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Stimulate This: How School Counselors Will Help Save Our Post-Pandemic Future

By: Brennan Barnard



The global pandemic has devastated much of the nation's economy. Unemployment is at unthinkable levels and every sector has felt the impact of this crisis, from large corporations and nonprofits to small businesses and schools. One could debate who has been hit the hardest—hospitals, retail, tourism, education—but the fact remains that except for [Amazon](#), [Netflix](#), [Zoom](#), [Clorox](#), [Kimberly-Clark](#), and a few other companies that stand to benefit, times are grim economically.

I am not a scientist, so I won't pretend to make predictions about the longevity of this virus, potential for a vaccine, or likelihood for a resurgence. Nor am I an economist, so I will not weigh in on whether this is a recession or a depression, and I will refrain from speculating on the long-term fiscal impact. However, I am an educator who has worked with students and families through the 9/11 tragedy and the 2008 recession. I have also seen the great disparity of educational resources, and the inherent inequities, that hold back many in this country. What I know to be true is that no matter when our country opens up, or how fast we bounce back, we need to think about how we stimulate our economy and workforce from the ground up. Guess where that starts? School counselors.

Access to Counseling

School counselors are on the frontline of supporting our nation's young people as they move through their educational journey, but access to these supports is wildly unjust and inequitable and this has serious implications on the availability of post-secondary planning. While the [American School Counselor Association](#) (ASCA) recommends a ratio of 250 students per counselor, according to Department of Education statistics, the national average is [430-to-1](#). Jill Cook, the assistant director of ASCA explains that encouragingly "the number of school counselors has been rising and the ratio of students per counselor is the lowest it has been in over 30 years." She says that this is thanks in part to initiatives on the state level like [Virginia's goal to reduce the ratio to 250-to-1](#), [Arizona's legislation to hire additional counselors](#) (reducing their worst in the nation ratio of 903-to-1), and the [Colorado School Counselor Corps grant](#) program. Cook worries, however, that school budgets will be slashed as a result of Covid-19 and that counselor resources will be lost at a time when they are more important than ever.

Tara Nicola is a doctoral student at Harvard's Graduate School of Education who is specializing in the field of school counseling. She agrees that lower counselor ratios are important, but explains that "the extent to which the ratio matters for post-secondary planning depends on school context." Reducing the caseload of counselors is not equally beneficial across all schools. Instead of focusing on the [250-to-1 benchmark](#), Nicola argues that "We need targeted improvement in counselor-to-student ratios." The schools where there is a greater need for more counselors are those in which these educators are pulled in many different directions, confronting student mental health struggles, food insecurity, abuse, and other issues. The bandwidth that counselors in these settings have for post-secondary guidance is often limited. She also points out that with targeted improvement in school counselor ratios, we must consider what other supports and resources are available in that school. For example, does the school partner with statewide nonprofit organizations that provide post-secondary planning like Maine's [MELMAC Education Foundation](#) or [New Hampshire's Higher Education Assistance Foundation \(NHHEAF\)](#)? In some schools, counseling is supplemented by locally affiliated programs like the [Breakthrough Collaborative](#) or federal outreach initiatives like TRIO's [Upward Bound](#), that provide support for low-income and first-generation college students to complete high school and continue their post-secondary education.

Tori Berube is the vice president for college planning and community engagement for NHHEAF. She says, "We know school counselors were taxed before Covid-19, and to be honest, I would suspect the mental health and general well-being of students are going to be taking the bulk of their time. We knew before the pandemic that college and career counseling was just a very small component of school counseling work." She worries that post-secondary planning will slip further down counselors' list of responsibilities. Berube adds, "I think school districts are going to be hard-pressed to add additional staff." She suggests funneling stimulus money—at the federal and state level—to college access programs like TRIO and [GearUp](#) to "allow current college access organizations to expand services to work more one-on-one with students."

