

# Texas School Counselor Study:

## Exploring the Supply, Demand, and Evolving Roles of School Counselors

Baseline Report

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Counselors in middle and high schools play an essential role: counselors help students with their emotional and behavioral development, they manage curricular and graduation plans, and prepare students for life after high school, be it for college or career. After funding reductions from the Texas legislature in the spring of 2011, many school districts across Texas reduced the number of counselors available to students, increasing the number of students the remaining counselors serve by an average of 24 students. In 2013, the implementation of graduation and curricular changes mandated by House Bill 5 (HB5) increased the responsibilities of middle and high school counselors. The purpose of this report is to begin to understand how specific changes in Texas education policy have influenced counseling in the state by considering these issues.

### ***Detailed information on how counselors spend their time in Texas schools is limited.***

Texas school districts collect and report detailed information on how teachers spend their time by indicating which classes they teach throughout the day. Information on the tasks counselors perform is scarce and obtained through intermittently conducted surveys. Currently there is no link between counselors and the individual students they serve reported to the state.

### ***There are many district and community efforts across Texas intended to improve the capacity of counseling services.***

Many school districts across Texas, from the Panhandle to the Rio Grande Valley, to the Dallas and Houston metro areas, to Central Texas, are actively engaged in community-wide efforts to improve the counseling services of students in middle and high school.

### ***Counselor related student outcomes are either inaccurately reported or are simply not collected.***

Counselors help students choose and apply to a college, assist students and parents to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), and help students transition to college and the workforce. Unfortunately, data regarding student access to college and financial aid application information often relies on student reporting; information related to college enrollment often excludes out-of-state colleges; employment information is often not readily available to counselors, counselors and school district personnel have no reliable means of obtaining high school graduate occupational choices; and Texas lacks a consistent state-wide means of collecting and reporting employment-related certificates.

***The student-to-counselor ratio increased substantially across the state from 2011 to 2012, and has not returned to pre-2012 levels.***

The Legislature's decision to cut \$5.4 billion in public education in the spring of 2011 led many districts to cut counselors to balance their budgets. Nevertheless, provisions within HB5 require parent, student, and counselor meetings, a stipulation that lends support for the idea that there is no substitute for students and parents spending quality time with a counselor. However, the larger the case load that counselors experience, the more difficult it is to spend the amount and quality of time required to effectively help students.

***The cost of reducing the student-to-counselor ratio in Texas to pre-recession levels is approximately \$66 million a year.***

In 2008, the student-to-counselor ratio was approximately 430:1. If the student population in Texas continues to increase at its 15-year average of 82,320 students per year, there will be approximately 5,234,250 students in Texas in 2014-15 (Figure 3). In Texas the average counselor FTE cost in 2014 was approximately \$60,000. To bring the student-to-counselor ratio back to its 2008 level, there would need to be approximately 12,173 counselor FTEs in 2014-15: 1,100 more than the 2013-14 amount. At approximately \$60,000/FTE, the total cost for these additional counselors would be approximately \$66,000,000 for each year.

***House Bill 5 increased the amount of work counselors are required to perform.***

Counselors are required to meet with all entering 9th grade students and their parents to choose a graduation plan and endorsement, a function that is performed either by an 8th grade counselor or by a high school counselor visiting the student in middle school. Any changes in endorsements that students seek to make must also involve a meeting between counselor, student, and parents. Counselors are required to meet with all students in each year of high school to provide information about postsecondary education.

***Not fully outlined in the legislation are several implicit demands on counselors imposed through House Bill 5's focus on not only college matriculation but also high school to career transitions.***

HB5 was intended to provide opportunities for high school students to earn endorsements and, along with endorsements, career-specific certifications. Implicit in this emphasis is the requirement that high school counselors provide information to students about the local labor market, including prevailing wages, industry demand, required certifications for occupations, and opportunities for linking career training interests with local colleges and universities.

***There are more efficient means of providing counseling services to students, particularly for process-related activities like choosing a four year plan or enrolling in college.***

Postsecondary counseling in high school is often envisioned as a counselor sitting down with a student and the student's parents and discussing the student's interests and desires in an effort to

match these with available opportunities. Unfortunately, such meetings are lengthy and likely inefficient. Texas school districts are trying a host of collaborative innovations around counseling efforts involving colleges, universities, chambers of commerce, school districts, non-profits, foundations and businesses. These innovations include the following types of activities:

- Leveraging school personnel, community organizations, and colleges,
- Using technology to more effectively and efficiently reach students,
- Utilizing useful data from non-district collected data sources,
- Utilizing efficient means of discovering student needs, and
- Managing the issue of summer melt.

***Data to identify many of the outcomes of interest mandated by HB5 are not currently available.***

Policy makers and researchers seeking to know whether recent high school graduates successfully enroll in college, receive an occupation-related certificate, or are successfully employed in the occupation the high school and local colleges prepared the student for are likely to be disappointed; this information is either incomplete or not collected in Texas.

These findings lead to a number of recommendations intended to improve student access to counseling services and increase the efficiency with which counselors obtain student information. These recommendations consist of two parts: those intended for school districts and their regional partners, including colleges and community organizations; and those intended for the legislature.

## **REGIONAL AND DISTRICT RECOMMENDATIONS**

***Increase the capacity of counseling at high schools.***

- Create a middle to high school transition counselor position to help 8th graders make their endorsement and graduation plan choices.
- Conduct electronic surveys of high school students to enable more efficient means of sharing student academic and career interests with counselors.
- Make counselor staffing a priority, publicly stating your district's student-to-counselor ratios at each of your schools and committing to increasing the availability of counseling staff for your students.

***Engage in community and regional partnerships.***

- Leverage community organizations and regional partnerships to develop and share strategies and coordinate efforts to improve counseling services to students in your region.
- Engage with local workforce development boards to ensure counselors understand local labor market conditions.

- *Commit to preparing all staff to assist students in achieving their academic and career goals*, Develop and adopt a community framework to allow teachers and other school staff to more effectively provide support to students in their goals.
- Teachers and other school staff should have ready access to the career and educational goals of students.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE LEGISLATURE**

***Reduce the assigned responsibilities of counselors, increasing the time they have to perform the work required to effectively prepare student for college and careers.***

- Many counselors spend significant time managing the administration of standardized tests. It is time to assign other personnel to engage in this work, freeing up some of the time of counselors currently assigned this task.

***Make available opportunities to increase the number of people providing appropriate counseling services at schools.***

- Restore cuts in funding to school districts so districts possess the resources to increase the number of counselors.
- Encourage school districts to create a middle to high school transition counselor for each middle school to serve as a coordinator for graduating 8th grade students.
- Encourage TEA to create a counselor's aide position to serve as support staff to the work counselors perform.
- Determine a threshold minimum for the number of students for which a school must have a full time counselor; e.g., "If a campus contains more than 100 students, the school must employ at least one full time counselor."
- Provide funding credit to colleges and universities who provide on-site college and career preparation services to non-dual credit high school students.
- Increase the number of counselors focusing on direct-to-college enrollment by scaling the Advise Texas program.
- Encourage the development of online training standards to ensure that counselors understand and use existing tools to evaluate local labor market demand.
- Encourage connections between local workforce development boards and high school counselors.

***Help districts improve the efficiency of counseling at their schools.***

- Improve student outreach through technology: Provide counseling technology capacity building grants to allow high schools to partner with colleges, universities, and private



vendors to develop and implement the technological tools to improve counseling efficiency. These tools may also be used to more effectively reach out to parents and the community about high school graduation, college transitions, and workforce services for students.

***Enhance current data collection systems to ensure that the effects of House Bill 5 can be appropriately evaluated.***

- Comparable to the way teachers are linked to their students, link counselors to the students they serve.
- Provide additional paid staff to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board to work directly with districts requesting FAFSA and Apply Texas data. Seek to develop workable means for the THECB to share FAFSA and Apply Texas data with school districts, be it through private, contracted vendors chosen by the districts or within an enhanced state-wide data sharing system.
- Upgrade the Unemployment Insurance wage system to collect job occupation and more accurate job location information.
- Revisit the manner in which occupational certifications are collected and maintained; access to consistently collected and centrally maintained certification records will allow districts, parents, and the broader community to evaluate their high school's performance.
- Determine which high school graduates enroll in out-of-state colleges and universities using National Student Clearinghouse data.

***Commit to increasing counselor capacity in the state by engaging in community counselor staffing and performance monitoring. Just as the state testing regimen allows for parents to assess the quality of teaching at their schools, develop counselor metrics to allow parents to assess the quality of counseling at their child's campus.***

- Press the Texas Education Agency to produce and publicly report student to counselor and student to counselor aide ratios each year for all schools in the state, subject to standard FERPA constraints.
- A regime of school-level counselor performance monitoring should include:
  - The ability to link counselors to the students they serve. The publishing of aggregate school-level information on specific student outcomes, including FAFSA completion, college application completion, direct-to-college enrollment (in-state as well as out), and occupations, specifically those related to the endorsements offered on each campus.
  - Annual student surveys to determine the share of students at each campus who met with their counselor at least once and at what point during the school year the meeting(s) take place.

- Annual survey of counselors asking them the types of tasks they engage in during the year and at least an approximation of what share of their time they spend performing these tasks.

Counselors play a vital role in the lives of Texas students. Recent funding and policy changes in Texas have increased the responsibilities of the counselor role. However, if the innovations in counseling being actively implemented by some school districts in Texas were more broadly used, it could strengthen the effective implementation of counselor requirements put forward in HB5.

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## INTRODUCTION

Policymakers in Texas are increasingly emphasizing the importance of ensuring that high school graduates are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to make successful transitions to college or a career. The most recent substantive policy change related to this effort is House Bill 5 (HB5), which was passed by the Texas Legislature in 2013 and subsequently signed into law. HB5 significantly changed the structure of high school curricula, graduation plans, and endorsements available to students, all of which have important ramifications for students' post-high school transitions. All students in the 8th grade must decide which of the available graduation plans and endorsements they will pursue while in high school.

Given the complexity of the curricular changes envisioned in HB5, the bill charged high school counselors with being the primary implementers of these new curricular policies and serve as the liaisons between students and the curricular options available to them. Districts therefore heavily rely on counselors to communicate high school graduation plans and their implications to students. Decisions made about courses and graduation plans affect whether a graduating high school student will have the qualifications to be accepted into college, and/or whether a student's career option as defined by these plans will prepare the student for a high-demand job in the Texas labor market. Counselors will need to understand all the implications behind choices that students make about their preferred graduation plan and endorsement and effectively communicate all potential choices and their ramifications to students. Thus, counseling staff play a critical role in the implementation of HB5 across Texas, being the primary intermediary between new HB5 graduation policies and the student.

