

EVALUATING THE SCOPE AND COST OF SCHOOL COUNSELOR LICENSING

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School counselors are vital to academic success. They work with students, parents, and teachers to provide intellectual and social support directly (e.g., through individual meetings) and indirectly (e.g., by providing referrals to outside services). Of course, a counselor's responsibilities vary according to student age. Counselors who work with younger children may focus on identifying students with special academic or emotional needs and providing accommodations. Those who work in middle schools often help students improve their study and interpersonal skills, while high school counselors help students select courses, narrow their career goals, and identify the necessary college or other training to achieve them.

Evidence overwhelmingly indicates school counselors' positive impacts. Studies show that they help improve grades and test scores, increase college enrollment, and reduce absenteeism.¹ Their impact is felt beyond high school; for instance, evidence suggests that counselors play a role in helping students find cost-effective job training (e.g., lower cost four-year institutions) which leads to higher college enrollment and persistence.² Their impact is felt more strongly among groups that need more assistance than most. Indeed, counselors are particularly effective at improving outcomes for low income and underperforming students.³

If there's a hurdle to their impact, it's elevated caseload—i.e., the ratio of students to counselors.⁴ High caseloads contribute to elevated stress and, ultimately, career burnout, which impairs student outcomes (e.g., lower grades and graduation rates).⁵ Surprisingly, however, few states require that schools maintain a specific caseload ratio.⁶ That's partly because there aren't enough qualified

1. See Scott E. Carrell and Mark Hoekstra (2014), "Are School Counselors an Effective Education Input?" *Economic Letters* 125(1): 66-69; Thurston Domina et al. (2022), "The Impact of School Counselor Resources in Elementary and Middle Grades," *Professional School Counseling* 26(1a); and Michael Hurwitz and Jessica Howell (2014), "Estimating Causal Impacts of School Counselors With Regression Continuity Designs," *Journal of Counseling & Development* 92(2): 316-327.

2. See Benjamin Castleman and Joshua Goodman (2018), "Intensive College Counseling and the Enrollment and Persistence of Low-Income Students," *Education Finance and Policy* 13(1): 19-41.

3. See Christine Mulhern (2023), "Beyond Teachers: Estimating Individual School Counselors' Effects on Educational Attainment," *American Economic Review* 113(11): 2846-2493.

4. The literature also indicates that poorly defined job descriptions can hinder counselor satisfaction and performance; see Mary Kate Blake (2020), "Other Duties as Assigned: The Ambiguous Role of the High School Counselor," *Sociology of Education* 93(4): 315-330.

5. See Emily Goodman-Scott et al. (2018), "An Ecological View of School Counselor Ratios and Student Academic Outcomes: A National Investigation," *Journal of Counseling & Development* 96(4): 388-398; and Patrick R. Mullen et al. (2021), "School Counselor Burnout, Job Stress, and Job Satisfaction by Student Caseload," *NASP Bulletin* 105(1): 25-42.

6. See Katherine Meyer and Elizabeth Bell (2023), "The School Counselor Staffing Landscape: Policies and Practice," *The Brookings Institution*.

qualified personnel to go around; there is, by most accounts, a shortage of school counselors and other support personnel.⁷

Increasing the number of counselors is crucial, but licensing requirements are a barrier to that end. Prospective counselors must satisfy state-mandated education, professional development, and testing requirements, all of which impose time and financial costs. The collective burden is high relative to school counselors' pay; in 2023, the median salary was \$61,710.⁸ Yet there is no real evidence that stricter licensure requirements create better, more effective counselors.

This paper outlines and discusses the school counselor license requirements imposed by state governments in three areas: education and training, testing, and fees. It also proposes reforms:

- Improving the transparency of license requirements and fees
- Revising required education and ongoing professional development mandates
- Eliminating exam requirements

These policy changes will ease the path to licensure and increase the number of counselors.

EDUCATION AND TRAINING REQUIREMENTS

All states require that school counselors first earn an advanced degree—i.e., at least a master's degree—in a related field.⁹ But there is variation in mandated pre-licensure training beyond the that degree. Many states do not specify a required number of hours, weeks, or months of supervised counseling experience, such as through fieldwork or a school-based internship, that an applicant must complete before receiving a license. However, such requirements are often “built-in” to required advanced degree programs. School counselors thus attain the experience, even if it is not strictly mandated by state law or administrative rule.¹⁰

Other states mandate a specific amount of pre-licensure training (see nearby table). Some quantify the training in hours. For example, Pennsylvania and Rhode Island require 300 hours, Nebraska requires 550, and seven states require 700: Alabama, Arkansas, Colorado, Delaware, Idaho, Louisiana, and New York. Other states are less precise. In South Dakota, prospective counselors must complete a one-year internship; in Connecticut, Tennessee, and Mississippi, the internship must last one semester. Other states do not require an internship from all applicants. Wisconsin waives its one-year internship requirement for prospective counselors with prior teaching experience.

