

Trends Across High School Counselor Experiences

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About this Snapshot

High school counselors work hard to ensure that students at their school have what they need to be successful. From helping students enroll in the right classes to providing supports following a crisis, counselors play an important role in students' lives.

A recent study found that having an effective high school counselor matters for high school graduation and college attendance (Mulhern, 2019). While we know they are tasked with many responsibilities, little is known about how high school counselors spend their time and what kind of supports they need.

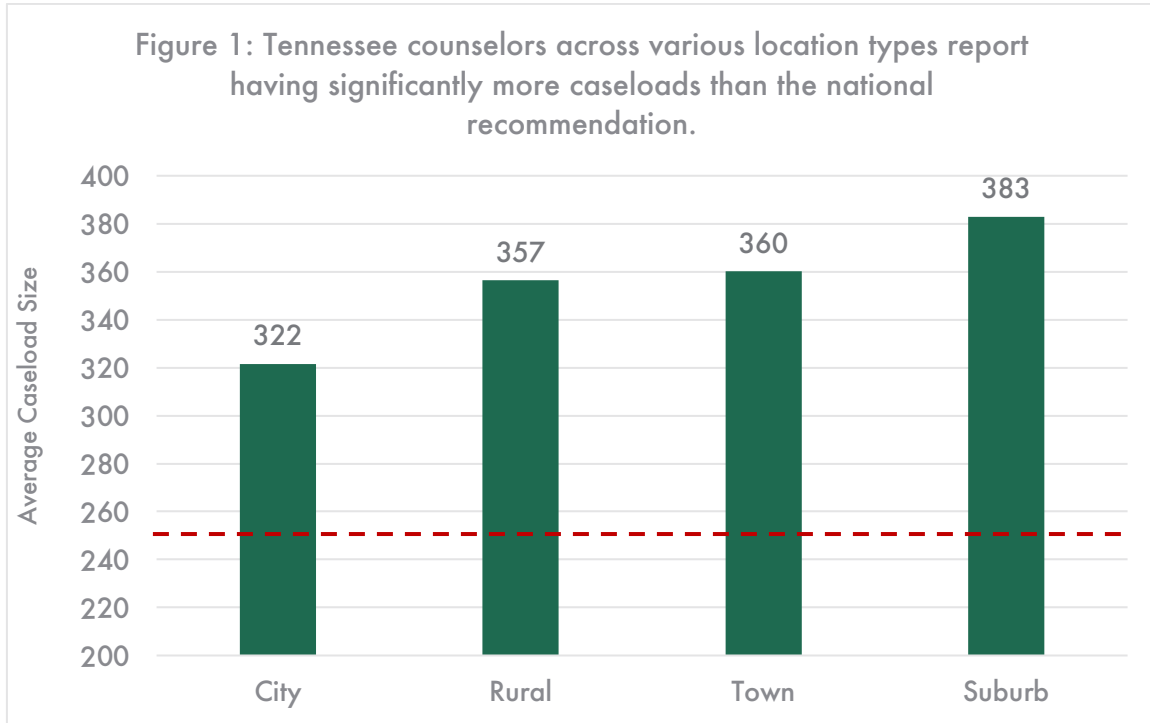
To gain more insights into this specialized group of educators, the 2019 Tennessee Educator Survey included questions specifically for counselors. This brief reports on responses from 519 high school counselors and compares their responses to suggestions for time use in Tennessee's School Counseling Model and to national recommendations.

A majority of Tennessee high school counselors report that they manage significantly more caseloads than the national recommendation.

"My greatest obstacle is my time, more specifically the lack of it. So many students need me and could use my help, but I am only one counselor in my building. It is difficult to meet all the needs of my students and I oftentimes go home feeling that I could have done more..."

High school counselors are responsible for a certain number of students in their school. Their student caseload is often assigned by the student's last name or hand selected based on the student's needs and counselor expertise. The *American School Counselor's Association (ASCA)* recommends a student caseload for high school counselors should be 250:1.

