



## Texas School Counselor Study: Exploring the Supply, Demand and Evolving Roles of School Counselors

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### What We Studied

Counselors in middle and high schools play several essential roles. Counselors help students with their emotional and behavioral development, they manage curricular and graduation plans, and prepare students for life after high school, be it for college or career. After funding reductions from the Texas legislature in the spring of 2011, many school districts across Texas reduced the number of counselors available to students, increasing the number of students the remaining counselors serve by an average of 24 students. In 2013, the implementation of graduation and curricular changes mandated by House Bill 5 (HB5) increased the responsibilities of middle and high school counselors. The purpose of this report is to begin to understand how specific changes in Texas education policy have influenced counseling in the state by considering these issues.

### How We Analyzed the Data

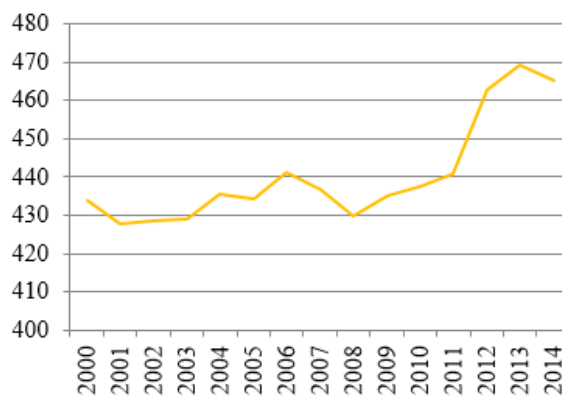
This study analyzes the supply, demand, and evolving roles of school counselors in Texas. This research first examines the role of counselors and evidence of their effectiveness in improving student outcomes. Second, researchers discuss the Texas policy context in relation to recent legislative changes that impact the work counselors perform. Then researchers use administrative data from the Texas Education Research Center to look at the supply and demand of counselors in Texas from 2000 to 2014. Analyzing the student to counselor ratio in relation to the budget cuts faced by school districts in 2011 provides material evidence of the responsibility burden on existing counselors. Variables considered include student-to-counselor ratio, growth of student population in relation to full-time employee (FTE) counselors, wages of counselors, school level characteristics by change in 2011 – 2012 student-to counselor ratio. A discussion of relatively recent innovations across the state that improve the efficiency of the work counselors perform is discussed in the second section. A summary of findings and recommendations follow.

### What We Discovered

- Detailed information on how counselors spend their time in Texas schools is limited.
  - Texas school districts collect and report detailed information on how teachers spend their time by indicating which classes they teach throughout the day. Information on the tasks counselors perform is scarce and obtained through intermittently conducted surveys. Currently there is no link between counselors and the individual students they serve reported to the state.

- There are many district and community efforts across Texas intended to improve the capacity of counseling services.
  - Many school districts across Texas, from the Panhandle to the Rio Grande Valley, to the Dallas and Houston metro areas, to Central Texas, are actively engaged in community-wide efforts to improve the counseling services of students in middle and high school.
  
- Counselor related student outcomes are either inaccurately reported or are simply not collected.
  - Counselors help students choose and apply to a college, assist students and parents to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), and help students transition to college and the workforce. Unfortunately, data regarding student access to college and financial aid application information often relies on student reporting; information related to college enrollment often excludes out-of-state colleges; employment information is often not readily available to counselors, counselors and school district personnel have no reliable means of obtaining high school graduate occupational choices; and Texas lacks a consistent state-wide means of collecting and reporting employment-related certificates.
  
- The student-to-counselor ratio increased substantially across the state from 2011 to 2012, and has not returned to pre-2012 levels.
  - The Legislature's decision to cut \$5.4 billion in public education in the spring of 2011 led many districts to cut counselors to balance their budgets. Nevertheless, provisions within HB5 require parent, student, and counselor meetings, a stipulation that lends support for the idea that there is no substitute for students and parents spending quality time with a counselor. However, the larger the case load that counselors experience, the more difficult it is to spend the amount and quality of time required to effectively help students.
  
