



Marsha Sutton's Column

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Relief for high school counselors

The counselor is arguably the most undervalued, unrecognized influence in a high school student's life.

Counselors are expected to help low-achieving students pass the high school exit exam, keep them from dropping out, improve their overall academic performance, and be able to recommend both college and vocational options after graduation.

Counselors are expected to help high-achieving students find challenging coursework and job experience, be a knowledgeable resource for the complicated college selection and application process, advise about college testing and Advanced Placement courses, and understand scholarship options, deadlines and essay writing.

Counselors are expected to help the rest of the students too, by doing everything just mentioned for both the low-end and high-end, as well as making sure the particular needs of students in the middle aren't forgotten. Counselors must be able to help special education students who have learning disabilities.

Counselors must be trained to help students succeed not just academically but also socially and emotionally. They need to know warning signs for suicide, depression, aggression, drug and alcohol abuse, gang and criminal activity, volatile home lives and other outside factors that can affect a student's performance at school.

Counselors need to know not just how to recognize these warnings signs but also how to address the issues, to ensure that students become productive members of society.

Counselors serve as teachers, parents, advisors, administrators, wardens, mentors, confidantes and psychologists – all rolled into one.

And they often have 500 or more students assigned to them – making it nearly impossible to provide adequate services for more than a handful of squeaky-wheel cases.

For students to succeed, "counselors are a missing key component," said San Diego County Board of Education member Sue Hartley, earlier this year.

Flush with money, the state this year allocated \$200 million to focus on the counseling issue, for seventh through 12th grades.

The statewide average for middle school counselors is 665 students to one adult and it is 486:1 in high schools. The state wants to lower those appalling ratios, to 500:1 in middle schools and 300:1 in high schools – still ridiculously high, but slightly more manageable.

According to Loretta Whitson, executive director of the California Association of School Counselors [<http://www.schoolcounselor-ca.org/>], a reduced ratio is critical to student success.

Whitson said in a press release that this is the first time in California history that the state has provided this level of funding for school counselors. She said the \$200 million will allow 3,000 credentialed school counselors to be hired statewide, which will bring California ratios closer to the national average.

According to Whitson, more school counselors will allow schools to increase the one-on-one attention provided to students who are at risk of not passing the California High School Exit Exam, needing direction for course requirements to apply for college, looking for career counseling, and struggling with social and emotional needs.

Waiting to hire Locally, the San Dieguito Union High School District is just now beginning to hire counselors, after the school board voted on Nov. 16 to approve acceptance of the state grant money.

According to Rick Schmitt, the district's associate superintendent of instruction, San Dieguito will receive about \$830,000, which equals about \$71 per pupil for its seventh- through 12th-grade students. This will pay for about eight credentialed counselors, he said, because each employee costs \$80,000 to \$100,000 per year – about \$60,000 in salary and \$30,000 in benefits.

Schmitt said all nine schools in the district will benefit from additional counseling services. He anticipated that each school can expect to receive one more counselor, "although we haven't decided where to place them all yet," he said.

The district hopes to have the new counselors in place by the start of the second semester at the end of January. San Dieguito will be providing special training for new and existing counselors on Jan. 25.

In the southern part of the district, there are currently six counselors at Torrey Pines High School, three at Canyon Crest Academy, two at Carmel Valley Middle School and one at Earl Warren Middle School.

With nearly 3,000 students at TPHS, the district would have to add four more counselors to reduce the ratio from 500:1 to 300:1. And at CCA, with its 1,500 students, two more counselors would be needed. So, even though \$200 million sounds like a lot of money, it isn't nearly enough funding to pay for enough counselors to reach the state's targeted ratios.

At San Dieguito, students are assigned to a counselor alphabetically by last name. When additional counselors are hired or taken away, students are re-sorted and often re-assigned to a new counselor. Based on this system, some students are forced to change counselors several times during their four years in high school, making it difficult for kids to establish connection, familiarity and continuity with their counselors.

"It's important for kids to have a counselor that they know," Schmitt said. To avoid disruption, he said the district may assign each school's new counselor in a different way, perhaps having them specialize in particular areas of need rather than forcing an alphabetical redistribution.

Carlsbad Unified School District also waited until recently to hire new counselors, while other school districts in the county jumped to hire counselors in the summer, right after news of the grant was made official.

Although there were still some unknowns, the Grossmont Union High School District in East County began hiring counselors in August. Scott Patterson, GUHSD's deputy superintendent of business services, called the program "a great boon for us."

Patterson said the district didn't want to implement such a program mid-year, even though he was unsure when the state money would come. His district's thinking in late summer was, "Let's go grab the best counselors now," he said.

Hiring early was important, Patterson said, to snag the best and the brightest. The counselors were paid initially with money in reserves. He was confident the money would eventually come through from the state and that the funding would be ongoing.

Last year's counselor-to-student ratio at Grossmont was 675:1, Patterson said. The district has just under 25,000 students in 11 high schools serving grades 9-12. Patterson said the district started with 35 counselors and is adding another 15 through the state's program.

The Poway Unified School District also hired all its counselors early in the school year, choosing not to wait. "As soon as we knew that grant was available, we began to hire counselors," said Sharon Raffer, PUSD's director of communications. "We've hired everyone already; they're all in place. They're all doing the work the grant is requiring them to do."