Caseload sizes reported by Tennessee high school counselors ranged from 20 to 795 students with an average around 350 students. Tennessee's Basic Education Program (BEP) funds a student to counselor ratio of 350:1 for high schools, which is the maximum load size the Tennessee Comprehensive School Counseling model suggests. However, more than half of the counselors who responded to the survey (51 percent) report caseloads that exceeded 350 – 100 over the national recommendation of 250. As shown in Figure 1, counselors in suburban areas report the largest average number of caseloads, while counselors in cities report the smallest average number of caseloads.



*** The red line represents the national recommended caseload size per counselor (250).

On average, Tennessee high school counselors report spending less time on direct student service and support than the national recommendations.

Tennessee’s counseling model recommends that counselors spend 80 percent of their time on direct student services and student support services and no more than 20 percent of their time on program management and school support. However, the average Tennessee high school counselor reports spending 75 percent of her time in direct and supportive student services activities, which includes individual student planning (25 percent), delivering the schoolwide comprehensive counseling curriculum (18 percent), responsive services (17 percent), and student support (14 percent).

Conversely, as shown in Figure 2, counselors in Tennessee also report spending 18% of their time on non-counseling tasks and seven percent of their time managing and evaluating the quality of the school counseling program, taking away valuable time spent directly with students and potentially detracting for their well-being. Indeed, research has found that counselors who performed more non-counselor duties were more likely to report exhaustion, negative work environment, and deterioration in

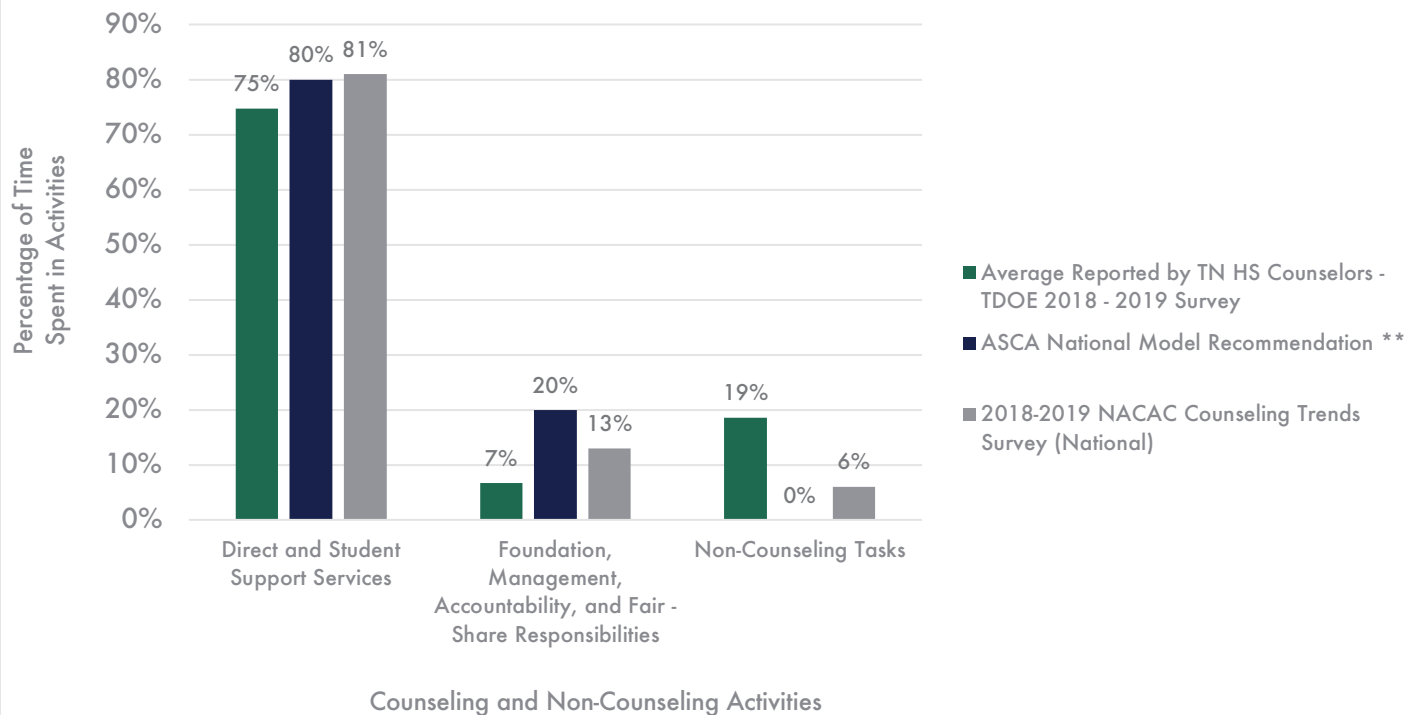
"The assuming of non-counseling duties such as testing, scheduling, registration and records have been duties which I have had since the beginning of my employment. These duties have not been reassigned, and frankly, it will be hard to find others to assume them because personnel are not compensated"

