

# Poised to Lead: How School Counselors Can Drive College and Career Readiness



The Education Trust

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Most schools have access to a staff asset that, if deployed properly, could help them do a better job of preparing students: school counselors. These educators are uniquely positioned not only to spot the problem, but to lead a college- and career-ready agenda.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The caliber of course selection strongly shapes the choices students have after they leave high school. Yet, few students are equipped to determine which combination of courses will best prepare them for success after graduation. School counselors can help. These educators know how to create course schedules that will prepare students for the twin options of college and career.

Not only can school counselors help individual students, they can help their schools, too. Their unique vantage point gives them insight into which students (including which groups of students) are on a dead-end path, which are receiving an education that will yield real choices, and which are in between. They also know which courses or teachers produce the most failures and successes, which policies hold students back, and which instructional supports actually help. This knowledge makes school counselors an invaluable resource for helping schools see how their policies and practices may contribute to holding students back, and for determining how to propel all students toward success.

However, on too many of our campuses, high school counselors are saddled with menial tasks that are unrelated to preparing students for success after graduation. The reasons for this range from the way school counselors are trained to how they see themselves, and the way their role is defined in schools. The failure of principals to recognize school counselors as potential leaders in the effort to raise achievement and success for all students also is a factor.

The good news is that across the United States, some school counselors are stepping forward to create change. These visionary educators have become key players on their school's leadership team, combing through academic data, and

helping teachers and administrators monitor progress and resolve problems. They also are champions of equity, finding out which groups of students are poorly served and leading efforts to do something about it.

Given the critical perspective school counselors can bring, it's time even more of them assume leadership in the movement for college and career readiness. States, districts, and schools can do much to help school counselors take on these crucial roles as leaders and advocates, including the following steps:

- 1. Revise the job descriptions for school counselors so they focus on equitable education and on preparing all students for college and career.**
- 2. Shift university training programs so they center on the school counselor's role in educational equity and college and career readiness.**
- 3. Align and tighten state credential requirements so that all school counselors get adequate school-specific training, including college- and career-ready counseling, and practice using data to spur change.**
- 4. Support working school counselors and principals through strong, embedded professional development to help develop effective college- and career-readiness programs.**
- 5. Align school counselor evaluations to academic outcomes, including appropriate measures of college and career readiness.**

Poised to lead, school counselors can and should play an essential role in ensuring that our nation's secondary schools prepare all students — especially those most often underserved — for a productive future.

# Poised to Lead: How School Counselors Can Drive College and Career Readiness

BY PEGGY LATURNO HINES AND RICHARD W. LEMONS with KAREN D. CREWS

Each year, the final days of summer find millions of high school students anxiously awaiting a critical document: their new class schedule. Will their friends be in their classes? Will they place into their electives of choice? Will they avoid being assigned to the teacher who's notorious for piling on homework and giving pop quizzes? Questions like these heighten the anticipation.

Unfortunately, too few students — and parents — focus on a more important aspect of class schedules: the quality of course selection, which has powerful implications for students' options *after* high school.

Decades ago, many students could graduate from high school, walk down the street, and land a job that offered benefits, a family-supporting salary, and reasonable job security. The courses they took or what they learned in high

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school didn't matter much. That's no longer the case. An increasing number of low-skill jobs are being outsourced or mechanized. The jobs that remain are more complex and require new competencies. Consequently, higher level courses once taken only by students bound for four-year colleges are now necessary even for those heading straight into the workforce, or to community and technical colleges.

While the demands of life beyond high school have shifted, many schools have not changed. These institutions continue to offer students two paths: One features a robust and rigorous course of study that prepares students for the challenges and opportunities they'll face after high school. The other features courses that, despite their appealing names, lead nowhere. And the likelihood of being placed on one or the other path has much to do with the zip code, race, or economic standing of the student's family. African-American and Latino students, for example, are only about half as likely to complete a rigorous curriculum as their white peers.<sup>1</sup>

The lack of academic rigor in high school closes the doors to good jobs, success in college, and, all too often, access

to the middle class. Many students don't know this while in high school, but they realize it quickly after graduation. A College Board survey of graduates from the class of 2010, conducted one year after commencement, found 40 percent wished they had taken different courses in high school.<sup>2</sup>

With such high stakes, it is essential that schools prepare all students for the demands of college and career. Most middle and high schools fall considerably short of that goal. With their relatively large number of students and their complicated departmental structures, secondary schools are far more effective at sorting students than assuring that all have the opportunities they need to thrive after graduation.

