



# INTRODUCTION

## *A Profession Ready for Change*

As a school counselor and university professor who trains future counselors, I hear one question over and over again from colleagues: “What do school counselors actually do?” People are often surprised to learn that school counselors support a wide range of student and school achievements and that they hold master’s degrees. They are surprised to hear that in some districts one counselor has to support more than eight hundred students. They also are particularly surprised to hear that counselors are a promising but untapped resource to meet the growing demands on schools and the increasing needs of students in our society.

Over the past several decades, policy makers and the public have called on schools to fulfill their core goal of developing students’ academic skills and address a wide range of societal priorities and student needs. This demand has been shaped by the growing recognition that students’ social, emotional, and academic needs are intertwined and must be addressed as such. Expectations for schools have evolved to include screening for mental health problems, addressing barriers to learning, and ensuring that all students graduate college- and career-ready. These demands have been driven in part by the logic of streamlining support systems so students don’t fall through the cracks of disconnected services. Meeting this myriad of expectations has left many schools struggling and overwhelmed.

Academic development is, of course, the core mission of schools. Even

in this domain, however, schools are facing new challenges. Fueled by an education reform movement that has been laser-focused on identifying achievement gaps for groups of students, schools have been concentrating on identifying and supporting students who have historically not been served well by schools. Educators are working tirelessly to identify appropriate academic interventions, skill-building opportunities, and strategies that help students create links between classwork and future goals. Meeting these academic expectations is a significant challenge.

While academic expectations have grown, schools have also been asked to embrace the responsibility for supporting the social and emotional development of students. Currently, schools often say they are educating the “whole child” but are not yet proficient in developing the social and emotional skills that underlie academic achievement, creating positive school climates that foster engagement and belonging, or conducting screenings for mental health concerns that can get in the way of learning or contribute to unsafe learning environments. In fact, although many school leaders recognize that some students are struggling with anxiety and depression, they are challenged to consistently provide supports for managing these debilitating conditions.

In addition to calls for increased academic standards and attention to the whole child, schools have been under pressure to prepare students for success in college, career, and life. Across elementary, middle, and high schools, principals have been searching for new ways to engage students in career and college exploration and readiness activities. Schools have been asked to adopt college-going cultures, expand career and technical education, align high school and college curricula, support postsecondary planning, and ensure that all students graduate with a postsecondary plan. While at one time high schools were focused on graduation rates, today they are being held accountable for post-high school outcomes and, as a result, are looking for ways to do more, often with fewer resources.

Many school leaders feel daunted by the formidable task of meeting students’ diverse needs across these three domains—academic, social emotional, and postsecondary. However, too often they overlook the fact

that our nation's schools already have an untapped resource for addressing these needs: school counselors. School counselors are trained to provide support to students across academic, college and career, and personal domains. In fact, the school counseling profession has evolved over the past six decades to the point where counselors have become uniquely situated at the nexus of students' educational experiences. Yet, they are among the most underutilized personnel in education, due to a range of factors from extremely high caseloads to a system that has not realized their full potential.

In my work, I have learned that too many adults have negative perceptions of school counselors. I have heard accomplished people give speeches that begin with a story about a high school guidance counselor who told them they "would never amount to anything." These stories make for great drama and the situations were undoubtedly painful for the people who lived them, but they are the exception rather than the rule. The majority of school counselors I have met are highly skilled, are longing for change, and have been working hard to meet the high expectations they have set for themselves. Many of us had a negative experience with a teacher or administrator along our educational journeys, but we don't tend to write off the value of all teachers or principals. Of course, as in any profession, some school counselors have languished in their roles as a result of inadequate training, low expectations, and a lack of support. Unfortunately, negative depictions of counselors have bled into popular media, creating low expectations of counselors that deter students, families, and educational partners and leaders from leveraging all that school counselors have to offer.

All these stakeholders should know that counselors are eager to be called on to help, and energizing evidence of their impact exists across all three domains. In the academic domain, studies highlight the impact school counselors have on organizational and social skills, attendance, and even improved standardized test scores.<sup>1</sup> Strong school counseling programs have successfully contributed to reduced discipline rates, improved attitudes about school, a sense of belonging, and reduced refer-

als to special education.<sup>2</sup> Studies also show that counselor involvement leads to improved postsecondary outcomes. For example, research has shown that adding a single counselor to a school can increase college-going rates by ten percentage points and that students who meet with their school counselor to plan for college are more likely to take the important steps necessary to enroll and succeed in college.<sup>3</sup> According to this growing body of scholarship, school counselors have managed to have quite an impact in spite of low expectations and a host of organizational challenges. Just imagine what they could do with a more clearly defined role and the institutional supports to fulfill it!