Poway is receiving \$1.2 million from the state for the program and hired 11.6 additional counselors to serve its 15,335 students in grades 7-12.

The San Diego Unified School District also began hiring counselors back in September. Said Nellie Meyer, SDUSD's assistant superintendent for high schools, "It looks like we will be able to support one additional counselor per high school, and some of the larger high schools will get two counselors. This should lower the ratio and also provide extra services."

Meyer said she was thrilled about the money. "This group has been overlooked in the past, and they are critical to high school success," she said.

Not a piggy bank

San Dieguito's Schmitt and Terry King, the district's associate superintendent for human resources, defended their decision to wait to hire counselors, saying there were good reasons to be cautious.

"Nothing was clear in the original legislation," Schmitt said. "The regulations were not final until three weeks ago."

In October, King said all they had from the state was a general statement of intent. "There's nothing specific," she said at the time. "We don't know how much money there is or when we'll get it or what the regulations are. I don't really want to spend it until we receive it or get really close to receiving it."

Alan Bersin, California's former Secretary of Education who just resigned the post December 15, said in an interview last month that there was no reason to delay hiring counselors because districts didn't have the money yet.

"The budget doesn't work like a piggy bank," Bersin said. "It's ongoing and built into the base. Of course districts will get the money."

"That's easy for him to say," said Schmitt, defending the district's cautious approach. As an example of the uncertainty, Schmitt said in July districts were expecting to get \$80 per pupil. "They knocked \$9 off; it's now \$71," he said. Whether the money will continue to flow in future years also concerns administrators.

"We are working on that premise" that there will be ongoing money to pay for the new counselors, said Ken Leighton, San Diego Unified's director of accounting operations.

Lora Duzyk, assistant superintendent for business services at the county's Office of Education, said the cash flow uncertainty justifiably worries school districts. Although districts are thrilled to be getting more money from the state, establishing new programs that need ongoing funding makes many uneasy, she said.

Bersin said there will be continued funding for counselors, because legislators understand that California's counselor-to-student ratio is currently "at the bottom of the heap" nationwide.

"The main challenge now is to reform secondary education," Bersin said. Reducing the counselor-to-student ratio in high schools will help, he said. "Because of the sheer numbers [of students per counselor], the job has become box-checking and bureaucratic." Professionals say 300:1 is manageable, he said.

Counselor responsibilities

"We need to be much clearer on what the standards of counseling are," Bersin said. Guidelines to receive state money outline what is now expected of new counselors.

To receive funding for additional counselors, a school district must offer an individual conference with each pupil, the parents or legal guardians, and the counselor, according to documentation from the San Dieguito district. This annual conference with the counselor is a condition of the grant, Schmitt explained.

In addition, Schmitt said there are six other objectives that must be met, all targeted to help under-performing kids. With these students, counselors must:

1. explain the consequences of not passing the California High School Exit Exam
- 2. provide information on technical opportunities available**
3. review cumulative records
4. review performance on standardized and diagnostic tests
5. explain remediation opportunities
- 6. discuss post-secondary educational opportunities**

The purpose of the extra counselors, the regulations state, is primarily to support those students at risk of not passing the exit exam and those working two or more grade levels below standards by seventh grade.

"The goal of the new law is to help under-achieving kids," Schmitt said. "It's for kids who haven't passed the CAHSEE, kids who are basic and below on normed tests." He said counselors need to spend more time supporting the achievement of those kids, and addressing "the mental health side too, and the social side."

"I think this is good news," Schmitt said. "The idea is to have more frequent, more in-depth contact with kids."

San Diego Unified's Meyer said, "Counselors are absolutely important. They help students determine which courses to take in high school, but I'm seeing the role changing."

In the past, she said many counselors have had to deal with disruptive issues. But she sees counselors moving away from that and now working more with college planning.

Meyer identified two separate skill sets required of today's high school counselors:

1. career and college counseling and advising

2. psychological/social/personal needs (crisis help)

Exacerbating the shortage problem is that many counselors are not fully trained nor equipped to address students' needs adequately.

"I got lucky," said Doug Davison, a 2006 Torrey Pines High School graduate who now attends Knox College in Illinois. "I had the most respected counselor at Torrey Pines who was able to work the system effectively."

Other kids were not so fortunate and "would try to use my counselor," he said. Although Davison found his high school counselor to be helpful, he chose to employ the services of an outside, independent college counselor to assist him in the college application process.

"High school counselors are not in a position to help kids with the college process," said Davison, an honors student. "Counselors are some of the busiest people I know. I had my high school counselor for four years. My name is Doug, and he always called me William."

Kids and parents often feel unable to criticize or complain about the quality of their high school counselors for fear of retribution. Students need their counselors to provide letters of recommendation, help with scheduling, and offer advice for courses. As a result, many kids are afraid to speak out when counselors are less than adequate, so the problems remain hidden.

With a few more counselors, more training and more public attention on the issue, students and parents can be optimistic that counseling services will improve. Counselors themselves welcome additions to their ranks.

"Counselors are pleased there's going to be more of them, but they are also cautious," Schmitt said. One extra counselor per school in some cases only means about 30 or 40 less students per counselor, he noted. "So they will still have hundreds of kids."