## UNIQUELY POSITIONED TO LEAD

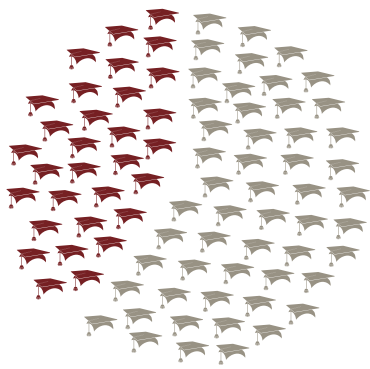
A close look at the typical role and function of secondary school staff reveals how so many students get stuck on the path to nowhere. Teachers are responsible for teaching subject matter to the students assigned to them. Principals and assistant principals are responsible for managing the budget, assuring a safe learning environment, making the buses run on time, and supporting the instructional and co-curricular programs. Given the design and demands of their jobs, neither teachers nor school administrators are in a position to easily spot, much less change, the alarming mismatch between the demands of the outside world and the trajectories of individual students.

However, most schools have access to another staff asset that, if deployed properly, could help them do a better job of preparing students: school counselors. These educators are uniquely positioned not just to spot the problem, but to lead a college- and career-ready agenda.

School counselors are responsible for each and every student in the building and, unlike others on campus, they are in a position to focus on the educational journey of each student. In most schools, counselors already manage course assignments and are responsible for ensuring students take the classes needed to graduate. They have access to reams of data — assessment results, enrollment patterns, attendance rates, and more. Because they often oversee student support services within the school, counselors also have a student's-eye view of the educational program. Good school counselors have keen insight into which students (including which *groups* of students) are on a dead-end path, which students are en route to a solid high school education

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that will produce real choices, and which students are somewhere in between. Moreover, good school counselors can see how their institution contributes to these patterns. They know which courses or teachers are producing the most failures, what policies are holding students back, and which supports help propel students toward success.

Across the United States, an increasing number of school counselors are stepping forward to help ensure that all students get access to the coursework they need to thrive after graduation. These counselors have become key members of their school's leadership team. They are the data mavens, helping teachers and administrators monitor progress and resolve problems. And they are champions of equity, finding out which groups of students are poorly served and leading efforts to do something about it.

## LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

Elmont Memorial Junior-Senior High School, just outside New York City, performs among that state's top schools. African Americans and Latinos comprise more than 95 percent of the school's students and school counselors are central to its success in preparing all students for college and careers.

*"Even if the students are struggling, we know they'll be more successful in college because they will have been exposed to the material and be better prepared when they leave Elmont."*

— Caron Cox, school counselor, Elmont Junior-Senior High School, N.Y.

Elmont's school counselors oversee a complex process that promotes college-going and helps every young person stay on track, says Caron Cox, chair of the counseling department. Throughout the school year, her team scours student transcripts, state assessments, course schedules, and grades. "We promote a college-going culture and help students create a road map toward graduation filled with rigorous courses: All of our students are in college- and career-readiness courses," Cox says. "Even if the students

are struggling, we know they'll be more successful in college because they will have been exposed to the material and be better prepared when they leave Elmont."

Head south 1,200 miles and you'll find another group of school counselors leading their campus to high rates of readiness for college and career. Bryant High School is part of the Mobile County Public School System (MCPSS) in Alabama. When school counselors there identified a problem with math, they tracked it back to the school's policy of giving credit for Algebra IA and IB as well as Geometry A and B, which allowed students to complete the four-credit math graduation requirement by the end of their sophomore year. The policy created an easy out for students who saw no need to take math as juniors and seniors. The school counselors advocated changing the local graduation requirements from four credits to four years of math at the level of Algebra I or higher. The school board now intends to review the district's graduation requirements in math.

This life-changing work is not limited to Bryant. Throughout Mobile County, school counselors use data to advocate for student success. In every MCPSS school, counselors develop yearly goals based upon student data and current school improvement efforts. At a recent meeting, Deputy Superintendent Martha Peek told school counselors: "Mobile is the only large district in Alabama to make AYP this year and one of the big reasons is what school counselors did. There has been this tendency to put students in low-level courses and just herd them through. You know we can't do that anymore. We've got to ramp up to the Common Core national standards. School counselors, you are the best to spread the word."

## BEST SCHOOL COUNSELING PRACTICES

The school counselors at Elmont and MCPSS have several practices in common. They advocate for all students in their schools to enroll and succeed in a course of study that prepares them for both college and career. They collect and analyze data to uncover equity gaps and choke points that impede access to or success in challenging content, then use the results to press their schools to respond to those problems. These school counselors see themselves as change agents who are helping the school better meet student needs.