- The cost of reducing the student-to-counselor ratio in Texas to pre-recession levels is approximately \$66 million a year.
  - In 2008, the student-to-counselor ratio was approximately 430:1. If the student population in Texas continues to increase at its 15-year average of 82,320 students per year, there will be approximately 5,234,250 students in Texas in 2014-15. In Texas, the average counselor FTE cost in 2014 was approximately \$60,000. To bring the student-to-counselor ratio back to its 2008 level, there would need to be approximately 12,173 counselor FTEs in 2014-15: 1,100 more than the 2013-14 amount. At approximately \$60,000/FTE, the total cost for these additional counselors would be approximately \$66,000,000 for each year.

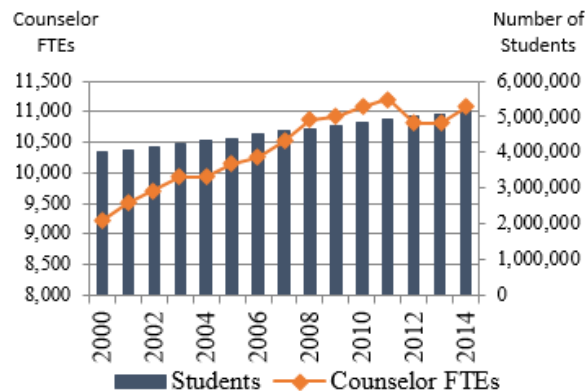
**Figure 1: Statewide Student-to-Counselor Ratio, 2000-2014**



Source: Data from the Texas Education Research Center.

- House Bill 5 increased the amount of work counselors are required to perform.
  - Counselors are required to meet with all entering 9th grade students and their parents to choose a graduation plan and endorsement, a function that is performed either by an 8th grade counselor or by a high school counselor visiting the student in middle school. Any changes in endorsements that students seek to make must also involve a meeting between counselor, student, and parents. Counselors are required to meet with all students in each year of high school to provide information about postsecondary education.
- Not fully outlined in the legislation are several implicit demands on counselors imposed through House Bill 5's focus on not only college matriculation but also high school to career transitions.
  - HB5 was intended to provide opportunities for high school students to earn endorsements and, along with endorsements, career-specific certifications. Implicit in this emphasis is the requirement that high school counselors provide information to students about the local labor market, including prevailing wages, industry demand, required certifications for occupations, and opportunities for linking career training interests with local colleges and universities.

**Figure 2: Growth in the Student Population and Counselor FTEs**



Source: Data from the Texas Education Research Center.

- There are more efficient means of providing counseling services to students, particularly for process-related activities like choosing a four-year plan or enrolling in college.
  - Postsecondary counseling in high school is often envisioned as a counselor sitting down with a student and the student's parents and discussing the student's interests and desires in an effort to match these with available opportunities. Unfortunately, such meetings are lengthy and likely inefficient. Texas school districts are trying a host of collaborative innovations around counseling efforts involving colleges, universities, chambers of commerce, school districts, non-profits, foundations and businesses. These innovations include the following types of activities:
    - Leveraging school personnel, community organizations, and colleges,
    - Using technology to more effectively and efficiently reach students,
    - Utilizing useful data from non-district collected data sources,
    - Utilizing efficient means of discovering student needs, and
    - Managing the issue of summer melt.
- Data to identify many of the outcomes of interest mandated by HB5 are not currently available.
  - Policy makers and researchers seeking to know whether recent high school graduates successfully enroll in college, receive an occupation-related certificate, or are successfully employed in the occupation the high school and local colleges prepared the student for are likely to be disappointed; this information is either incomplete or not collected in Texas.

## **Policy Recommendations/Implications**

These findings lead to a number of recommendations intended to improve student access to counseling services and increase the efficiency with which counselors obtain student information. These recommendations consist of two parts: those intended for school districts and their regional partners, including colleges and community organizations; and those intended for the legislature. Each recommendation includes policy specific actions which further the goal.

