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School Counselors

School counselors are an integral part of the education workforce. Such professionals work in school environments to support students and families in developing a strong academic foundation, as well as plans for guidance and future goals. The American School Counselor Association, a national organization focused on supporting school counselors, notes school counselors “design and deliver programs that improve a range of student learning and behavioral outcomes.” Each counselor aims to create a school environment that fosters equity in student success, ensuring every student reaches their full potential. School counselors particularly focus on individual student success by helping each student understand all options that enable them to pursue their future academic and career goals.

Role and Scope of School Counselors

School counselors play a vital role in the academic career of students. Without the presence of a school counselor, research shows students may lack resources and support, stunting their progress in entering both the postsecondary and working world. School counselors assist students in identifying their interests and next steps to pursue these interests. School counselors also take on responsibilities such as reducing the number of dropouts and communicating with families to increase attendance rates.

School counselors are distinct from other school professionals in a number of ways. They are the only professionals in the school whose job is dedicated to planning a path for every individual student. Other professionals, such as school social workers, help students with long-term behavioral problems or develop skills to connect with peers in the classroom. A social worker might also administer assessments to students to identify what behavioral health issues must be presently addressed. Professionals such as school psychologists might also serve long-term behavioral and mental health needs of students, but they may also work for the school district rather than the school itself, and therefore are not always directly in the schools. School counselors are unique in the role they play directly at the school site.

There are two existing characterizations of a school counselor. The first is an academic and educational counselor whose primary focus is to help students decide on course plans, career interests, and post-graduation

Key Takeaways

School counselors prioritize creating equitable programs for all students, helping them to realize their potential and to reach their goals.

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School counselors are distinct from other professionals as they work and remain fully in schools, curate personalized plans for individual students, and more.

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The American School Counselor Association recommends a ratio of 250 to 1, students to school counselors. New Mexico’s average is 444 to 1. Schools that meet the recommended ratio see increasing improvements in student success.

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Level III counselors are licensed and compensated through the three-tier system.

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The American School Counselors Association recommends the use of the term “school counselor” rather than “guidance counselor.” According to the association, the term “school counselor” better suits a proactive and data-driven role that prioritizes inclusivity, the development of comprehensive career plans for each student, and leadership in the education environment, focusing on collaboration with other professionals and families.

plans. The second is a counselor who specializes in mental health issues among students. This kind of counselor might assist a student who is experiencing problems at home, resulting in tolls that immediately impact the student’s engagement in school.

Because of the lack of specific distinction in the broad definition of the role of school counselors, many take on the role of both types of counselors. Often, counselors are not well equipped for assisting students in both areas, and yet are expected to fill each role simultaneously. According to the American School Counselor Association, school counselors are also expected to deal with a wide range of ethical issues involving students, including harassment, confidentiality issues, mental health needs, family trauma, in addition to the academic guidance each student requires. Additionally, school counselors often find themselves performing tasks that are outside of their role entirely, such as administering standardized tests, becoming an

attendance clerk, or serving as a dean of students, taking away from the time and energy intended for advising students. As a result, counselors are often serving beyond their capacity and may experience shortcomings in delivering their commitments to student success.

Recognizing and emphasizing the distinction between academic counselors and mental health counselors is crucial to the success and the level of impact of school counseling programs in New Mexico’s public schools. Complicating the issue further, in New Mexico, school counselors, mental health counselors, and social workers are often grouped together, yet they have distinct responsibilities and different advanced degrees. As such, the types of supports and professionals available in schools may vary, depending on the available workforce in certain communities.

Landscape of School Counselors in New Mexico

National Recommendations and Data

The American School Counselor Association recommends a student to [school counselor ratio](#) of 250 to one. According to the American School Counselor Association, New Mexico’s statewide average ratio is approximately 444 students to one school counselor, compared with a national average ratio of 408 students to every one school counselor. Since this is a statewide ratio, the number of counselors per student likely varies district by district; LESC staff analysis indicates there are schools that lack a counselor entirely.

National recommendations for the ratio of students to school counselors is 250 to one. According to national data, New Mexico’s current average ratio is 444 to one.

As discussed in state data considerations below, national numbers may also reflect a different methodology in who is included in the school counselor workforce, an important consideration in assessing the workforce and its availability in New Mexico schools.