School counselors' effectiveness is due, in part, to the hard work that has gone on within the field of school counseling. With leadership from professional associations such as the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), the College Board, and school counseling scholars and leaders, school counseling practices have benefitted from a set of national standards, evidence-based school counseling tools, enhanced cultural competence, best practice programming, and alignment with related professional competencies. However, these professional advances are largely invisible to educators outside the profession. School and district leaders as well as community partners have not been engaged in school counseling reform and have not educated themselves about successful school counseling initiatives such as data-driven school counseling, counselor-principal agreements, and postsecondary leadership teams. As a result, efforts to capitalize on the potential contributions of counselors are thwarted by uninformed leadership and conditions that are not conducive to counselor effectiveness. High caseloads, ambiguous roles, lack of organizational alignment between counselors and school mission, inadequate professional support from districts, misuse of time, and an overreliance on enrichment and add-on programming have strained a profession suited to support schools. Despite this reality, school counselors *could* become more effective if we conceptualize this problem as an organizational issue rather than a personnel problem. Educational lead-

ers need to create the structural conditions for counselors to perform their jobs optimally. Reducing high caseloads is a good first step and has been often recommended, but it is not enough. Placing more counselors in an outdated role will not go very far to improve schools' ability to meet students' comprehensive needs. Our students need us to do more. They need us to unlock the potential of professionals who are right around the corner and ready to help.

### **A REENVISIONING OF SCHOOL COUNSELING—NOT JUST FOR COUNSELORS**

This book provides an inside look at what is possible when schools and districts draw on the talents of their counselors and put them at the center of students' school experience. It provides a strategic and systemic approach to school counseling that enables educational leaders to draw on staff they already have to create supportive contexts and programs for students. In this approach, counselors are at the hub of student supports—their “academic home”—connecting and coordinating services much like primary care physicians coordinate patient care in medical settings. In a “medical home” model, primary care physicians are the first point of contact, provide as much care as is possible and reasonable, and refer patients for specialized care when needed. This book outlines the metaphor of the “academic home,” in which school counselors are a first point of contact for student support and weave a web of networked supports so that students don't fall between the cracks. Although teachers may see themselves as students' academic home, the relationship students and teachers have with counselors is central to students' overall educational experience and success. By drawing on promising practices in schools, districts, states, and by individual school counselors and leaders, this book offers a conceptualization of school counseling that is not just for counselors but also for the district and school leaders, teachers, community partners, policy makers, and funders who shape the contexts in which we all work and students learn.

This book is written for anyone who believes that we can do a better job of supporting students and is willing to look carefully at the system. It is for educators who know that meeting the needs of all students requires tackling the hardest part—the structures and systems in which counselors work and are trained. Schools are systems, even if not visible to the naked eye. Everyone involved is needed to change the system and achieve better results. We know that schools need improved support services to promote students' academic, social emotional, and postsecondary development. We've tried adding new programs to “augment,” “complement,” “supplement,” or even “compensate” for school counseling weaknesses. This book presents, instead, a perspective for strengthening school counseling. With a stronger system and the support of those extra community partners and programs, we can provide academic homes that equip all students with skills for success.

The book is also intended for content teachers, college advisors, and others wondering how improvements to school counseling can provide support for achieving their own goals. These professionals, who work in and outside school buildings, often hand in hand with school counselors, could benefit from more specific knowledge about what counselors do and how they can work together. This book offers practical suggestions to those working in and out of schools to make those relationships more productive.

As a school counselor at heart, I hope that this book speaks to those in the school counseling community who are responsible for developing, managing, and delivering school counseling services and supports. It aims to provide framing and specific strategies for how to advocate for their programs and their profession; how to make changes in their own schools and districts so that they can fulfill their and their students' potential rather than being relegated to managing student records and supervising lunch periods. Many of them reading this book may not be surprised by the suggestions I am making. However, I expect that the examples presented here will give school counselors the encouragement and guidance for successfully engaging others in collaborative practices and change.