personal life (Bardhoshi, Schweinle, & Duncan, 2014). In order to free up time to complete more appropriate counseling duties, the ASCA suggests that principals reassign these activities to other school staff if possible, and if necessary, hire clerical support staff to complete the tasks;

Non-counseling tasks include many clerical and administrative tasks to maintain the operations of a school such as

- Updating student transcripts
- Maintaining student records
- Providing academic interventions to students
- Working with high absenteeism students
- Coordinating state and/or district testing
- Developing the master schedule, and
- Covering classrooms if teachers are absent.

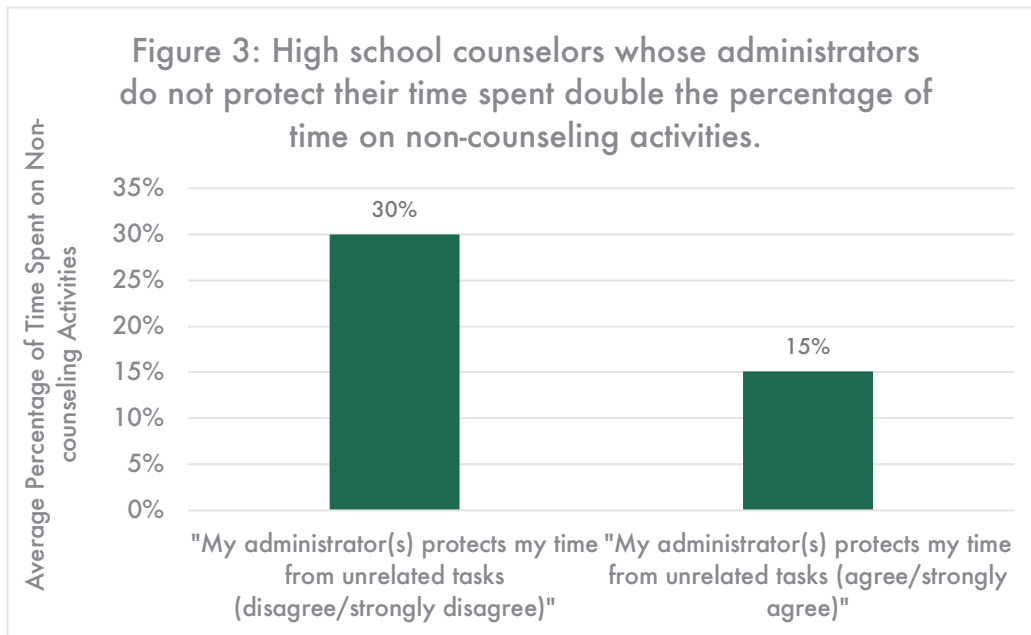
Figure 2: On average, Tennessee high school counselors report spending less time on direct student service and support than the national recommendations.



High school counselors who report that their administrators do not protect their time also report spending more time on non-counseling activities.

“Additional, non-counseling responsibilities (testing and scheduling) still take up a significant amount of time throughout the school year. Again, when administration seems overwhelmed with the task of running the building, these things fall on our shoulders.”

