

School-Based Mental Health Collaborative: A Promising Solution to Alleviate the Mental Health Professional Shortage in K-12 Schools

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Abstract: We are facing a critical nationwide shortage of mental health professionals in our schools, which directly impacts the well-being and success of our students. Through our innovative partnership, funded by the Department of Education, our program has the potential to alleviate this shortage by providing a pipeline to a committed pool of novice school-based mental health professionals who have been extensively trained in supporting students in high-needs schools.

Keywords: Mental Health Professionals, K-12 Schools, School Counseling

Introduction and Related Literature

As school personnel scramble to fill classrooms during a record-breaking teacher shortage, another shortage warrants immediate attention. We are facing a critical nationwide shortage of mental health professionals in our schools, which directly impacts the well-being and success of our students. According to ASCA (2022), the current ratio is one counselor for every 415 students, which is in direct contrast to the recommended ratio of one counselor for every 250 students. Although there are no mandates to govern the ratio, there is a 1:250 ratio outlined in the American School Counseling Model. The Texas Model for Comprehensive Counseling Programs in Texas schools recommends a higher ratio of 1:350 (TEA, 2018), and less than 3 percent of students attend a school that meets that standard (Lamm & Stuckey, 2022).

According to Texans Care for Children, receiving services and treatment for mental health issues among school-age children has been challenging for many families since the pandemic (Sexton, 2022). In 2019, Texas passed legislation that provided funding for school-based tele-mental health. However, that program only reaches 40% of school districts, and expansion of the program depends on federal pandemic funds that will lapse in 2023 (Sexton, 2022). Also, in 2019, Texas passed comprehensive student mental health legislation. However, districts have struggled to implement and sustain these programs due to unreliable or insufficient funding, which is limited to approximately \$10 per student but is also intended to cover multiple uses, from building security to school counselors (Texas School Safety Center, 2020). In June 2022, after the Uvalde Shooting, Texas committed more

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than \$100 million to school safety and mental health. However, only about \$11 million is devoted to increasing access to mental health services for Texas schools (Svitek, 2022).

The increase in mental health concerns among students in Texas K-12 public schools in Texas, combined with a pre-existing shortage of school counselors, is creating a mental health crisis for Texas children. School counselors are on the front line of detecting and providing early intervention services for children struggling with mental health concerns. The increased need that students are reporting suggests that additional school counselors are highly needed. Additional training and support systems would help them deliver mental health intervention services more successfully.

Shortage of Mental Health Professionals in K-12 Schools

Teacher recruitment and retention challenges have been well-documented in the literature (Darling-Hammond, 2023; Ronfeldt, 2021; Williams et al., 2022). These issues are not exclusive to teaching; they now extend to counseling. Human resource personnel have described problems recruiting K-12 school counselors, particularly in urban schools (Edwards, 2024; Burstein, et al., 2023). According to the most recent Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) 2019 Annual Report (CACREP, 2022), there are 164 CACREP-accredited school counseling programs in the U.S. In 2019, the programs reported 2,260 students graduating with school counseling concentrations. The 2019 report reveals a decline in CACREP programs and graduates compared to the 2018 Annual report. The 2018 report includes graduation statistics for all CACREP programs for the years ranging from 2016-2018. Since 2018, school counseling graduates have steadily declined, from 3,732 in 2016 to 3,712 in 2017 and 3,493 in 2018. In Texas, 13 universities have school counseling programs with CACREP accreditation. Over the 2020-2021 academic year, the number of 2020-2021 school counseling graduates (IHE are only required to post the most current statistics) and 2020-2021 clinical mental health graduates differed significantly, with school counseling graduates often in the single digits (CACREP, 2022). In addition, of the approximately 11,000 school counseling students graduating nationwide annually (including those also graduating from a non-CACREP program), not all ultimately choose to work in a public school, enticed away from higher-paying jobs (ASCA, 2023b).

Shortage of Mental Health Professionals in High-Poverty Schools

Sadly, the ratio of students to school counselors in many high-poverty schools is alarmingly higher than in more affluent schools (Savitz-Romer & Nicola, 2022). Students growing up in poverty have an increased risk for trauma and chronic stress than their more affluent peers (Anderson et al., 2022). Students with the greatest need for mental health services are less likely to receive them (Donohue, et al., 2022; Savitz-Romer & Nicola, 2022). This underscores the continual educational inequity faced by students in high-poverty schools (Savitz-Romer & Nicola, 2022). These inequities deprive them of the benefits that counseling offers, such as social-emotional support and academic development, which can significantly improve their life trajectories (Savitz-Romer & Nicola, 2022; Donohue, et al., 2022). Students growing up in poverty are more vulnerable to trauma and chronic stress

than their more affluent peers. This heightened risk can have lasting effects, including depression, maladaptive coping strategies, and substance abuse (Hutchinson, et al., 2020).

