

School Counselors in Tennessee:

Trends from the 2023 Tennessee Educator Survey

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Introduction

Effective school counselors can have large impacts on student educational attainment, including graduation and college attendance and persistence.¹ But several factors influence counselors' effectiveness, including the size of their student caseloads,² their perceptions of administrative support,³ and the amount of time they must spend on non-counseling job responsibilities.⁴

To learn more about this group of educators, the 2023 Tennessee Educator Survey (TES) includes questions specifically for counselors. This brief draws from counselors' responses about their responsibilities, job satisfaction and professional learning, and, where questions have remained consistent over the years, tracks trends since TERA's last counselor-focused [brief](#) in 2019 through 2023.

¹ Mulhern, 2022

² Kearney, Akos, Domina, & Young, 2021

³ Bardhoshi & Um, 2021

⁴ Bardoshi, Schweinle, & Duncan, 2014

Key Findings

- 1** About 8 in 10 counselor respondents reported serving higher-than-recommended caseloads of students, and few reported that caseloads are strategically assigned.
- 2** Over 9 in 10 counselor respondents reported that they feel supported by their administrators and that they collaborate well with teachers and other mental health professionals.
- 3** Three out of 4 counselor respondents evaluated with the School Services Personnel Rubric reported that it is appropriately designed to evaluate the role of counselor, compared to more than one-third of counselor respondents evaluated with the General Educator Rubric.
- 4** Reported job responsibilities of school counselors vary by the grade levels served with high school counselors reporting that they spend an average of one day per week on non-counseling activities.
- 5** The majority of counselor respondents expressed a need for professional development on supporting students' non-academic needs.

DATA

In the 2023 Tennessee Educator Survey, 1,248 survey participants identified themselves as school counselors and responded to counselor-specific questions, representing about half of all counselors in Tennessee. Unlike other TERA analyses of survey responses from teachers and school leaders, counselor responses are not weighted to account for differential response rates across school type, region, or students served.

Among this pool of respondents, 92% are female and 88% identify as White. On average, they have 13 years of experience in Tennessee schools, and 96% have either a Master's or Education Specialist degree. 36% work in elementary schools, 31% in high schools, 19% in middle schools, and the remainder work in K-8/K-12 or other schools.

KEY FINDINGS

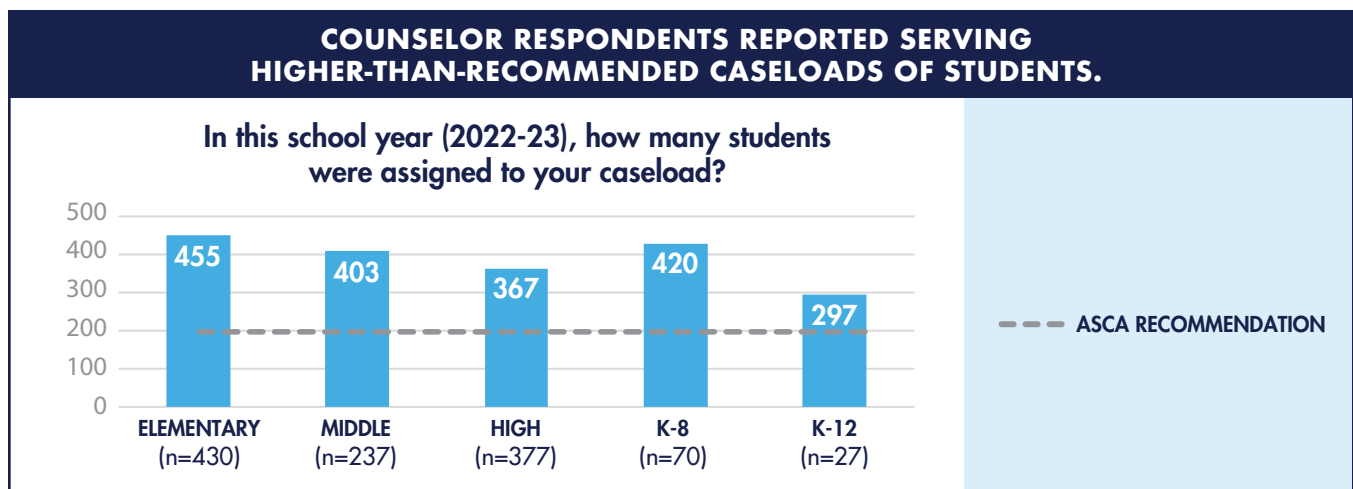


KEY FINDING 1

About 8 in 10 counselor respondents reported serving higher-than-recommended caseloads of students, and few reported that caseloads are strategically assigned.

