



asca **research report**

State of the Profession 2020

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State of the Profession 2020

In October 2020, the American School Counselor Association distributed a state-of-the-profession survey to nearly 75,000 members and nonmembers. The survey was designed to gather details on school counselor demographic data, roles and responsibilities, the challenges of virtual learning necessitated by COVID-19, efforts to combat systemic racism, their most significant day-to-day challenges, professional development needs and other areas. The data reveals that the nation's school counselors consider meeting student needs in a virtual environment to be their biggest challenge, followed by managing a large number of students and addressing achievement and opportunity gaps.

Respondents largely began the 2020-2021 school year with all virtual (43%) or hybrid virtual/in-person (39%) classes, and they have seen their responsibilities change as a result, especially following up with students who haven't participated in virtual classes. Additionally, school counselors report taking a number of measures to address racism and bias, including monitoring student behavior to identify racist behavior or speech, providing individual counseling and providing classroom lessons.

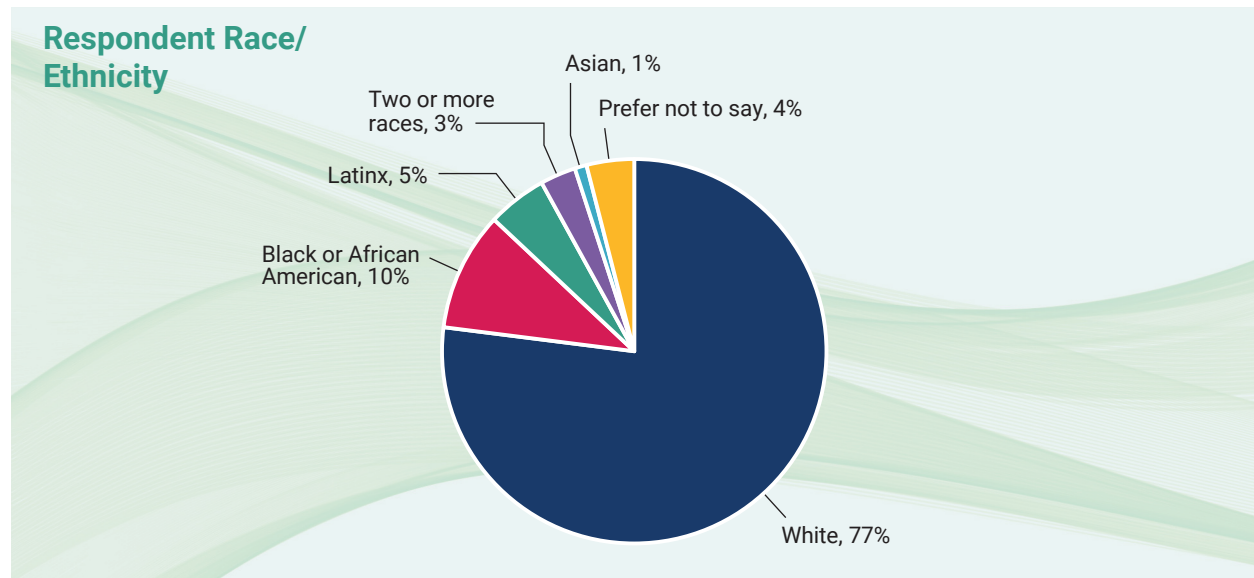
Methodology

The research was conducted via an electronic survey using the Qualtrics platform. An email invitation with a unique link to the survey site was sent to 74,451 members and nonmembers and yielded 7,000 responses, for an overall response rate of 9.4%. The data is inclusive of practicing school counselors only. Research of other school counseling roles, including faculty, will be conducted at a later date. All 50 states, as well as some U.S. territories, are represented in the responses. The statistical universe measured in the survey is derived from a universe of approximately 110,000 U.S. school counselors. Responses were calculated at the 95% confidence level with a margin of error of +/- 1%, which is well within the acceptable range of 95% +/- 5%.