National research shows schools with a ratio of 250 students to one school counselor see improvements in a wide range of areas such as grade point averages, graduation rates, SAT scores, attendance rates, and more.



Additionally, research shows schools that fail to reach this ratio result in shortcomings when it comes to students making post-high school graduation plans, whether these include postsecondary enrollment, career technical education training, the military, entering the workforce immediately after graduation, or an established internship or apprenticeship.

New Mexico Workforce Data and Supports

Workforce data from the Public Education Department (PED) indicates approximately 763 counselors were working in schools across the state in FY22. Of the 763 counselors in New Mexico, the department reports nearly 50 percent hold a level III license. This data is inclusive of school counselors *and* mental health counselors. This can be attributed to current methods of workforce tracking, where school social workers, school counselors, and school behavioral health counselors are combined under a single, trackable job code.

Professional Learning and Support. The extent of data tracking aimed at improving the understanding of counselor workforce conditions and needs remains unclear; however counselors in New Mexico have access to professional learning opportunities. The New Mexico School Counselors' Association promotes excellence in the profession of school counseling by providing professional resources to school counselors and hosting annual conferences. Additionally, PED hosts the New Mexico School Counselors Community of Best Practice to provide support to encourage collaboration around information and resources that support best practices in school counseling that are anchored within three key domains of development: academic, career, and social emotional wellbeing.

Licensing, Statutory, and Administrative Considerations

The [New Mexico Administrative Code \(NMAC\) 6.63.6](#) outlines three pathways to obtain a [School Counseling \(Pre K-12\)](#) license in the state. Applicants for licensure meet the requirements of the license if:

- The applicant maintains a national certified school counselor credential issued by the national board for certified counselors;
- The applicant is a licensed professional mental health counselor (LPC) or licensed professional clinical mental health counselor (LPCC) by the New Mexico counseling therapy practice board with a minimum of six semester hours of graduate credit in school counseling coursework; or
- The applicant holds a master's degree in school counseling from a regionally accredited college or university that incorporates the New Mexico PED competencies in the area of school counseling or hold a master's degree in a discipline other than school counseling and 36-42 graduate hours in school counseling.

Regardless of the chosen route, each requires a background check, fingerprint registration, and the passing of two Praxis exams. For a school counselor to renew their license, they must apply for renewal and be approved by the district's superintendent.

According to New Mexico Administrative Code (NMAC), New Mexico school counselors are expected to “develop and implement a comprehensive school level guidance program based on the American School Counselor Association’s national standards and focused on the physical, social, intellectual, emotional, and vocational growth of each student.”

According to [NMAC 6.63.3](#) counselors work on inclusive and accessible programs that aid students in:

- Identifying interests;
- Cumulating a path to steer students toward their goals;
- Identifying needs of specific students;
- Formulating specific programs and steps to address said needs;
- Communicating curriculum and programs with students and their families;
- Providing prevention strategies in areas such as teenage substance abuse, various forms of abuse in the home, pregnancy, or suicide.

Level III Counselor Compensation. While minimum salaries are not set for all school counselors, those who have obtained a level three license have their minimum compensation tied to the three-tier teacher compensation system. Section 22-10A-11.1 NMSA 1978 sets the minimum salary for a counselor who holds a level three license at \$70 thousand, the same for a teacher holding a level three license. It should be noted that most school counselors in New Mexico hold a level three counseling license. PED staff reported for the 2021-2022 school year, approximately 50 percent of school counselors worked under a level three license.

Research and Policy Considerations

LESC staff will continue to research this topic throughout the interim with the hope of further understanding what particular barriers stand between school counselors and adequately fulfilling their roles and practicing within these prescribed roles. LESL staff will also work with relevant data to determine the student success outcomes associated with the presence of school counselors in schools. Of particular interest to the committee will be staff work to monitor licensure requirements, compensation, licensure data collection practices, the retention of school counselors, and the availability of preparation programs.

In studying this issue, one challenge is understanding the workforce focused on school counseling because of the way that workforce data is collected. One potential policy and budget recommendation is to implement a workforce tracking system that enables the monitoring of different types of school counselors and social workers in schools. This would assist in better understanding workload, programming support, funding, and the professional learning of school counselors to recruit, retain, and adequately support such professionals.

As the accumulation of data and research continues, LESL will also look to members and stakeholders for feedback and work to propose policy and budget recommendations for LESL members.