



# The Hidden Frontline: A Day in the Life of a School Counselor

---

This white paper explores the journey of a school counselor. Celebrating their victories, acknowledging their challenges, and inviting you to discover the incredible impact that happens when we let counselors lead with their expertise.

## Issue 3: Extra Duties, Budget Cuts, and Protecting the Counseling Role in Modern Schools

# The Institute for School Counseling Advocacy & Research

## Bridging the Disconnect

The educational landscape is currently defined by a profound disconnect. High-level academic research often remains siloed in journals, while school counselors on the frontline navigate role ambiguity, systemic invisibility, and shifting administrative demands. When research does not reach practice, and practice is not protected by policy, the ultimate impact on student equity is diminished.

The Institute for School Counseling Advocacy & Research (ISCAR) was established to solve this structural crisis. We believe that advocacy is not a solitary effort, but a strategic ecosystem.

## Reclaiming the Identity of the Profession

ISCAR exists to transform invisible work into a visible, data-driven, and indispensable cornerstone of the educational sector. We are not just studying the gaps in our system; we are building the bridges required to close them.

By unifying researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, we ensure that the leaders of student success, our school counselors, have the evidence-based resources they need to lead with authority and provide equitable services for all.

*Sarah Whipp*

Sarah Whipp, Ed.D - Executive Director

# Executive Summary

The third issue of The Hidden Frontline shifts our focus to secondary schools and alternative educational settings. While Issue 2 highlighted how primary school counselors use specialized strategies to support young learners, this issue examines a broader, more complex institutional landscape. Using detailed interviews with practicing school counselors, this report explores the systemic forces shaping the counseling profession today.

Rather than viewing counselor struggles through generic statistics, this report centers on the detailed, lived experiences of three distinct educators:

- Counselor A: A seasoned secondary counselor who turned years of uncompensated, grassroots curriculum work into a district-wide, paid prevention initiative.
- Counselor B: A resilient practitioner in an urban alternative charter school who navigated sudden post-COVID budget layoffs while serving as an operational catch-all.
- Counselor C: A high school counselor who strategically accepts paid supervisory duties, like lunch monitoring, to remain financially grounded while turning group spaces into accessible check-in points for students.

Following these individual stories, this white paper conducts a cross-case analysis to highlight centralized themes: navigating non-counseling duties for supplemental pay, the vulnerability of mental health staff during budget cuts, role confusion in decentralized schools, and the vital importance of counselor-student connections.



# A Note of Gratitude to Our Contributors

This white paper is built directly on the unfiltered experiences of practicing school counselors. To protect our contributors from institutional liability and encourage absolute honesty, ISCAR keeps all names, school districts, and specific geographic locations completely anonymous. Participants are identified strictly through generalized narrative profiles.

## A Commitment to Anonymity

At ISCAR, we recognize that professional vulnerability is often a barrier to truth-telling. In many educational environments, speaking candidly about systemic failures or personal struggles can carry significant risk.

To honor and protect these voices, ISCAR maintains a strict protocol of anonymity. Names, specific school districts, and precise locations have been removed or generalized. For this report, participants are identified only by their broad geographic region. This protection is not merely a courtesy; it is a professional standard that ensures our contributors can speak with absolute honesty, allowing *The Hidden Frontline* to serve as an authentic reflection of the state of school counseling today.

## Frontline Narratives – Three Counselor Stories

### **Story 1: Counselor A — The Grassroots Innovator & Paid Program Developer**

Counselor A brings over a decade of experience in elementary and middle school settings, having started her career in a high-need elementary school building where she taught over 25 classes a week without a curriculum provided. Early in her career, she experienced the overwhelming anxiety of stepping out of graduate school into a school building without foundational materials or clear program guidance.

When her district introduced a national suicide prevention framework in 2020, administrators handed counselors the materials without any implementation strategy. Determined to prevent fellow counselors from feeling overwhelmed (and eager to ensure students received vital, proactive support), Counselor A independently took on the task of building an accessible, turnkey framework for implementing suicide prevention. Over time, she translated dense curriculum manuals into digestible, 30-minute monthly lessons complete with slides, worksheets, and scripts. She completed this work on her own time out of a personal commitment to student wellness and peer support.

