

**School Counseling in Marin County
Middle and High Schools
May 24, 2001**

Summary

In response to recent reports of stress and incidents of violence in schools throughout the country and locally, the Grand Jury conducted a study of the credentialed school counseling function in Marin County's high schools (HSs) and middle schools (MSs). School Counselors (SCs) are the front line professionals both in prevention and intervention when stress becomes overwhelming for students and when students' behavior at school becomes disruptive and counterproductive. A number of the schools typically supplement their counseling programs with community agencies and outside organizations (e.g., Full Circle for Marriage and Family Therapy, School Linked Services, etc.). This report does not attempt to analyze these outsourcing situations.

The Grand Jury believes that there should be a central counseling and guidance unit at the Marin County Office of Education (MCOE) for school counseling. The variability between schools with respect to essential counseling functions led to our conclusion that countywide leadership and coordination of the counseling program is missing. The role of a countywide unit would be to coordinate, support and provide leadership for the 19 districts in order to strengthen programs.

The Grand Jury identified the need for a well-articulated description of programs so that providers and consumers are clear about what they can expect from the school counseling personnel. We believe that the periodic evaluation of school counselors' performance would be more meaningful if expectations were more clearly defined.

It was observed that communication between middle and high school counselors needs to be improved. Communication between the schools occurs erratically and often not at all. Attention to this process is of importance to help our students make the best decisions both academically and personally and allowing counselors to help in identifying students with particular difficulties.

While funding is always a challenge, two comparable school districts contacted by the Grand Jury were able to find the ways and means to support this counseling function. Among the many goals of the MCOE, one must be to improve the commitment to the counselor resource for the students of Marin County. While this need is more acute in the middle and high schools, the elementary schools, likewise, have very few, if any, counselors available.

Background and Discussion

Introduction

Reports of stress and violence in our schools have increased significantly. In the wake of recent school shootings, the stresses in our schools have painfully come to our awareness. The Columbine High School disaster tipped the scales. It seems that a week does not go by in which the news media do not report upon an actual or planned new violent incident. SCs are the personnel attuned to the pulse of the students. SCs receive information about the students' performance or behavior from teachers, administrators, parents and often from the students themselves. Their role/responsibility is to help students function to their maximum potential in school by reducing whatever barriers may be in their way.

The Grand Jury notes that the California Education code section 49600 on "Educational Counseling" provides the following:

1. Counseling is not mandated; however, school districts may provide a counseling program, and,
2. If counseling is provided, the program shall include counseling in the following areas:
 - o Academic
 - o Career and Vocational, and
 - o Personal and Social

The Grand Jury found the following points helpful in understanding the context of SCs in Marin.

- California ranks 43rd in the nation in per capita expenditures for public education at the primary and secondary levels.
- Twenty-nine states mandate schools to have school counselors; most of these schools have counselors at all three levels (i.e., elementary, middle and high school).
- When funding mandates exist in states other than California, county offices of education are required to support the counseling service.
- In California, schools are free to hire or contract for services of non-credentialed personnel to do vocational/career, personal/social and substance abuse counseling.
- To practice in a school, a School Counselor must have a master's degree from an accredited graduate program as well as be credentialed by the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, which certifies that the counselor has met all of the requirements to be called a School Counselor.

Marin Public Schools

Marin County public education is organized as follows: The Marin County Office of Education, a singular entity, has as its primary function, channeling money and assuring that policies from the state and federal government are executed properly for all 19 school districts under its jurisdiction. The mission statement of the MCOE defines its role as "providing leadership,.....and effective centralized services to the districts and schools in Marin County." In the absence of a state mandate for the schools to have SCs, the MCOE is not required to provide support or coordinating services. Their only statutory requirement is to maintain a registry to assure that all school counselors are credentialed.

There are 15 independent school districts within Marin, excluding the Community College and three small districts aligned with Sonoma County. Countywide, the total enrollment is approximately 29,000 students. The number of credentialed school counselors in Marin County is approximately 39.

Funding for Education

The Grand Jury recognizes that funding for educational priorities can be a daunting challenge for the education system and is subject to economic and political realities of the times. The Grand Jury notes newspaper coverage of a recent announcement by the California Superintendent of State Schools of a plan to spend an additional \$60 million per year on improving the school counselor effort in California schools. This is an example of the attitude needed to solve this dilemma. While the funds are not in the current budget, state education officials are committed to finding a solution.

The Role and Responsibilities of School Counselors

The role of the counselor is to help a student function to his/her potential in school. The student may be assigned a counselor who is the student's resource for educational and vocational planning as well as for help in solving personal and social issues that interfere with academic progress.

SCs have large assigned caseloads in addition to many other general responsibilities. In the high schools, SCs conduct different activities for each grade level. These activities are varied and are intended to meet the needs of students at different stages, such as group orientations for incoming students and parents, senior conferences emphasizing preparations for college, sophomore conferences with students to discuss future plans and scheduling, and numerous other activities. Additionally, time must be allocated to work with those students in need of extra attention.

