

School Counselors Just Want to Do Their Job

From substitute teaching and lunch duty to administrative paperwork, counselors are being tasked with responsibilities outside their job description. They say it's making it harder to focus on the student mental health crisis.



By [Jessica Fregni](#)
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Balancing students' social, emotional, and academic needs with numerous other responsibilities was always a challenge for school counselors, says Samantha Carmona (Rio Grande Valley '13), a counselor who works in South Texas. But since the start of the pandemic, the balance has only grown more difficult as districts cope with staff shortages, teacher burnout, and other challenges.

This has led some schools to ask counselors to pitch in and lend support in areas outside of their typical roles. In a previous school counselor position during the pandemic, Carmona estimates she spent 60% of her time taking on additional tasks beyond counseling—an experience that left Carmona feeling torn in different directions. Carmona emphasized how important it is to have a supportive administrative team that understands the significance of a counselor's role in supporting students.

Carmona isn't alone. Since the pandemic began, school counselors have often been tasked with additional duties that take them away from their core responsibilities. A [2020 survey](#) of 7,000 school counselors found that many had been required to serve as substitute teachers, perform temperature checks, and take on other tasks as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.

Since then, many school counselors have been tapped to take on extra duties including substitute teaching, administrative work, COVID-19 contact tracing, coordinating student tests, and lunch duty. But even now that COVID-19 screening efforts in schools have wound down, counselors say many of these issues continue to be a problem due to teacher shortages in certain [regions and districts](#).

This is happening at a critical time when youth mental health has been declared a [national emergency](#) and adolescent suicide is [on the rise](#). "I've had more suicidal ideation amongst my fourth and fifth graders than I've had in all my years as an elementary counselor," said Stephanie Coleman (North Carolina '98), a counselor at Beattie Elementary in Fort Collins, Colorado, who has almost 20 years of experience.

The extra workload, combined with a long-standing [counselor shortage](#) that predates the pandemic, is making it harder for school counselors to focus on student interventions—even though they are often the only professional mental health providers in the building. In addition to supporting students' social and emotional needs, school counselors are also responsible for supporting students' academic outcomes and college/career readiness, according to the [American School Counselor Association](#).

Officials in some states are working to ensure schools have more counselors and other mental health professionals. Counselors and advocates are also calling for clearer boundaries around what is and isn't an appropriate use of a counselor's time and training.

Students' Mental Health Needs Are Going Unaddressed

Experts have seen a significant uptick in mental health incidents among children since the start of the pandemic. In 2020, youth mental health was declared a [national emergency](#) by the American Academy of Pediatrics due to "soaring rates of depression, anxiety, trauma, loneliness, and suicidality" among children and adolescents. And while the mental health crisis is impacting youth across all backgrounds, it is [disproportionately harming children of color](#)—the students least likely to have adequate access to a counselor.

"We're in the trenches and, you know, we love our students... We just want to be able to do our jobs."

Joanna Aragon
School Counselor, Hillview Junior High School in Pittsburg, California

Research shows that access to school counselors has [myriad positive impacts](#) on students' academic achievement, college and career readiness, and social and emotional development, especially for [low-income students and students of color](#).

Counselors are also often the only mental health providers in a school "identifying, managing, and providing interventions for students at risk," according to [research published](#) in 2020.

When a student is in crisis, waiting for a counselor can sometimes escalate the situation, which can make it harder to address the student's needs, said Coleman, the counselor in Colorado.

Counselors say pitching in during a pandemic isn't the problem—it's the long-term mission creep of their roles and how that impacts students.

"While I have not heard many complaints from school counselors, I have heard deep concerns (from counselors) because of the high need for mental health counseling that is being unaddressed because of competing responsibilities," said Loretta Whitson, the executive director of the California Association of School Counselors.

Joanna Aragon, a veteran school counselor at Hillview Junior High School in Pittsburg, California, stepped in as a substitute music teacher for several weeks in January. The omicron variant of COVID-19 caused a significant uptick in absences among teachers and students that winter.

Aragon tried to make the most of the time spent substitute teaching by incorporating her counseling skills and knowledge into the classes. "I wanted to make sure that I connected with each of them," she said. "We were able to talk about the anxiety that they had felt to be back on campus and what was going on at home."

Still, Aragon worries about being available for the students who need her most.

"The kids need every bit of social-emotional support that we can give them," Aragon said. "I have a whole plan of interventions that we're going to be doing. These interventions include classroom presentations about social-emotional learning and hosting group counseling sessions and individual check-ins with students who are chronically absent.

"But if I have to teach music, I'm not going to be able to do those things."

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But improving these ratios to address the current crisis is only one part of the solution, some experts say. Many counselors say extra work on top of their counseling duties—such as serving as testing coordinators or registering kids for school—is not a new phenomenon: they were tasked with it long before 2020 and the pandemic exacerbated the issue.

Requiring school counselors to do tasks outside of their specialized degree and certification is "a waste of resources for our underfunded public schools," former counselor Robin Lanehurst [wrote](#) in Psychology Today. Administrators should hire paraprofessionals or pay stipends to cover non-counselor tasks instead, she said.