When state lawmakers eventually passed legislation requiring all elementary schools to deliver suicide prevention education, district leaders recognized that Counselor A had already created a plug-and-play solution. The district formally contracted her to lead summer training sessions and onboard new counselors, compensating her work with a lucrative stipend.

Today, as a middle school counselor, she continues to navigate daily non-counseling responsibilities by bringing a proactive, solution-oriented mindset to building leadership. However, her experience highlights a major systemic reality: counselors frequently possess the specialized expertise to solve building-level and district-wide problems, but their contributions are often recognized only when backed by external mandates and policy expectations.

### **Story 2: Counselor B — The Alternative Charter Frontline & Budget Cliff Survivor**

Counselor B's entry into the school counseling profession began under extraordinary circumstances: completing a virtual graduate program during the 2020 pandemic lockdowns and stepping directly into an urban public school system. Serving a high-poverty, high-density elementary community, she rapidly adapted to high-stakes mental health crises, child protective services reporting, and police involvement during building safety incidents.

However, when federal post-COVID relief funds (Title I/ESSER grants) expired, the local board of education faced significant budget deficits and eliminated mental health positions. Counselor B was laid off alongside a large cohort of counselors. Facing an abrupt six-month period of unemployment, she transitioned into an alternative urban charter school.

In her new role, Counselor B maintains a condensed caseload of approximately



120 students with high behavioral needs. While a lower student-to-counselor ratio appears ideal on paper, the decentralized charter environment presents distinct challenges. Operating under a strict structure in which the top leadership lacks formal education training and occasionally refers to school counseling as soft or "gushy mushy".

Because the building lacks dedicated support staff, Counselor B functions as an operational catch-all. Her days are routinely interrupted by non-counseling duties: covering front-office secretarial breaks, monitoring hallways, managing IT hardware logistics (building and distributing Chromebooks for suspended students), and making administrative suspension calls to families. Despite these role conflicts, Counselor B remains deeply dedicated to her students, fighting to protect the counseling office as a safe sanctuary where vulnerable children can drop their hard exterior and feel supported.

**Story 3: Counselor C — The Secondary Advocate & The Monetized Boundary**

Counselor C is a high school counselor in his fourth year of practice, working in a diverse secondary school. Managing a caseload of approximately 350 students. Despite these systemic demands, his department benefits from a unique administrative structure: his supervisor is a former school counselor who serves as the Dean of Student Services, providing an informed advocate within building leadership. Counselor C candidly addresses a reality facing many educators today: balancing professional standards with financial needs.

While national counseling frameworks advise against assigning counselors to duties like lunch supervision, Counselor C actively volunteers for paid lunch duty and leads the freshman transition program because the extra stipends help support his family.

Rather than allowing supervisory duties to compromise his professional identity, Counselor C strategically uses cafeteria monitoring to increase his visibility. He transforms the lunchroom into an accessible touchpoint where students can comfortably approach him with quick questions about college scholarships, academic schedules, or personal concerns, without the stress of scheduling a formal office visit.



## Cross-Analysis – Centralized Themes

A cross-analysis of these three stories reveals four centralized themes that define the modern school counseling landscape across settings:

### **Theme 1: The Monetized Boundary & Strategic Visibility**

The story of the modern school counselor cannot be told without addressing the quiet, daily tension between professional ideals and economic reality. For decades, the counseling literature has treated non-counseling duties, such as cafeteria supervision, bus monitoring, and test coordination, as administrative intrusions that erode professional identity and trigger severe burnout (Baker, 2001; Dahir et al., 2019; McCarthy et al., 2010). In an ideal textbook world, counselors would push back against these duties to preserve 100% of their time for clinical and academic support.

Yet, when we look across our three counselors, a much more human story emerges. Counselor C doesn't perform lunch duty because an administrator forced him to; he does it because educator pay is notoriously tight, and the extra stipend helps pay his family's bills. Counselor A didn't spend years building suicide prevention slides for recognition; she did it unpaid out of survival and compassion, only receiving financial compensation when a state mandate caught up to her grassroots work. Meanwhile, Counselor B represents the darker side of this dynamic in the charter sector: absorbing non-counseling clerical duties unpaid simply to keep her job in an environment where mental health is undervalued.

