty are raising already-high levels of trauma and stress among young people.

It will be tempting for schools to direct resources and attention this fall to bolstering the instructional core, given well-founded fears of learning loss and the widening of academic inequities. But our research suggests that districts need to focus just as much on deploying staff and policies that promote students’ social and emotional development. School counselors have a critical but [often overlooked role](#) to play in meeting this urgent need.

According to [our survey](#)  of nearly 1,000 school counselors from across the country, these professionals faced significant challenges last spring as they sought to support students’ social-emotional, academic, and postsecondary development in a remote learning environment. Schools should now make it a priority to understand what went wrong in the spring, so they don’t repeat the same mistakes this fall.

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First, we found that school counselors were not able to spend as much time as usual counseling students about social-emotional issues, career development, or postsecondary plans. This is especially troubling for a profession that was already stretched thin to begin with: Last year, all but three states significantly exceeded the recommended ratio of students-to-counselors. In our survey, 43 percent of counselors reported spending less time providing individual counseling than in their work pre-COVID-19, despite the stress and trauma caused by the pandemic.



While navigating personal stressors brought on by the pandemic, school counselors faced unique professional challenges as well."

Instead, a large majority of the counselors—who regularly worked well beyond their usual hours—reported spending their time tracking down students with low attendance in remote learning and delivering social-service and technology information to families. These are worthwhile efforts, of

course, but they limited counselors' ability to check in with students, assess their well-being, and intervene when necessary.

Second, our results suggested that a lack of direction and leadership from school and district leaders complicated this shift in responsibilities. Approximately 55 percent of counselors surveyed reported not receiving clear directions about their expected role in a remote environment. One midsize, urban school district's updated memorandum of understanding with the teachers' union never even mentioned school counselors.

While school counselors appreciated ongoing communication from administration and district staff, counselors were rarely involved in planning for remote schooling. Despite their unique skills in supporting students, only 35 percent of counselors say they were asked to provide input about school contingency plans or how to maintain counseling programming. Counselors also reported that training for counselor-specific remote work was not available to them. This problem was especially acute in rural communities, where 1 in 3 counselors reported receiving no training.

Third, like all educators, school counselors struggled to adjust to remote schooling. While navigating personal stressors brought on by the pandemic, school counselors faced unique professional challenges as well. In addition to losing the valuable opportunity to connect with students in informal settings such as hallways and lunchrooms, many counselors received instructions from school leaders not to meet one-on-one with students, provide group or classroom instruction, or even use videoconferencing software because of concerns about meeting confidentiality requirements remotely.

These findings highlight long-standing challenges facing the school counseling profession. For decades [\[1\]](#), school counselors have called on principals to provide better leadership to counseling programs. Such leadership is now essential. If schools are committed to healing students and supporting their engagement in academics amid a wave of national trauma, they must heed this call now more than ever. To support their efforts, we offer the following recommendations for school and district leaders:

1. Establish a clear plan for school counseling programming and communicate it widely.

School and district leaders are often not familiar with counseling models or standards, so they need to take their lead from counselors. Strong administrators understand the assets and expertise of counselors and are careful not to misdirect their time toward tasks that don't leverage their mental-health training. With counselors' input, school and district leaders can prioritize the availability of counseling programs and services at the systems level. At a minimum, counselors can identify counseling-related policies and practices that transfer to a virtual or hybrid context.

For example, school counselors can join morning meetings to connect with students, partner with teachers to integrate strategies for well-being into classes, and collaborate with other support staff to utilize screening tools to identify depression, trauma, and other signs of distress.

2. Build time for counseling into student schedules. Face-to-face time with students—either virtually or in person when it is safe to do so—is a precious commodity. School leaders will therefore need to be intentional about scheduling time for students to meet with counselors and for counselors to provide mental-health support to whole classes, grades, or schools. Consistent advisory blocks and office hours might offer structured times for students to reach out for additional support. School counselors around the country have set up Google Classrooms and Bitmoji offices to be added to district platforms.

3. Evenly distribute the responsibility of tracking down students. School leaders must avoid the temptation of assigning attendance and noncounseling duties to counselors simply because they are not responsible for a classroom of students. Pulling school counselors away from checking in with students, delivering resources for managing anxiety, and supporting postsecondary planning will leave some students vulnerable to further disengagement.

