

current issues in education

School Counselor Shortages

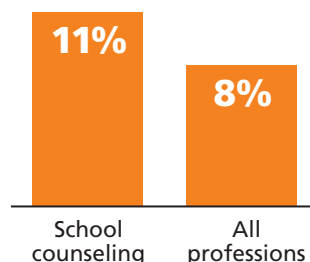
THE ISSUE

The educator shortage has been well reported over the past several years. When the 2022-23 school year began, 45% of public schools were operating without a full teaching staff, according to [U.S. Department of Education](#) data. The nation’s school districts have struggled to fill vacant positions, including school counselors, psychologists, social workers, occupational therapists, library media specialists, speech language pathologists and others. Forty percent of public schools reported non-teaching staff vacancies. Further, 40% of public schools indicated it was very difficult or difficult to fill “mental health professional” roles.

Poor pay, onerous administrative work, safety concerns and post-COVID stress, among other reasons, have contributed to shortages. According to hiring company [Indeed.com](#), potential school counselors are also deterred by the training and education requirements and lack of consistency in roles from district to district. The 2020 ASCA State of the Profession study found that 39% of school counselors were extremely challenged or challenged by being assigned inappropriate duties. Requiring school counselors to serve as 504 coordinators, testing coordinators, substitute teachers and more pulls them away from direct and indirect student services.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics has projected 11% growth in school counseling (2020-2030) compared with 8% for all professions. For the nation to reach ASCA’s recommended 250:1 student-to-school-counselor ratio, another 77,000 school counselors would need to be hired.

Job Growth (2020-2030)

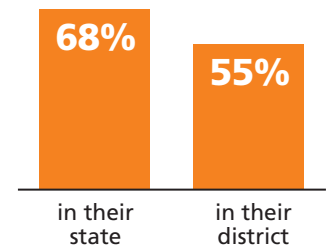


DISCUSSION

In December 2022, ASCA surveyed state coordinators and district directors of school counseling to gather further insights about the school counseling job market. Among school counseling district directors, 68% indicated there were not enough school counselors to fill available positions in their state, and 55% said there weren’t enough in their district. “I would say there is a good balance, but it really depends on the district,” reported one respondent. “Some [districts] seem more desirable than others, so they don’t have any issues hiring. Others are not so lucky.” Adds another, “I usually have a waiting list. For the first time, I opened the school year with three vacancies.”

2022 School Counseling District Directors Survey

There are not enough school counselors to fill available positions...



At the state level, the data is even more alarming. More than three quarters (76%) of state school counseling coordinators indicated there are not enough school counselors to fill available positions. Compared with district directors, state school counseling coordinators have a more comprehensive view of their state, including rural areas where shortages may be more significant. It's also important to note that not all school districts employ a district director.

Even before issues like the COVID-19 pandemic became a factor in school counselor job satisfaction, [Mullen et al. \(2018\)](#) found that school counselors face a high risk of burnout. According to the study, "School counselors can face multiple and competing demands, leading to symptoms of stress, empathy fatigue, emotional exhaustion, counselor impairment, and eventual departure or resignation from their jobs. Findings also indicated that "younger and less experienced school counselors are more likely to report greater perceived stress and burnout compared to older and more experienced school counselors," which was supported by [Bardhoshi et al.](#) in 2022.

This research suggests some school counselors may be leaving the field due to disillusionment and job-related stress. The politicization of education (e.g., debate over book bans, CRT bans, anti-LGBTQ+ legislation), safety concerns (K-12 School Shooting Database [predicts 400 school shootings in 2023](#) compared with 2022's record high of 273), and the seemingly insurmountable challenge of addressing student wellness in a post-COVID world have affected school counselors' job satisfaction. Research is needed to better determine reasons school counselors may be leaving K-12 education.

Still other newly minted school counselors may be choosing not to enter the profession at all. Data from the U.S. Department of Education's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System indicates approximately 11,000 students are graduating with a school counseling master's degree each year. However, due to attrition, the lure of private schools or jobs outside school counseling and other issues, this workforce isn't always landing in traditional public schools.

MITIGATION STRATEGIES

The following strategies represent some possible mitigating approaches to address the school counselor shortage, encouraging school counseling as a career choice and ensuring more affordable degrees.

- 1. Ensuring affordable options to earn a master's degree in school counseling; developing degree programs that don't require two to three years of study.** Although some universities require a 60-hour master's program, universities can fully prepare school counseling students to meet high professional standards in fewer hours. The [ASCA Standards-Aligned School Counseling Curriculum](#) encompasses all school counseling standards, ensuring graduates are prepared to build their programs and support student success, and doesn't suggest a prescriptive number of hours for completion.

- 2. Creating state, university or district partnerships to prepare school counselors, especially school counselors of color.** A few states ([Tennessee](#), for example) have launched programs providing scholarships for qualifying students to earn teaching degrees from state colleges. Similar programs could be used to train aspiring school counselors to meet states' needs, particularly in rural areas. Additionally, allowing school counselor interns to be paid for internships could help with recruitment and degree completion. Teacher residence programs could also be applied to school counseling. Such programs combine coursework with on-the-job training and typically place educators in high-need areas.
- 3. Exploring and creating pathways to enter the field.** [EducationNext](#) reported that traditional preparation programs for teachers at colleges and universities fell by 29% from 2013 to 2019, yet alternative-route programs, which are shorter and more cost effective, grew by 18%. Although school counselor training includes an advanced degree, Opportunities exist to train teachers and other education professionals to become school counselors. [Oklahoma's](#) emergency certification is one example of a stopgap measure to fill vacant positions.
- 4. Protecting the appropriate school counselor role.** As a respondent to ASCA's study of district directors noted, "Other duties continue to negate the work of school counselors. We are finding that school counselors moving from other ASCA-supported states/areas do not stay in our district due to other duties." When school counselors are required to coordinate schoolwide 504 plans, serve as substitute teachers, build the master schedule or maintain student records, they are less able to deliver a school counseling program. Further, it undermines their expertise and others' respect for the school counselor role. [Research](#) has shown that ASCA National Model implementation improves school counselor job satisfaction and a better understanding of the school counselor role.
- 5. Countering the voices of those that seek to undermine public education by pushing social and political agendas.** ASCA and other educational organizations play an essential role in countering these negative voices and acknowledging the expertise of teachers, school counselors, administrators and other school staff who are trained in developmentally appropriate student support. Despite assertions to the contrary, the [Annual PDK Poll](#) found that 72% of public school parents express trust and confidence in the public school teachers in their community.
- 6. Increasing school counselor pay.** Another district director reported, "The school counselors in my district who have left our area have shared that the pay they receive has been a huge factor in their decision to move to another district." Educators' salaries have not kept up with inflation and, in some cases, may not provide a living wage. The

[PDK Poll](#) found that just 37% of respondents would want their child to become a public school teacher in their community due to poor pay and benefits; the difficulties, demands and stress of the job; and a lack of respect or being valued. Significant stu-

dent debt further compounds the issue. States need to prioritize increasing school counselor, as well as teacher, pay to ensure they are able to attract staff to fill available roles.