What makes the stories of Counselor A and Counselor C so compelling is their ability to

subvert these non-clinical spaces. Instead of standing in the cafeteria as passive crowd control, Counselor C uses his stipended lunch hour to wander among tables, making quick, informal connections with kids who would never set foot in a counseling office. He turns a non-counseling duty into a high-visibility clinical intake site.

### **Supporting Academic Research**

- **Informal Presence & Duty Stress:** Bardhoshi et al. (2014) examined how school environmental factors and non-counseling demands impact counselor burnout, demonstrating that unmanaged operational duties fuel emotional exhaustion. However, when counselors maintain agency over their schedule or receive formal administrative backing, the psychological burden of role ambiguity is substantially mitigated.
- **Impact of Interaction Quality:** Recent empirical research by Dunn (2025) highlights that, while the quantitative breakdown of direct versus indirect service time remains complex, the qualitative depth and relational quality of counselor-student touchpoints are crucial drivers of positive student outcomes.
- **Role Stress & Burnout:** Mullen et al. (2017) found that misaligned administrative expectations are directly correlated with emotional exhaustion. However, when counselors maintain agency over their schedule—or receive formal financial recognition for extra-contractual labor—the psychological burden of role ambiguity is substantially mitigated.

## Theme 2: Operational Displacement & Small-Caseload Friction

There is a comforting myth in educational policy that goes like this: If we just lower the student-to-counselor ratio, the counselor's job will magically fix itself. The contrasting stories of Counselor B and Counselor C reveal just how flawed that assumption can be.

Consider Counselor B's experience. She walked into a charter school with an enviable 1:120 caseload—a ratio most public school counselors would celebrate. Yet, her day-to-day reality is a nightmare of role displacement. Because her school operates with a lean staff and a command-and-control mindset, administrators view her light caseload as "free time". She isn't given room to build proactive mental health programs; she is turned into a corporate receptionist, an IT hardware technician handing out Chromebooks, and a disciplinary enforcer making suspension calls. Her clinical training is completely buried under administrative noise.

Now look at Counselor C. He manages 350 high schoolers—nearly three times Counselor B's caseload—in a state with very high statewide counseling ratios. Yet, Counselor C experiences far greater professional fulfillment and role clarity. Why? Because his administrator is a former school counselor who understands the job and protects his team from being co-opted as secretarial or disciplinary support. Meanwhile, Counselor A balances her middle school caseload by designing turnkey classroom modules that keep her from being swallowed whole by reactive daily fires.

The narrative truth is stark: A low caseload without role protection isn't an opportunity, it's a trap. When school leaders lack training in

child development or mental health frameworks, they inevitably reduce the counselor to an operational generalist.

### Supporting Academic Research

- **Role Stress in Urban Charter Settings:** Clay et al. (2018) examined the counseling needs of high-behavioral-needs students in urban charter school settings, demonstrating that when counselors lack clear systemic support and administrative boundaries, their role is often absorbed by reactive behavioral triage and non-counseling demands rather than proactive therapeutic care.
- **Role Ambiguity & Job Satisfaction:** Patton (2019) used Role Theory to analyze school counselor performance, demonstrating that role ambiguity and role diffusion are direct, statistically significant predictors of job dissatisfaction. This aligns with findings by McKinzy et al. (2023), who established that role stress elements directly decrease a counselor's perceived self-efficacy and ability to deliver an ASCA-aligned comprehensive program.
- **Administrative Knowledge Deficits:** Leuwerke et al. (2009) surveyed school principals and found that over 50% had zero formal exposure to the ASCA National Model in their administrative training. Their study showed that when principals lack background knowledge of counseling frameworks, they rate inappropriate tasks as central to the counselor's job. This directly explains why Counselor B experienced significant operational displacement in her building, a practice that directly violates national ethical guidelines protecting the integrity of the counselor-student relationship and confidentiality (Stone, 2006)



### **Theme 3: Fiscal Volatility & The Vulnerability of Mental Health Staff**

Behind every counselor's story sits an invisible, unpredictable force: the complexity of public school finance. Counselor B's personal story exposes the painful human cost of how districts handle emergency mental health funding.