Respondent Demographics

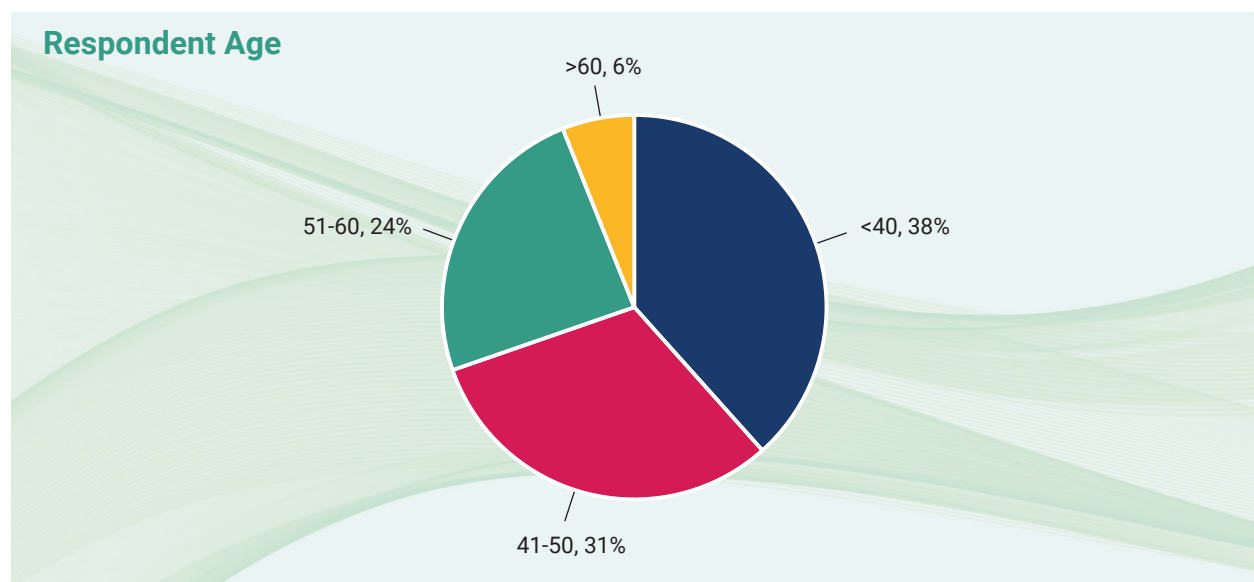
Overall, 87% of respondents are school counselors, while 3% are building-level directors/coordinators/building supervisors. The remaining 10% of respondents hold other job roles and were not included in this survey. Overall, 85% hold a master's in school counseling and 12% hold a master's degree in another discipline. Three percent hold doctorate degrees. In terms of certifications, 78% hold NCC, 20% hold NBCT and 16% NCSC. Three quarters of respondents are ASCA members.

More than three-quarters (77%) of responding school counselors are white, 10% are Black or African American, 5% are Latinx, 3% are two or more races, about 1% are Asian, and less than 1% each are American Indian or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific island, and 4% prefer not to say.



Most respondents are female (87%), 11% are male, less than 1% are nonbinary/third gender and 2% prefer not to say. More than nine in 10 are heterosexual, 2% are gay or lesbian, 2% are bisexual, less than 1% note a different identity, and 5% prefer not to say.

Overall, 38% are 40 or younger, 31% are 41–50, 24% are 51–60 and 6% are 61 or older. Similarly, 20% have been working as school counselors for five or fewer years, 22% for 6–10 years, 18% for 11–15 years, 14% for 16–20 years and 18% for 20–plus years.



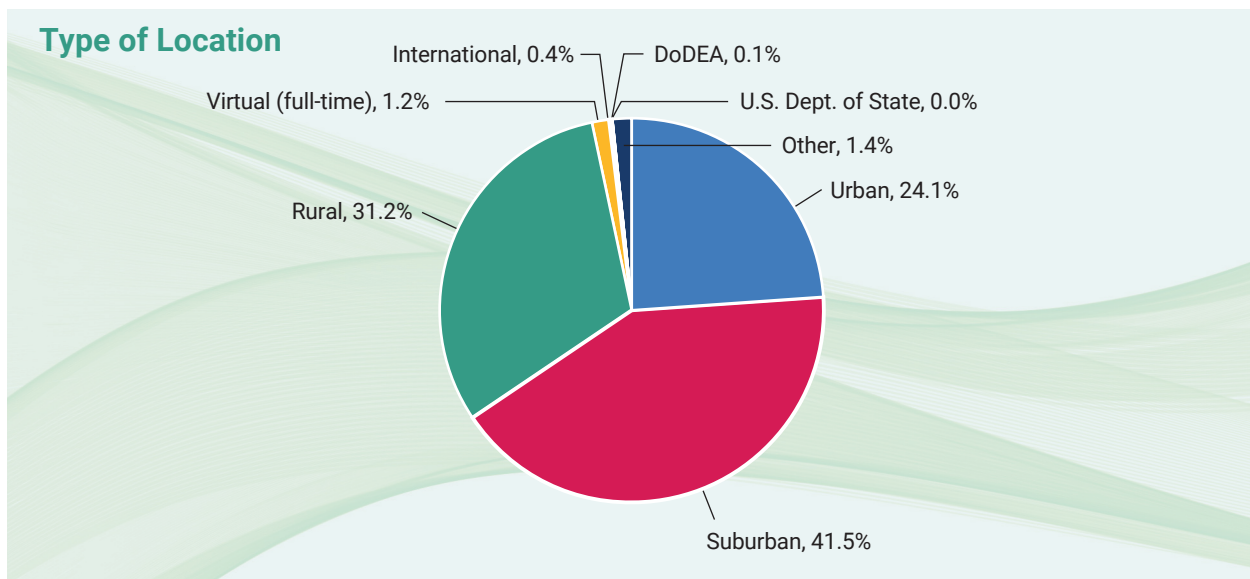
School Characteristics

Thirty-two percent of respondents work in elementary schools, another 32% work in high schools and 21% work in middle schools. Another 13% work in multilevel schools and 3% point to other categories. Nearly nine in 10 respondents work for public, non-charter schools (88%), 5% work for public charter schools and 5% work for private/independent/parochial schools.