While counselors can and should play a critical role in guiding students' curricular pathways and preparing them to transition to college or a career, Texas has little information regarding the degree to which the cadre of counselors is able to effectively serve in this capacity. There is a lack of research examining the factors that influence the student-to-counselor ratios. This is particularly important given the current financial context for education in the state. The Texas Legislature eliminated approximately \$5.4 billion from public schools during the 2011 legislative session, and research has shown that these cuts necessitated the reduction in both teaching and non-teaching staff in Texas schools (Goff, 2013). A reduced supply of counselors would likely prevent the full implementation of HB5. However, the extent of counselor layoffs and the effects on the student-to-counselor ratio in the state is currently unknown. Additionally, school counselors are charged with a variety of responsibilities in addition to college and career counseling and curriculum advising, such as schedule coordination and standardized testing administration. It is also unknown the extent to which counselors in the state have the time and capacity to study, understand, and communicate the

policy changes included in HB5 to students and their families, particularly if counselor reductions resulted in increased workloads for counselors.

Given these limitations in our understanding, the purpose of this study is to analyze the supply, demand, and evolving roles of school counselors in Texas. This research first examines the role of counselors and evidence of their effectiveness in improving student outcomes. Second, researchers discuss the Texas policy context in relation to recent legislative changes that impact the work counselors perform. Then researchers use administrative data from the Texas Education Research Center to look at the supply and demand of counselors in Texas from 2000 to 2014. A discussion of relatively recent innovations across the state that improve the efficiency of the work counselors perform is discussed in the second section. A summary of findings and recommendations follow.

## HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELING

### Texas Policy Context

In 2013, the legislature passed House Bill 5 (HB5). While this report looks specifically at counselors and their role in a post-HB5 world, the context for what led to the passage of this legislation is important. While HB 5 instituted multiple changes including adding a college readiness course for high school seniors and instituting changes to the career and technology education courses, arguably the most relevant policy context affected by HB5 for high school counselors involved changes in the mandatory testing requirements and graduation plan structure.

#### *Mandatory Testing*

The origins of House Bill 5 began, in part, as a response to implementation of Senate Bill 1031 (passing during the 80th legislative session in 2007) and House Bill 3 (passed during the 81st legislative session in 2009), which required:

- increasing the rigor and relevance of both standards and assessments;
- creating and assessing postsecondary readiness standards;
- establishing campus and district accountability based on higher college- and career-readiness performance standards on STAAR, and
- establishing new time lines for interventions and sanctions while also expanding school closure and alternative management options." (HB3 Executive Summary)

In 2011 this new test, the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness, or STAAR test, replaced the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills, or TAKS test. Begun in 2003, the TAKS test included assessments in English, math, science, and social studies for students attending school in 3rd through the 11th grade, though not all subjects were tested in all years. Prior to the STAAR test implementation year, high school students during their junior year were required to take TAKS tests in English, math, social studies, and science though these tests were not necessarily course-specific (i.e., students taking Calculus in their junior year took the same mathematics test as students taking Algebra 2).

Texas' school sanction system uses the school-level passing rates, both overall and for specific groups of students, to determine state-mandated sanctions; the passing threshold for any test is the minimum share of students from any group that must pass the test to avoid school sanction. The TAKS test began with a low passing threshold for schools with the intent that in subsequent years the passing threshold would become higher. In 2003, schools where at least 35% of their students passed the math exam were considered academically acceptable. In following years, the threshold required for schools to be classified as academically acceptable increased; by 2011, 65% of a school's students needed to pass the mathematics exam in order for that school to be classified as academically acceptable. Texas used this 'ramping-up' of school passing rates as a means of improving the academic rigor of their schools throughout the TAKS era.

The structure of the new STAAR test for high school students significantly altered the rigor and structure of student testing requirements for high school graduation. Beginning in the 2011-2012 school year, entering 9th graders in high school were required to take and pass 12 end-of-course assessments in the four subjects (Cloutd, 2010). Furthermore, these end-of-course STAAR test results in high school were required to account for at least 15% of the student's final grade in that subject (Cloutd, 2010). In a presentation to the Texas Assessment Conference in December of 2010, Criss Cloutd, an Associate Commissioner at the Texas Education Agency described how results from these tests would be used to determine if a student was qualified to graduate from high school:

"To graduate under STAAR, a student must achieve a cumulative score that is at least equal to the product of the number of EOC assessments taken in each foundation content area (English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies) and a scale score that indicates satisfactory performance." (Cloutd, 2010)

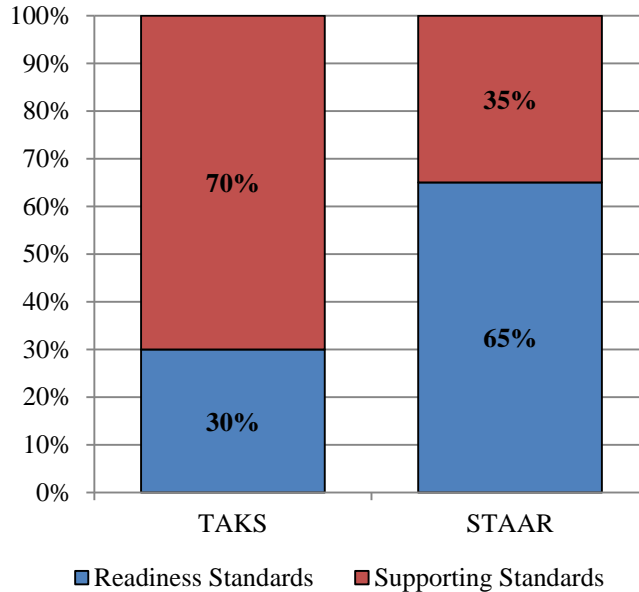
The Texas Education Agency implemented these admittedly confusing requirements in combination with increased rigor in the exams. The increased rigor inherent in the STAAR tests as compared to the TAKS test for high school students dealt with the structure (end-of-course exams for STAAR compared to grade-level structure for TAKS) and content (more rigorous content in the STAAR compared to the TAKS) of the tests. The TAKS tests in high school included skills from the current as well as previous years: thus, students taking the high school math exit test were required to demonstrate proficiency in Geometry, Algebra 1, and 8th grade math concepts.<sup>1</sup> The end-of-course STARR tests are much more subject specific, so students taking the Algebra 1 test are tested only on concepts learned in that course, so information mastered in previous courses is tested only to the extent that it is incorporated into the current subject.

In addition, standardized tests focus on both *readiness standards* and *supporting standards* (TEPSA, 2012). Readiness standards tend to be more rigorous, emphasizing "broad and deep ideas," that are, "important for preparedness for the next grade or course," that "necessitate in-depth instruction," and "support college and career readiness," (TEPSA, 2012). Supporting standards are generally less rigorous and may come from previous grades or courses but can also "address more narrowly defined ideas," (TEPSA, 2012). On the TAKS test, 70% of the test consisted of supporting standards, with just 30% of the test measuring readiness standards (Figure 2). Additionally, the STAAR test consists of only 35% of "supporting standards," with 65% of the test measuring "readiness standards," (TEPSA 2012).

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<sup>1</sup> Information presented by TEA staff as oral testimony before the House Committee on Education, October 8th, 2014.

**Figure 1. Types of Standards Tested in TAKS and STAAR Tests**



Thus, students entering high school in the 2011-2012 school year were required to take significantly more mandated tests, and the rigor of the tests was intended to be greater than that for the TAKS tests which those students had completed from the 3rd through the 8th grades and was more rigorous than state-mandated TAKS exams for previous high school students. This additional rigor resulted in significant changes in the share of students who passed these exams.

The spring 2012 STAAR test results showed that state-wide, 17% of test takers did not pass the Algebra 1 end-of-course (STAAR 1, Jan 2013). Furthermore, 32% of test takers did not pass the English 1 end-of-course exam and 45% of test takers did not pass the English 1 writing tests (STAAR 1, Jan 2013). Since only entering 9th graders were tested, some district personnel expressed particular concern that students who were already academically advanced enough to take courses like Algebra 2 and Chemistry (courses traditionally taught to 10th graders) performed very poorly. Only 65% of test takers passed the Algebra 2 exam and only 54% of Chemistry test takers passed their end-of-course exam (STAAR 1, Jan 2013). If the most academically advanced students in the state performed this poorly, results did not bode well for future test performance in these subjects.

Students who did not pass the STAAR end-of-course tests are required to take them again. Students who failed the end-of-course exam but passed the class needed academic supports that schools and districts needed to provide outside of the classroom, which likely caused a drain on district resources. Students who took a test the following fall (many of whom failed that test in the spring) performed very poorly: of the over 51,000 students in Texas who took the Algebra 1 course in the fall of 2012, 62% failed the exam, some for the second time (STAAR Fall Results).



### *Graduation Plans*

Since the early 2000s, Texas' graduation requirements became increasingly stringent. Prior to HB 5 Texas had three graduation plans: a minimum plan, a recommended plan, and a distinguished plan, with academic course requirements increasing in rigor from the minimum to the distinguished. Beginning with entering 9th graders in the 2004-2005 school year, all students were automatically enrolled in the recommended plan, and only after parent involvement and administrative review could a student graduate using the minimum plan. This automatic enrollment continued for students entering 9th grade in the 2007-2008 school year. However, for these students, the ability to drop down to the minimum plan was much harder: not only were there parental and administrative reviews required to place a student into the minimum plan, but the student needed to be at least 16 years old, have at least completed two credits in each core subject, and failed to be promoted to 10th grade one or more times (section 74.61.c). All of these conditions needed to be met in order for a student to graduate using just the minimum plan. Not only did it become more difficult for high school students to escape the recommended plan, but the course taking and completion requirements to complete the recommended plan substantially increased over this time.