The average caseload reported on the TES in 2023 was 406 students, which is below the national average of 430 students but above the caseload of 250 students [recommended by the American School Counselor Association](#). Figure 1 shows average caseloads by school tier, with elementary school counselors serving average caseloads of nearly 100 more students than high school counselors. The average caseload for middle schools and K-12 school counselors has decreased since 2019 from 410 and 341 students, respectively, but has risen for high school counselors from 354 students to 367 students.

FIGURE 1



The way that schools assign counselors to students may have an impact on their ability to improve student outcomes. Individual counselors tend to have a larger “value-added” impact on some groups of students over others, indicating that pairing students to counselors based on students’ achievement level, program of study, and/or race/ethnicity match with the counselor may benefit students.⁵ However, 45% of counselors responded that they are the only counselor at their school, making such strategic matching opportunities impossible at those schools. Another 35% of respondents said they are assigned to students based on grades and/or cohorts, and 17% said that students are assigned to their caseloads alphabetically and/or randomly. Only 3% of counselors said they were assigned to students based on program of study, and within the 10% of respondents that selected “Other” assignment strategies, only 17 respondents indicated assignments are based on “need” or “fit.” As one respondent explained, “the other counselor and I work together to decide which students we will support. We have different strengths and find some kids fit better with one of us.” In addition, 33 respondents wrote that they share all students with their co-counselors, which may give some opportunity for student choice.

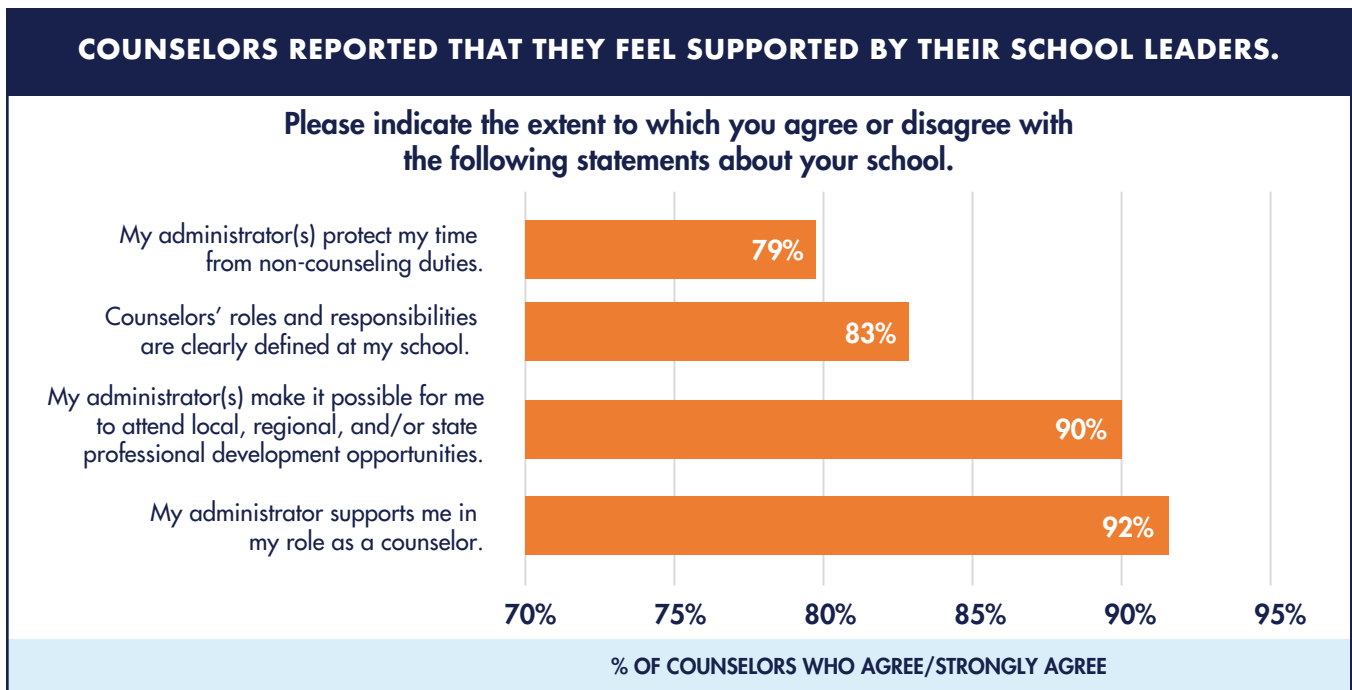
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KEY FINDING 2