For these ideas to work, we must first get clearer about what that role is and what it is not. I am often reminded that the general public does not have a clear understanding of what school counselors actually do. In fact, the field of school counseling has been on the defensive for quite some time, thanks to a combination of role confusion, some individuals' sour experiences with counselors, and negative media portrayals. Film and television depictions frequently present counselors as clueless, negligent, unhelpful, burned out, and even harmful. For example, in one movie I saw, the school counselor is too busy writing her novel during school hours to offer much help to her students. That portrayal may be humorous, but it doesn't reflect reality; most counselors have nearly overwhelming caseloads of hundreds, and I vividly remember many days when I couldn't find five minutes to eat lunch. Such depictions undermine counselors' effectiveness by creating low expectations that deter students, families, and educational partners and leaders from leveraging all that school counselors have to offer. To remedy this problem, a new approach for school counseling should include intentional efforts to reach out to the entertainment, news, and policy communities to explain the true value of our role.

My hope is that by galvanizing many stakeholders around a shared understanding of school counseling and a framework to enact that understanding, we can become more effective and communicate that effectiveness to students, their families, and the general public. For all readers, this book outlines a path forward. It is a reminder of what is possible for counselors and, more importantly, their students.

## **SHIFTING PERSPECTIVES**

Each academic year, I teach a group of smart young professionals eager to engage in school counseling work. Many of my students have found their way to the profession because they are most engaged when working with young people, are passionate about education, and see counseling as a good vehicle to promote social justice and better educational outcomes

for students. Yet, when my students leave the program and begin their work in schools, they encounter school systems that reveal a profession in crisis. Many find themselves in situations like Alyssa's:

*Alyssa was thrilled to be hired for her dream job as a high school counselor in her first year out of graduate school. She had looked forward to this day ever since her junior year in college, when she had shadowed a school counselor and immediately realized she had found her perfect career. As she began her new position, she was especially excited to be working with the innovative school leader who had recently restructured the school and adopted a focus on supporting the "whole child." She was eager to collaborate with teachers, use data to identify students' risk levels, run groups, and manage other responsibilities necessary to fulfill the school's mission. With her graduate training, she was ready to provide whatever academic, social emotional, and postsecondary supports were needed to set up students for success. Moreover, because the school was located in a small city with many youth programs, she was excited to learn more about them so that she could find ways to bridge students' school and community lives.*

*By November, however, Alyssa's excitement fizzled. She was frustrated by her job and wondering if she had made a mistake in choosing this path. She found herself spending inordinate amounts of time proctoring tests, covering the tardy desk, and writing up students who had been kicked out of class—and spending hardly any time on the social emotional and cognitive skill building she had prepared for. Why wasn't she included in her school's focus on the whole child, she wondered. Worse, some of the school's structures and policies seemed to directly undermine her role. For example, one school policy limited counselors from taking students out of classes. "How are we supposed to find out why students are struggling?" she asked at one staff meeting. The shrugs and eye rolls from her counseling colleagues suggested her concern was nothing new.*



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*Alyssa couldn't quite figure out how the school would fulfill its mission to support the whole child when the professionals who knew most about development were struggling to do their jobs. Even worse, she knew that many students were grappling with major challenges, and if she didn't find a way to make changes in her work, those students would suffer the most.*

Counselors like Alyssa are keenly aware that their good intentions and training are simply not enough, but many are not quite able to pinpoint why. Counselors are often implicated when reports show gaps in college enrollment, increased bullying behavior, and students lacking study skills. Yet, increased numbers of school shootings and demands on schools to more effectively screen for mental health needs have led many politicians to call for the hiring of more school counselors. In fact, in a recent survey of district leaders regarding how they intend to use Student Support and Academic Enrichment grant funds from the federally funded Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), respondents ranked school counseling as the second most common planned investment.<sup>4</sup> Yet, even if school counselors have the skills to screen students and provide personal supports, many are struggling to use all that they know to give students and schools the supports they require. Therefore, investments in new counselors need to be matched by renewed attention to the role.