School-Based Mental Health Collaborative (SBMHC)

One of our College of Education (COE) priorities is to seek alternative solutions to current dilemmas in PK-20 education. As the COE faculty examined the needs of our partner LEAs, it became evident that we needed to supply highly prepared school-based mental health professionals to serve in schools with students who had the most to gain from a well-trained, school-based mental health workforce. This became the impetus behind creating the School-Based Mental Health Collaborative (SBMHC) to prepare school-based mental health professionals in partnership with traditionally underserved LEAs.

The SBMHC is designed so that school-based counselor candidates receive their Master of Education (M.Ed.) in School Counseling, in conjunction with Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), and Mental Health (MH) certificates as part of a comprehensive preparation and induction model. During the first three years of the program, candidates complete all coursework and field experiences required of counseling candidates enrolled in our traditional school-based counselor preparation program. Candidates receive extensive, diverse field experiences in high-need partner schools that follow a gradual release of responsibility model. Candidates are awarded their M.Ed. in Counseling Education after their third year. During their induction years, candidates participate in continuing education, mentoring, and support through a multi-tiered, collaborative approach between partner LEAs and our counselor preparation program.

Evidence-Based Practices

The SBMHC Collaborative extended preparation and induction model relies on evidenced-based practices primarily found in teacher preparation (Darling-Hammond, 2023; Williams, et al., 2022) but shows promising potential across all educator roles, including counselor education. These evidence-based practices are the hallmark of the SBMHC, including a) recruiting talented, committed candidates; b) intensive counselor in-training preparation, including school-based field experience; c) novice induction and mentoring; and d) sustained professional learning.

Training and Field Experiences

The SBMHC is a nationally accredited CACREP program. In Texas, TEA requires all school counselor candidates to complete an Education Preparation Program for School Counseling, complete a 48-hour master's degree in school counseling or related counseling degree, 160 hours of field experience, and a passing score on the state school counselor certification exam. Courses cover evidence-based counseling practices, assessing student mental health, and creating a positive school culture. All courses incorporate appropriate topics related to cultural proficiency and emotional, social, and academic strategies related to counseling practices. Opportunities for candidates to demonstrate their skills and competencies through enhanced professional development are also incorporated. These courses are specifically designed to support candidates during the weeks they prepare for

their induction years. SBMHC candidates also earn Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and Mental Health (MH) certificates through participation in a series of workshops designed to prepare them for working in high-needs schools taught by renowned experts in the counseling profession.

Mentorship for Novice School Counselors

It is important to note that according to Texas school counseling certification requirements, there is no additional internship or mentorship period required for certified school counselors beyond their graduate degree, which presents challenges for new school counselors adjusting to their new role and responsibilities, including diminished confidence, feeling overwhelmed, and struggling with ideal expectations versus the reality of the school counselor position (Um & Bardoshi, 2025; Alti, 2020). To address the struggles many school counselors feel upon entering their first position, our candidates receive intensive mentorship during their first two years in the K-12 schools, which is among the most effective teacher induction practices that this project will adapt to counselor education (Darling-Hammond, 2023). Due to the fact that novice school counselors need consistent support with accessing and using resources, implementing effective procedures, routines, and counseling practices, developing a passion for lifelong learning and professional growth, bonding with a learning community, and displaying sensitivity to and understanding of the school community (Wilder, 2022; Hong, 2023; Boulden & Schimmel, 2022).

Particular thought and consideration go into choosing mentors for the program. Candidates are assigned a mentor who meets the following criteria, which also has been shown to be successful for teacher preparation programs (Schwan, 2020; National Institute for Excellence in Teaching, 2021): (a) practices in the same district as the candidate; (b) has at least 3 years of creditable counseling experience; (c) is a highly effective counselor as evidenced by relevant outcomes; and (d) is committed to mentoring the next generation of counselors. The mentors have access to daily contact with their assigned mentees and carry the primary responsibility for helping them access and use district resources and develop an understanding of the school's community. In addition, mentors use the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) Coaching model as a framework to coach their mentees, meeting with their candidates and conducting observations regularly to provide feedback and support (Pierce, 2024).