Over 9 in 10 counselor respondents reported that they feel supported by their administrators and that they collaborate well with teachers and other mental health professionals.

Most counselor respondents appear satisfied with their school leaders. Specifically, as Figure 2 shows, they reported that their administrators protect their time from non-counseling duties (79% agreed or strongly agreed), clearly define their roles and responsibilities (83%), make it possible to attend professional development opportunities (90%), and support them in their role as counselor (92%).

FIGURE 2



Note: Number of respondents (N) across above questions=1,151-1,158.

Counselor respondents also reported high levels of collaboration with teachers and mental health professionals. Over 90% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they routinely collaborate with teachers about students' academic needs (e.g., course placement and accommodations), and 96% responded the same regarding collaboration with teachers about students' non-academic needs (e.g., behavior and engagement). Only 5% reported that they do not collaborate with a social worker or mental health professional about their students' mental health needs, with 20% reporting that they collaborate "a little", 26% "somewhat", and 50% "significantly".

"The other counselor and I work together to decide which students we will support. We have different strengths and find some kids fit better with one of us."
 – Tennessee School Counselor

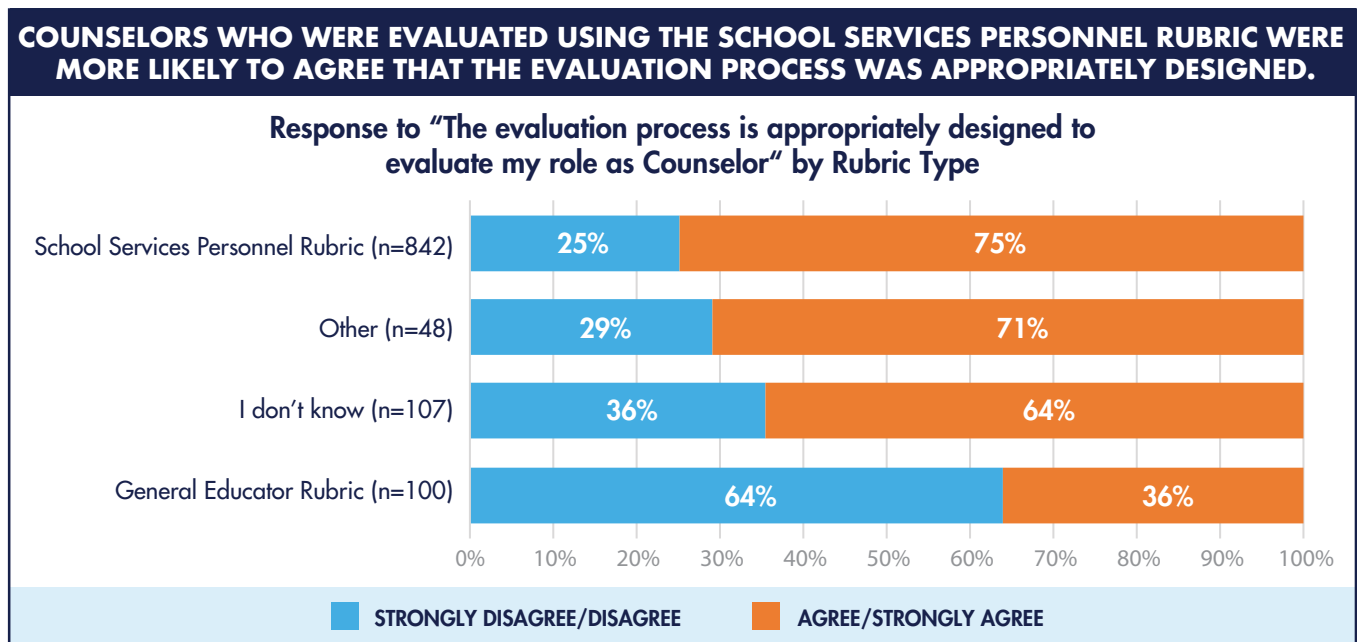
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KEY FINDING 3