Yet, in far too many places, school counselors are not doing this essential work. In the *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher*, 65 percent of high school students acknowledge school counselors as one of the top three sources of information on what success in college requires.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, the vast majority of students are not getting this information until the 11th or 12th grade. This is much too late for this information to be most effective.<sup>4</sup> In some cases, it's because counselors are not allowed to work with students sooner. Many principals don't see counselors as central to the academic mission of schools, so they weigh them down with mundane tasks: spending huge amounts of time coordinating the many tests given in high schools and

## CAN SCHOOL COUNSELING SURVIVE THE CURRENT ECONOMIC CRISIS?

Fontana Unified School District is the 12th largest school district in California. Last spring, Fontana's school board eliminated the district's school counseling program and its 69 school counselor positions.<sup>15</sup> In addition, 30 comprehensive student support providers were employed for the 2011-12 school year through categorical funding for at-risk students.<sup>16,17</sup> In August, the school board created 12 new positions called Academic Pathway Advisors who will "provide education and career advisement to students and parents."<sup>18</sup>

A different story unfolded this spring in Utah's Jordan School District. The annual school counseling program presentation to the Board of Education, held on May 10, 2010, was followed by a request for 14.5 additional school counselors to lower the district ratio to 1:350. They were hoping to get three or four new positions.

Chris Richards-Khong, then secondary guidance counselor specialist, presented the results of a small pilot program designed to increase participation of historically underserved students in Early College and honors programs. School counselors were trained in the importance of postsecondary education, labor market trends, what makes a student college and career ready, and how to analyze and disaggregate their school's student data.

School counselors explored the data and began working with students and their families. As a result, an additional 32 percent of the students, helped by the counselors, chose to participate in Early College and honors programs.

The Board of Education made funding school counselors their number one priority and funded all 14.5 positions, an increase of over 30 percent in a district with 48 school counselors. During the 2011-2012, JSD is expanding this project district wide.

It is important to note that this is not a perfect program. The pilot only identified students who were already highly qualified. However, the school counselors who implemented the pilot noted this and recommended that in the future "the desired program will entail encouraging teachers to build confidence in all students and in helping all students stretch higher in their academic pursuits."

These stories from Utah and California convey important lessons. School districts have a specific mission and, like any employer, they need to see how every position contributes to that mission. School counselors cannot expect their jobs to continue if they aren't able to provide data that show how they contribute to college and career readiness. If counselors do make that case, armed with real evidence, their profession has the potential to endure and grow, even in hard economic times.

performing more than their fair share of lunch, bus, or hall supervision. But sometimes the problem is with the school counselors themselves. Many have grown comfortable in their ancillary roles, shying away from strongly advocating for their students. Among school counselors, more than 90 percent consider advocating for all students an ideal mission for their profession. But only 45 percent see that as actually happening in their schools. While 68 percent believe their mission should be to ensure that low-income students get the extra help they need, only 30 percent of counselors say this is the reality at their school.<sup>5</sup>

It is hardly surprising, then, that high school graduates surveyed by Public Agenda in 2009 hold negative views of their school counselors with the majority rating their counselors as only "fair" or "poor."<sup>6</sup> Among recent grads surveyed by the College Board, one-third said their schools did not do a good job ensuring they took the coursework needed for the colleges they chose. And 40 percent said they failed to get the guidance needed to understand the college application and financial aid processes.<sup>7</sup>

## WHAT PREVENTS SCHOOL COUNSELORS FROM BECOMING LEADERS AND ADVOCATES?

Three key barriers limit school counselors from leading the college- and career-ready agenda at their schools:

1. Pre-service training programs rarely prepare future school counselors in the dispositions, knowledge, and skills required to develop, implement, and evaluate college- and career-readiness programs.
2. In many secondary schools, principals do not know how to hire, supervise, or evaluate school counselors.
3. Finally, there is a large discrepancy between how school counselors see their role, both ideally and in reality, and how graduates view the guidance and services they received as students.

## University-Based School Counselor Training Programs

Almost every state requires those seeking certification for work as a school counselor to show successful completion of a university-based school counselor preparation program. While taking courses, learning dispositions, and developing skills, prospective counselors launch their entry into the profession. In all too many places, though, future school counselors are not trained to lead or support school efforts to prepare graduates for life beyond a diploma. Instead, they are trained to provide individual therapy and intervention. As a result, most are ill-prepared to assure that all students are college and career ready, provide school-wide leadership, and help drive organizational improvement through the strategic use of data.