Other advocates say that clearer definitions and boundaries around appropriate uses of school counselors' time could help.

The Oklahoma Counsel Corps spent grant funds on training administrators and providing a document that outlines appropriate tasks for school counselors, which is showing early promise, said Jenna Jones, the executive director of school counseling for the Oklahoma State Department of Education.

Education leadership training can also help administrators and school leaders learn about school counselors' work and how to effectively use them, said Tristen Bergholtz (South Louisiana '09), a lead school counselor at Jackson Parish School District in Jonesboro, Louisiana. That instruction is part of the educational leadership training program at Louisiana State University, where Bergholtz received her master's degree.

Bergholtz said there needs to be a larger movement to ensure school leaders have that information so they can better understand how counselors' work can help with achieving goals such as reducing truancy, improving academic achievement, and boosting student mental health outcomes.

When they aren't allowed to do their jobs, some school counselors say, children ultimately suffer—especially during the current mental health crisis.

"We're in the trenches and, you know, we love our students," said Aragon, the counselor in Pittsburg, California. "We always want the best for them and we just want to be able to do our jobs. We know that when we do our jobs, we can make a positive impact on the lives of our students."



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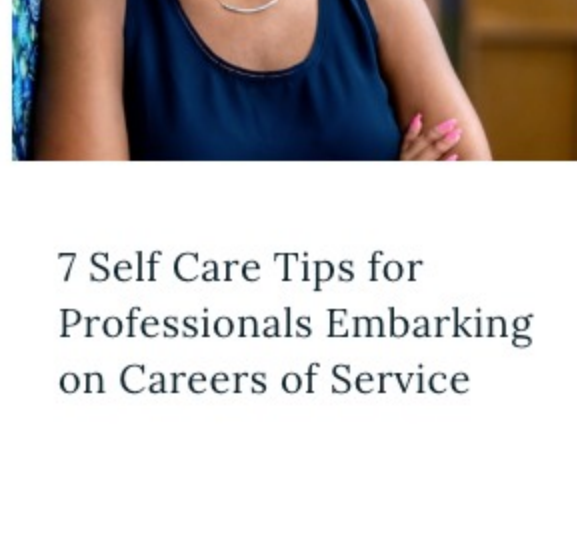
'We Just Want to Be Able to Do Our Jobs'

Officials in a number of states are working to ensure school counselors have enough time and bandwidth to counsel students. One way to do that is to hire more counselors to have an optimal ratio of counselors to students, but schools struggled with that goal even before the pandemic. Although the American School Counselor Association recommends a [counselor-to-student ratio](#) of 1-to-250, the national average is 1-to-415. The ratios tend to be worse at schools predominantly serving students of color and those from low-income families.

In 2021, the Oklahoma Education Department used \$35 million in federal pandemic relief aid to found the Oklahoma Counselor Corps, which aims to boost the number of counselors and mental health professionals in schools. Other states, such as Minnesota and Colorado, have invested in similar [efforts](#).

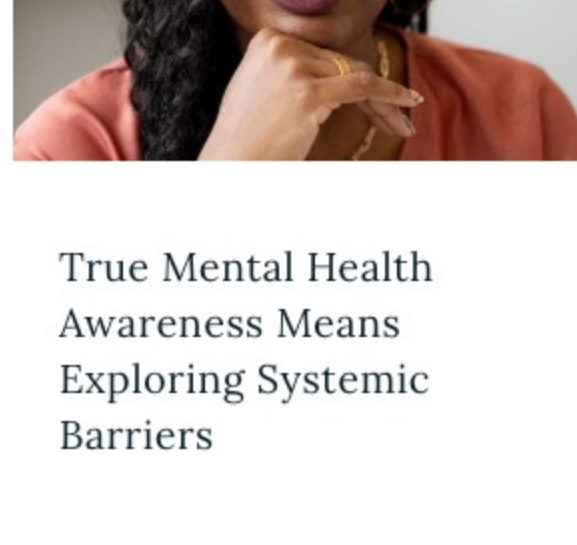
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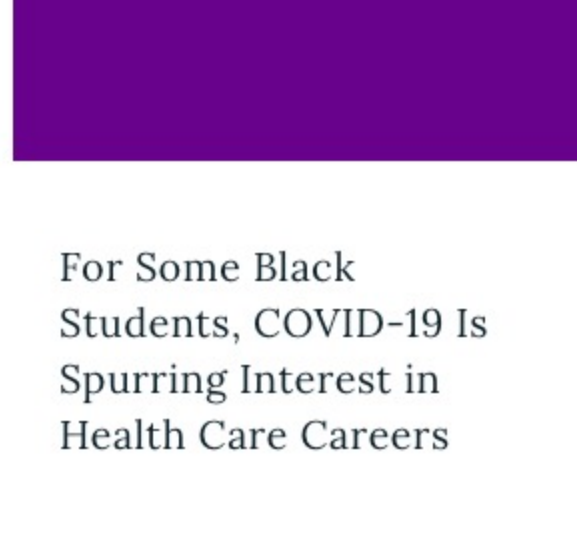
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