Three out of 4 counselor respondents evaluated with the School Services Personnel Rubric reported that it is appropriately designed to evaluate the role of counselor, compared to more than one-third of counselor respondents evaluated with the General Educator Rubric.

School leaders evaluate counselors each year as part of the Tennessee Educator Acceleration Model (TEAM) evaluation process. Counselors generally reported feeling that the evaluations are fair (85% agree or strongly agree); however, only 70% reported that the evaluation process is appropriately designed to their role as counselor. Despite [TDOE guidance](#) that school leaders use the School Services Personnel Rubric to evaluate their counselors, 148 respondents reported being evaluated with the General Educator Rubric or “Other”. Figure 3 shows that only 36% of those evaluated with the General Educator Rubric (100 respondents) agreed or strongly agreed that their rubric was appropriate, compared to 75% of those evaluated with the School Services Personnel Rubric (842 respondents).

FIGURE 3



Note: Number of respondents for each category displayed within bars. Total N=1,097



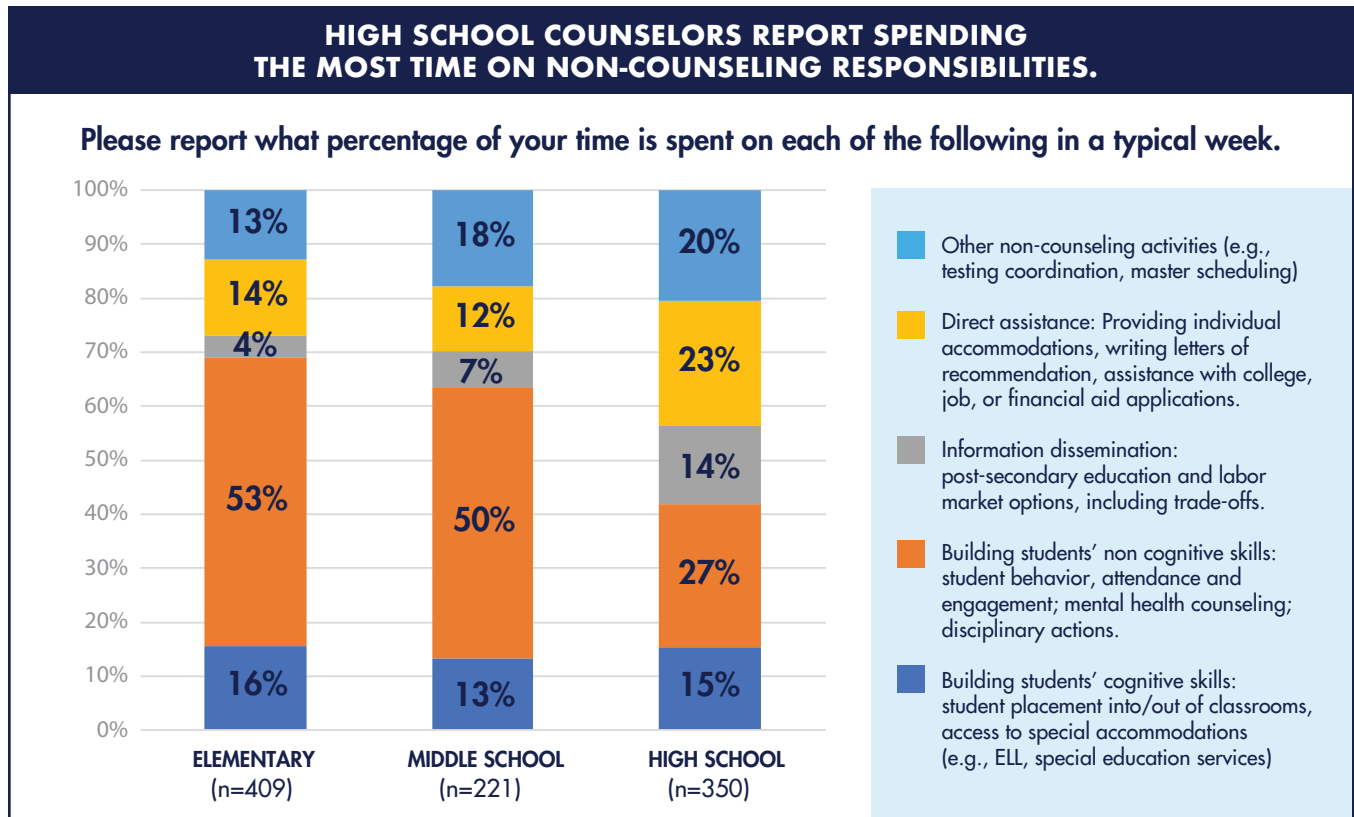
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KEY FINDING 4