From 2003 to 2011, additional course requirements increased the number of academically rigorous courses in the recommended plan. An entering 9th grader prior to the 2007-2008 school year who graduated on the recommended plan was required to take four English, three math, three science, and three and a half credits of social studies, along with a host of other requirements. Students entering after that year were required to take four English, four math, four science, and four social studies courses. Thus, successive cohorts of entering 9th grade students encountered more stringent graduation requirements. From 2003 to 2011, the policy trend in Texas aligned with a 'college for all' model, with expanding requirements for students to take specific courses (such as Algebra 2) intended to prepare them for college entry. At the same time an increasing share of students within schools needed to pass the exams in order for the school to be considered academically acceptable. The reasoning behind requiring student to take academically rigorous courses lies in the fact that students from certain socio-economic and demographic groups are much less likely to voluntarily take these courses, regardless of ability to successfully complete them, which limits their ability to enroll in college (Delany, 1991; Gamoran, 1992; Lee, 1993; Rosenbaum, 1976; Spade, Colomba, & Vanfossen, 1997).

The focus on increasing mandatory course requirements stemmed, in part, from the Closing the Gaps report by the Texas Higher Education Report, which recognized that "...a large gap exists among racial/ethnic groups in both enrollment and graduation from the state's colleges and universities." (THECB, 2000). In 2000, the THECB expected Texas to experience an increasing share of high school students from low income and minority backgrounds that are traditionally much less

likely to enroll in college, likely widening the college enrollment gap between these groups of students and their higher income counterparts (THECB, 2000). By not enrolling in colleges and universities, the skills of individuals might not meet the needs of Texas employers, which could suppress future individual earnings and, over the long term, hurt the Texas economy.

Their prediction of dramatic demographic shifts came to fruition. The share of low income students in all Texas public schools grew from 49% in the 1999-2000 school year to 59.2% by the 2010-2011 school year (AEIS, 2000 & 2012). This growth in the share of low income students coincided with a rapid increase in the number of students Texas public schools served, growing by over 23% over this same time period, serving over 4.9 million students in the 2010-2011 school year (AEIS, 2000 & 2012). Texas experienced higher growth in the number of high school graduates, increasing 27% over this same time period (THECB, 2014). Increasing testing stringency and requiring completion of advanced coursework were methods designed to ensure that high school graduates could successfully matriculate to college.

#### *House Bill 5*

As the 82nd Texas Legislature began in January of 2013, some districts placed pressure on their legislators to address what they perceived as over-zealous and burdensome testing requirements, particularly for their high school students. Certainly, after the passage of HB5, the immediate message about the bill's passage from many school district personnel was relief at the reduction of the testing burden on high school students, their parents, and school districts. Inherent in this reduction was an attempt to reduce the work load of high school counselors in relation to managing the testing process, who in most schools coordinate the administration of all standardized accountability tests.<sup>2</sup> However, other provisions in the bill increased the work load of middle and high school counselors. In prepared statements for the Senate Journal Senator Dan Patrick outlined reasoning behind House Bill 5:

"When we as a Legislature first instituted the current high school testing regime several years ago, we did so with the best intentions. We wanted to ensure that students left Texas public high schools fully equipped to enter postsecondary education. Texas has not stepped back from that commitment. However, we needed, this session, to take a hard look at whether we were honoring that commitment under a current testing regime...We heard from teachers that teaching to an exam interferes with their lesson planning. We heard from thousands of students unable to pass one or more end-of-course exams and putting their dreams of graduating and going to college at risk. Even for those that passed all exams, we heard about students having their chances at getting into the college of their choice hampered by the requirement that an end-of-course exam count as 15 percent of their final grade. And we heard about students fearing the exams and dreading going to school. Taken together, we couldn't help but conclude the elements of our current regime were putting unnecessary obstacles in the way of our students achieving their goals of going to college. Surely, something needed to be done." (Senate Journal, pg. 3829)

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<sup>2</sup> Based on an interview with HD Chambers, Superintendent of Alief ISD.

After the passage of HB5, beginning in 2013 the only required end-of-course exams included English I, English 2, Algebra 1, biology and US. history, a far cry from the 12 exams administered in the 2011-2012 school year.

However, HB5 did not only alter the testing regiment of students, but also changed graduation requirements. The legislature dropped the minimum, recommended, and distinguished graduation plans, which had existed in some form over the previous decade, in favor of a different graduation plan structure. Students are required to complete the Foundation Program, which includes four credits in English, and three credits each in math, science, and social studies, among other course requirements.<sup>3</sup> In addition to completing the Foundation Program, "each student, on entering ninth grade, indicates in writing an endorsement...that the student intends to earn," (HB5 Sec. 28.025.b). These endorsements include five possible options: STEM, Business and Industry, Arts & Humanities, Public Services, and Multi-Disciplinary Studies (HB5 Sec. 28.025.c-1).

Students and their parents can decide to opt out of choosing an endorsement, but may only do so after completing their sophomore year of high school, are providing guidance from their high school counselor about the importance of obtaining an endorsement and the parent provides written permission for their child to not receive an endorsement (TEC sec. 28.025.b). Thus, all entering students in the 8th grade must choose an endorsement regardless of whether or not they intend to graduate with one.

These endorsements are meant to serve as a means of providing academic supports for both college and career preparation. Districts are required to offer at least one of these endorsements, and if they offer only one, it must be the multi-disciplinary studies endorsement (HB5 Sec. 28.025.c-4). Many districts offer at least two endorsements. Some districts with multiple high schools offer different endorsement options at each school.

The endorsements are intrinsically tied to the Foundation Program course structure, which stipulates that students need to take three courses in some subjects, with one of those courses being considered an advanced course. Students seeking to receive an endorsement in Business & Industry, for example, might be required to complete, for one of the three math credits, a math course specifically related to their endorsement and then an additional math course, receiving a total of 4 credits in that subject. Students who complete the Foundation Plan with an endorsement are required to receive four credits of English, math, science, and social studies.

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<sup>3</sup> Additional requirements include 2 foreign language courses, 1 each of physical education and fine arts, and five elective courses. The emphasis placed on English, math, science, and social studies is due to these courses being considered the 'core' curriculum and as these are the subjects for which students are tested using the STAAR test.

Students can also graduate on the Distinguished Achievement Program, which includes completing all requirements for the Foundation Program, an endorsement, Algebra 2, and other specific activities. Some school districts have consciously chosen to default students into the distinguished plan, which others default students into the foundation plan. Placing students into a non-distinguished plan as the default as students enter high school has the potential to influence their college enrollment prospects. First, the distinguished plan is intended to provide academic rigor above and beyond the foundation plan; therefore, students who complete the distinguished plan may be more likely to be prepared for, accepted to, and enroll in college. Additionally, for high school graduates to be considered for automatic admission into public universities in Texas through the top 10% policy, they must graduate on the distinguished plan (TEC §51.803). Students graduating on the foundation plan with an endorsement are not eligible for the top 10% automatic admission policy. Prior to HB5, students entering high school were defaulted into the recommended graduation plan; students graduating under that plan who graduated in the top 10% of their class were eligible for automatic admission.

The reasoning behind HB5 graduation requirements is strikingly similar to the reasoning behind efforts to increase the stringency of testing and graduation course requirements: preparation for the workforce. The prevailing viewpoint prior to HB5 was that students graduating from high school would need to enter college in order to possess the knowledge and skills Texas employers needed; this is the same viewpoint after HB5. The difference is that, prior to HB5, the policy was that students would more likely see economic benefit from receiving a 4-year degree, so the state needed to ensure that as many students as possible were prepared for a university education. The types of jobs students were preparing for included working in health care and high tech industries. After HB5, students can receive workforce ready certifications and training while in high school, enroll in either a 2-year or a 4-year program after high school, and be ready for the workforce.

An additional provision in HB5 concerns the academic preparedness of recent high school graduates for appropriately rigorous non-remedial college coursework. Students who leave high school without appropriate academic preparation for college and who then enroll in developmental non-credit bearing courses in college are much less likely to complete college. Provisions in HB5 require a college preparation course be offered to high school seniors who are not classified as college ready by the end of their junior year (TEC §28.014). The purpose of this course is to "prepare students for success in entry-level college courses," (TEC §28.014.2). By identifying students in need of academic support, and then providing it, public schools lay the foundation for reducing the long-term college costs for individual students marginally prepared for college at the end of their junior year who are then classified as being college ready after completing the course.

## High School Counseling

Counselors play a significant, often a primary, role in all of the policy areas addressed by House Bill 5: managing the campus-wide state-mandated testing regime, guiding students through the decision-making process of choosing their graduation plan, and informing students regarding their course selection preferences, including choosing to take a course designed to ensure the student graduate high school classified as being college-ready. The importance of the role of counseling in helping student navigate high school and the transition from high school to college and/or a career is well documented in the literature.

In her report prepared for the National Association of College Admission Counseling (NACAC), McDonough (2005) stated that, “Within schools, no professional is more important to improving college enrollments than counselors” (p. 2). Results from a variety of studies support the contention that counselors can have a pronounced impact on students’ college outcomes by increasing their postsecondary aspirations, assisting them in navigating the financial aid system, expanding and refining the types of colleges they apply to, and helping them choose a postsecondary institution that is aligned with their aspirations and abilities (Adelman, 1999; Belasco, 2013; Bryan et al., 2011; Holcomb-McCoy, 2010; Jordan, 2001; McDonough, 1997; Orfield & Paul, 1993; Perna & Titus, 1997; Rosenbaum, Miller, & Krei, 1996). While isolating the causal effect of school counseling on students’ postsecondary outcomes is difficult, recent studies suggest that greater interaction between students and counselors has a positive and significant impact on students’ likelihood of postsecondary enrollment and the school’s overall college-going rate (Belasco, 2013; Engberg & Gilbert, 2013; Stephan & Rosenbaum, 2012).

While much of the research on counselor effects has focused on the influence counselors have on students during their college search process, counselors also play a critical role in guiding students into particular curricular pathways early in their secondary schooling. Researchers have demonstrated that the presence of diverse curricular tracks often results in the reinforcement of social stratification on racial and socioeconomic lines due to two interrelated phenomena:

- 1) Different curricular pathways provide students with varying levels of academic preparation and, consequently, access to higher education; and,
- 2) Racial minority, low-income, and first-generation students are often the least informed regarding the long-term effects of the academic pathways they pursue, resulting in these students being more likely to opt for less rigorous or more vocationally oriented pathways.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Delany, 1991; Gamoran, 1992; Lee, 1993; Rosenbaum, 1976; Spade, Colomba, & Vanfossen, 1997.

Counselors can play a significant role in guiding students into curricular tracks appropriate for their aspirations, but an insufficient supply of counselors, particularly at schools where the student body has greater need, may serve as a systemic barrier to the college access of students from underrepresented groups.