7. See Donna St. George (2023), “In a Crisis, Schools are 100,000 Mental Health Staff,” The Washington Post.

8. See U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2024), “School and Career Counselors and Advisors,” Occupational Outlook Handbook, retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/community-and-social-service/school-and-career-counselors.htm>, accessed July 29, 2024.

9. Some states (e.g., Minnesota) permit licensure if the counselor is enrolled in a relevant graduate program and has completed sufficient coursework. Regulatory language in Alaska states a bachelor's degree is required but that a prospective school counselor must also have finished a relevant counseling program, which will almost certainly be a master's or doctoral degree.

10. The American School Counselor Association does not recommend a specific pre-service training requirement for academic programs.

<i>State</i>	<i>Requirement</i>	<i>State</i>	<i>Requirement</i>
Alabama	700 hours	Maryland	Varies
Arizona	Varies	Massachusetts	450 hours
Arkansas	700 hours	Michigan	600 hours
Connecticut	10-month internship	Mississippi	1 year internship
Delaware	700 hours	Nebraska	550 hours
Florida	600 hours	Nevada	600 hours
Idaho	700 hours	New York	700 hours
Illinois	600 hours	Pennsylvania	300 hours
Iowa	600 hours	Vermont	600 hours
Kentucky	1 year	Virginia	200 hours
Louisiana	700 hours	Wisconsin	Varies

In most of the United States, a school counselor's education continues after completing an advanced degree in their field and receiving a license, albeit semi-formally. Forty-four states require ongoing professional development to maintain a school counselor license.¹¹ A counselor must complete the requirement to renew the license, which typically occurs every five years.¹²

However, it is challenging to compare requirements across states because of inconsistency the language used to describe them. Some states describe their professional development mandate as a certain number of "hours." That ranges from a low of six hours every five years in Idaho to a high of 200 hours in Texas. Florida, Indiana, Nebraska, Nevada, North Dakota, Pennsylvania, Georgia, and Maine define their respective mandates as six hours of "college credit." Other states describe their requirement using different units: Washington requires 100 "clock hours," South Carolina mandates 120 "renewal credits," Louisiana demands 150 "continuing learning units," and South Dakota requires six "transcribed credits." In some states, a counselor can demonstrate professional development with a combination of tasks. For example, Hawaii

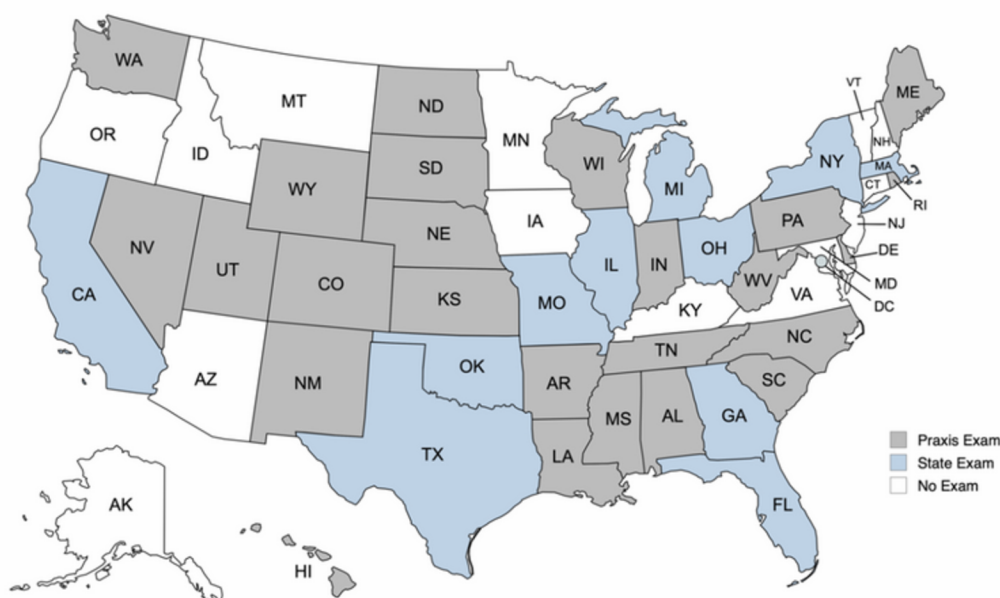
11. Three states do not list any mandatory continuing education requirements for school counselors: California, New Mexico, and New York. In Missouri, the license lasts for 99 years and carries no professional development mandate. Oklahoma school counselors can skip additional coursework if employed full-time; otherwise, the state imposes a sliding-scale mandate. West Virginia does not require additional training after five years of work experience.