One of the major reasons for this gap is that schools need a more strategic and systemic role for counselors. Despite the fact that almost 130,000 educational, guidance, school, and vocational counselors are employed in American schools—making them the second largest group of educators after teachers—few leaders know what they are positioned to do.<sup>5</sup> When the school counseling role is well articulated and supported, schools and students benefit. This was the case for Maria, one of Alyssa's classmates from graduate school:

*In her first year out of graduate school, Maria was hired by a veteran principal of an urban high school who fundamentally believed that*

*students who came to school having experienced trauma and other conditions related to poverty were not likely to thrive in school without adequate supports. This principal also believed that the school was responsible for preparing students for careers and, because he felt accountable for these aspects of students' development, was committed to supporting a team of school counselors. Before Maria's hiring, this principal worked collaboratively with the district's director of school counseling to hire two new school counselors and charged the entire department with developing a mission statement for the school.*

*Within her first year, Maria was tasked with setting up an intervention team, which would ultimately become a high-functioning support team that regularly used data to identify students' risk levels and connect them to appropriate supports. Maria enjoyed her new role, especially working alongside the other three school counselors who had many years of experience and mentored her at various points throughout the year.*

*In particular, one of her mentor counselors shared the district's early college awareness curriculum that was designed to be cotaught with a ninth-grade teacher. At first, Maria was reluctant to collaborate with teachers, having never been a classroom teacher herself. However, she quickly realized that the school had a culture of collaboration and the ninth-grade teachers saw the counselors as partners. Together, she and a team of teachers implemented the curriculum during Maria's first year. When the year ended, she used a survey created by the district to assess students' growth. To her surprise, 79 percent of the students reported increased awareness of postsecondary options, and 93 percent of the students could identify how their current classwork connected to their future goals. By the end of her first year, Maria felt good knowing that she could see the impact of her work and share it with the school principal.*

The contrast between these stories, created as a composite from my students' experiences, is striking and reflective of the variation in school counseling that exists today. On the one hand, this variation is troubling; often, the school counseling role is poorly understood and underutilized. But on the other hand, it shows that creating systemic and successful roles for counselors is possible and suggests that some schools and districts offer models from which others can learn and grow.

Creating the conditions for school counselors to be most effective, however, will require tackling the systemic barriers that have made it extremely difficult for school counselors to perform their counseling roles as they were once envisioned. The reasons for this are as multifaceted as the role itself. Most notably, counselors' caseloads are unreasonably high to the point of compromising their ability to do their jobs. Although the American School Counselor Association recommends a caseload of 250 students to 1 counselor, the national average is 443:1.<sup>6</sup> Currently, Arizona and California rank among the highest with 903:1 and 708:1, respectively.<sup>7</sup> These data mean that in Arizona, *the average student has to compete with almost one thousand other students for time with a counselor.* With these caseloads, simply not enough counselors are available to provide the kinds of personalized supports that students need, and that is having real consequences for young people. For example, studies show that lower caseloads are associated with increases in student attendance, decreases in the need for disciplinary actions, and increases in four-year college-going rates.<sup>8</sup> As a result, some states such as New York have begun to take steps to lower extremely large caseloads.

Simply adding more counselors will address only part of the problem. Because superintendents and principals are often unaware of school counselors' skills and potential contributions, counselors do not routinely receive professional feedback or training to improve and are often assigned tasks simply to pick up the slack, such as managing schedules, proctoring exams, or monitoring lunch duty. I often hear from school counselors who implement innovative programming that they are suc-

ceeding not because of district support but in spite of it. Sometimes counseling departments don't even appear on a district's organizational chart. It is hard to imagine how counselors and school leaders can envision or implement a counseling program aligned with a school mission when their organizational relationship lacks clarity.

Forces outside of schools also contribute to a system in need of reform. Preservice pathways and professional development programs are inadequately preparing school counselors for the demands of their jobs. For example, many critics have pointed to the fact that graduate programs in school counseling overemphasize the clinical aspects of training with little attention to the aspects of college counseling, such as fostering early aspirations, engaging families in the process, and developing skills for postsecondary transitions.<sup>9</sup> My own research has found that school counselors in training rarely receive coursework in college- and career-readiness counseling, thereby making it difficult for counselors to engage in that aspect of their work. In a similar vein, school administrators don't receive preparation or information during their graduate training regarding the role of counselors. This lack of knowledge certainly makes it hard for counselors to receive adequate supervision and guidance from their school leaders, who are typically responsible for evaluating them and defining how they spend their time.