But while counselors may be one of the most crucial links between students and postsecondary education, particularly for first-generation students and those from groups historically underrepresented in higher education (Stanton-Salazar & Sanford, 1995), a number of factors often hinder counselors from providing students with the guidance and support they need to realize their postsecondary aspirations. College counseling is only one facet of a counselor's responsibilities which also include crisis intervention, developmental counseling, and discipline (Ballard & Murgatroyd, 1999; McDonough, 2005a; NACAC, 2006; Venezia & Kirst, 2005). Indeed, results from a survey administered by NACAC (2012) showed that public school counselors spend only 23% of their time on college counseling, compared to 55% on average for private school counselors. Many counselors report that the accountability movement has also detracted from their ability to provide college counseling, as counselors are frequently the school-level personnel charged with standardized test coordination and administration (Brown, Galassi, & Akos, 2004; Perna et al., 2008). And perhaps the most significant obstacle to counselors assisting students' in their college search is the student-to-counselor ratio common in many schools; the United States averages one counselor for every 471 students, and some states, such as California, average more than 1,000 students for each counselor (American School Counselor Association, n.d.).

Whether due to the inadequate supply of school counselors overall or the conflicting demands on their time, it appears that many students feel as though the information they received from their counselors was inadequate to prepare them for life after high school. In a nationally representative sample of youth between the ages of 22-30, all of whom had enrolled in postsecondary at some point, Johnson and Rochkind (2012) found that the majority of students reported feeling that their interactions with their counselors were inadequate. Importantly, the study also found that students who reported dissatisfaction with the counseling services available to them were less likely to enroll in college directly after high school. Although the study was retrospective and non-experimental, the results suggest that increasing the supply of counselors may be an important step in increasing students' college outcomes.

### **Counselor Policies in Texas**

Counselors are mentioned 71 times in the Texas Education Code (TEC), which contains the statutory framework for Texas' public and higher education systems. General duties for counselors are assigned in section 33.006. The "primary responsibility" of a counselor is to "counsel students to fully

develop each student's academic, career, personal, and social abilities," (33.006.a). The TEC also outlines some of the duties prescribed to school counselors, which include developmental guidance, crisis intervention, and developing educational plans for at-risk students. Beginning in 2007, the Texas Legislature also began adding sections focused specifically on counselor requirements relating to college counseling. At the high school level, the TEC now states that counselors must:

- 1) Meet with each student and the student's parent or guardian annually;
- 2) Stress the importance of postsecondary education to the student;
- 3) Emphasize the advantages of earning an endorsement and a performance acknowledgement and completing the distinguished level of achievement under the foundation high school program;
- 4) Explain the disadvantages of taking courses to prepare for a high school equivalency exam;
- 5) Discuss financial aid eligibility and application information, and;
- 6) Provide information regarding automatic admission to Texas postsecondary institutions under the Uniform Admissions Policy (TEC, §33.007(b)).

One item not listed here, but repeated during conversations with counselors and district staff involves the role of counselors in managing the administration of mandatory testing at their schools. While some districts specifically assign all testing management responsibilities to one counselor, others distribute these responsibilities. And as stated in the introduction, HB5 also placed new requirements on counselors for assisting students in choosing a curricular pathway.

HB5 imposed a number of new tasks both specifically and implied for counselors to perform. For entering 9th graders, counselors or an administrator, are required to sit down with the student and the student's parent to discuss graduation plan options available under HB5 (Sec. 28.02121). Before the end of that student's 8th grade, both student and parent have to sign the student's graduation plan. According to Senator Dan Patrick this provision was included in HB5 for a reason: "The series of endorsements students may take under House Bill 5 gives students greater ownership over their own academic career and lets them choose their own path toward postsecondary education or the workforce" (Senate Journal, pg. 3829).

Students who decide to pursue a different endorsement or add an endorsement are required to meet with a counselor during their 10th through 12th grade years and the same process is followed: the counselor, the student and parent meet to make modifications to the plan and then the parent and student sign off on the new plan.

Prior to HB5, counselors were required to provide information to each high school senior and their parents about higher education. Now counselors are required to provide information about postsecondary education to the student and the student's parent "during each year of a student's enrollment in high school," essentially quadrupling this portion of the work a counselor performs (TEC, §33.007(b)). This same provision also deletes the words "higher education" and replaces it with "postsecondary education." This change in emphasis is likely on having counselors provide

information related to 2-year colleges and technical schools as well as 4-year colleges. Implicit in HB5's emphasis on high school to career, counselors must also provide information to students on the local labor market, including prevailing wages and industry demand. However, the current capacity for high school counselors to serve as workforce intermediaries is unclear.

### **Supply and Demand of School Counselors**

Despite the critical role counselors play in guiding students into particular academic pathways and providing students with important information related to college access, little is known about factors that influence the supply and demand of school counselors. Nationally, the most widely recognized source of variation in the supply of counselors is at the state level. As mentioned previously, the United States averages a student-to-counselor ratio of 471:1, but the states exhibit wide variation in this rate; five states have ratios greater than 700:1, while four states and the District of Columbia have ratios less than 300:1 (ASCA, n.d.). Only two states have ratios lower than the 250:1 ratio recommended by the ASCA.

One might assume that this state-level variation in the student-to-counselor ratio is a product of state policy that mandates specific levels of counselor availability, but research has shown this not to be the case. In Perna et al.'s (2008) study of counseling practices and availability at 15 schools across five states, the researchers concluded that "one state-level force that appears to be unrelated to the availability of college counseling at the study schools is a state mandate for counseling" (p. 152). Of the five study states, only two had specific mandates for counselors to be provided. However, schools with no state mandate often had lower student-to-counselor ratios than the schools with state mandates. Additionally, in Georgia, all three of the study high schools had ratios higher than the state mandate of 400:1, suggesting that the presence of state policy related to counselor distribution alone is insufficient to ensuring an adequate supply of counselors.

Researchers have therefore looked for school and district conditions that influence the availability of counselors. The two factors that have been investigated most frequently are student achievement and demographic characteristics. In terms of the relationship between student achievement levels and counseling, some studies have found that college counseling is more available for college-track students (McDonough, 2005a; Venezia & Kirst, 2005). However, Perna et al.'s (2008) study found that there was little relationship between the average achievement levels of schools and the availability of counselors. This could be due to the fact that certain types of counseling services target the most needy students, particularly those dealing with significant issues such as drugs and alcohol, violence, and the possibility of dropping out of school. Thus, high- and low-risk students may receive equivalent levels of counseling on average, although for different reasons. In this sense, requiring counselors to spend quality time with 8th graders entering into high



school to discuss course-taking and graduation plans may provide high-risk students an opportunity which they may not normally encounter to discuss long-term planning topics with their counselors.

Studies have also investigated whether the racial and socioeconomic composition of the student body influences the supply of counselors. Some studies found that college counseling is less available in predominantly low-income and/or minority schools (McDonough, 1997, 2005a). However, once again other studies have shown that student-to-counselor ratios are not directly related to the demographic characteristics of the student body (NACAC, 2006; Perna et al, 2008). In Perna et al.'s (2008) study, low-resource schools in some states had a significantly higher student-to-counselor ratio than high-resource schools, but this relationship was reversed in other states. These researchers concluded that school-level administrative decisions may have a more pronounced effect on the availability of counselors than state mandates or the composition of the student body.

One factor that has repeatedly been shown to affect the supply of counselors is funding for education. Most notably, the recent recession appears to have led many schools and districts to eliminate counseling positions. A survey of school districts conducted by the Center on Education Policy (2011) at George Washington University indicated that over half of all districts facing budget reductions as a result of the recession indicated that they would need to cut school counselors. Hurwitz and Howell's (2013) analysis similarly showed that counselors are often one of the first in-school positions to be eliminated during budget deficits, possibly due to the ambiguity surrounding the effects of counselors on student outcomes. And in some states it appears that low-income schools absorbed a disproportional share of the cuts to counseling staff. In California, approximately one-quarter of high-wealth schools cut counseling staff due to budget reductions following the recession, compared with more than half of low-wealth schools (Freelon, Bertrand, & Rogers, 2012). However, much of this recent research investigating the effects of the recession on the supply of counselors has utilized surveys and interviews of district-level personnel to draw conclusions. Few studies have empirically examined how recent budget trends have impacted the availability of counseling.

### **Supply and Demand of School Counselors in Texas**

During the 2011 legislative session, the congressional budget shortfall resulted in the Texas Legislature eliminating approximately \$5.4 billion from public schools. The budget cuts to Texas education were so deep, coalitions of school districts and other educational interest groups sued the state for failing to meet the constitutional mandate of adequate funding for public education. In their petitions, a number of the plaintiffs specifically mentioned how the budget reductions forced them to layoff educational staff, including counselors. Given the state's increasing emphasis on preparing students for college and career and the college advising mandates placed on high school counselors in

the TEC, the plaintiffs argued that the budget cuts resulted in their inability to meet state educational mandates, in part due to a lack of funding for counseling positions.

While the District Court initially ruled in favor of the plaintiff school districts (the case has been reopened after the Legislature restored \$3.4 billion in education funding during the 2013 session), none of the plaintiffs provided actual data regarding how the budget cuts had affected the student-to-counselor ratio statewide.

Outside of budgetary constraints, the supply of school counselors in Texas is primarily influenced by the supply of individuals interested in being counselors meeting the required qualifications: Counselors are required to have two years of teaching experience, hold a master's degree in counseling, and pass a counselor certification exam before becoming employed as a school counselor. Most counselors meet these qualifications, with over 90% possessing a master's degree in 2014. However, counselors are not as diverse as the students they serve. Whereas the majority of students in Texas (52%) are Hispanic of any race, this is true of just 27% of counselors. Notably, nearly 90% of counselors are women. However, the share of counselors who are African American (14%) is roughly equivalent to the share of African American students (13%).

The only mention of a student-to-counselor ratio in the TEC comes in chapter 33 which indicates that every school district with at least 500 students in the elementary school grades must employ a certified school counselor and mandates a student-to-counselor ratio of no more than 500:1. This statute still requires school districts with less than 500 students to provide counseling services to their students, but districts falling into this category have the option of employing part-time counselors or sharing counselors with other districts as part of a shared service agreement.

In short, high school counselors in Texas have substantial mandates from the state regarding college preparation and advising. Interestingly, however, state statute says nothing regarding the required student-to-counselor ratio at the high school level, nor does it mandate that counselors must be provided once the high school population in a district reaches a particular threshold. Additionally, the state does not require that counselors receive training or professional development, either before or after becoming a certified school counselor, related specifically to college advising.