School Type by Respondent Race/Ethnicity

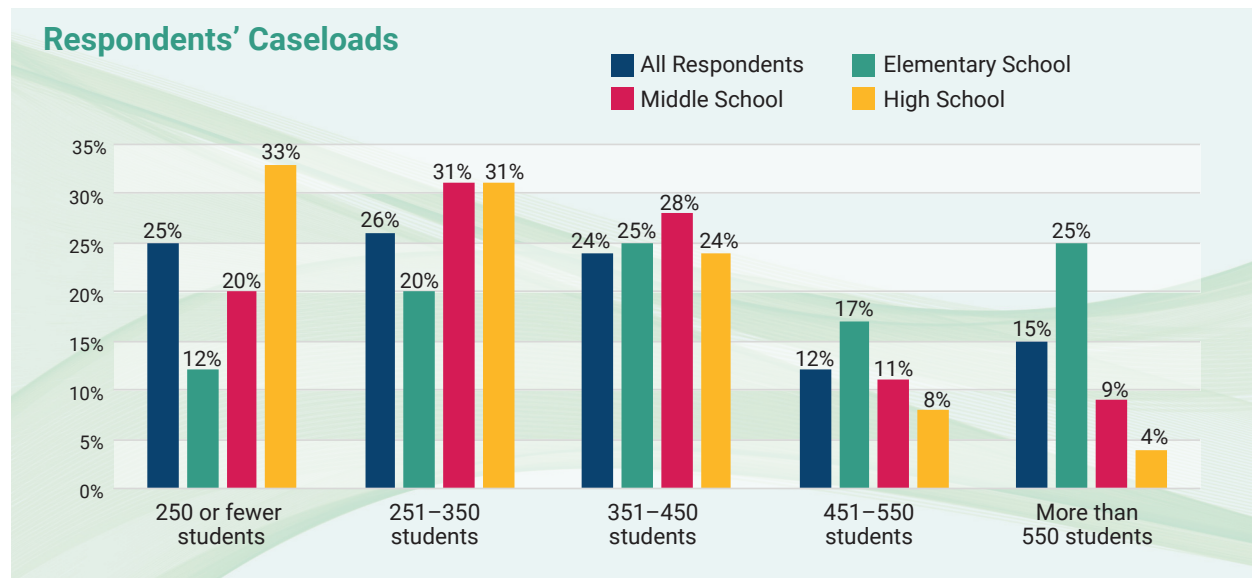
	All respondents	White	Black or African American	Latinx	Native Hawaiian or other Pacific island	Two or more races
Elementary School	32%	32%	37%	25%	23%	28%
Middle School	21%	21%	22%	20%	8%	24%
High School	32%	31%	30%	41%	54%	33%
Multilevel School	13%	13%	10%	12%	8%	10%
International	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Other	3%	2%	1%	3%	8%	5%

In terms of location type, 42% work in suburban areas, 31% in rural and 24% in urban, rising to 48% among respondents who are Black or African American and 41% of Latinx. Much smaller percentages (one percent or fewer) are full-time virtual, international, DoDEA or other.



Student-to-School-Counselor Ratios

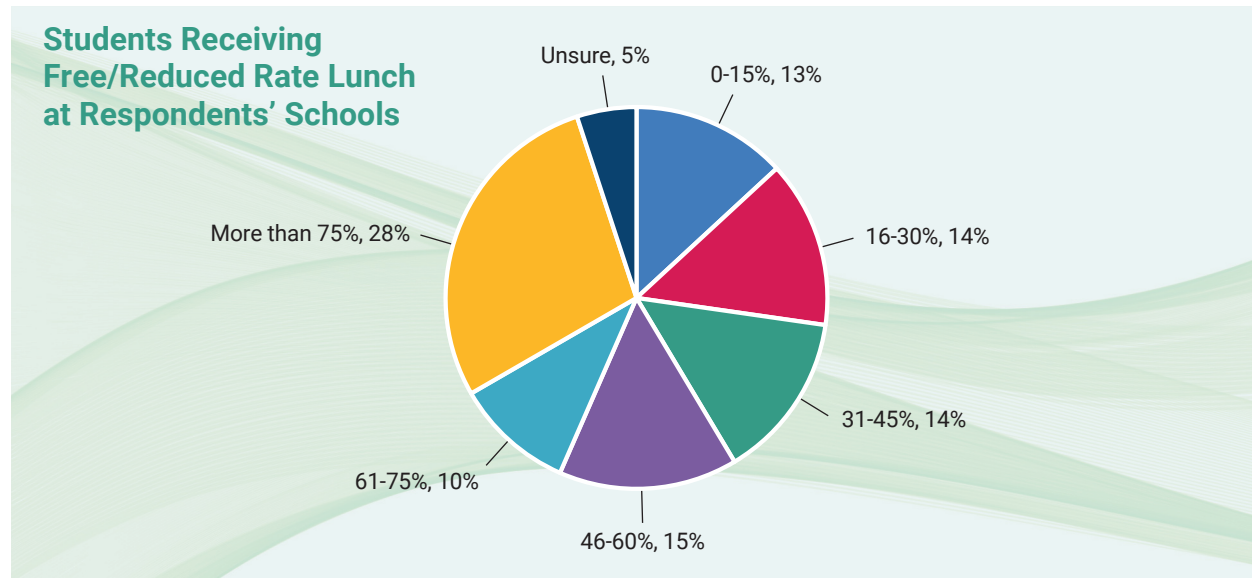
The largest percentages of respondents report a student-to-school-counselor ratio of 251–350-to-1 (26%) and 450-to-1 (24%), which is comparable to the national average (430:1; U.S. Department of Education data) yet well above the ASCA recommendation (250:1).