Additionally, mentors can participate in our Leadership Mentoring Academy (LMA) for K-12 Counselors. Undergirding this leadership academy for school counselors is vital for mentoring competence. Because mentors and mentees bring different levels of experience and competence to the relationship, this leadership academy will use the work by LeBlanc et al. (2020) to help mentors understand their role in learning. The book emphasizes the importance of building solid relationships with mentees, celebrates individuals from various cultural backgrounds, and provides specific strategies for improving the mentorship experience.

Selection of Partner LEAs

Our LEA partners were strategically chosen because they serve students of great need and because of their difficulty recruiting and retaining school-based mental health professionals. Currently, participating districts serve approximately 100,000 students, with

over 70% qualifying as economically disadvantaged. Unfortunately, most of these students attend Title I campuses, which typically experience even greater difficulty attracting and retaining personnel (Edwards, 2024). The partner LEAs have a demonstrated need for well-trained, highly committed school-based mental health professionals to provide a pipeline to provide much-needed mental health support for students.

As shared earlier, The Texas Model for Comprehensive Counseling Programs recommends a school counselor-to-student ratio of 1:350 (TEA, 2018). We identified five partner school districts for our program, which all fell below the needed numbers of school counselors to meet the recommended ratio of 1:250: District A which employed 186 school counselors and needed an additional 67; District B, which employed 89 and needed an additional 45; District C which employed 47 and needed an additional 20; District D which employed 17 and needed an additional 43; and District E which employed 32 and needed an additional 31. In our first year of implementation, our program recruited 15 of our partner LEA's teachers, followed by an additional 25 candidates each academic year.

Recruiting Candidates from a Variety of Backgrounds

One of our goals and inspiration for establishing this program was to increase the number of qualified school-based mental health services providers from various backgrounds in high-need local education agencies (LEAs). Recruitment of our candidates from various backgrounds necessitates active and intentional approaches, such as building connections throughout the community. Addressing student needs (e.g., financial support, academic assistance, childcare vouchers, etc.) and a commitment to representing various backgrounds (e.g., hiring and retaining faculty from different experiences) have been recognized as essential in creating a sustainable model.

Historically marginalized communities experience unique barriers throughout the educational system and can benefit through academic, financial, and community support to help overcome these barriers (Thiem & Dasgupta, 2022). Recruitment should be a long-term investment operated daily through intentional strategies to ensure we are populating schools with counselors from various backgrounds who match school demographics. School counselors oversee the social-emotional development, academic development, career development, and mental health of students across the nation. ASCA member data found that 76 percent of members were white compared to 51 percent of school-aged children (ASCA, 2023a). In contrast, only 6 percent of ASCA members were Hispanic compared to 25 percent of students (ASCA, 2023a).

Our program provides financial support to promote the recruitment of individuals from various backgrounds through financial scholarships, directed academic and testing support, vouchers for childcare and testing requirements, and intentional career readiness preparation and placement in high-need partner LEAs along with existing support service programs that provide services including networking, mentoring, and academic success programming for individuals from marginalized backgrounds.

Moving Forward and Concluding Thoughts

Nationwide, 40% of public schools struggled to fill mental health professional roles, which resulted in an inadequate meeting of the needs of K-12 students last year (ASCA,

2023b). The cost of higher education, inadequate pay, and stressful workloads are critical factors in this shortage (ASCA, 2023b). Through our SBMCH, we can help alleviate the shortage by providing a pipeline of school-based mental health professionals extensively trained to support students in high-needs schools. Through funding from the Department of Education, we can provide financial assistance, professional development, and mentoring through candidates' induction years. We hope this model can be replicated to assist other schools nationwide as the demand for school-based mental health professionals increases. U.S. Bureau of Labor has projected 11% job growth in school counseling (2020-2023), requiring an additional 77,000 school counselors to be hired (ASCA, 2023b).

It is vital to recruit school counselors and retain them through strong mentorship, supportive administrators, manageable workloads, good work-life balance, and better pay (Hong et al., 2023; ASCA, 2023b). As an educational community, we must prioritize mental health for K-12 students and find solutions to address the shortage of school-based mental health professionals.

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