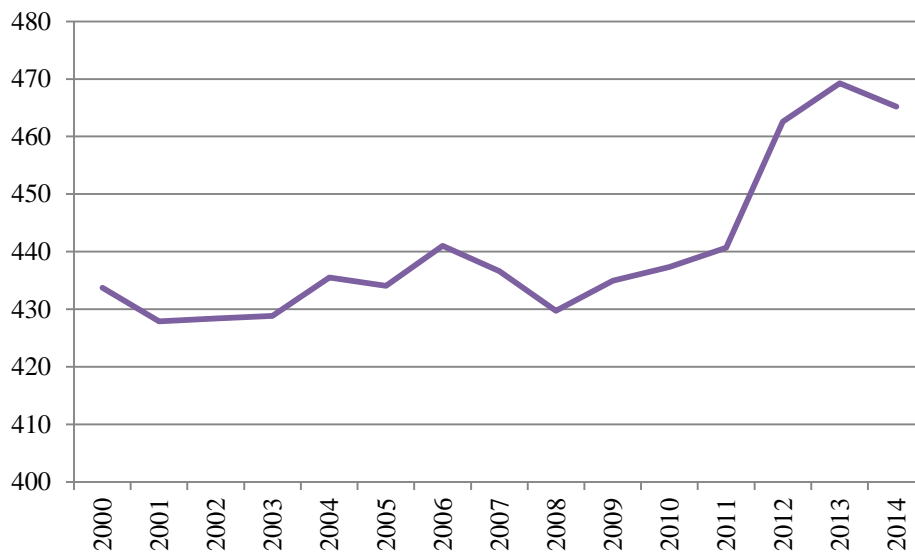
While research has shown that state mandates regarding counseling do not always translate into districts meeting the student-to-counselor ratios set by the state, in Texas it does appear that the average student-to-counselor ratio is below the state threshold of 500:1. The ASCA reported that Texas' ratio was 440:1 in 2010-11, lower than both the state threshold and the national average.

Using quantitative data drawn from the Texas Education Research Center (TERC), a research center housed at the University of Texas at Austin which maintains Texas' statewide longitudinal data system, researchers calculated the state-wide student-to-counselor ratio from 2000 through 2014 (the latest date for which this data was available). This database contains nearly all P-12 data collected by

the Texas Education Agency (TEA). Data on the number of counselor FTEs by school and district are provided by TEA’s educational employee datasets, and the database also contains a wealth of information on students, including their demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. This analysis provides us with a baseline understanding of the longitudinal trends in the supply of counselors over this fifteen-year period.

Figure 1 presents the trend in the student-to-counselor ratio from 2000 to 2014, both statewide and by school level. The student-to-counselor ratio remained relatively constant between 2000 and 2011, hovering between 430:1 and 440:1. Beginning in 2012 and through 2014 the student-to-counselor ratio also remained relatively constant, being between 460:1 and 470:1. However, between the spring of 2011 and the spring of 2012, the state experienced a significant decrease in the availability of counselors to students as districts cut budgets in response to state-wide education budget cuts.<sup>5</sup> More than 20 students were added to the caseload of counselors on average between these years, and the student-to-counselor ratio continued to increase in 2013. The nearly 470:1 ratio in 2013 was approximately 40 more than the ratio in 2008, before the recession.

**Figure 2: Statewide Student-to-Counselor Ratio, 2000-2014**



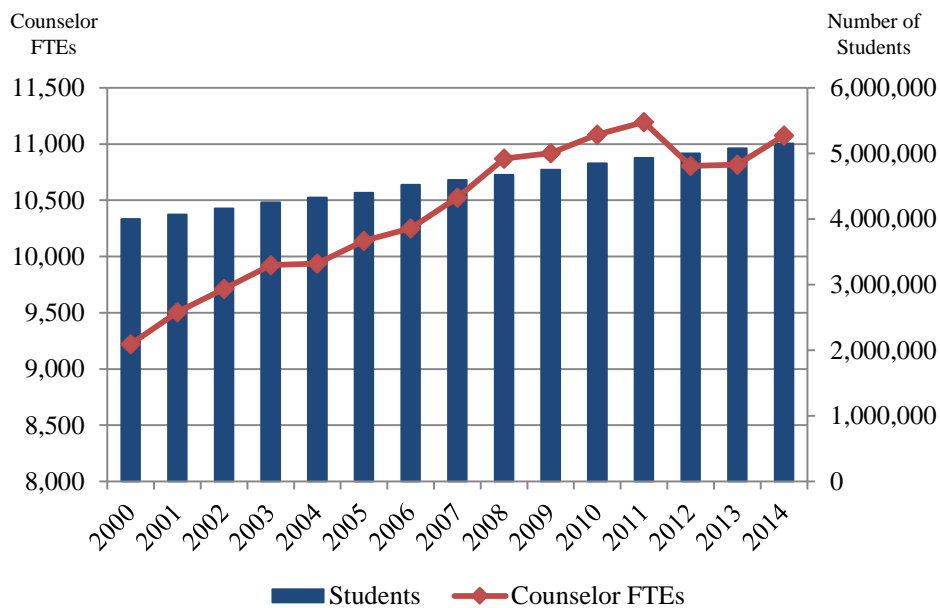
If the student population in Texas continues to increase at its 15-year average of 82,320 students per year, there will be approximately 5,234,250 students in Texas during the 2014-15 school year and 5,316,570 students during the 2015-2016 school year. To immediately bring the student-to-counselor ratio back to its 2008 level, there would need to be approximately 12,173 counselor FTEs in 2014-15, 1,100 more than in the 2013-14 school year an increase of nine percent.

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<sup>5</sup> Researchers acknowledge that some school districts maintained their student-to-counselor ratios between 2011 and 2012 and may have added counselors and reduced their student-to-counselor ratios. However, the statewide trend clearly shows significant increase in this ratio between these years.

In 2008, the student-to-counselor ratio was approximately 430:1. If the student population in Texas continues to increase at its 15-year average of 82,320 students per year, there will be approximately 5,234,250 students in Texas in 2014-15 (Figure 6). The average yearly wage of counselors paid by schools districts was roughly \$60,000 in 2014. To bring the student-to-counselor ratio back to its 2008 level, there would need to be approximately 12,173 counselor FTEs in 2014-15, 1,100 more than the 2013-14 amount. At approximately \$60,000/FTE, the total cost for these additional counselors would be approximately \$66,000,000 for each year. This significant investment would enable school districts to bring their student-to-counselor ratios back to levels seen in 2008.

**Figure 3: Growth in the Student Population and Counselor FTEs**



Source: Data from the Texas Education Research Center.

One of the chief concerns of stakeholders regarding the increase in the number of students the average counselor needed to serve between the spring of 2011 and the 2011-2012 school year was that these changes may disproportionately affect certain schools. For example, schools with a higher share of low-income students might have chosen to reduce their counseling staff at higher rates than schools with a low share of low-income students. However, there is limited evidence that schools with a higher share of low-income students were more likely to reduce counselor funding. Campuses that decreased their student-to-counselor ratio were just slightly more likely to have a larger share of economically disadvantaged students than campuses that increased their student-to-counselor ratio.

**Table 1. 2012 School-Level Characteristics, by Change in 2011 to 2012 in Student-to-Counselor Ratio.**

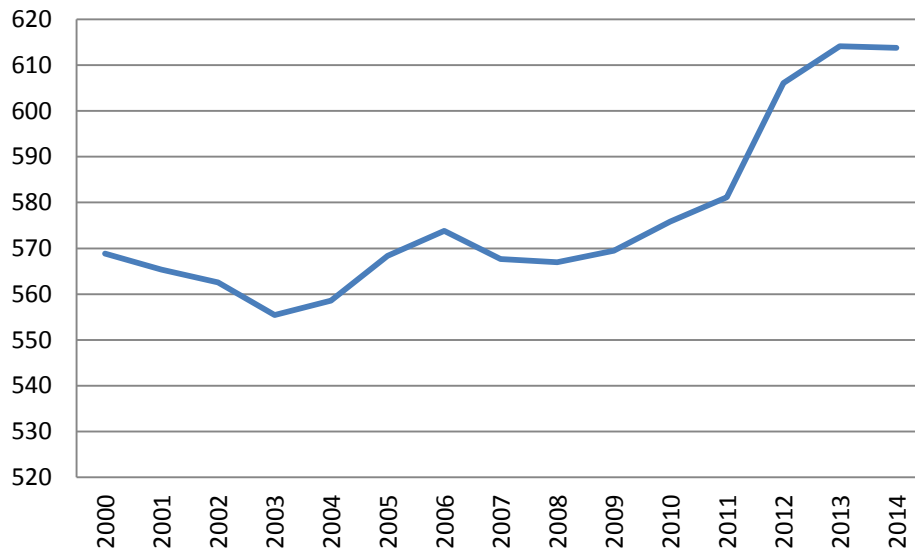
	<b>Student-to-Counselor Ratio</b>	
	<b>Decreased</b>	<b>Increased</b>
Ethnicity		
Asian	3%	3%
African American	11%	11%
Hispanic	50%	49%
White	34%	35%
Other Characteristics		
Limited English Proficient	21%	19%
Special Education	9%	9%
Enrolled in Vocational Education	26%	29%
At Risk	45%	43%
On Free or Reduced Lunch	62%	60%

Source: Data from the Texas Education Research Center.

Researchers then calculated the student-to-counselor ratio by school level, divided into four categories: elementary schools, middle and junior high schools, and high schools. The student-to-counselor ratios for each school level were calculated by dividing the number of students enrolled in each school level by the number of counselor FTEs employed in those school levels.