When reported ratios are disaggregated by school level, ratios are also comparable to national medians (national averages are less accurate for this measure due to available national data). The national median ratio for K–8 is 708:1 vs. 212:1 for 9–12. Fortunately, small numbers of respondents report having responsibility for more than 750 students (5% overall).

Student Demographics

In terms of student demographics, the largest percentage of respondents (28%) report that more than three quarters of students in their school receive free/reduced rate lunch, rising to 35% among elementary school counselors; 13%, 0%-15% of students; 14%, 16%-30% of students; 14%, 31%-45% of students; 16%, 46%-60% of students; and 10%, 61%-75% of students.



A majority of respondents (59%) report 15% or fewer students are English-language learners, while 18% report 16%-30% of students are ELLs and 19% report 31% or more of students are ELLs, rising to 33% among school counselors in urban area schools.

Most-Significant Challenges

Not surprisingly, respondents indicate that having access to students in a virtual environment (68% rate extremely challenging/challenging) is their biggest day-to-day challenge at work, followed by providing counseling and lessons to students in a virtual environment (62%). Majorities are also challenged by managing high caseloads (53%) and closing opportunity and achievement gaps (51%). Findings are similar regardless of whether respondents' schools began the year as virtual, hybrid or in person, with the exception that slightly more than 50% find having access to students in a virtual environment and providing counseling and lessons to students in a virtual environment extremely challenging/challenging.

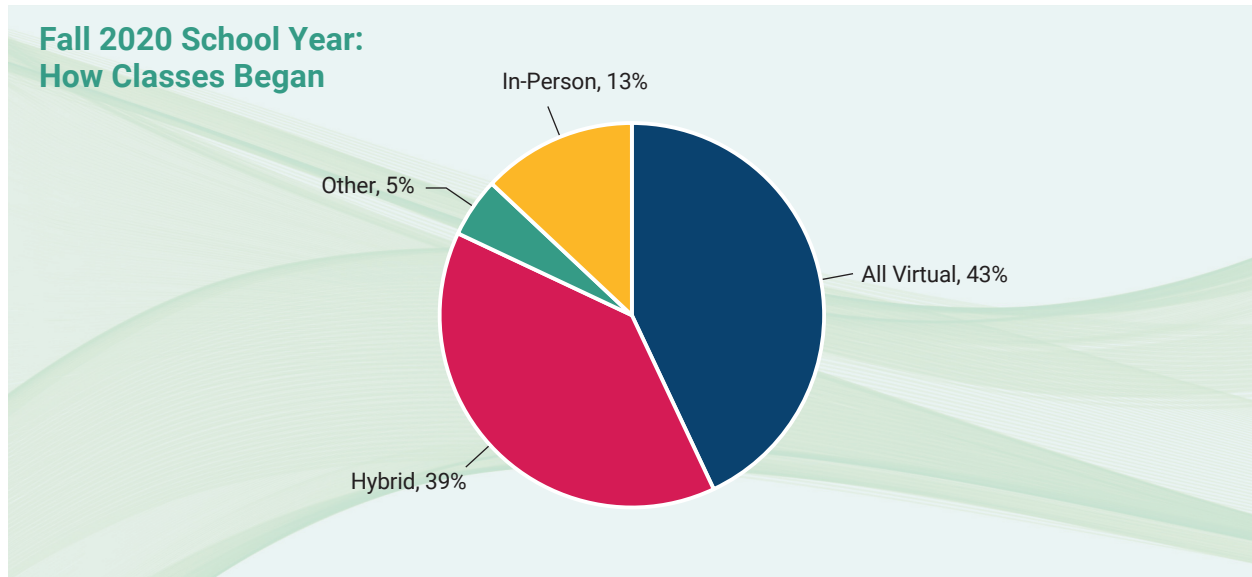
Day-to-Day Challenges

Rating Extremely Challenging/Challenging	All Respondents
Having access to students in a virtual environment	68%
Providing counseling and lessons to students in a virtual environment	62%
Managing high caseload/number of students	53%
Closing opportunity and achievement gaps	51%
Being assigned inappropriate duties	39%
Ensuring administrators understand the school counselor role	38%
Participating in professional development appropriate for school counseling	38%
Providing training and resources for teachers/staff	37%
Accessing adequate school and community mental health resources for referrals to students and parents	36%
Providing short-term counseling to support students' mental health needs	36%
Collecting/analyzing student data	34%
Keeping up with new technologies	31%
Incorporating anti-racism practices/ pedagogy/curriculum in the school counseling program	30%
Finding time for professional development	29%
Responding to students in crisis	29%
Having access to students in a regular school environment (pre-COVID-19)	27%
Addressing school/district policies that result in institutional discrimination	25%
Hiring of inadequately or improperly trained school counselors	13%

Survey respondents also mentioned several other challenges, such as funding for school counselor resources, responsibility for 504 case management and caring for their own mental health.