12. Deviations from the five-year renewal cycle include Tennessee, which has a ten-year cycle, and Arizona, which has a 12-year cycle. In other states (e.g., Missouri and New Jersey), the license is perpetual; thus, there is no renewal period. In New Mexico, it varies by license type.

TESTING MANDATES AND COSTS

As the nearby map illustrates, over two-thirds of state governments mandate that prospective school counselors receive a passing score on an examination before issuing a license. Twenty-five states require the Praxis exam in school counseling. The Educational Testing Service (ETS), a non-profit organization that oversees various standardized tests, including the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE), administers the computer-based, 120-question exam. As of 2024, it costs \$130, a \$24.95 practice test is also available.¹⁴ The exam's content derives from the American School Counselor Association's School Counselor Standards & Competencies.

Testing Requirement by State



Eleven states do not mandate the Praxis exam and administer their own alternative instead. Those exams vary in content and cost, from a low of \$30 in California to a high of \$200 in Texas, with an average of about \$116. The exam is not strictly mandatory in one state: California requires its Basic Educational Skills Test only if a prospective school counselor's prior coursework fails to satisfy the state's basic skills requirement. In the remaining states, however, the exam is required to obtain licensure. In some, it is similar-if not identical-to the exam mandated for teacher licensure. But the exam is specific to school counseling in five states: Michigan, Missouri, New York, Oklahoma, and Texas.

13. See Hawai'i Teacher Standards Board (n.d.), "Hawai'i Teacher Standards Board License Renewal for School Counselors Verification of Satisfying the Hawai'i School Counselor Performance Standards Documentation," retrieved from https://hawaiiteacherstandardsboard.org/content/wp-content/uploads/RA-5010-Standards-Counselor_Performance_Documentation2015-01-1.pdf, accessed July 29, 2024.

14. The Educational Testing Service provides limited to no-cost preparation materials to individuals who provide their email address in advance.

16. An initial inquiry to the appropriate agency in Texas resulted in an email response suggesting a question about the state's license fees be directed to an agency helpdesk; the helpdesk responded with a suggestion to contact an "educator preparation program" to inquire about costs.

often buried within an agency website (if they are available at all). Furthermore, the information may not appear in website search results or is not publicly available (i.e., fee information is only available to individuals who create an online account with the agency.) That leaves counselors little recourse but to send an email, place a phone call, or submit a help desk request, all of which are an unnecessary inconvenience.

Policymakers should borrow from New Hampshire's Economic and Labor Market Information Bureau, which publishes exemplary fact sheets for licensed occupations. The two-page document pertaining to school counselors (reproduced below and available online¹⁷) lists the governing legislation and administrative rules, contact information for the appropriate agency, education and testing requirements, professional development requirements, all fees, and links to professional associations.