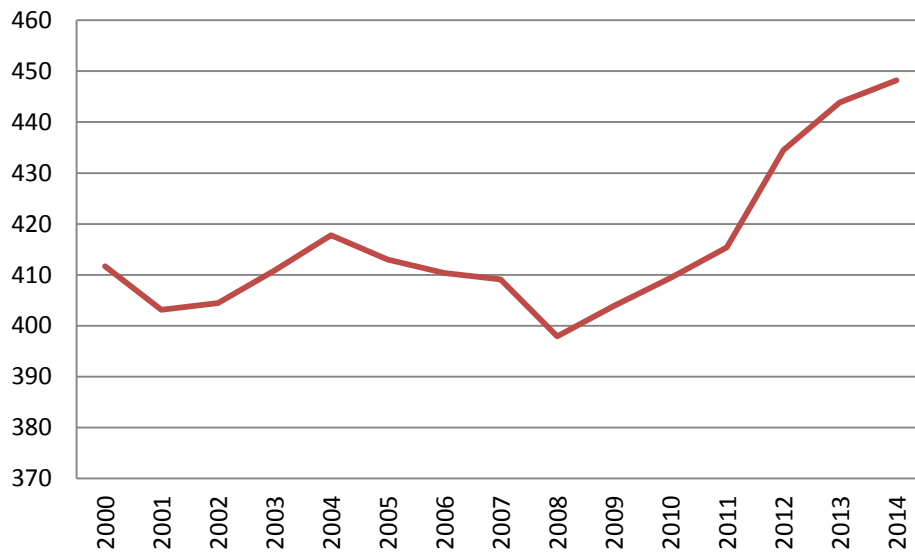
The trend in student-to-counselor ratios for the state can also be seen for elementary, middle and junior high, and high schools presented in Figures 5, 6, and 7, respectively. Each school level experienced a substantial increase in the student-to-counselor ratio between 2011 and 2012, reaching a 15-year high in either the 2013 or 2014 school year. In 2014, elementary schools saw a very slight reduction in the number of students their counselors were required to serve. Counselors continued to see an aggregate increase in the number of students they served in middle and junior high schools during 2014. This is particularly important because the first cohort of students intended to graduate under HB5 were, in the spring of 2014, eighth grade students choosing their graduation plan and endorsements.

**Figure 4: Elementary School Student-to-Counselor Ratio, 2000-2014**



Source: Data from the Texas Education Research Center.

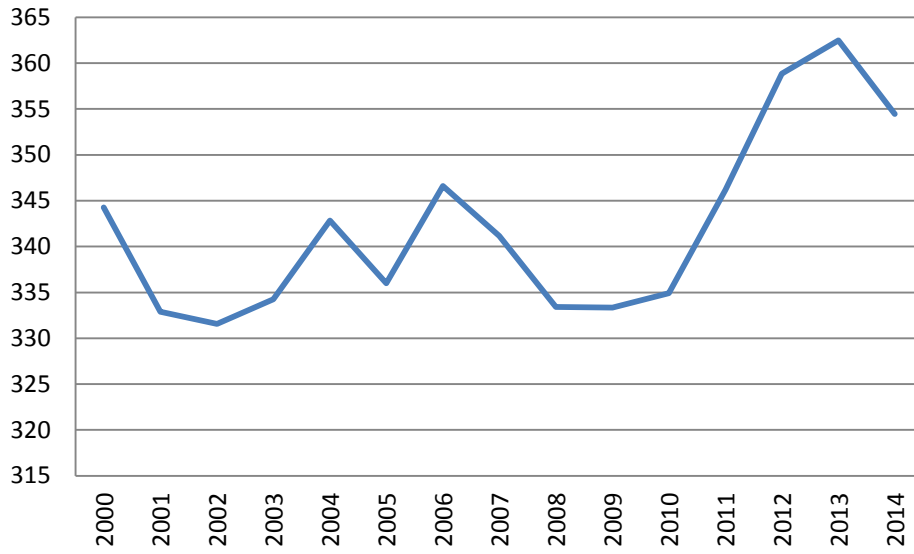
**Figure 5: Middle & Junior High School Student-to-Counselor Ratio, 2000-2014**



Source: Data from Texas Education Research Center.

Perhaps in an effort to improve the ability of counselors to help students manage the graduation and endorsement plan process, high schools reduced their student-to-counselor ratio by more than six students between the spring of 2013 and 2014. Despite this the 2014 ratio was still approximately 20 students-per-counselor higher than the 2008 level.

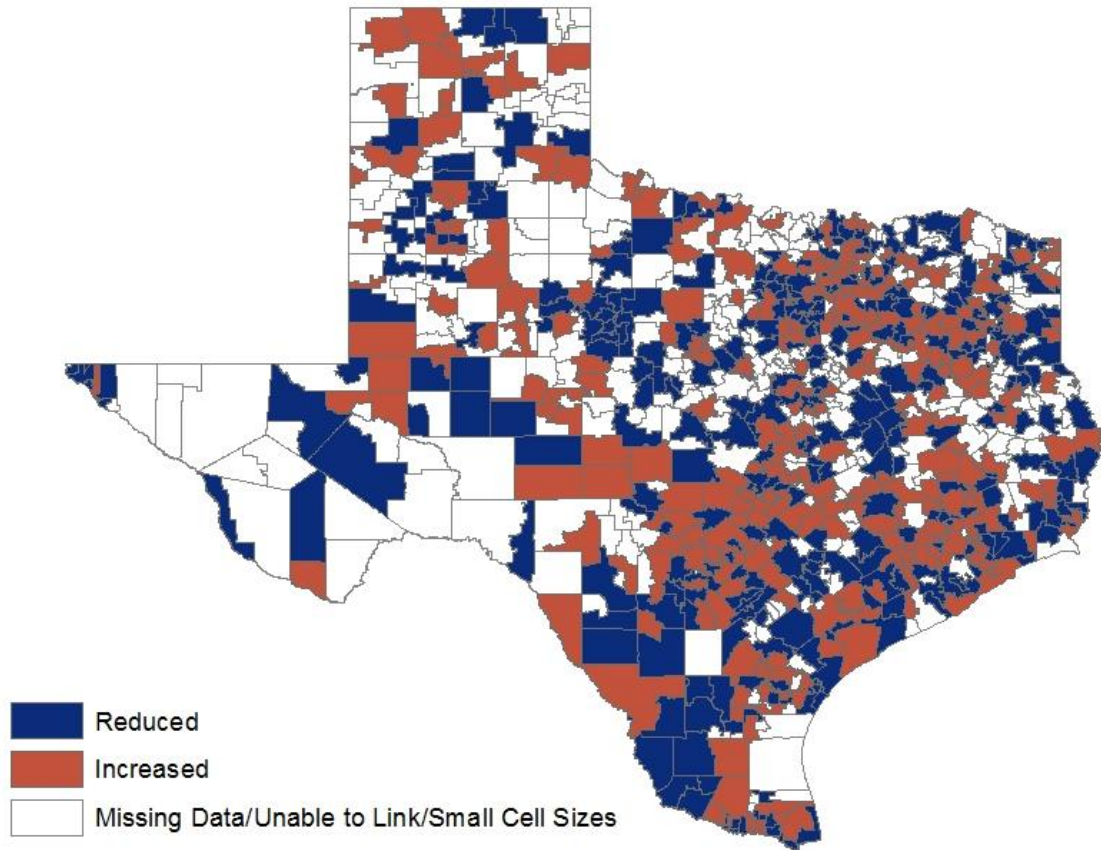
**Figure 6: High School Student-to-Counselor Ratio, 2000-2014**



Source: Data from Texas Education Research Center.

The change in the student-to-counselor ratio between 2008 and 2014 for high schools is not necessarily dependent on a high school's district's location. Figure 5 shows which school districts increased the student-to-counselor ratio in their high schools between 2008 and 2014 and those which reduced these ratios.

**Figure 7. Reduction or Increase in the High School Student-to-Counselor Ratio from 2008 to 2014, by District.<sup>6</sup>**



Source: Data from Texas Education Research Center.

Urban, suburban, and rural school districts each saw reductions and increases in their student-to-counselor ratio between 2008 and 2009.

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<sup>6</sup> Districts without data include those where the size of the class of high school was too small to be exported using FERPA-compliant standards from the Texas ERC or represents districts where there is either no high school or students attend a non-standard campus, such as a K-12 school.



## COUNSELING 2.0<sup>7</sup>

One means of helping counselors, is through the creation of systems and supports that will enable counselors to perform the work they are mandated to do more efficiently. Researchers encountered a number of colleges, districts, community organizations, and private vendors engaging in five types of 'innovations' specifically designed to help improve the efficiency with which counselors perform the work that they do:

- Leveraging school personnel, community organizations, and colleges,
- Using technology to more efficiently and effectively reach students,
- Utilizing data from non-district collected data sources,
- Utilizing efficient means of discovering student needs, and
- Managing the issue of summer melt.

Many of these efforts are focused on the high school to college transition. College matriculation consists of knowable clear processes students need to engage in prior to successfully enrolling in college. These processes include determining what colleges a student intends to apply to, the college application process, the financial aid application process, the college admissions and financial aid information acceptance process, and host of college-specific deadlines, such as housing applications, that students need to meet prior to successfully enrolling in college. While these processes are often very clear to counselors who help students, each new cohort of students encounters them for the first time. Thus, the college matriculation counseling process parallels that of successive cohorts of 8th graders entering high school and choosing a graduation plan and endorsement, as the process and information is familiar to counselors but new to students.

### **Leveraging School Personnel, Community Organizations, and Colleges**

#### *School Personnel*

The primary and most accessible means for schools to increase their counseling capacity stems from using non-counseling staff in supporting the counseling efforts of the high school. Students already likely receive some guidance from trusted teachers and other school staff. This is particularly true for students attending Career and Technical Education (CTE) courses that may lead to occupational certifications; teachers in these courses are likely readily familiar with nearby job prospects and requirements. In informal and formal interviews for this report, numerous individuals

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<sup>7</sup> Rather than provide individual case studies, efforts here are discussed in a general sense based on numerous formal and informal interviews with staff from multiple school districts, colleges, and community-based organizations, as well as the author's extensive knowledge of work related to the Student Futures Project serves as a survey of current efforts.

ascribe to the concept that all personnel at a school can provide counseling support. While this should be true, such a diffusion of responsibility may lead to a lack of accountability. In several regions, the concept of all staff playing a role in counseling works effectively because the region has adopted and trained school personnel along a commonly accepted framework where individuals each play a specific role. The framework may be simple in structure, such as having students focus on the 'next steps' of their education; thus, when teachers talk with students they can ask, "What is your 'next step' and how can I help?"<sup>8</sup> If all staff within a school are trained to use such parallel language and provide this type of guidance, students may gravitate to those individuals with specific knowledge in line with the students aspirations.