4. Ask counselors if and how they need support and training to use virtual platforms to provide counseling. In our survey, many school counselors reported having to use their personal phones to call students. Often, parents and students didn't answer those calls, which appear as if they come from unknown numbers. Access to a school phone, Google Voice number, or other platforms to communicate with students will enable counselors to conduct confidential or sensitive conversations with students. School counselors also need different kinds of training from what is offered to teachers. Training on virtual platforms, strategies that support telecounseling, and legal and ethical considerations are especially in demand. As the college-admission process continues to evolve during the pandemic, school counselors will also benefit from training on policies and practices that have been updated during the pandemic.

While today's educational context is defined by uncertainty, one thing is for certain: As students return to Zoom rooms or school buildings, they are hurting. We have professionals who are trained and ready to help them heal and develop the social and emotional skills to cope with their current reality. Let's be sure to take counselors into account in our planning this semester. Our students and teachers are going to need them.

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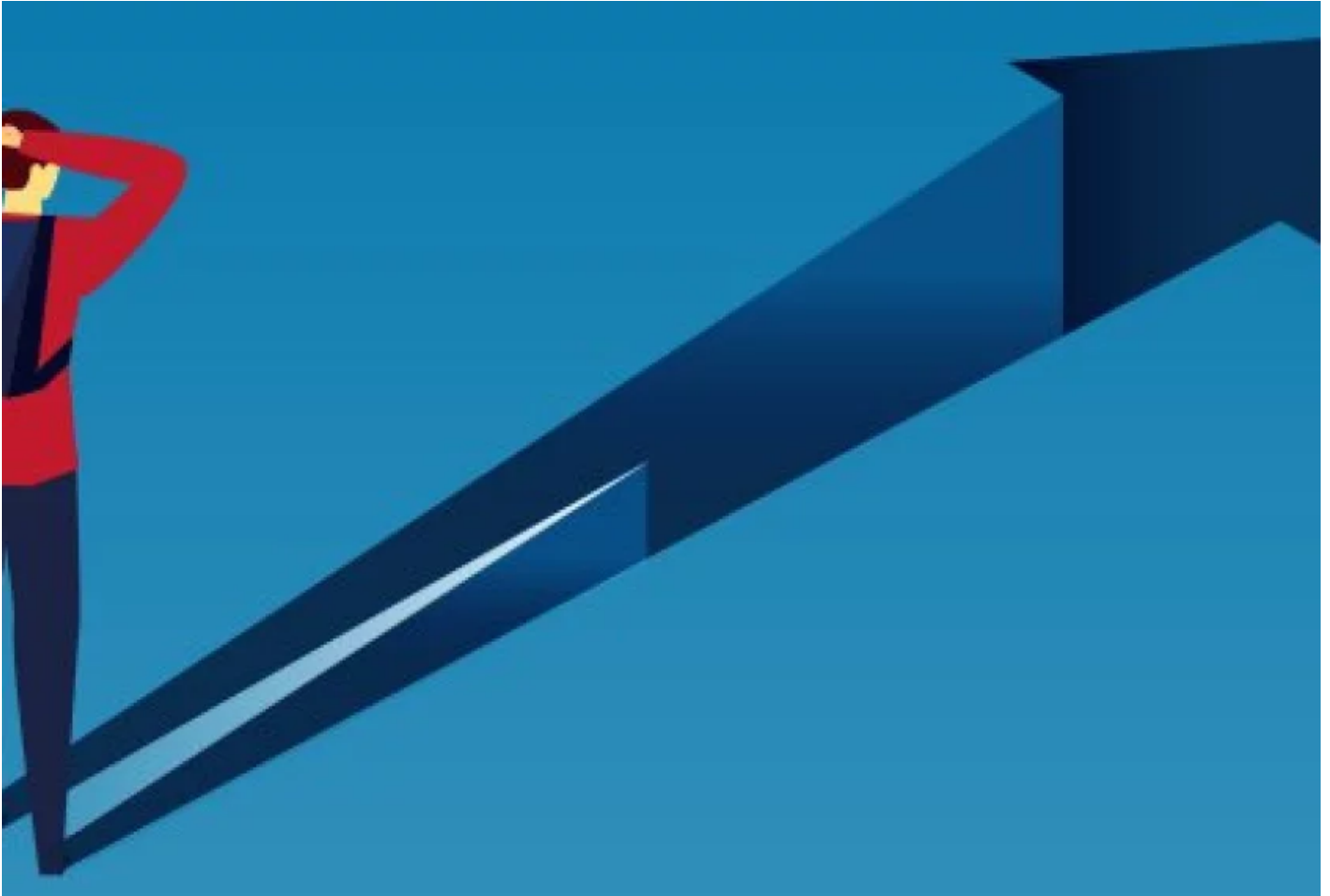
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