Reported job responsibilities of school counselors vary by the grade levels served with high school counselors reporting that they spend an average of one day per week on non-counseling activities.

The job responsibilities of school counselors seem to vary by the grade levels they serve. Elementary and middle school counselor respondents reported spending about half their time (50% and 53%, respectively) building students’ non-cognitive skills; whereas high school counselors reported spending only a quarter of their time (27%) on the same type of tasks. Instead, high school counselors said they spend much more of their time disseminating information (14%), directly assisting students such as writing letters of recommendation or assisting with college applications (23%), and other non-counseling activities, such as testing coordination and master scheduling (20%) than elementary and middle school counselors do.

FIGURE 4

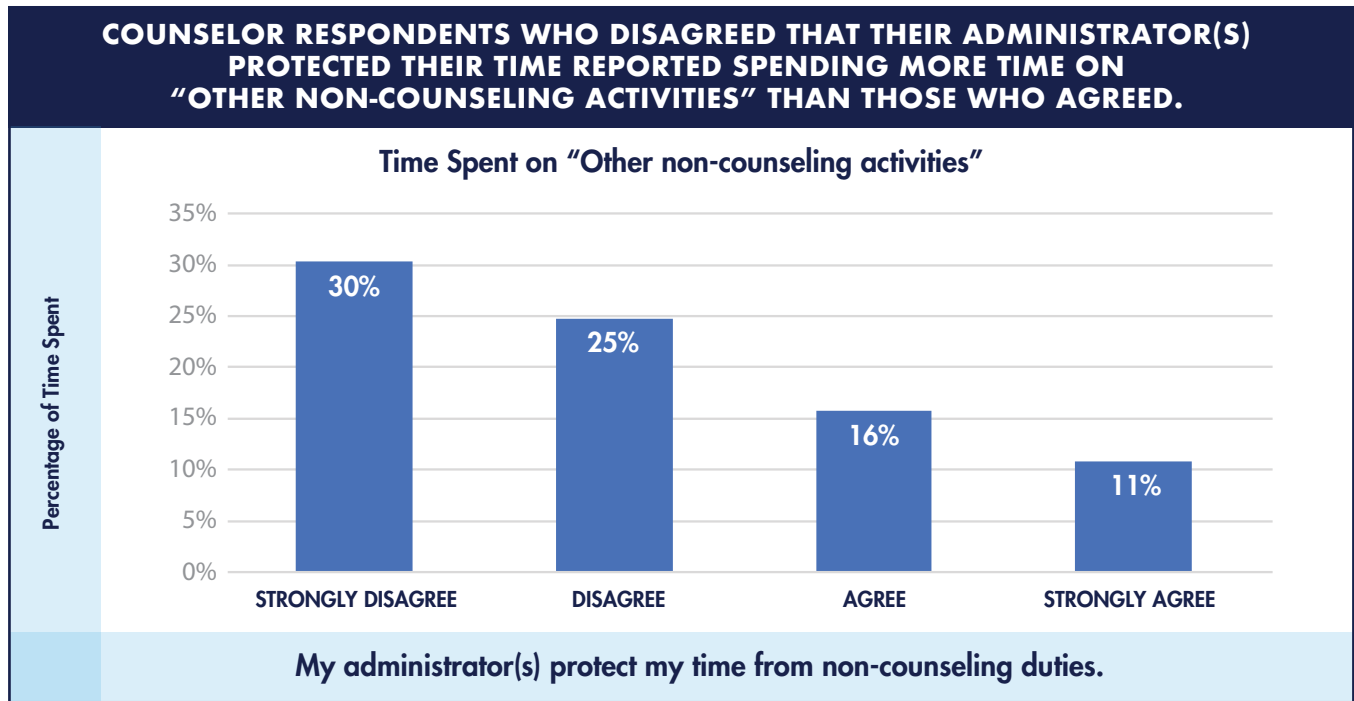


Note: Number of respondents (N)=1,122

Many counselors noted the difficulties of juggling these multifaceted responsibilities in an open-ended question about the greatest obstacles they face to implementing a comprehensive school counseling program. As one counselor put it, “even at my school with extremely supportive administrators, I constantly do many