One result of all these challenges is the arrival of a constellation of out-of-school programs and partnerships, staffed by people ready to step in and fill the gaps. With dwindling budgets and competing demands for funds, many schools have begun to rely on college access programs, social service agencies, and community youth programs to provide specialized supports that enhance school programming. These programs are well intentioned and sometimes effective but can lead to fragmentation. Counselors tell me that they find themselves handing over the work they were trained to do and which drew them to the profession so that they have time for the administrative and clerical tasks that are distracting them from their core work. At best, these programs relieve schools of the overwhelming needs brought by students, such as counseling and col-

lege planning. But at worst, they exacerbate deficiencies in the school counseling system because they keep school leaders and external partners from looking at the factors that contribute to counselors' full plates in the first place. When I recently proposed to the president of a private foundation that he invest in training for school counselors as part of his foundation's efforts to increase college-going rates, he was quick to dismiss the idea because, he said, "The schools just waste the money, and the counselors are terrible." I knew this was a gross mischaracterization and a missed opportunity; I also knew it would take more than one conversation to change his—and many others'—assessment of the profession.

### **A TIME FOR CHANGE**

School counselors can serve students more effectively—and they want to. They also know that their school and district leaders want the same thing. Now is the ideal time to refocus and reenvision the role of school counselors, thanks to four major trends in education that are opening a window of opportunity for change.

First, superintendents, philanthropists, politicians, and business leaders have all called for more attention to postsecondary preparation and success. They have become increasingly aware of the large gaps in this area between more and less advantaged students, and as a result, schools have stepped up their responsibility for students' success in college, career, and life. For example, Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel proposed a policy requiring seniors to show evidence of a postsecondary plan (such as a job offer or college acceptance) in order to graduate. Placing more responsibility on schools to raise the standards for students is a good thing, especially in tandem with other district efforts to close opportunity gaps between more and less advantaged students. School counselors are well suited to consider how to implement such a policy in a way that will ensure all students are set up to meet the requirement, along with community and university-based partners who might share responsibility for helping students meet a new graduation requirement of this type.

Imagine a school where school counselors embed this requirement into classroom-based lessons beginning in grade nine and use data to track students' progress toward meeting the postsecondary plan goal with input and support from community partners. Such a systemic approach is far more likely to lead to success than a last-minute scramble to help students put plans into place.

Second, educators, parents, and policy makers are becoming aware of the importance of social emotional learning (SEL) and the development of “noncognitive” skills.<sup>10</sup> Counselors are often the only people in schools with training in developmental psychology and are well positioned to support such efforts. In some schools, the counseling role includes leading advisories, facilitating classroom-based social emotional curricula, and guiding Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) systems.<sup>11</sup> Emily Goodman-Scott, a counselor-educator who has written extensively on the alignment between school counseling and PBIS, argues that school counselors, because of their training in prevention, counseling, and advocacy, are uniquely positioned to coordinate the implementation of PBIS programs and collaborate with PBIS teams to identify appropriate interventions.<sup>12</sup> Imagine a school where the school counselors are routinely leading prevention curricula and group counseling to promote a positive school climate through social skill development. School counselors' involvement in SEL could be more widespread, and the field is ripe for learning from the promising practices in schools at the leading edge of this movement. Universal support for social emotional skills will require that counselors expand their prevention efforts and provide consultation to teachers and school staff.<sup>13</sup> Maurice Elias, a psychology professor and leading expert in SEL, contends that school counselors play a pivotal role in promoting students' social emotional development. Elias points out, however, that although counselors should be seen as the “quarterback of the team,” they are seen as positions worth cutting when budgets are tight.<sup>14</sup>

Third, in addition to promoting college and career readiness and social emotional skills, counselors also have the potential to fill gaping

holes in school-based mental health. In the wake of high-profile tragedies including suicides and school shootings, communities have questioned the limited availability of mental health supports in schools. For example, a report published in response to the devastating school shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, blamed local schools for not monitoring shooter Adam Lanza's emotional and academic progress, pointing to poorly trained staff and a lack of resources. Although it is logical to call on school counselors to screen for mental health needs, provide support as needed, and make referrals to social service agencies, research suggests that they are only minimally involved. Surveys of school counselors report that although they believe their role should include supporting students' mental health needs, they rarely have time or support to engage in that work.<sup>15</sup> Imagine a school where the school counselors ensure that all students are screened and treated for mental health needs, teachers receive consultation and support for how to support students, and social service agencies have clear systems for receiving referrals and maintaining ongoing communication with schools. Importantly, imagine a school where counselors have enough time to build relationships with students so that students feel safe disclosing emerging symptoms and struggles.