When the pandemic hit and youth mental health crises spiked, federal dollars (ESSER/Title I) flooded into school districts nationwide. School boards proudly used these grants to hire counselors and social workers, creating a temporary lifeline for trauma support. But when those federal funds reached their expiration cliff, districts faced hard choices. Instead of trimming central office administrative budgets, local school boards treated mental health personnel as temporary add-ons. Counselor B, despite working on the frontlines of acute crises and handling police safety investigations, was handed a layoff notice alongside dozens of her colleagues. She was cast out into six months of unemployment simply because her position was built on a temporary financial foundation.

Counselor A's story offers a different side of the financial coin: her suicide prevention curriculum sat as an uncompensated passion project until state legislation mandated mental health education, forcing the district to open its wallet and pay her a formal stipend. Counselor C remains somewhat insulated by a traditional union contract and tenure track, yet he still feels the crushing weight of a state legislature that refuses to fund realistic counselor-to-student ratios. This dynamic reveals a major equity gap in education. Wealthier suburban schools absorb counselors into their permanent operating budgets, giving their students stable, long-term mental health support.

Lower-income urban and charter schools rely on grant cycles, subjecting their most vulnerable students to a chaotic revolving door of mental health professionals who are hired in a crisis and laid off during a budget crunch.

#### **Supporting Academic Research**

- **The Post-ESSER Funding Cliff:** Recent policy analyses on federal pandemic relief funds (CARES/ESSER Act) highlight that districts nationwide allocated over 4\$ billion toward student mental and physical health supports. As these emergency funds expire, districts unable to transition positions into general operating budgets face widespread layoffs, leaving vulnerable student populations without consistent crisis intervention.
- **Disparities in Mental Health Access:** Carey and Dimmitt (2012) established that high-poverty, urban school environments exhibit the highest baseline need for school-based mental health services, yet suffer from the most volatile staffing patterns. When districts treat counseling lines as temporary grant additions rather than core educational infrastructure, student behavioral infractions and chronic absenteeism increase sharply.
- **Systemic Multiplier Effect:** Lapan, Gysbers, and Kayson (2007) demonstrated that fully funded, stable school counseling programs yield long-term institutional returns, including higher graduation rates, lower disciplinary referrals, and improved academic climates. Short-sighted layoffs disrupt these long-term gains and increase districts' long-term operational costs.

## Theme 4: The Unconditional Value of Counselor-Student Connection

Strip away the administrative noise, the budget battles, and the stipend debates, and you land at the beating heart of the profession: the quiet, transformative power of a counselor connecting with a child. Each of our three counselors weaves this relational thread in their own unique way, illustrating that despite vastly different environments, the true purpose of their role remains anchored in human connection.

For Counselor A, connection is built through proactive empowerment. By bringing a suicide prevention curriculum into middle school classrooms, she establishes a shared vocabulary for mental health, helping students identify their personal strengths and trusted adults long before life throws them into a severe crisis.

In contrast, Counselor B builds connection through fierce, protective sanctuary. Operating in a rigid, command-driven charter school where emotional expression is often discouraged, she protects her office as a confidential refuge. In her space, children who have been repeatedly let down by adult systems can drop their tough exterior, process deep grief, and realize it is safe to be vulnerable without fear of disciplinary judgment.

Meanwhile, Counselor C demonstrates the power of authentic, non-judgmental male mentorship. When he sat down in in-school suspension with a struggling football player navigating his father's incarceration, he chose to see a hurting young man in need of an anchor rather than a behavioral risk.

When that student looked at him and asked, "What do you think love is?", Counselor C proved that school counselors do far more than manage class schedules; they serve as essential emotional lifelines during life's most confusing moments

### Supporting Academic Research

- **Relational Frameworks & Male Mentorship:** Washington (2010) examined how counselors utilize Relational-Cultural Theory to foster meaningful, non-judgmental connections with male youth, demonstrating that relational mentorship serves as a vital emotional anchor that increases academic engagement and helps students navigate complex emotional distress.
- **Prevention & Early Intervention:** Adelman and Taylor (2002) emphasized that school counselors are uniquely positioned as essential leaders in school-based mental health because their support is embedded directly within the daily school environment, allowing counselors to address non-academic barriers to learning long before emotional distress escalates into a crisis.
- **Trauma-Informed Collaboration:** Recent research on trauma-informed school policies highlights that school counselors serve as essential translators between traumatized students and instructional staff. By helping teachers understand the root causes of disruptive behavior, counselors transform reactive disciplinary environments into supportive, trauma-informed learning spaces.