Issues Related to COVID-19

Only 13% of respondents began the 2020–2021 school year with in-person classes. The largest percentage, 43%, began with all virtual classes, while 39% began the year with a hybrid virtual/in-person schedule. Another 6% point to other situations.



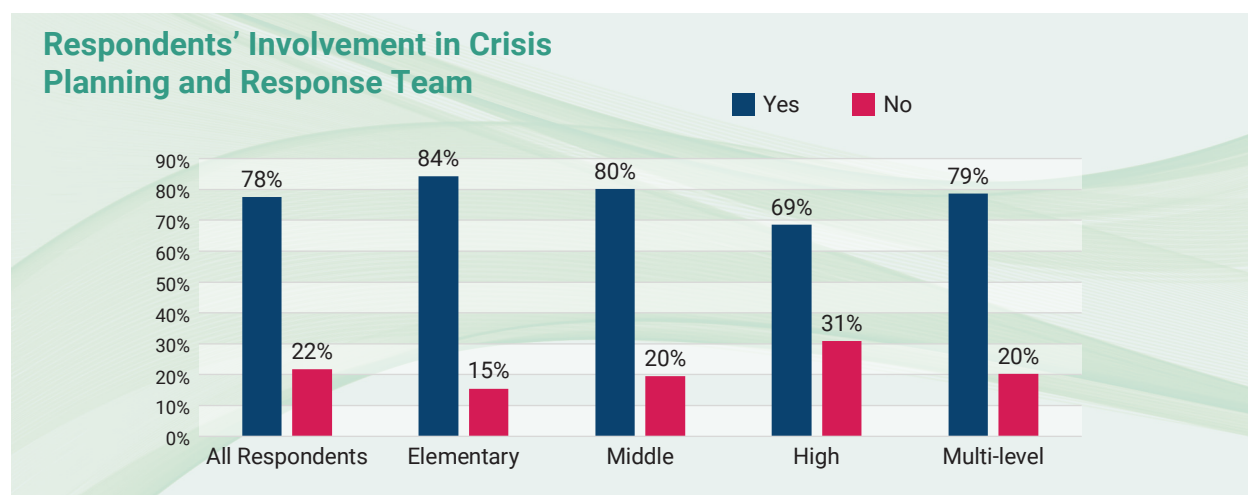
As a result of the pandemic, job responsibilities have changed for most respondents. For example, 73% follow up with students who have not participated in virtual classes; 53% follow up with students who have not returned since schools reopened; 48% participate in attendance/check-ins; 45% have increased responsibility regarding SEL implementation; and 34% have new/additional duties before/after school, bus/hall/lunch duty, etc. These additional duties vary somewhat based on how respondents' schools began the 2020–2021 school year. For example, 47% of school counselors who started the year in person are involved in additional duties before/after school, bus/hall/lunch duty, etc. And, compared with in-person school counselors, all virtual school counselors are more likely to have increased responsibility regarding SEL implementation (48% vs. 38%).

Additional Duties Related to COVID-19

	All Respondents	All Virtual	Hybrid	In-person
Follow-up with students who have not participated in virtual classes	73%	80%	74%	44%
Follow-up with students who have not returned since schools reopened	53%	56%	56%	37%
Attendance/check-ins	47%	55%	45%	31%
Increased responsibility regarding SEL implementation	45%	48%	44%	38%
New/additional duties (before/after school, bus/hall/lunch duty, etc.)	34%	24%	41%	47%
Additional responsibilities related to universal mental or behavioral health screenings	30%	28%	32%	30%
Home visits	20%	25%	17%	12%
New health-related duties (temperature check, etc.)	20%	15%	23%	26%
Substitute teaching	14%	9%	15%	24%
No significant changes	8%	7%	6%	14%
Other	11%	10%	11%	8%

Among the other responsibilities that have increased under COVID-19 are managing student schedules, additional paperwork related to hybrid structures, community engagement activities, additional meetings with building leadership, learning new technology platforms and more. “Constant schedule changes for students switching back and forth from virtual to in-person learning,” a respondent notes – a comment that is echoed by many others. “I feel like I’ve been on call. I’ve been working 12–15 hours per day, including weekends,” a respondent says. “The day never ends,” says another. “Very few boundaries. Difficult to reach students when we can’t speak with them during class.”

Asked if they are part of a crisis planning and response team for natural disasters, school violence, suicide risk assessment, etc., 77% respondent yes, while 23% responded no. Respondents who work in high schools are less likely than elementary and middle school counselors to be part of a crisis planning and response team.



Commenting on their crisis planning team, respondents indicate the team serves a number of roles – from dangerous situations to student risk assessments. “Student services and administrators meet each week to discuss collaborative efforts for student and family support. Protocols for crises are discussed and reviewed with the entire staff,” a respondent notes. Unfortunately, several survey respondents indicate that while a team is in place, it doesn’t meet regularly. And among those who say they aren’t part of a crisis planning team, teams either don’t exist or school counselors aren’t included. “All school counselors are asked for input for certain areas, but not officially on the team,” a respondent comments.