In many universities, school counselors take the majority of their courses alongside the students of other counseling programs (such as marriage and family, and mental health) and therefore learn little about either the broad aims or practical realities of schools. Although school counselors can't possibly do individual therapy with all of the students they are typically assigned, they study a curriculum based on a general model of intervention with individual clients. Practical experience requirements vary dramatically across universities, but many allow school counselors to satisfy their field practice hours by simply doing individual counseling. In many university programs, these counseling sessions aren't even required to be conducted in schools.

Another problem is that many of the professors teaching to prospective school counselors have little, if any, professional background in schools. The result of omitting from curriculum *and* field practice the knowledge and experiences critical to the counselor's role in today's schools? The students in these programs fail to understand the important aspects of today's educational environment and the critical role school counselors must play in building equity.

There are school counselor preparation programs that stand out for their excellence, however. San Diego State University and the University of North Florida are two examples. Both these programs list educational equity and academic success for every preK-12 student as part of their mission statements.<sup>8,9</sup> Since the majority of the courses they offer enroll only school counseling students, these programs are free to build curriculum, field experiences, assignments, and assessments around education issues. These successful programs teach students how to use data to support decision making, and develop strategies for removing institutional barriers to student success. Meaningful field experiences start early in the program and professors get out into the K-12 schools along with their school counseling students. This latter practice allows instructors to stay current on the issues, challenges, and opportunities that occur in the real-world educational setting.

In some parts of the country, frustrated districts are demanding that local school counselor training programs produce graduates who can work toward equity and drive

a college- and career-ready agenda. Joyce Brown, former district manager of secondary school counselors with the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), met with local universities to send them a critical message: Their school counseling interns were coming to CPS unprepared. She told them CPS would no longer take school counseling students unless they were leaders and collaborators who wanted to work in an urban setting and knew how to use data to advocate for equity and access to a rigorous curriculum. "That got their attention," Brown said. "They changed their programs because they wouldn't exist if they couldn't place their students."

At the time, Chicago's DePaul University was already

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revamping its school-counselor preparation program, and the pressure from CPS helped accelerate the process. DePaul interns are now required to complete advocacy projects and are expected to contribute to the academic achievement levels of students. For example, a recent intern, working with students, teachers, and parents, significantly increased the number of low-income Hispanic students who applied for and won acceptance to coveted spots at the district's most selective high schools.

University training programs can produce highly qualified school counselors with the knowledge and skills needed to ensure that every student graduates from high school ready for success in college and career. But to do so, they must be willing to take a hard look at what they are doing and spend considerably more time on the "school" part of school counseling.

### Building Administrators:

In the vast majority of buildings, school counselors report directly to principals. Principals, therefore, exert vast influence over how school counselors think of and perform their jobs. Those school counselors who embrace the challenge of preparing all students for college and the workforce often point to the principal as their chief barrier. While most principal-preparation programs have improved their training in instructional leadership, they still tend to give short shrift to what principals should know about hiring, developing, and evaluating school counselors.

As a result, many principals don't recognize the essential role school counselors could and should play in making sure that the school is equitably preparing students for success after high school. Many principals assign non-counseling duties — from standardized-test coordination

to student discipline and substitute teaching — and keep counselors from taking leadership in the school. Saddled with menial tasks, school counselors become quasi-administrators, not agents of equity.

## Many principals assign non-counseling duties — from standardized-test coordination to student discipline and substitute teaching — and keep counselors from taking leadership in the school.

Certainly, some principals understand the critical link between school counselors and college and career readiness. One recent study looked at the relationships between principals and school counselors at high schools that won or were runners up in the College Board’s Inspiration Awards. These high-poverty, highly diverse schools had substantially increased student achievement, AP and honors class participation, test scores, and college acceptance and enrollment. Not surprisingly, their administrators and school counselors believed all students could attend college, shared responsibility for making this happen, and collaborated so that the entire school community, working together, reached its goals.<sup>10</sup>

To achieve these kinds of results at scale, both individual principals and the programs that prepare them need to do some serious thinking about the role of the school counselor and how principals can better support their participation in school efforts to solidly prepare all students for what awaits them after high school.

### School Counselors:

As noted earlier, school counselors themselves can diminish their scope of influence. Today, children facing difficult situations, from poverty to abuse and homelessness, fill our schools. Most school counselors truly want what’s best for students. Yet, in a misguided effort to help students succeed in at least one area of their lives, too many school counselors allow them to drop rigorous courses or, worse, never enroll in them. Unfortunately, this “bless your heart” mentality results in choices that slam the doors on these students’ futures. Certainly, empathy matters. But being sensitive to the challenges in students’ lives is quite different from excusing them from doing hard work, a practice that has devastating repercussions in limiting their life options.

