Why the School Guidance Counselor Might Not Know Your Kid's Name

Forming personal relationships and getting students on the path to college is tough for the overburdened educators.

(Photo: Getty Images)

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- Bio

It’s a middle and high school crisis that few teachers notice and fewer school administrators, or parents, are discussing. To understand the effects of a nationwide shortage of school counselors, just ask one about her day.

The counselor we asked—who requested anonymity—works in a 1,600-student suburban Washington, D.C., high school. Through her students, she sees nearly every issue the public education system faces: standardized test pressure, the needs of poor and immigrant students, teens wrestling with their sexuality. That’s in addition to making sure they’re academically on track.

“Paperwork, schedule changes, [college] letters of recommendation,” she says, adding that unaccompanied students—the newly processed Latin American “border kids” who triggered a presidential-level immigration crisis last summer—are part of her portfolio. “And what about the kid that comes to you one time but you were very busy?”

This counselor, however, considers herself lucky: She works in a well-funded district, and her caseload is roughly 250 students, about half the national average.

According to the Association for College Admission Counseling, most schools have one counselor for every 500 students. Less well-off districts have a ratio twice that, and schools in struggling districts may not have a counselor at all.

Compared to controversial, headline-grabbing education issues such as Race to the Top and the Common Core curriculum, the shortage of guidance counselors might seem insignificant. Yet, besides helping students meet graduation requirements and take the right exams, counselors help determine whether students get into college, and they can help kids find ways to pay for it.

“The reality is there’s no shortage of workers,” says Corinne Weinman, who directs an internship program for education students at New York University. Because more school principals have the authority to spend their budget on staff and facilities, and budgets are increasingly tighter, school counselors are the first positions to go.

“They see us as ancillary,” Weinman says. “We see ourselves as central to the school. I absolutely do consider it a crisis.”

First Lady Michelle Obama, writing in *USA Today*, said the problem has created two worlds.

“There’s the world of high schools where the question isn’t whether students are going to college, but where,” she wrote. From their first day of high school, she says, those kids “are shepherded through the process, often by school counselors who ensure they enroll in the right classes; prepare for the SAT and ACT” and find a college that’s a good fit for them.

“Then there’s the world of the schools that most of our kids attend,” she continued, “where school counselors are too often undervalued and overstretched, and they simply don’t have what they need to do their jobs.”

Sharon F. Sevier, the chair of the American School Counselor Association, says shrinking school budgets and short-sighted administrators are largely to blame.

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"When districts are faced with having to make cuts, too often the school counselors are the first ones on the chopping block," Sevier, a counselor at Lafayette High School in Wildwood, Missouri, wrote in an email. "People fail to understand the work that the school counselor does and how students are different as a result of that work," including meeting with parents and helping students through a crisis.

"Our job components include addressing and educating students about their academic development, career development, and social/emotional development," Sevier wrote. "We are the 'go-to' people for students who need assistance or information in these areas. School counselors work with the 'whole student' as we help students achieve their goals and reach their potential."

Though the shortage has affected better-funded districts as well as struggling ones, poor students are bearing the brunt of the problem, Weinman says.

“Affluent students will get services because they can afford services,” even if they have to pay for them themselves, says Weinman. But in schools trying to make do without a counselor, she says, students may have to rely on a poorly trained, ill-informed substitute: a trusted coach, or maybe a favorite teacher who might not might not be qualified to help..

Still, Sevier says, there’s reason for optimism: The White House and U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan are focused on the issue, creating grants for college education majors who want to become guidance counselors and creating funding streams for local districts. Two months ago, the first lady presented the first-ever School Counselor of the Year award in a White House ceremony.

For the guidance counselor working in Washington, D.C., awards are nice, but helping students get into college or easing them through a crisis is better. The job is difficult, she says, but it’s hard to think of doing anything else.

“I love working with kids,” she says. “If I can make a difference in someone’s life, it’s worth it.”