Issues Related to Racism and Bias

The ASCA study gathered details about school counselors’ efforts in addressing racism and bias in their school counseling program, as well as how their schools are addressing racism and bias. Although 17% of responding school counselors indicate they have taken no specific actions to address racism and bias in their program, 42% point to monitoring student behavior (in person) and chats (virtual) to identify racist behavior or speech; 38%, providing individual counseling; 35%, providing classroom lessons; 22%, identifying and advocating to revise or remove policies that disproportionately affect students of color, such as “looking at data across higher-level classes to make sure all populations are represented,” “decreasing punitive response to behaviors,” “prioritizing students of color for support and intervention, reaching out for check-ins and referral to racial affinity groups,” “formed a districtwide team to systematically tackle equity work across our district ... point out practices that affect students of color in negative ways...” and other practices.

Additionally, 22% say they are using data to identify students who should be included in most rigorous coursework; 20%, providing parent information, education or outreach; 19%, providing in-service training for staff; and 15%, providing small-group counseling.

Other actions taken include “updating schoolwide materials to reflect diversity and teach about bias and discrimination,” “prepared in-service training with my school psychologist,” “started an equity leadership professional learning community that meets twice a month,” and other actions. In comments, however, a number of respondents point to lack of support for these efforts, for example, “I have communicated with my administrators the need for addressing this matter but I am being told to wait.” Another notes, “[I’m] attempting more staff training. Sometimes [it’s] a struggle at current institution.” Additionally, several comments reveal a segment of school counselors lack an understanding of systemic racism and their role in educating students.

Actions to Address Racism and Bias in School Counseling Program

	All Respondents	Elementary	Middle	High School	Multi-level	Current RAMP	Non-RAMP	ASCA Member	Non-member
Monitoring student behavior (in person) and chats (virtual) to identify racist behavior or speech	42%	45%	47%	34%	45%	38%	41%	42%	41%
Providing individual counseling	38%	34%	46%	37%	38%	37%	37%	39%	38%
Providing classroom lessons	35%	59%	29%	14%	39%	35%	35%	36%	32%
Identifying and advocating to revise or remove policies that disproportionately affect students of color	22%	18%	22%	26%	22%	30%	23%	23%	17%
Providing parent information, education or outreach	20%	22%	21%	17%	21%	23%	19%	20%	19%
Using data to identify students who should be included in most rigorous coursework	22%	13%	29%	31%	18%	39%	22%	24%	18%
Providing in-service training for school staff	19%	18%	21%	20%	20%	27%	19%	20%	18%
Providing small-group counseling	15%	17%	17%	9%	18%	15%	13%	15%	15%
No actions taken	17%	12%	16%	23%	16%	16%	18%	16%	20%

As the chart indicates, some differences appear among demographic groups. For example, 59% of elementary school counselors (vs. 35% of the full sample) are providing classroom lessons to address racism and bias in their school counseling program and 46% of middle school counselors (vs. 38%) of the full sample are providing individual counseling. Recognized ASCA Model Program (RAMP) status also has some bearing on anti-racism and bias efforts. Thirty percent of respondents with the RAMP designation are identifying and advocating to revise or remove policies that disproportionately affect students of color (vs. 23% of non-RAMP schools), 39% are using data to identify students who should be included in the most rigorous coursework (vs. 22% of non-RAMP schools) and 27% are providing in-service training for school staff (vs. 19% of non-RAMP schools). A school counselor's race/ethnicity appears to be less of a factor in these efforts.

Survey respondents were also asked how their schools or districts are supporting and promoting diversity, equity, inclusion and access this year. Respondents indicate their schools/districts have adapted by requiring diversity, equity and inclusion training for all faculty (34%), incorporating diversity, equity and inclusion in student curriculum (27%) and created positions for diversity, equity and inclusion specialists (16%). Ten percent have changed policies and

procedures for students, such as ensuring students have access to computers and the Internet, updated dress codes to be more equitable and added restorative practices, for example. Six percent have changed procedures for faculty, such as required professional development on equity, revised teaching practices and monthly meetings to discuss implicit bias. Four percent of respondents say their schools have eliminated/modified school resource officer positions (4%).

Other actions taken by schools include “invited an outside agency to help facilitate discussion,” “district launched an equity department, which has promoted the equity tenet in various formats for all district personnel, students and families” and started a “book club on several books related to white privilege and institutional racism in education,” for example.

Schools’ Efforts to Promote Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Access

	All Respondents	Elementary	Middle	High School	Multi-level
Required diversity, equity and inclusion training for all faculty	33%	33%	35%	35%	27%
Incorporated diversity, equity and inclusion in student curriculum	27%	29%	27%	23%	28%
Created positions for diversity, equity and inclusion specialists	16%	16%	18%	17%	12%
Changed policies and procedures for students	10%	10%	11%	10%	10%
Changed policies for faculty	5%	6%	6%	5%	4%
Eliminated/modified school resource officer position(s)	4%	3%	4%	4%	4%
No actions taken	36%	33%	36%	37%	43%

School Counseling Program Characteristics and Use of Time

Majorities of respondents strongly agree/agree that their school counseling program includes developmentally appropriate instruction focused on the mindsets and behaviors all students need for postsecondary readiness and success (88%); is delivered to all students systematically (82%); is based on the ASCA National Model (78%); incorporates data-informed decision making (82%); results in improved student achievement, attendance and discipline (81%); and closes achievement and opportunity gaps (73%). In general, elementary school counselors assess their programs more favorably, as the chart shows, while more than nine in 10 school counselors at RAMP-designated schools agree their programs meet the criteria indicated.