Even with the benefit of these supplemental supports, Wil Del Pilar, vice president for higher education at the [Education Trust](#) points out that 1 in 5 students in this country has no access to a counselor and that while 1.5 million students have no counselor in their school, they do have a sworn police officer. He asks, "What messages are we sending to children?" Del Pilar adds that "from a national perspective, school counseling inequities have always been critical and it will be an even more critical issue coming out of this crisis." He uses the Philadelphia public schools as an example where, in 2013, [the district laid off all school counselors](#). He says that "as schools struggle with resources, it is important not to cut crucial counseling resources as families address financial hardships and other significant struggles."

Counselor Training

While access to counselors is critical, so is the preparation of these educators to provide comprehensive post-secondary guidance. Del Pilar at the Education Trust argues that in the same way we talk about teacher education not adequately preparing teachers for the classroom, counselors are often ill-equipped to support post-secondary planning for students. In fact, he explains that he has a degree in school counseling but only took one class on this topic and there was very little education about post-secondary planning. NHHEAF's Berube agrees, saying that "for up and coming school counselors (at least in New Hampshire), college counseling as part of the curriculum is sparse at best." She explains that "these positions require thorough training in the admission process," adding, "having them trained in the

general financial aid process would also be key—understanding how federal aid is awarded, how federal methodology works, how to make smart financial choices.”

Diane Campbell is the director of college counseling at Liberty Common High School, a public charter school in northern Colorado. She says, “the lack of training for school counselors in most areas is truly a crisis.” Campbell believes that there needs to be a focus on training for counselors in critical areas in support of students such as anxiety and stress management, closing achievement gaps, grief and loss, trauma, and cultural competency. But she also points out that proficiency in college admissions is needed more than ever. She asks, “How can counselors support students as they exit high school if they have not been trained in the areas of college admission, career/major exploration, and other post-graduate options?” She adds, “Our economy and employment trends have changed significantly for high school students and I feel we need to truly focus on how some of our frontline people, like counselors, are receiving training to be ready.” Campbell wonders about how best to support students in learning about potential majors that lead to employment given the changing economy. She asks, “How can counselors learn more about affordable choices for families and what colleges will offer a 4-year degree and without significant debt?”

Campbell agrees with Berube and Del Pilar that most of the training for school counselors regarding college admission is nonexistent. She says, “I feel that in many high schools, counselors are neglected when it comes to efficient training and professional development in how to support students through the postgraduate process.” In her own experience, she only had 6 hours of college counseling training in a school counseling master’s degree program and she believes that this training did not prepare her for the depth of information she needed to know in supporting students. All that she has learned has been through additional professional development courses and conferences paid for by her high school and with her own funds. She emphasizes that “not all schools or counselors have this privilege or access, and this is why we need designated funding set aside, used, and regulated for every counselor to receive college admission training.”

David Hess is a school counselor at **Elgin High School** in Illinois. Elgin is one of five high schools in **District U-46**, which is the second-largest district in Illinois. The school serves about 2600 students, of which 75% are low income and 81% are students of color. The vast majority of their graduates who continue onto college are first-generation in their family to do so. Hess explains that Elgin doesn't have dedicated post-secondary counselors and he says, “there is a strong need to support professional development and training around the post-secondary process. Ensuring that all students graduate with a post-secondary plan requires understanding, planning, and systems throughout the whole school.” Hess explains that in his district they are working to embed post-secondary planning throughout the coursework in every subject area, so the training and professional development goes beyond counselors to include teachers as well. Like Campbell, he says that in addition to the training provided by his district, some of his professional development came out of his own pocket because he knows that quality training and professional development improves outcomes for students. Hess says, “in a district with 20,000 low-income students, we need more support.”