hours of work outside of school in order to complete all the non-counseling tasks assigned to me. If I used my actual workday to complete these mandatory tasks, I would have no time for direct counseling services. This is a huge barrier to implementing comprehensive programs and is a big contributor to burnout.”

Further, administrators can play a large role in the distribution of counselors' job responsibilities. As Figure 5 demonstrates, counselors who strongly disagreed with the statement "My administrator(s) protect my time from non-counseling duties" reported spending 30% of their time on such tasks, whereas those who strongly agreed with the same statement reported that they spent only 11% of their time on non-counseling duties.

FIGURE 5



Note: Number of respondents (N) =1,122



"Even at my school with extremely supportive administrators, I constantly do many hours of work outside of school in order to complete all the non-counseling tasks assigned to me. If I used my actual workday to complete these mandatory tasks, I would have no time for direct counseling services. This is a huge barrier to implementing comprehensive programs and is a big contributor to burnout." – Tennessee School Counselor

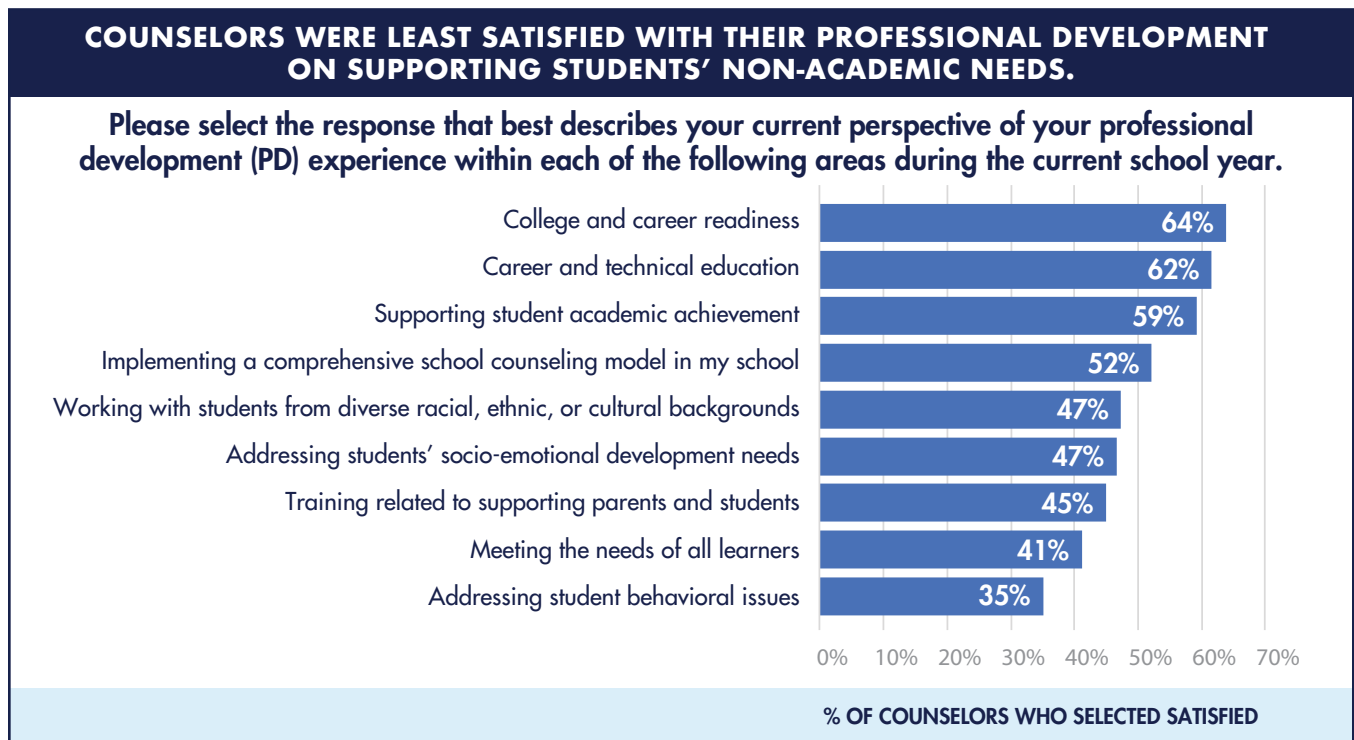
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KEY FINDING 5