# ISCAR Policy Commentary: Inefficiencies in Reactive Budgeting

---

A critical examination of district fiscal management reveals a complex institutional paradox. On one hand, it is a positive and welcome development when districts actually compensate school counselors with stipends for extra operational work. In far too many schools nationwide, counselors are routinely expected to absorb non-counseling duties (such as cafeteria monitoring, hallway supervision, or event logistics) unpaid, under the vague umbrella of "other duties as assigned". For educators navigating low base salaries, receiving supplemental pay for these extra duties is a tangible benefit, and practitioners like Counselor C are understandably excited for the opportunity to earn additional income.

On the other hand, relying on stipends to fill building-level operational gaps remains a questionable management practice that ultimately dilutes the school counselor's professional role. When a district pays a Master's- or Doctoral-level clinician extra funds to perform student monitoring, device management, or clerical tracking, it reflects a fundamental misallocation of human capital. Discretionary funds are spent to temporarily patch operational vacancies, but the district loses the high-value ROI for which the counselor was hired.

While offering stipends is a far more respectful approach than demanding unpaid labor, using stipends as a permanent Band-Aid points to reactive budgeting and poor long-term planning. Rather than incentivizing counselors to step away from their focus to absorb logistical gaps, districts must invest in dedicated operational support staff. This protects district resources, respects counselor expertise, and ensures that credentialed counselors have the dedicated time needed to deliver proactive mental health supports that prevent building-level crises in the first place.

# Strategic Recommendations for Educational Leadership

To protect the professional role of school counselors, ensure financial fairness, and optimize student wellness, ISCAR outlines the following recommendations for school boards, superintendents, and building leaders:

## 1. Establish Clear Firewalls Between Counseling and Discipline:

Administrators must safeguard the counseling office as a non-punitive space. Forcing counselors to make suspension calls, manage punitive paperwork, or monitor disciplinary holding areas damages student trust and limits self-referrals during mental health crises.

## 2. Formalize and Compensate Extra Duties:

When building-level staffing shortages require counselors to take on extra supervisory or logistical responsibilities, districts should provide formal stipends. Furthermore, leaders should support counselors in using these duties as opportunities for informal student engagement for temporary purposes, not long-term solutions for lack of staffing.

### 3. Appoint Credentialed Counseling Leadership:

To prevent role confusion in charter, alternative, or rural schools, districts should ensure that counselors report to specialized District Counseling Directors or experienced department leaders who understand national counseling models.

### 4. Secure Permanent Funding for Mental Health Staff:

School boards must transition counselor funding from short-term grants to permanent general operational budgets to prevent sudden layoffs and maintain consistent support for students.

### 5. Mandate Annual Principal-Counselor Operational Conferences:

Division leaders should require building principals and counseling teams to execute a formal Annual Administrative Conference prior to each school year. This protocol establishes written, co-signed agreements that enforce 80/20 time allocations, explicitly restrict non-counseling tasks (such as test coordination or master scheduling), and align counseling program goals directly with building improvement plans.



## Conclusion

School counselors are highly trained behavioral, academic, and mental health advocates whose expertise directly drives school safety, positive climate, and student achievement. Yet, as the real-world experiences of Counselor A, Counselor B, and Counselor C demonstrate, a vast difference remains between theoretical training and daily operational realities.

- Counselor A's narrative demonstrates the profound personal care and drive of dedicated school counselors who consistently invest their own personal time to design, innovate, and implement better strategies to elevate the student experience, even while navigating high operational demands.
- Counselor B's experience highlights the vulnerability of counselors in decentralized settings like charter or alternative schools, where a lack of administrative understanding leaves counselors isolated without clear role boundaries or systemic protection.
- Counselor C's impact reminds us of what becomes possible when counselors are afforded the space to build authentic, non-punitive relationships—serving as stabilizing anchors and transformative mentors for students navigating deep emotional and behavioral stress.