Finally, the academic standards movement, which shapes our current educational climate, hinges on counselors helping all students to meet high achievement standards. Certainly, the standards movement, with an emphasis on raising expectations for all students, has made progress in getting the majority of students to perform at a high level.<sup>16</sup> However, those subgroups of students for whom we have not witnessed such progress would benefit from counseling to identify what stands in the way of their educational progress. For this struggling group, academic instruction and preparation alone are often insufficient. Rather, this lowest performing group of students will require counselors who can attend to the issues that otherwise interfere with their school engagement and achievement. Studies show that counselors can be effective in helping students improve their organizational, time management, and study skills.<sup>17</sup> Imagine a school district where school counselors regularly use data to iden-

tify which students warrant intensive targeted supports, conduct home visits for those students with chronic absenteeism, and identify alternative programs when necessary.<sup>18</sup>

Instead of focusing blame on school counselors, as recent reports on college and career readiness, mental health, and academic achievement have done, the current moment can be a time for focusing resources on a profession that is well positioned to meet key student needs.<sup>19</sup> We have known for some time that students are facing a considerably different educational context than in the past, and many preparation programs for teachers and school leaders are undergoing reform to these changes, such as the increased number of students experiencing trauma. The time is ripe for school counselor training to make those changes, too.

From the White House to private philanthropy, policy windows have begun to open to galvanize the profession. Counselors themselves are poised and ready for change. In 2014, First Lady Michelle Obama launched Reach Higher, an initiative to promote college access and success among low-income students. Along with a focus on raising students' postsecondary aspirations and understanding financial aid, this initiative included a primary focus on supporting school counselors and the school counseling profession. Speaking at the national ASCA conference, hosting School Counselor of the Year awards at the White House, and speaking to counselors in her final address to the nation, Michelle Obama raised public awareness about the importance of this profession to student success. The groundswell of interest evident in response to this initiative is a testament to the desire among many in education for change.

Until now, however, change has been slow for the professional school counseling community. The reason is in part that reform in school counseling has largely reached only those in the field. Organizations such as the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) and the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) provide important leadership and professional development for those working as school counselors; however, these efforts have barely scratched the surface in



changing the systems in which counselors work. For example, NACAC has produced persuasive research that has led to improvements being made in school counseling training programs; however, school leaders' understanding of counselors' skills and knowledge remains low. Likewise, although ASCA has long advocated for counselors' work to span academic, social emotional, and postsecondary development, some educators and leaders continue to hold low expectations of counselors' ability to work in all three areas.

This slow rate of change hurts all students, though some more than others. Recent events have called attention to the fact that some students, especially students of color and those from low-income communities, have limited access to school-based counselors. According to the Office of Civil Rights at the US Department of Education, "1.6 million students attend a school with a sworn law enforcement officer but not a school counselor."<sup>20</sup> Perhaps most alarming, counselors in schools serving high percentages of low-income students have the largest caseloads, despite the fact that their students are most in need of their services, from coping with the mental health consequences of trauma to navigating an unfamiliar world of postsecondary planning.<sup>21</sup> Some studies show that counselors working in schools with low college-going rates spend less time devoted to college counseling than those who work in high schools with high college-going rates.<sup>22</sup> This difference in the amount of time counselors dedicate to college planning has the potential to disproportionately impact some students more than others.

The stakes are higher in low-income communities, where the effects of poverty are significant and the safety nets are fewer. All kids need support, however, and all communities would benefit from improvements in school counseling. While some students would benefit from support to manage a stressful situation at home, others need assistance with strategies to handle a dilemma with a teacher or peer. Thus, a new approach that calls on districts and school leaders to attend to the system has the potential to ensure equal access to much-needed supports.