Respondents' Assessment of their School Counseling Program

Strongly Agree/Agree the School Counseling Program...	All Respondents	Elementary school	Middle	High School	RAMP	Non-RAMP
is based on the ASCA National Model	78%	85%	80%	73%	97%	75%
incorporates data-informed decision making	81%	83%	85%	78%	95%	79%
is delivered to all students systematically	82%	89%	80%	79%	95%	81%
includes developmentally appropriate instruction focused on the mindsets and behaviors all students need for postsecondary readiness and success	88%	93%	86%	83%	95%	87%
closes achievement and opportunity gaps	72%	77%	70%	69%	92%	70%
results in improved student achievement, attendance and discipline	80%	86%	79%	75%	93%	79%

In the categories of direct student services, respondents spend an average of 28% of their time in counseling, followed by instruction (17%), as the chart that follows indicates. Findings are similar among grade levels, although elementary school counselors spend significantly more time on direct instruction compared with middle and high school counselors. Conversely, high school counselors spend more time in appraisal and advisement. These are positive findings, indicating that school counselors, on average, spend nearly 80% of their time in direct and indirect student services (74%), as recommended in the ASCA National Model.

Time Spent in School Counseling Tasks

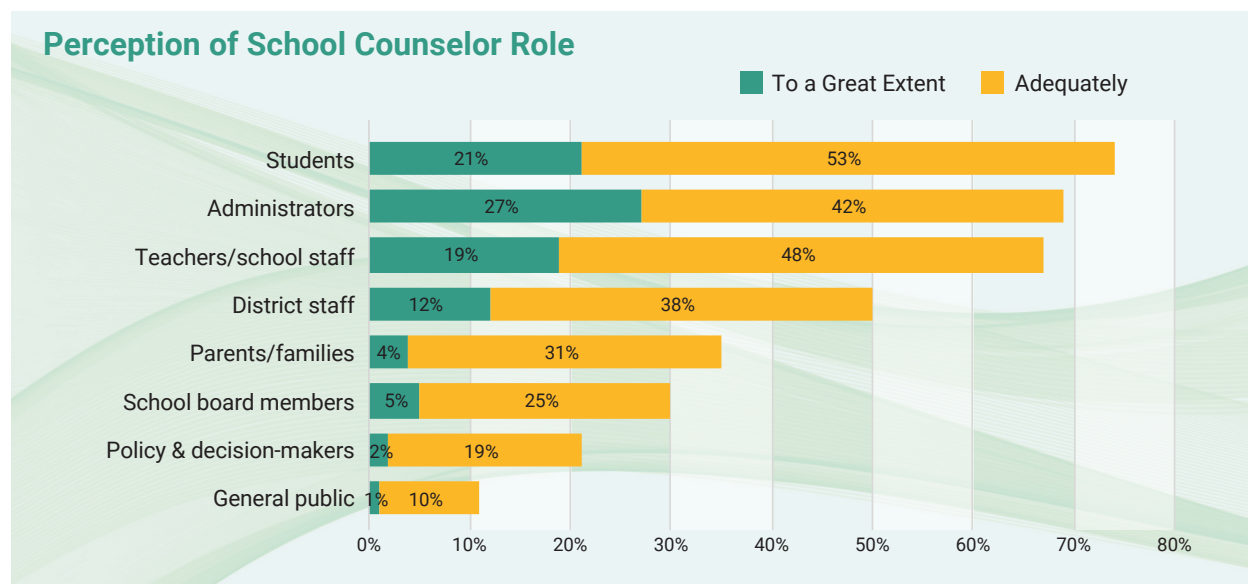
Time Spent in Each Area (Average)	All Respondents	Elementary	Middle	High School
Direct student services	57.5%	60.5%	54.2%	56.1%
<i>Counseling</i>	27.4%	25.2%	30.7%	27.0%
<i>Instruction</i>	17.4%	27.7%	12.1%	10.2%
<i>Appraisals and advisement</i>	12.7%	7.6%	11.4%	18.9%
Indirect student services: referrals, consultation, collaboration	16.8%	15.7%	18.9%	17.1%
Defining, managing and assessing activities	8.1%	7.9%	7.9%	8.4%
Fair-share responsibility activities	6.1%	6.3%	6.6%	5.9%
Non-school-counseling tasks	11.5%	9.7%	12.4%	12.5%

About eight in 10 respondents report their school counseling program has not received the Recognized ASCA Model Program designation, 4% have a current RAMP designation, about one percent previously earned the designation but it's now expired and 15% are unsure.