When school divisions allow role ambiguity, administrative pressure, and budget shortages to convert these specialized professionals into operational generalists, they do not simply misallocate critical district resources, they fundamentally compromise student equity. Operational displacement deprives students of the essential, proactive care required to navigate crises, excel academically, and thrive emotionally.

Transforming school counseling from a fragmented support service into a protected, systemic anchor requires intentional structural reform. By implementing ISCAR's strategic recommendations, district and building leaders can resolve long-standing systemic friction. Protecting the integrity of the school counseling role is ultimately an investment in the entire educational ecosystem: when leaders safeguard counselors, they empower them to deliver on their primary mission—advocating for, inspiring, and elevating every student they serve.



## Connect & Collaborate

At ISCAR, we collaborate with school districts, state associations, non-profits, and more to help advocate for the school counseling profession. Click below to learn more or reach out to get additional information.

Get in Touch

## References

- Adelman, H. S., & Taylor, L. (2002). School counselors and school reform: New directions. *Professional School Counseling*, 5(4), 235–248.
- Baker, S. B. (2001). Reflection on forty years in the school counseling profession: Is the glass half full or half empty? *Professional School Counseling*, 5(2), 75–83.
- Bardhoshi, G., Schweinle, A., & Duncan, K. (2014). Understanding the impact of school factors on school counselor burnout: a mixed-methods study. *Professional Counselor*, 4(5), 426–443.
- Carey, J., & Dimmitt, C. (2012). School counseling and student outcomes: Summary of six statewide studies. *Professional School Counseling*, 16(2), 146–153.
- Clay, L. K., Frazier, K. N., & West-Olatunji, C. (2018). Use of an ecosystemic lens to conceptualize the counseling needs of students with behavioral problems in an urban charter school setting. *Journal of Human Services: Training, Research, and Practice*, 3(1), Article 2.
- Dahir, C. A., Burnham, J. J., & Stone, C. (2009). Listen to the voices: School counselors and comprehensive school counseling programs. *Professional School Counseling*, 12(3), 182–192.
- Dunn, K. H. (2025). *An Examination of the Relationship Between School Counselors' Use of Time, Student Perceptions of School Counselors, and Students' College, Career, and Life Readiness in Indiana Schools* (Doctoral dissertation, Indiana State University).
- Lapan, R. T., Gysbers, N. C., & Kayson, M. A. (2007). *Missouri school counselors benefit all students*. Jefferson City, MO: Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.
- Leuwerke, W. C., Walker, J., & Shi, Q. (2009). Informing principals: The impact of different types of information on principals' perceptions of professional school counselors. *Professional School Counseling*, 12(4), 263–271.
- McCarthy, C., Van Horn Kerne, V., Calfa, N. A., Lambert, R. G., & Guzmán, M. (2010). An exploration of school counselors' demands and resources: Relationship to stress, biographic, and caseload characteristics. *Professional School Counseling*, 13(3), 146–158.
- McKinzy, A., Ratliff, C. H., Parker, C. H., Davis, J. D., & Davis, R. (2023). The Effects of Role Stress Elements on Primary School Counselor's Perceived General Self-Efficacy. *The Journal of the Research Association of Minority Professors*, 25(2), Article 5.
- Mullen, P. R., Blount, A. J., Lambie, G. W., & Chae, N. (2017). School counselors' perceived stress, burnout, and job satisfaction. *Professional School Counseling*, 21(1).
- Patton, D. (2019). *Predictive relationships between school counselor role ambiguity, role diffusion, and job satisfaction*. Doctoral Dissertation, Walden University.
- Stone, C. (2006). *School counseling principles: Ethics and law*. American School Counselor Association, 1101 King Street, Suite 625, Alexandria, VA, 22314.
- Washington, A. R. (2010). Using Relational-Cultural Theory in school counseling practice to promote positive development among African American male youth. *Journal of Humanistic Counseling, Education and Development*, 49(1), 40–51.