In a recent national survey, 52 percent of school counselors said they believe the goal of equity in their school should be for all students to receive equal support and attention rather than ensuring that those students with the greatest challenges receive the support they need to succeed.<sup>11</sup> Sometimes counselors simply can’t see how their attitudes get in the way of student success. Another recent study, though, provided countless examples. Almost 4 in 10 counselors, for example, said that low-income students should avoid student loans

because of the risk of default.<sup>12</sup> Given the soaring costs of college attendance, it is virtually impossible for students from low-income families to get through college without acquiring some debt. Students who follow the advice of these school counselors may find themselves literally cut off from the surest path out of poverty. Instead of advising low-income students to avoid loans, school counselors should help them choose wisely and make sure they prepare for success in college and career by completing rigorous, high-level classes.

Even school counselors who have high expectations for their students can easily find themselves spending the bulk of their time providing personal and social counseling to individual students. Of course, school counselors mean well with these efforts, but the hard truth is our public schools are not set up to provide therapy to students. Certainly, when personal and social issues significantly interfere with learning, school counselors need to help. They can best assist students, not with long-term, time-consuming therapy, but with brief, short-term counseling sessions, referrals to small-group counseling, or other support systems in the school or community.

Let us be clear: Personal counseling is a key practice in ensuring college and career readiness. However, when school counselors allow 20 percent of their students to take up 80 percent of their time, in effect, 80 percent of the students do not get properly prepared for college and career. That outcome is not acceptable.

Yes, we know that counselor-student ratios are absurdly large, making it hard to focus on every student. The average counselor-student ratio in our country is now 1 to 459 — almost double that recommended by the American School Counselor Association, which is 1 to 250.<sup>13</sup> In some schools and districts, the numbers are much higher than the average.

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At The Education Trust’s National Center for Transforming School Counseling (TSC), we have seen incredibly effective school counseling programs with outsized ratios, and weak programs with relatively low ratios. That evidence on the ground sends a message: Today’s school counselors have to choose. If they opt to wait until ratios improve before tackling the challenge of getting all their students ready, they’ll likely be waiting a long time, leaving many of their students on the economic sidelines. Our hope is that far more will do what our top professionals already do: collaborate creatively with parents and institutions in the school community to prepare every student for college and career, no matter what.



# STEPS FOR CHANGE

For the first time ever in the United States, most stakeholders agree on the end goal of K-12 education: preparing all young people for college and career. As of the writing of this paper, 46 states have stepped forward to adopt common, “college- and career-ready” standards, and most are partnering in efforts to develop aligned assessments. Yet the presence of new standards and assessments does not ensure that all students will graduate from high school, much less thrive in higher education or the workforce. Among other essential work, schools will have to make sure that every student is on a path toward success, which includes successfully completing a rigorous course of study.

Poised to lead, school counselors can and should play an essential role in transforming the nation’s secondary schools. Making that happen, however, will require lots of hard work, including improvements in preparation and changes in school job descriptions. In addition, principals need to see their school counselors as leaders and advocates.

States, districts, and schools can do much to leverage the support needed for school counselors to assume this important role.





## CONCLUSION

School counselors are in a unique position to lead. However, if they fail to work toward equity, and college and career readiness for every student, school counselors can pose the biggest, most devastating obstacle of all. Researchers have well documented the importance of teacher beliefs about students. Yet the assumptions of school counselors can have just as great an effect, if not

more. If a school counselor doubts that every student can learn, that schools have the responsibility to teach every student, and that each student deserves to graduate ready to succeed in college and career, that person should quit the profession. Our country desperately needs school counselors who believe in our underserved youth and are committed to opening the doors to a productive future for all of them.

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## **ABOUT THE EDUCATION TRUST**

The Education Trust promotes high academic achievement for all students at all levels — pre-kindergarten through college. We work alongside parents, educators, and community and business leaders across the country in transforming schools and colleges into institutions that serve all students well. Lessons learned in these efforts, together with unflinching data analyses, shape our state and national policy agendas. Our goal is to close the gaps in opportunity and achievement that consign far too many young people — especially those who are black, Latino, American Indian, or from low-income families — to lives on the margins of the American mainstream.

## **ABOUT METLIFE FOUNDATION**

The Education Trust is grateful to MetLife Foundation for its generous financial support for the development of this brief. MetLife Foundation is committed to building a secure future for individuals and communities worldwide, through a focus on empowering older adults, preparing young people and building livable communities. In education, it seeks to strengthen public schools through effective teaching and collaborative leadership, and to prepare students for access to and success in higher education, particularly during the crucial first year. The Foundation's grantmaking is informed by findings from the annual MetLife Survey of the American Teacher. More information is available at [www.metlife.org](http://www.metlife.org).

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