

COMMENTARY

Mental Health Services

A Cost-Effective Option for Increased Learning

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California has the lowest elementary school counselor-per-student ratio of any state; the majority of California's elementary and middle schools do not offer any counselors. I once encountered one of the exceptions: During the 1997–98 school year, I was a 5th grade teacher at [Menlo Oaks Middle School](#) in the Bay Area. The school primarily served children from East Palo Alto as it was part of the Ravenswood School District, but it was located within the border of Menlo Park. The Menlo Park Police Department funded counselors to visit the school and meet individually with students. After referring two of my students to these weekly counseling sessions, I saw the potential benefits of these services on both the students themselves and the overall environment in my classroom.

Years later, I set out to investigate whether greater availability of counselors systematically affects various types of outcomes at schools. The results of that investigation were reported in the [Journal of Policy Analysis in Management](#) in 2010. I conducted the first nationally representative study of the provision, financing, and impact of elementary school counselors. I examined changes in student learning and behavior after states adopt more aggressive elementary counseling policies, and I compared these changes with changes in other states that did not adopt counseling policies.

The findings suggest that greater availability of counselors may help students along many dimensions. When states subsidize districts' employment of counselors or require a minimum counselor–student ratio, this reduces the fraction of teachers reporting that their instruction suffers due to student misbehavior and reduces the fractions reporting problems with students physically fighting each other, cutting class, stealing, or using drugs. Greater availability of counselors is also correlated with improvements in student learning and in students' mental health. These findings imply substantial public and private benefits from providing additional elementary school counselors. When states require a basic minimum level of counseling services, teachers are far more satisfied with school climate.

It is not surprising that mandating some counseling services leads to large beneficial outcomes; rarely do educational resource debates compare offering almost none of a resource to offering a moderate amount. Although more research is still needed, my results suggest that counselors could potentially be more cost-effective than other interventions, such as reducing class sizes. Even in tight fiscal times, it would be wise for states to require schools to offer a minimum level of mental health services. One question that is still open for future research is whether these services best come in the form of school counselors or social workers or psychologists working in school-based health centers. Local politics do not always lead to the most productive allocation of resources for students' long-term welfare, but requiring schools to offer at least some mental health services will ultimately improve the welfare of students and teachers alike.

The full study can be found [here](#): Reback, Randall (2010). "Schools' mental health services and young children's emotions,

behavior, and learning," Journal of Policy Analysis and Management 29: 698–725.

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