Given the current environment, respondents were asked if they have spent more time on social/emotional development over the past 12 months. Nearly two-thirds of respondents (63%) indicate they are spending more time on SEL, while 29% have spent about the same amount of time/emphasis and 8% have spent less.

Perception of School Counselor Role

Confusion about the role of school counselors continues to be an issue, according to respondents. Asked to what extent particular demographic groups/roles understand the role of school counselors, respondents assign the highest score to administrators (27% understand the role to a great extent; 42% adequately), followed by students (21% to a great extent; 53% adequately) and teachers/school staff (19% to a great extent; 48% adequately).



It's clear that continued advocacy is needed to support appropriate school counselor roles, especially among families and the general public. "I work in a rural, small district and it seems like no one really understands the point of my job," a respondent comments.

Professional Development Needs

When school counselors and building-level supervisors/directors need information to solve a problem at work, they first turn to trusted peers and colleagues (91%), followed by ASCA (67%), website search (65%), social media channels (29%) or another association (24%), including their state association. Although findings are similar by school type, years of experience makes a difference. New school counselors (0–2 years of experience) are more likely to turn to ASCA (74% vs. 67% of the full sample) and less likely to seek information from another association (16% vs. 24% of the full sample). However, it's clear that trusted colleagues and peers are a critical information source for school counselors. Across the board, nine in 10 respondents are most likely to turn to colleagues.

The survey asked respondents about their professional needs. Although the question asked specifically about receiving professional development from ASCA in key areas, the data is included in this report because it sheds light on school counselors' overall needs. The data indicates they are most interested in receiving education in the areas of mental health (87% extremely interested/interested), social/emotional development (86%), virtual school counseling (83%), crisis/trauma/violence (83%), diversity, equity and inclusion (78%), school counseling technology (78%), anti-racism practices (75%), self-injury and suicide (74%) and grief and death (72%).

Professional Development Interests

Rating Extremely Interested/ Interested	All Respondents	Elementary	Middle	High School	0-2 yrs exp	20+ yrs exp
Mental health	84%	83%	85%	84%	91%	80%
Social/emotional development	83%	87%	82%	79%	93%	77%
Crisis/trauma/violence	81%	84%	81%	78%	91%	75%
Virtual school counseling	80%	81%	83%	79%	84%	80%
School counseling technology	76%	78%	72%	74%	75%	77%
Diversity, equity and inclusion	75%	76%	76%	75%	81%	66%
Anti-racism practices	72%	72%	74%	73%	78%	64%
Self-injury and suicide	72%	69%	74%	70%	89%	64%
Grief and death	70%	73%	70%	64%	83%	59%
Group counseling	67%	75%	68%	56%	82%	56%
LGBTQ issues	65%	54%	72%	69%	74%	56%
Legal and ethical issues	62%	59%	60%	65%	68%	60%
Advocacy	62%	60%	62%	64%	76%	51%
Data collection and analysis	62%	68%	58%	59%	72%	52%
Bullying/conflict resolution	61%	64%	61%	53%	83%	49%
Career development	59%	52%	56%	66%	66%	57%
Academic achievement/success	59%	53%	62%	62%	69%	53%
Leadership	58%	56%	55%	59%	65%	48%
Substance use/abuse	58%	42%	60%	68%	69%	52%
Disabilities/special needs	57%	60%	55%	54%	72%	47%
Transitions	57%	51%	57%	60%	70%	48%
Postsecondary education	43%	20%	37%	66%	51%	38%
Rural school counseling	34%	32%	30%	31%	46%	28%
Classroom management	34%	45%	30%	21%	51%	24%
Urban school counseling	33%	32%	33%	36%	43%	27%

Conclusion

The results of the 2020 State-of-the-Profession survey reveal encouraging trends in the school counseling profession. Progress is being made with improved student-to-school-counselor ratios—from 588:1 in 1986 to 430:1 today, based on data from the Department of Education, and reinforced by this study, which finds that 75% of school counselors are responsible for 450 or fewer students. School counselors also are spending more time in direct student services and leading efforts to address systemic racism and reduce inequities. School counselors embrace the standards of the profession and utilize vital resources to continue to grow their expertise.

It's important to acknowledge that this research was collected during an atypical year. The global COVID-19 pandemic, as well as educators' renewed attention to addressing racism and bias, created increased social and emotional learning needs, as well as new and increased job responsibilities. School counselors responded, adapting to new ways of learning and increasing their advocacy to ensure success for all students.

School counselors understand their role in creating an inclusive and supportive school culture where all students can thrive. When schools counselors are empowered and provided the tools to support students' social and emotional development, academic success and post-secondary planning through a school counseling program, student outcomes improve.

About the American School Counselor Association

The American School Counselor Association is a nonprofit, 501(c)(3) professional organization based in Alexandria, Va. ASCA promotes student success by expanding the image and influence of school counseling through leadership, advocacy, collaboration and systemic change. ASCA helps school counselors guide their students toward academic achievement, career planning and social/emotional development to help today's students become tomorrow's productive, contributing members of society. Founded in 1952, ASCA has a network of 50 state and territory associations and a membership of nearly 40,000 school counseling professionals. For additional information on the American School Counselor Association, visit www.schoolcounselor.org.