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The Experiences of School Counselors Providing Virtual Services During Covid-19: A Phenomenological Investigation

By Allison Roberts and Emily Goodman-Scott, Old Dominion University, and Natalie Edirmanasinghe, California State University, Long Beach

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY To explore school counselors' experiences providing virtual school counseling services during the beginning stages of the COVID-19 pandemic when many K-12 schools were initially closed.

HOW THE RESEARCH ADVANCES THE PROFESSION This research advances the school counseling profession in terms of practice, preparation, school/district policy and research surrounding virtual school counseling during times of crisis and recovery (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic). Researchers found counselors lacked the ability to spend time with or access students during the pandemic, which significantly impacted their ability to provide services. Researchers recommend school counselors collaborate with stakeholders to ensure a student access plan is in place prior to a potential crisis (i.e., natural disaster, pandemic, etc.). Additionally, findings indicated a need for virtual school counselor preparation. School counselors who traditionally deliver their comprehensive school counseling programs in person must be prepared to deliver their curriculum virtually in the event of school closures, similar to what was experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. This directly relates to the need for school counselors to manage their role in the virtual setting through preparation and continuing education. School counselors must also consider how mental health can be supported virtually, not solely academics and career development. Students' mental health must be a priority in virtual school counseling. Lastly, school counselors and stakeholders should be aware of and/or develop ethical standards and practices specific to the virtual setting.

GUIDANCE FOR PRACTICING SCHOOL COUNSELORS School counselors can hold daily virtual office hours to increase access to students and stakeholders while simultaneously establishing boundaries. They can also increase access by being present in virtual classrooms, similar to how they are present in the in-person classroom setting. Through school counselor-teacher collaboration, counselors can spontaneously join virtual classrooms or schedule a time to be present. School counselors should also ensure they have up-to-date parent/guardian and student contact information to increase accessibility. School counselor educators can provide information on ethics and practices unique to virtual settings. For example, there are various concerns pertaining to confidentiality due to the virtual counseling setting, such as household members overhearing counseling sessions. Additionally, counselors must be prepared to respond to crises from afar. For example, they must be equipped to assess and respond to crises by having a direct reporting/communication protocol in place.

EQUITY DIMENSIONS The needs of students in the virtual setting are similar to those in the in-person setting. Thus, school counselors and stakeholders must be cognizant of the unique needs of their students based on demographics such as age, race, socioeconomic status, gender identity, etc. School counselors must work in collaboration with parents/guardians/caretakers in virtual learning,

understanding that they are balancing multiple roles while supporting their students. School counselors must also not assume that all students have a similar support system at home, thus not relying on parents/guardians/caretakers to support virtual learning more than in-person learning. Additionally, counselors and stakeholders should recognize that various schools and districts have access to different resources. Providing virtual school counseling during a time of crisis is unique in that students often lack access to resources they typically access via in-person learning (food, healthcare, internet, technology, etc.). Staying in tune with current events that impact students, indirectly and directly, is critical in school counseling to best tailor supports to the ever-changing needs of students. Counselor educators can prepare school counselors to deliver a virtual program through various techniques and by providing resources. Current school counselors can seek continuing education to learn how to adapt their in-person counselor programs to the virtual setting. Lastly, given the consistent role of the school counselor regardless of modality, counselors must continue to advocate for the profession to ensure their time is being utilized appropriately.