At both middle and high schools, SCs roles may also include meetings with parents, writing newsletter articles, arranging for assemblies, coordinating and running peer counseling programs, conducting teacher

counselor study teams to discuss students who may be having difficulties, teaching classes on topics like parenting, conducting groups for students with specific problems, collaborating with community agencies for school-linked services and referrals, consulting with teachers about behavioral issues, attending special education meetings on individual education plans, identifying potentially violent students and meetings with individual students who may be in need of help.

In addition to the above activities, SCs are also periodically expected to participate in in-service training workshops to upgrade their skills. As can be seen, in addition to their primary task, there is a plethora of additional activities assigned to the SC.

Methodology

In order to understand both the background and current status of school counseling in some comparable areas within the United States, California and Marin County, we interviewed administrators from the California State Office of Education, local administrators in the MCOE, experts in the counseling profession, administrators in Maryland and Virginia, local superintendents, MS and HS principals. We surveyed thirty-nine SCs in Marin County, the results of which are attached to this report ([Appendix](#)).

Findings

1. HSs in Marin County have the highest number of school counselors while MSs have far fewer; K-5 counselors are virtually nonexistent. Some MSs do not have any fulltime school counselors. The *overall* student-to-counselor ratio in Marin County is approximately 744/1. Relative to other counties in California, Marin fares rather well. Its standing among similar counties nationwide, however, is found to be lacking. The high school student-to-counselor ratio results in counselors having more work and more students than they can effectively handle. The ratios are presented in the following table:

	Student/Counselor Ratio	Comments
Marin County		
High School	374/1	
Middle School	625/1	
Elementary School	--	
Overall	744/1	Includes all three levels (Marin County ranks sixth out of 58 California counties)
California		
Overall	1024/1	Includes all three levels (California ranks 50th in the nation)
National	513/1	
American Counseling Assoc. recommendation	250/1	Includes all three levels
Comparable Socio-Economic Counties		
Fairfax County, VA	300/1	Includes all three levels
Montgomery County, MD	290/1	Includes all three levels

2. Marin County school counselors have unusually heavy workloads. The counselors believe that "There is just not enough time to do everything that needs to be done." They perceive that they have more work and more students than they can effectively handle. The counselors estimate that as much as 20 percent of their time is used for clerical duties; therefore, non-credentialed personnel must often supplement the counselor role. With the exception of one school and one small district in the county, superintendents and principals were aware of, and lamented, the heavy workload of the school counselors.

3. MCOE does not have a centralized counseling unit to provide leadership, coordination, or support to school district counseling in the county. The Grand Jury concludes that there should be a centralized counseling unit in the county. In support of this conclusion, the following should be noted:
 - A countywide, standardized, in-service counselor training program does not exist. Each school and district has its own idea of what constitutes additional training for counselors. Each entity appears to work according to its own agenda. Workshops on specific topics, such as violence prevention, depression/suicide risks and caseload management are not available to all counselors. Other areas in which more training is needed include substance abuse (especially in MSs) and computer use.
 - A wide disparity exists within the county in development and delivery of counseling programs to students and parents. Three-quarters of all school counselors indicated that their schools had a comprehensive guidance program. The HSs comprehensive guidance programs appear to work reasonably well. The MSs guidance programs, on the other hand, ranged from adequate to nonexistent, with most not adequately documented. Each school district and school has its own approach to presenting the counseling programs to its students and parents. The Grand Jury believes that the county schools do an acceptable job in trying to reach all of the students and families.
 - Variability and inconsistency exists in assessing the performance of counselors. Some schools do an excellent job, while a few do very perfunctory reviews. The procedures run the gamut from annual student evaluations, to logging complaints, to parent evaluations every three years, to oral feedback from a principal, to the use of teacher evaluations for assessing counselors.
 - Administrators and counselors indicated that the communication link between HSs and MSs needs improvement. Inquiries found that, while there were cases in which communications were satisfactory, there were too many instances of poor documentation or little communication.
 - Principals of MSs interviewed were, by and large, in favor of a California state mandate that would require and set staffing levels for school counselors. In the absence of such a mandate, the principals suggested improvements along the following lines: MCOE should provide consultation when needed, find and coordinate funding, provide statistical help, establish logistical support, arrange programs for parents, provide more in-service training, standardize evaluations, create a pool of counselors available to each school, and provide program development and support

4. Administrators in MSs insist that early intervention is a critical step in identifying and addressing problems that interfere with student learning. They believe that early intervention should occur at the elementary level.

Recommendation

The MCOE should, as part of its mission to "provide effective, centralized services," create a countywide unit of counseling and guidance. This unit would provide leadership, coordination, support and service for all Marin County school districts. The Grand Jury recommends that each of the areas needing attention as outlined in the "Findings" portion of this report be addressed in concert with the individual school districts to develop the consolidated county plan.

Request for Responses

Pursuant to California Penal Code section 933.05, the Grand Jury respectfully requests a response to each of the Findings and the Recommendation from the Marin County Office of Education.