The majority of counselor respondents expressed a need for professional development on supporting students' non-academic needs.

Counselors were more likely to report satisfaction with their professional development (PD) experiences on topics related to students' academic needs than on topics related to students' non-academic needs. Figure 6 shows their satisfaction rates with PD experiences on a variety of topics, with the remaining respondents either wanting more PD experiences, higher quality, or both in each topic area. A majority of counselors were satisfied with their PD on college and career readiness (64%) and career and technical education (62%), but fewer were satisfied with their PD on students' socio-emotional development needs (47%), supporting parents and students (45%), and addressing student behavioral issues (35%).

FIGURE 6



Note: Number of respondents (N) across above questions=1,059-1,077

“Counseling is more responsive in nature. There is very little time for proactive, preventative counseling. The needs of our “COVID kids” are so great; they lack basic social and coping skills.” – Tennessee School Counselor

The desire for more or better-quality PD on these non-academic topics may reflect counselors' responses to an open-ended question about how their work has changed since before the pandemic. Almost half of the respondents who wrote in an answer to that question discussed an increase in students' anxiety, mental health struggles, or social-emotional challenges. As one counselor put it, "student needs in mental health, on-going therapy services, and crisis evaluations have greatly increased since before the pandemic." Another asserted that "there is a stronger need for behavior management, coping skills, and communication training for students." In meeting these increased needs, some counselors noted that this impacted their comprehensive school counseling program: "Counseling is more responsive in nature. There is very little time for proactive, preventative counseling. The needs of our 'COVID kids' are so great; they lack basic social and coping skills."

Most counselors reported attending in-person conferences or trainings for professional development (PD) in the 2022-23 school year either with other counselors from their schools (68%) and/or on their own (50%). Counselors who reported that their PD experiences were "collaboratively chosen between myself and my administrator" were more likely to report satisfaction. Across the above topic areas, counselors who chose their PD collaboratively were the most satisfied (56%), followed by those whose PD was prescribed by district leaders (50%) or by school administrators (47%), while counselors who chose their PD independently were the least satisfied (46%).

"After the pandemic, there is a stronger need for behavior management, coping skills, and communication training for students." – Tennessee School Counselor

"Student needs in mental health, on-going therapy services, and crisis evaluations have greatly increased since before the pandemic." – Tennessee School Counselor



CONCLUSION

School counselors play a vital role in a school's team of educators and fulfill a wide range of essential tasks. In fact, 68% of teacher respondents to this year's survey identified "counseling, psychological, and social services" as the most urgent need for additional support/resources at their school.

Evidence from the TES indicates that although counselors generally feel supported and collaborate well with their colleagues, they face challenges in terms of managing high caseloads, juggling non-counseling responsibilities, and addressing students' increased mental health needs. These challenges can impede counselors' ability to fulfill their core job responsibilities and can increase burnout, which can impact student success over the long term.⁶ The TES provides useful and actionable feedback on how the state and districts can better support school counselors, such as encouraging administrators to collaborate with counselors on PD opportunities and evaluating counselors with the most appropriate rubric to their role.

⁶ Bardhoshi, Schweinle, & Duncan, 2014

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