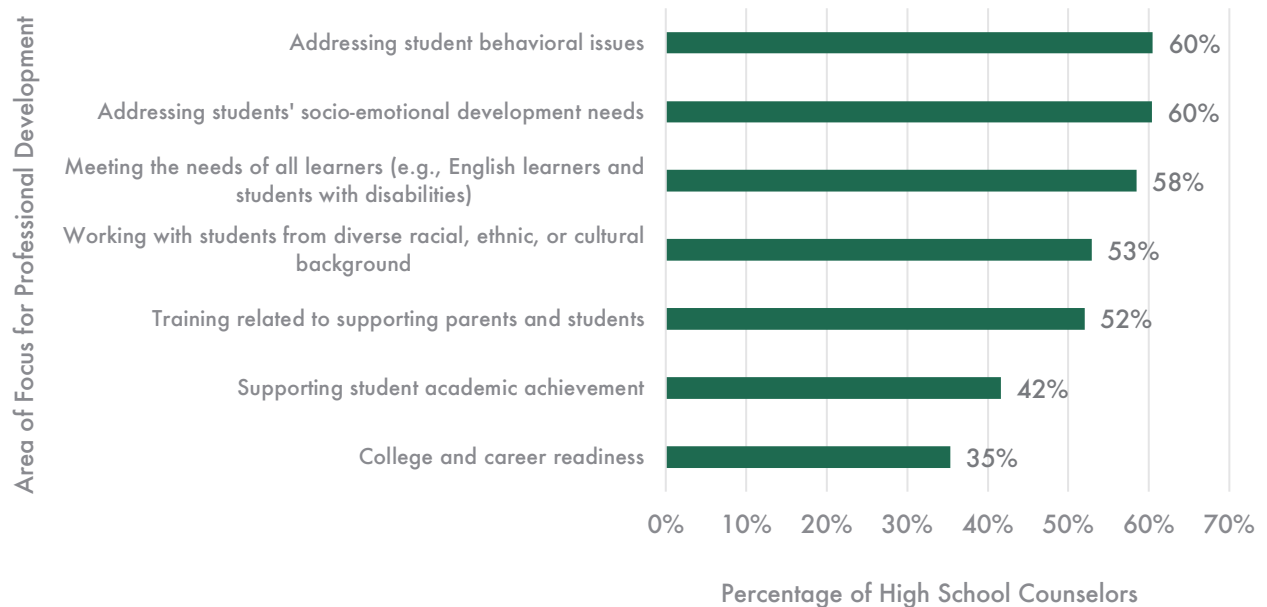
Nearly one-quarter of Tennessee’s high school counselors (23 percent) do not feel like their administrators protect their time. These counselors also report spending significantly more time on non-counseling tasks compared to those who do feel like their time is protected. Specifically, counselors, who agree that their administrators protect their time from unrelated tasks report spending an average of 15 percent of their time on non-counseling tasks, compared to 30 percent for counselors who do not agree.



High school counselors report wanting more professional development addressing student behavioral issues and socio-emotional development needs.

High school counselors in Tennessee feel competent and capable of advising students in college and career readiness goals. College and career readiness is the area in which most high school counselors have spent the most time, desire the least professional development, and feel that they’ve improved the most. Conversely, they report wanting more professional development to address student behavior issues, student social and emotional development needs, and to work with and meet the needs of students from diverse backgrounds and learning abilities.

Figure 4: High school counselors say they need more high-quality PD that addresses student behavior and socio-emotional issues.



Next steps for research

Counselors are specially trained educators that are vital to producing a safe and productive learning environment. They work to ensure students have what they need to succeed academically, socially, emotionally, and professionally. High school counselors, in particular, support students as they are preparing to transition to a life beyond their K-12 experience.

Tennessee high school counselors report that they have large caseloads, spend less than the recommended time doing counseling tasks, spend too much time performing non-counseling duties, and want more professional development addressing student behavior and social/emotional development.

Further research should consider the impact of hiring more counselors, reducing caseloads, transferring non-counseling duties to other staff, and rethinking professional development opportunities for counselors. Further, work and attention should be given to make sure districts and schools are successfully implementing a comprehensive school counseling program that promotes the best interests of all students.

References

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