#### *Community Organizations and Colleges*

However, public schools do not exist in an organizational vacuum, utilizing only school and district resources. Schools are a natural hub of service provisions, with non-profits, community colleges, universities, businesses, and regional stakeholders often involved directly or indirectly in meeting the needs of students. There are so many organizations that work within and outside of the walls of schools providing services to students, that tallying them all up, or providing a comprehensive list would quickly lose meaning. The major players may vary from school to school but there are some types that serve as examples. These include traditional organizations such as Parent Teacher Organizations (PTOs or PTAs) and Communities in Schools (CIS). Some organizations provide school staff whose salaries are supported in whole or in part by state or federal programs, such as Upward Bound or GEAR-UP. Businesses may also play a role, either in supporting roles (such as providing mentors or tutors) or through fiscal supports (through scholarships or donations). So when schools need supports for their students who fall outside of their current capacity to provide, they often draw on regional partners. The efforts discussed below often increased the number of individuals acting as counselors on site at a high school campus.

As part of the college application work, some colleges and universities send personnel to local high schools to help students with the application process.<sup>9</sup> As employees of the college or university, these college counseling advisors provide a unique perspective on the application process in general and have specific and sometimes very important knowledge about the college and financial aid process for their specific school. These types of college-to-high school personnel exchanges can be particularly useful when a large share of high school graduates matriculate to that particular

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<sup>8</sup> A framework similar to that described here operates around Amarillo ISD and was developed by the regional coalition "Panhandle 2020."

<sup>9</sup> For example, Austin Community College, the University of Texas at Arlington, and West Texas A&M University all provide personnel on high school campuses to specifically support effective college advising and college transition services. This list is not meant to be exhaustive and it is assumed that other colleges in Texas also engage in this type of support.

institution. However, these personnel do not discourage students from applying to other colleges or universities and help seniors through that process as well.

Colleges providing counseling support to high school students is a particularly salient parallel for high school staff supporting 8th graders as they make decisions about their high school curriculum choices. While some districts provide counseling support for 8th graders by training and utilizing their middle school counselors, other schools send high school counselors to their respective feeder middle schools to work with students and their parents to decide on their high school pathways. Of course, while high school counselors are at a middle school during the spring when students typically decide which courses to take next year, their capacity to provide services to high school students is limited.

There are some state-wide efforts to increase the number of staff helping students through the college application process using recent college graduates. One of these programs, Advise Texas,<sup>10</sup> assigns recent college graduates to high schools, specifically to provide guidance for low-income and first-generation students in their transitions to college. Started at the University of Texas at Austin and now at five colleges and universities, each college finds and provides six-weeks of training to individuals to serve at local area high schools. Advisers work on campus to provide assistance in the entire college and financial aid application process, working to help students determine and apply to the best college for them. Though the number of advisors is relatively small, this program has been undergoing an evaluation and could be scaled-up.

Another means of increasing the number of staff on a high school campus to help in the process of college application is when a non-college organization provides staff or funds for staff for the specific purpose of helping seniors with the college and financial aid application process.<sup>11</sup> These methods effectively increase the number of counselors helping students, though most of these efforts are designed to influence the college matriculation process for students.

### **Using Technology to more Efficiently Reach Students**

Students who regularly seek the help of their counselor are more likely to receive the help they need; however, this means that a student's individual persistence in reaching out to their counselor determines the amount of guidance he or she is likely to receive. This may or may not be the best method of allocating counseling services to students, as many students in need of additional supports may not directly seek the help of their counselor. Thus, students who could benefit most from counselor help may receive less help than they need. This is understandable; counselors have a

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<sup>10</sup> Information on Advise Texas is available at their website: <http://advisetx.org/about/>.

<sup>11</sup> An example of this would include the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce, who provides funds to schools to hire college advisors.

limited schedule in any given day. Several efforts are underway to increase the manner in which counselors reach out to students. By reaching directly out to the student by sending student-specific text messages or emails, messages are more likely to be received.

Traditionally, counselors provide time-specific information to their students using daily or weekly announcements (over the intercom or via a school's television broadcast show), flyers, posters, announcements by teachers in their classroom, classroom visits, general assemblies, and individual visits with students. With all of these means of contact, it might seem a wonder that students are not always aware of all the opportunities available to them, including help with the college and financial aid application process. However, these more traditional means of relaying information often suffer from some specific faults if the method is not a direct meeting with a counselor. First, these messages suffer from being broadcast in a medium that high school students are less likely to use themselves. Second, these messages are often very general, offering services or information to students as a broad group; many students who might benefit from such help do not necessarily consider themselves the targets of these messages.

The advantage for counselors of using a medium like texting to reach out to students stems from its ability to deploy information in an automated manner and the ability for a student to respond quickly if they have any questions. If a school is having a Saturday event on campus helping families complete the FAFSA, the school could send out a series of text messages relaying the importance of this college matriculation step and reminding high school seniors of these events. Embedded in the message could be a quick statement asking the student if they need help on identifying and collecting the types of documents needed to complete the FAFSA, and students in need can directly respond to their counselor.

Digital messaging efforts have been conducted in Central Texas, Dallas, and Houston. Central Texas and Dallas both participated in projects intended to provide supports to high school graduates during the summer after graduation. In the summer of 2013, students were provided college-specific text messages related to deadlines and tasks students need to complete in order to enroll in college during the summer with the offer of help if students needed it. Central Texas and Houston juniors and seniors in 2014 will receive text messages related to the college application and financial aid process, respectively. Digital messaging efforts were led in these regions in partnership with Drs. Page, Castleman, and Owen, all of whom lead their field in terms of addressing 'summer melt' (see below).

### **Utilizing Data from Non-District Collected Data Sources**

Districts collect information on their students through various systems, allowing district and school personnel to keep track of a student's attendance, course selections, and other pertinent

information. Particularly in the college financial aid application process, some information collected on students is not always readily available to counselors working to help students, since students submit state-wide or nationally-based forms to other entities for approval. In many schools, the only evidence counselors have regarding whether a student completed these forms is self-reported. For example, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and the Apply Texas college application data is not automatically shared with high school counselor. If a school intends to maximize the number of students transitioning to high school, following up with students who have not started, or have started but not submitted, their FAFSA and college applications is an important intermediate step to improving college matriculation. By finding these students in a timely manner, counselors can offer appropriate means of help and encouragement to completing these applications. This help needs to be performed in a timely manner as many colleges have strict deadlines for their application, and the allocation of federal, state, and institutional aid are often dependent on the completion of the FAFSA in the first quarter of the calendar year of potential college enrollment.

In the Central Texas region, counselors use the Counselor Portal, a dashboard interface product created and supported by OneLogos, to access college advising data. District personnel request weekly updated FAFSA and Apply Texas data from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and then upload this information into the Counselor Portal. Counselors then use this weekly data to track who has begun and who has finished their college and/or financial aid applications, targeting services to students who have not yet completed any applications.

### **Utilize Efficient Means of Discovering Student Needs**

Whether counselors manage a portfolio of 150, 450, or 700 students, keeping effective track of each student's goals and aspirations can be complicated. Using paper or electronic folders for each student provides detailed information in face-to-face meetings with parents and the student, but is less effective when being used to group students with similar interests and goals together. Furthermore, information contained in these folders might contain notes written down by the counselor from their last one-on-one meeting. Counselors may spend valuable one-on-one time with students asking the same set of questions to each student. "What are your plans after high school?" "What type of postsecondary institution are you interested in attending?" "What career are your seeking?" While this time is valuable, because it allows counselors to get to know the needs of their students, it takes up time that could be used in providing advice, support, and counseling.

Schools in Central Texas use an online junior survey of their students to quickly and effectively obtain this type of standardized information. Once collected, the information is placed into an administrative data system that counselors can access prior to meeting with a student. Counselor conversations with students may then follow a much more focused discussion: "You indicated on the

survey that you would like to be a veterinarian, but you said you were not certain what type of schooling you needed to complete to qualify for this job. Looking at your current GPA, there are a couple of colleges in Texas that might be a good fit for you."

Surveys administered sometime during the student's junior year can quickly obtain information related to postsecondary plans, colleges of interest, and career interests. These surveys can also capture general student knowledge about the transition to postsecondary education, such as whether the students knows the best time to complete the FAFSA. By asking the same types of information at the end of the senior year of high school, surveys can be used to gauge the effect of counseling services on students, particularly for learning related to specific tasks and processes such as college and financial aid applications. Many districts across the state use surveys to gauge school safety and other types of student-perceptions and still more districts already engage in a formal or informal senior exit survey designed to allow students to provide input to the school district about their high school experiences.

### **Managing the Issue of Summer Melt<sup>12</sup>**

A persistent concern has been the extent to which students apply and are accepted into college in the spring of their senior year, but do not end up enrolling in college after graduating. This is traditionally termed 'summer melt,' and reflects the fact that there are a number of process barriers to college entry that students may encounter after they leave their high school (Castleman et. al., 2014). These process barriers include things like housing applications and deposits, confirmation of meningitis shots, and financial aid verification forms. High school graduates that encounter these barriers during the spring of their senior year may access high school counseling services in an effort to understand and manage them. However, high school graduates who encounter these barriers during the summer after graduation traditionally cannot draw on these services because their high school campus is closed. Moreover, some of the deadlines for these college enrollment processes are disseminated through media that high school students are unlikely to access regularly. Colleges contact prospective students through the mail or via email to provide deadlines for these processes. Having received notification of college acceptance, students sometimes ignore these messages over the summer, believing that issues like housing will be dealt with once they arrive on campus. While students can contact their college to help them through these issues, students most in need of their help are unlikely to do so. Furthermore, college personnel are not always able to distinguish between

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<sup>12</sup> The definitive text on summer melt comes from Drs. Ben Castleman and Lindsay page. *Summer Melt: Supporting Low-Income Students Through the Transition to College*, Harvard Press, October 2014. Discussions here stem from this work and conversations with personnel who implemented a summer melt program in the Austin region in the summers of 2013 and 2014.

accepted students *who still intend to enroll in their college but who do not complete the intermediary paperwork* and accepted students *who have decided to enroll in another college*. Thus, assigning outreach efforts through colleges would not necessarily reach those students most in need of summer transition help.

Providing counseling services to recent high school graduates over the summer allows students who encounter issues in the enrollment process to contact their high school counselor if they need help. The high school counselor may act as an intermediary between the student and the college, but more often the counselor guides the student through the process of engaging with college personnel, helping students to build these types of skills that they will use once on campus. Furthermore, several randomized controlled trials have demonstrated the efficacy of direct counselor outreach to students most likely in need of such supports, such as first-generation and low-income high school graduates, over the summer after graduation. In addition, several randomized controlled trials utilized automated digital messaging (text messages) to send college-specific reminders about deadlines to students, with an offer of help from their counselor. These efforts allow districts to target students most likely to need or who would most like to receive these services in an efficient manner. Instead of following up with all students, only students who receive a text message and need help directly contact their counselor.