School leaders want those supports and so do parents. A recent poll by *Phi Delta Kappan* found that Americans expect schools to do more than provide academic instruction.<sup>23</sup> They expect schools to prepare students for careers and also to support students' development of interpersonal skills such as cooperating, solving problems, and showing respect for others. Likewise, parents overwhelmingly want schools to provide mental health supports to those who need it. Yet, meeting those expectations successfully depends on a clear understanding of how the current system may not yet be well set up to meet these goals and what we can do better.

### **FROM CHALLENGES TO OPPORTUNITIES**

This book is, at its heart, about student opportunity, but it is deeply informed by my own professional pathway and experiences. Professionals across many industries talk about the spark that incited them to pursue a career in medicine or the arts or business. For me, it was my high school counselor, Miss Miskie. Before I met her, I was primed to be a teacher. My mother was a teacher, and when I was growing up, I played a lot of "school," with a chalkboard and many dolls. But I was always more interested in what my dolls wished to be when they grew up than I was in helping them master addition. In time, I came to be so interested in counseling that Miss Miskie invited me to be a "guidance assistant" in her office, and I eventually got my own office as a licensed school counselor in a Boston public high school. The list of what I loved about my work was long and included amazing students and families, teacher and counseling colleagues who affirmed my path in education, and the ability to work with young people in a school setting. My official focus was college and career counseling, but as I told an author who interviewed me about my job, "in a school with kids who have many needs, you end up doing much more." I loved the additional counseling I provided and never shied away from new things.

It took me five years to realize that my do-it-all approach wasn't work-

ing. I encountered many unexpected frustrations: My caseload was too high; I lacked some of the training to do my job well; I spent too much time on administrative tasks; I had colleagues who did not share my desire to expand the role; I rarely received supervision or critical feedback; and I never had enough time to do all the things on my list. I felt I was regularly putting Band-Aids on problems rather than addressing the underlying causes. I watched too many students who had gone off to college return each spring, having left school for academic, social, or financial reasons. I wondered whether I gave those students the time and care they needed to find the right path. Would some of those students have benefitted from counseling earlier in their educational careers? I eventually realized that, even with the best of intentions and the support of a principal who fundamentally believed in the power of counseling services, I wasn't able to give the students everything they needed.

Years later, as a counselor educator and researcher, I realized that I was not part of an extended school counseling program and, as such, had been missing a clear set of standards to drive my work and professional development programs to help me meet those standards. Although I worked with numerous valuable partners, I never felt that, together, we created a coherent system. Instead, it was more of a catch-as-catch-can model.

Now that I am the director of a counseling education program, my graduate students sometimes argue that the model in which we are training them is too idealistic and does not necessarily reflect the reality of the conditions for the profession today. Indeed, we need to revise our training approaches, but we also need to change the role of school counselors and the systems in which they work in American education. Today, we are better prepared than ever before to make those changes. We have not seen an opportunity like this since the post-*Sputnik* moment in the 1950s, when concerns about America's global competitiveness led politicians to see school counselors as vital for guiding students to science careers. To seize this moment, we need to articulate the challenges our schools are facing . . . and what we can do to help.

## **BRIGHT SPOTS**

In this book, I call attention to the high expectations we can and should set for all school counselors, along with the requisite professional working conditions and supports necessary for them to meet those expectations. To meet new demands placed on schools, we need models illustrating where counselors have been successful when conditions have been ripe for them to succeed. Thus, I offer examples of counselors, schools, districts, and even states that have experimented with new models and structures and have found that changes in expectations of counselors, revisions to their roles, and investments in positions and programming lead to improvements in student outcomes and school climate.

School districts and schools cannot do this work alone, however. For this reason, this book also calls on the policy and philanthropic communities to examine their current investments in school counseling. Although private philanthropy has drastically increased its investments in educational endeavors such as nonprofit programs and charter schools, parallel investments in school counseling are nascent. Likewise, major differences in statewide policies regarding mandated school counseling programs and related support call into question whether all students across the nation have equal access to high-quality counseling supports. By highlighting states and funders that have taken important steps toward equalizing opportunity through school counseling reform, I provide examples we can all learn from.