### **Regional and District Recommendations**

1. Increase the capacity of counseling at high schools.
  - Create a middle to high school transition counselor position to help 8th graders make their endorsement and graduation plan choices. Conduct electronic surveys of high school students to enable more efficient means of sharing student academic and career interests with counselors. Make counselor staffing a priority, publicly stating your district's student-to-counselor ratios at each of your schools and committing to increasing the availability of counseling staff for your students.
2. Engage in community and regional partnerships.
  - Leverage community organizations and regional partnerships to develop and share strategies and coordinate efforts to improve counseling services to students in your region. Engage with local workforce development boards to ensure counselors understand local labor market conditions.
3. Commit to preparing all staff to assist students in achieving their academic and career goals.
  - Develop and adopt a community framework to allow teachers and other school staff to more effectively provide support to students in their goals. Teachers and other school staff should have ready access to the career and educational goals of students.

### **Legislative Recommendations**

1. Reduce the assigned responsibilities of counselors, increasing the time they have to perform the work required to effectively prepare student for college and careers. Many counselors spend significant time managing the administration of standardized tests. It is time to assign other personnel to engage in this work, freeing up some of the time of counselors currently assigned this task.
2. Make available opportunities to increase the number of people providing appropriate counseling services at schools. Restore cuts in funding to school districts so districts possess the resources to increase the number of counselors. Encourage school districts to create a middle to high school transition counselor for each middle school to serve as a coordinator for graduating 8th grade students. Encourage TEA to create a counselor's aide position to serve as support staff to the work counselors perform. Determine a threshold minimum for the number of students for which a school must have a full time counselor; e.g., "If a campus contains more than 100 students, the school must employ at least one full time counselor." Provide funding credit to colleges and universities who provide on-site college and career preparation services to non-dual credit high school students. Increase the number of counselors focusing on direct-to-college enrollment by scaling the Advise Texas program. Encourage the development of online training standards to ensure that counselors understand and use existing tools to evaluate local labor market demand. Encourage connections between local workforce development boards and high school counselors.
3. Help districts improve the efficiency of counseling at their schools. Improve student outreach through technology: Provide counseling technology capacity building grants to allow high schools to partner with colleges, universities, and private vendors to develop and implement the technological tools to improve counseling efficiency. These tools may also be used to more effectively reach out to parents and the community about high school graduation, college transitions, and workforce services for students.

4. Enhance current data collection systems to ensure that the effects of House Bill 5 can be appropriately evaluated. Comparable to the way teachers are linked to their students, link counselors to the students they serve. Provide additional paid staff to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board to work directly with districts requesting FAFSA and Apply Texas data. Seek to develop workable means for the THECB to share FAFSA and Apply Texas data with school districts, be it through private, contracted vendors chosen by the districts or within an enhanced statewide data sharing system. Upgrade the Unemployment Insurance wage system to collect job occupation and more accurate job location information. Revisit the manner in which occupational certifications are collected and maintained to provide greater transparency on school performance. Determine which high school graduates enroll in out-of-state colleges and universities using National Student Clearinghouse data.
5. Commit to increasing counselor capacity in the state by engaging in community counselor staffing and performance monitoring. Just as the state testing regimen allows for parents to assess the quality of teaching at their schools, develop counselor metrics to allow parents to assess the quality of counseling at their child's campus. Press the Texas Education Agency to produce and publicly report student to counselor and student to counselor aide ratios each year for all schools in the state, subject to standard FERPA constraints. A regime of school-level counselor performance monitoring should include:
  - The ability to link counselors to the students they serve. The publishing of aggregate school-level information on specific student outcomes, including FAFSA completion, college application completion, direct-to-college enrollment (in-state as well as out), and occupations, specifically those related to the endorsements offered on each campus.
  - Annual student surveys to determine the share of students at each campus who met with their counselor at least once and at what point during the school year the meeting(s) take place.
  - Annual survey of counselors asking them the types of tasks they engage in during the year and at least an approximation of what share of their time they spend performing these tasks.

Counselors play a vital role in the lives of Texas students. Recent funding and policy changes in Texas have increased the responsibilities of the counselor role. However, if the innovations in counseling being actively implemented by some school districts in Texas were more broadly used, it could strengthen the effective implementation of counselor requirements put forward in HB5.

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