Nicola’s research at Harvard revealed that school counseling education programs in most states do not require post-secondary training because their accrediting organizations do not require it. There are little or no mandates about proficiency around college access. Meanwhile, availability and access to professional development for post-secondary advising are limited. While organizations like the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) provide opportunities for continuing education in these areas, many school districts do not have the funding available to send their counselors and/or have

policies against counselors leaving the school building during the academic day, when these workshops are offered. As for in-school professional development, often districts lump training for counselors in with teachers and so post-secondary counseling issues are rarely addressed. For example, Del Pilar at the Education Trust says “a school might offer an in-service day on literacy for all staff but it is not tailored to the needs of school counselors and doesn’t help them to become better counselors.” Jayne Caflin Fonash, NACAC’s president, says that the organization is exploring how best to offer more accessible training for counselors, including remote options that will reach educators who have traditionally not had the resources or flexibility to attend conferences. She says, “we need to equip counselors with tools they need, especially in terms of better fluency with financial aid advising.”

Stimulating Effective Counseling

Christine Mulhern is a doctoral candidate in public policy at Harvard University. [Her recent research](#) highlights the positive impact of effective high school counselors on graduation rates and college enrollment, especially for some of the most vulnerable students in our schools. Meanwhile, [a 2017 study](#) by Benjamin Castleman of the University of Virginia and Joshua Goodman, then at Harvard University, showed the benefit of intensive, personalized counseling on college enrollment and completion among low-income students. But sadly our nation’s education system doesn’t always support this reality. Jerry Lucido is a professor of practice and associate dean of strategic enrollment services for the University of Southern California’s Rossier School of Education and also executive director of the [USC Center for Enrollment Research, Policy and Practice](#). He explains that “the issues around school counseling are many. They are undervalued in schools, often the first to be cut in hard budget times. Their duties span crisis intervention to behavior and psychological guidance to scheduling, testing, lunch, and bus duty.” Lucido says, “all of this means that counseling for college, among all but the best-resourced schools, suffers under the burdens of too many students to serve and too many responsibilities.” He adds, “moreover, precious few school counselors have had a course or professional training in college counseling. This comes at a time when demographic shifts will see a decrease in traditional college-bound students and an increase in students whose families have little to no college experience.”

Liberty Common’s Campbell says “The ultimate job of a school counselor is to provide and implement a comprehensive school counseling program that fits the needs of students and aligns with the mission of their school. Now, more than ever, as a response to Covid-19 we need not only more school counselor’s, but well-trained counselors who can support students in an unprecedented time of heightened anxiety around online school, grades, social connections, college admissions, and affordability. NHHEAF’s Berube says, “Having more boots on the ground to help students navigate their options coming out of this would be wonderful,” but adds, “I struggle with how schools would pay for it as I think districts are really going to be stretched in so many directions. Federal and state financial support, and enhanced counselor training, are necessary.” USC’s Lucido agrees, emphasizing “It is now a national imperative to move a new generation of students to a level of education that their families have yet to achieve. Our national interest—the economy, civic participation, and its health and welfare—requires it. These students will need informed counselors to guide them to the proper next steps of their educational and career futures. Those counselors will need the time and professional education to do the job right.”

As we rush to bolster our nation's economy with trillions of dollars, we must be sure not to miss the forest for the trees. There is no question that we need to protect small businesses, workers, and many other vulnerable people and companies at this time of crisis. But we also have to be intentional about long-range planning, and the frontlines of our future are school

counselors. As revenue dries up in many states that fund their public schools through tax dollars, we need to find ways to support these institutions amid [budget cuts](#) and protect the very individuals we will rely on to guide tomorrow's leaders and workers.

It is time for companies like Amazon, Apple, Zoom, and Netflix to step up if our federal, state, and local governments do not. [Jeff Bezos](#), I am looking at you. The viability of our workforce and the economic outlook for the country depend on a well-educated society that has made wise choices after high school. The most reliable way to ensure this is to support our school counselors. If we overlook these impactful professionals, the consequences will be severe and long-lasting. Let's make the right choice for the future of our children and our economy.