## **A ROADMAP FOR THIS BOOK**

The organization of this book is designed to offer a new way of conceptualizing school counseling and present options for actualizing this new approach that will enable a more strategic, efficient, and effective role for school counselors. The first chapter describes the context of school counseling, offering a basic history of the profession, specific historical trends and events that have shaped the field, and how such an evolu-

tion has contributed to the multifaceted and ambiguous nature of the school counselor's role today. Chapter 2 presents a new approach to school counseling that elevates the centrality of the school counselor role and portrays counselors playing a role in education much like primary care physicians play in health care—forming strong relationships with students, providing some direct services, and then referring students to specialists and partners and ensuring continuity across services. Chapter 3 highlights the strong network of specialized supports provided by teachers, community partners, and students and how counselors can best leverage these important assets. Chapter 4 defines how school leaders can support this new approach by creating the conditions that are necessary for counselors to positively influence students' educational experiences such as counselor assignments and responsibilities. Chapter 5 explains the role that district leaders can play in supporting school-level change through role articulation, hiring practices, licensure and training needs, and evaluation systems that create a strong professional experience for counselors. Chapter 6 highlights private philanthropy and how new investments in system-level changes in school counseling have the potential to address a range of pressing issues in schools. This chapter also considers important shifts in policy, such as mandating that schools have school counseling programs and establishing maximum student-to-counselor caseloads that are essential to counselor effectiveness. In the concluding chapter, I sum up the urgent need for a new way of thinking about school counseling and its potential impact for all students, but especially traditionally underserved students.

Throughout this book, I present examples that highlight the challenges and opportunities that schools and school counselors are experiencing. Most of these examples depict exciting work taking place in schools and districts, and thus, both are named. In other parts of the book, I share stories that reflect composites drawn from a broad range of my professional experiences; in these cases, I use only a first name to distinguish these composites from real-world examples.

**A NOTE ABOUT TERMS**

Throughout the book, I use the term *school counselor* rather than the more well-known term *guidance counselor*. My usage is not solely based on the fact that being referred to as a guidance counselor grates on many counselors. While it is true that this irritation has prompted many counselors to correct their well-meaning colleagues and even sport T-shirts with *Guidance* crossed out in exchange for *SCHOOL COUNSELOR*, counselors' preference for correct terminology is not merely a trendy move. Counselors have consciously shifted away from the term *guidance*, which reflects the historical emphasis on vocational guidance, to better illustrate the professional scope of their role today. The term *guidance counselor* was initially coined in the early 1900s to refer to teachers who took on additional responsibilities providing vocational guidance to students. Yet that was over one hundred years ago, and the role has changed too much to rely on an outdated term. Today, counselors' work involves many aspects of a complex educational system and multiple dimensions of students' development. Thus, *guidance* belittles the profession in ways that do not serve students well. It narrows the scope of counselors' work and programming, thus misrepresenting their actual contributions to student success.

This shift in terminology mimics other changes in educational staff titles, such as *home economics*. Indeed, schools today hire *family and consumer science* educators, who teach courses similar to what was once understood as *home ec*. Likewise, what was once known as *vocational education* is now known as *career and technical education*. Similar to school counseling, these shifts in terms were intentional and have been accompanied by changes in instructional content and professional training. A similar evolution has occurred for counselors. Whereas school counselors lead classroom lessons that support students' future goals, that is only one aspect of their role. They also use data to identify students at risk of dropping out, refer students for intensive mental health support and treatment, implement positive behavioral support programs, screen stu-

dents for signs of suicide, and perform a host of other responsibilities that extend well beyond career development. That is, changes in the role have brought about comprehensive school counseling programs that are designed to support school culture and mission instead of focusing solely on delivering services to students.

To continue to use the term *guidance* is outdated, and it is misleading. Fortunately, this change is easy, free, and, I believe, matters a lot. In this book, I stick to the term *school counselor* unless using direct quotes or sharing the history of the profession.

### **A NEW DAY**

Today more focus than ever before is placed on ensuring that all students, regardless of background, receive a strong education that prepares them for their future in a twenty-first-century economy. Achieving this goal absolutely depends on our willingness to address the systemic challenges that limit school counselors' contributions in schools. There is no better time to take on this challenge because educators are looking for new solutions and strategies to solve pressing issues such as gaps in academic achievement and increased mental health needs. The field of education desperately needs a change in how schools think about and employ their school counselors. Counselors are ready and eager to be a part of that change.