Summer melt efforts occurred in 2013 in Central Texas and Dallas, and 2014 in Central Texas. Efforts in 2013 used randomized controlled trials to test the effectiveness of this effort and demonstrated significant effects for certain groups of individuals, including Hispanic, African American, and first-generation high school graduates. Summer melt efforts in 2014 targeted students from these groups using digital messaging, though counseling services were available to all students.

### **The Counseling 2.0 Vision**

While in isolation any of the above innovations may be used to improve the efficiency and efficacy of counseling, using them in conjunction hints at a vision of counseling in the twenty-first century. One of the key drivers in making students successful is to realize where and when students need help and then accommodate students by providing help at that time and location. Using surveys, administrative data from other sources, partnering with other organizations, utilizing automated texting to target students most in need, and providing counseling services the summer after graduation can maximize the effectiveness of counselors.

## **NEXT STEPS**

While this research has led to a number of conclusions and policy recommendations, there is still much work to be done. Depending on funding availability, researchers will more closely examine the relationship between funding variations and counselor staff reductions between the 2011 and 2012 school years. Additional supply and demand characteristics will also need to be examined. Counselors are required to go through several steps, including teach, receive a master's degree, and certify to serve as a counselor prior to working as a school counselor in Texas. Accurate state-wide data related to counselor certifications was only recently provided to the Texas Education Research Center as this initial report went to press. Further work will examine the number of counselor certifications obtained during each year and the labor market demand for counselors over time.



## CONCLUSIONS

***Detailed information on how counselors spend their time in Texas schools is limited.***

Texas school districts collect and report detailed information on how teachers spend their time by indicating which classes they teach throughout the day. Information on the tasks counselors perform is scarce and obtained through intermittently conducted surveys. While districts report which students teachers teach, there is currently no link between counselors and the individual students they serve reported to the state.

***There are many district and community efforts across Texas intended to at least impart, improve the capacity of counseling services.***

Many school districts across Texas, from the Panhandle to the Rio Grande Valley, to the Dallas and Houston metro areas, to Central Texas, are actively engaging in community-wide efforts to improve the counseling services of students in middle and high school.

***Counselor related student outcomes are either inaccurately reported or are simply not collected.***

Counselors help students choose and apply to college, they work with students and parents to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), and help students transition to college and the workforce. Unfortunately, information regarding student access to college and financial aid application information often relies on student reporting; information related to college enrollment often excludes out-of-state colleges; employment information is often not readily available to counselors and counselors and school district personnel have no reliable means of obtaining high school graduate occupational choices; and, Texas lacks a consistent state-wide means of collecting and reporting certificates.

***The student-to-counselor ratio increased substantially across the state from 2011 to 2012, and has not returned to pre-2012 levels.***

The Legislature's decision to cut \$5.4 billion in public education in the spring of 2011 led many districts to cut counselors to balance their budgets. Nevertheless, provisions within HB5 require parent, student, and counselor meetings, a stipulation that lends support for the idea that there is no substitute for students and parents spending quality time with a counselor. However, the larger the case load that counselors experience, with only the limited traditional support, the more difficult it is to spend the amount and quality of time required to effectively help students.

***The cost of reducing the student-to-counselor ratio in Texas to pre-recession levels is approximately \$66 million a year.***

In 2008, the student-to-counselor ratio was approximately 430:1. If the student population in Texas continues to increase at its 15-year average of 82,320 students per year, there will be

approximately 5,234,250 students in Texas in 2014-15 (Figure 4). The average counselor FTE cost in Texas was approximately \$60,000 in 2014. To bring the student-to-counselor ratio back to its 2008 level, there would need to be approximately 12,173 counselor FTEs in 2014-15: 1,100 more than the 2013-14 amount. At approximately \$60,000/FTE, the total cost for these additional counselors would be approximately \$66,000,000 for each year.

***House Bill 5 increased the amount of work counselors are required to perform.***

Counselors are required to meet with all entering 9th grade students and their parents to choose a graduation plan and endorsement, a function that is performed either by an 8th grade counselor or by a high school counselor visiting the student in middle school. Any changes in endorsements that students seek to make must also involve a meeting between counselor, student, and parents. Counselors are required to meet with all students in each year of high school to provide information about postsecondary education.

***Not fully outlined in the legislation are several implicit demands on counselors imposed through House Bill 5's focus on not only college matriculation but also high school to career transitions.***

HB5 was intended to provide opportunities for high school students to earn endorsements and, along with endorsements, career-specific certifications. Implicit in this emphasis is the requirement that high school counselors provide information to students about the local labor market, including prevailing wages, industry demand, required certifications for occupations, and opportunities for linking career training interests with local colleges and universities.

***There are more efficient means of providing counseling services to students, particularly for process-related activities like choosing a four year plan or enrolling in college.***

Postsecondary counseling in high school is often envisioned as a counselor sitting down with a student and the student's parents and discussing the student's interests and desires in an effort to match these with available opportunities. Unfortunately, such meetings are lengthy and likely inefficient. Texas school districts are trying a host of collaborative innovations around counseling efforts involving colleges, universities, chambers of commerce, school districts, non-profits, foundations and businesses. These innovations include the following types of activities:

- Leveraging school personnel, community organizations, and colleges,
- Using technology to more effectively and efficiently reach students,
- Utilizing useful data from non-district collected data sources,
- Utilizing efficient means of discovering student needs, and
- Managing the issue of summer melt.

***Data to identify many of the outcomes of interest mandated by HB5 are not currently available.*** Policy makers and researchers seeking to know whether recent high school graduates

successfully enroll in college, receive an occupation-related certificate, or are successfully employed in the occupation the high school and local colleges prepared the student for are likely to be disappointed; this information is either incomplete or not collected in Texas.

These findings lead to a number of recommendations intended to improve student access to counseling services, and the efficiency with which counselors obtain student information. These recommendations consist of two parts: those intended for school districts and their regional partners, including colleges and community organizations; and those intended for the legislature.

## **REGIONAL AND DISTRICT RECOMMENDATIONS**

### ***Increase the capacity of counseling at high schools.***

- Create a middle to high school transition counselor position to help 8th graders make their endorsement and graduation plan choices.
- Conduct electronic surveys of high school students to enable more efficient means of sharing student academic and career interests with counselors.
- Make counselor staffing a priority, publicly stating your district's student-to-counselor ratios at each of your schools and committing to increasing the availability of counseling staff for your students.

### ***Engage in community and regional partnerships.***

- Leverage community organizations and regional partnerships to develop and share strategies and coordinate efforts to improve counseling services to students in your region.
- Engage with local workforce development boards to ensure counselors understand local labor market conditions.

### ***Commit to preparing all staff to assist students in achieving their academic and career goals,***

- Develop and adopt a community framework to allow teachers and other school staff to more effectively provide support to students in their goals.
- Teachers and other school staff should have ready access to the career and educational goals of students.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE LEGISLATURE**

- ***Reduce the assigned responsibilities of counselors, increasing the time they have to perform the work required to effectively prepare student for college and careers.*** Many counselors spend significant time managing the administration of standardized tests. It is time

to assign other personnel to engage in this work, freeing up some of the time of counselors currently assigned this task.

***Make available opportunities to increase the number of people providing appropriate counseling services at schools. There is no substitute for counselors spending time helping their students.***

- Restore cuts in funding to school districts so districts possess the resources to increase the number of counselors.
- Encourage school districts to create a middle to high school transition counselor for each middle school to serve as a coordinator for graduating 8th grade students.
- Encourage TEA to create a counselor's aide position to serve as support staff to the work counselors perform.
- Determine a threshold minimum for the number of students for which a school must have a full time counselor; e.g., "If a campus contains more than 100 students, the school must employ at least one full time counselor."
- Provide funding credit to colleges and universities who provide on-site college and career preparation services to non-dual credit high school students.
- Increase the number of counselors focusing on direct-to-college enrollment by scaling the Advise Texas program.
- Encourage the development of online training standards to ensure that counselors understand and use existing tools to evaluate local labor market demand.
- Encourage connections between local workforce development boards and high school counselors.

***Help districts improve the efficiency of counseling at their schools.***

- Improve student outreach through technology: *Provide counseling technology capacity building grants to allow high schools to partner with colleges, universities, and private vendors to develop and implement the technological tools to improve counseling efficiency. These tools may also be used to more effectively reach out to parents and the community about high school graduation, college transitions, and workforce services for students.*

***Enhance current data collection systems to ensure that the effects of House Bill 5 can be appropriately evaluated.***

- Provide the ability to link counselors to the students they serve.
- Provide additional paid staff to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board to work directly with districts requesting FAFSA and Apply Texas data. Seek to develop workable means for the THECB to share FAFSA and Apply Texas data with school districts, be it

through private, contracted vendors chosen by the districts or within an enhanced state-wide data sharing system.

- Upgrade the Unemployment Insurance wage system to collect job occupation and more accurate job location information.
- Revisit the manner in which occupational certifications are collected and maintained; access to consistently collect and centrally maintain certification records will allow districts, parents, and the broader community the evaluate their high school's performance.
- Determine which high school graduates enroll in out-of-state colleges and universities using National Student Clearinghouse data.

***Commit to increasing counselor capacity in the state by engaging in community counselor staffing and performance monitoring. Just as the state testing regiment allows for parents to assess the quality of teaching at their schools, develop counselor metrics to allow parents to assess the quality of counseling at their child's campus.***

- Press the Texas Education Agency to produce and publicly report student to counselor and student to counselor aide ratios each year for all schools in the state, subject to standard FERPA constraints.
- A regime of school-level counselor performance monitoring should include:
  - The ability to link counselors to the students they serve in collected and reported district records.
  - The publishing of aggregate school-level information on specific student outcomes, including FAFSA completion, college application completion, direct-to-college enrollment (in-state as well as out), and occupations, specifically those related to the endorsements offered on each campus.
  - Annual student surveys to determine the share of students at each campus who met with their counselor at least once and at what point during the school year the meeting(s) take place.
  - An annual survey of counselors asking them the types of tasks they engage in during the year and at least an approximation of what share of their time they spend performing these tasks.

Counselors play a vital role in the lives of Texas students. Recent funding and policy changes in Texas have increased the amount of work required in their positions. However, innovations in counseling being actively tried in Texas, more broadly used, could help counselors improve the work the quality and quantity of counseling time spent with students.

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