Licensed, Certified, and Registered Occupations in New Hampshire 2023		Licensed, Certified, and Registered Occupations in New Hampshire 2023	
SCHOOL COUNSELOR		SCHOOL COUNSELOR (continued)	
<p>Administer school guidance and counseling programs, which must be developmentally appropriate and designed to address the educational and career needs of all students. Guidance and counseling programs must deliver career, occupational, and educational information; student appraisal activities; placement services; and identification and referral of students in need of special services, including suicide prevention and psychiatric referrals. High school guidance programs must also provide for the delivery of career and college counseling.</p>		<p>Experienced Educator License</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Upon completion of three years of full-time educator experience while maintaining a valid credential, a beginning educator is qualified for an experienced educator license only if the educator is determined to be "effective" or better under the local supervision and evaluation system for at least two consecutive years. An experienced educator credential shall be issued for three years. 	
<p>Legislation Statute: NH RSA 186 Administrative Rules: Chapter Ed 500</p>	<p>School Counselor</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Have completed a State Board of Education approved school counseling collegiate program at the Master's degree level or higher; or Have completed courses related to school counseling at the Master's degree level or higher and have done a counseling internship in a school setting; or Experience in comparable positions in school counseling or other professions closely related to school counseling <p>There are multiple levels of credentials, each with varying requirements:</p> <p>Intern Authorization</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have met the requirements for a Statement of Eligibility Currently be employed in a New Hampshire public or non-public school role Intern authorizations are granted for the duration of the individualized professional development plan Educators who hold a valid intern authorization receive a beginning educator license after the Bureau approves the required report of completion under the individualized professional development plan <p>Beginning Educator License</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Beginning educator certificates are issued for an initial period of three years Upon completion of three years of full-time educator experience while maintaining a valid credential, a beginning educator is qualified for an experienced educator license only if the educator is determined to be "effective" or better under the local supervision and evaluation system for at least two consecutive years. 	<p>Reciprocity Permitted in accordance with the NASDTEC Interstate Contract</p> <p>Active Licenses Not provided</p>	<p>O*Net Codes 21-1012.00 Educational, Guidance, School and Vocational Counselors</p>
<p>Regulatory Agency Bureau of Credentialing Division of Educator Support and Higher Education New Hampshire Department of Education 25 Hall Street Concord, New Hampshire 03301</p> <p>phone 603-271-2409 fax 603-271-4134 web www.education.nh.gov/educators contact Administrator e-mail cert.info@doe.nh.gov</p>	<p>Certification Requirements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Qualify through one of the available Alternative Pathways for licensure described on NH Department of Education webpage. <p>School Counseling Director</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Completed a state board of education approved school counseling program at the master's degree level or higher; Current possession of New Hampshire certification as a school counselor; At least 3 years of successful paid and progressively responsible experience in the field of school counseling, with recent leadership experience that encompasses comprehensive knowledge of school operations; and Have acquired the competencies, skills, and knowledge itemized in Ed 506.10 	<p>Examination Not required</p> <p>Criminal History Record Check Clearance Applicants may be required to submit a Criminal History Record Check from the NH Department of Safety. For more information please visit the Bureau of Credentialing website.</p> <p>Continuing Education Staff development activities totaling 45 Professional Education continuing education units and 30 continuing education units per endorsement during the three-year licensure period.</p>	<p>Related Training Educational, School, and Vocational Counselors</p> <p>Additional Information Sources National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification (NASDTEC) www.nasdtc.org American School Counselor Association www.schoolcounselor.org</p>
<p>Fees</p> <p>Three-year licensure \$120.00 Three-year renewal \$120.00 Additional fees vary by pathway for licensure and number of endorsements applied for. Exam fees are set by each testing company.</p>			

Revise Education and Professional Development Mandates. The education level required to become a school counselor—an advanced degree beyond an undergraduate degree—is the most expensive component of state licensure requirements. Policymakers should consider a different, less costly approach: encouraging colleges and universities to create undergraduate programs in school counseling that provide the necessary preparation. Options include four-year degrees focused entirely on school counseling or “4+1” programs that allow prospective counselors

17. See <https://www.nhes.nh.gov/elmi/products/licertocc/documents/guidance.pdf>

to complete undergraduate and graduate degrees on an accelerated timetable. Either option reduces the time and cost of training to become a school counselor. Policymakers in some states should also consider whether school counselors must also have a current teaching license, prior teaching experience, or both. These represent additional, and costly, burdens that likely reduce the ranks of school counselors.

Professional development requirements also merit closer scrutiny. That might include greater consistency in how they measure relevant activities—i.e., abandoning the status quo of units, points, and hours and adopting a shared standard for quantifying expectations. Policymakers could also eliminate the requirement outright until licensing agencies document that the additional professional development effort improves student outcomes.¹⁸ Alternatively, states could devolve the requirement to local school districts, which can better tailor professional development mandates, if any, to student needs.

Eliminate Examination Requirements. There is no evidence that the Praxis exam mandated in 25 states or the state-specific exams required in eleven others improve school counselor efficacy. That's likely because, in part, state exams fail to assess the full scope of school counselor requirements.¹⁹ More generally, exam mandates should not be necessary if given state-mandated academic preparation is sufficient for the career. To wit: school counselors must complete a graduate-level degree program that is regulated by a state licensing agency, conforms to professional standards, and is often accredited by a national organization. A prospective counselor's knowledge of professional standards and practice is presumably assessed throughout their coursework in that advanced degree program, rendering a mandatory exam after the fact redundant—and costly. Using the exam as a gatekeeper to the profession also conflicts with the American School Counselor Association's position on high stakes testing for students, which notes that testing “may not accurately measure quality of knowledge, may be biased and may disincentivize culturally responsive pedagogy.”²⁰

Alternatively, if policymakers believe the Praxis or state-specific exam accurately gauges a prospective school counselor's knowledge and ability to provide student support, then they should consider allowing individuals with a bachelor's degree in a related field to take the exam and waive the advanced degree requirement if they receive a passing score.

18. The American School Counselor Association's position statement on counselor licensure, last revised in 2021, states that applicable state legislation “should include...requirements for continuing education to further develop skills as a school counselor” (see <https://schoolcounselor.org/Standards-Positions/Position-Statements/ASCA-Position-Statements/The-School-Counselor-and-Credentialing-and-Licensu>). However, the statement includes no evidence for benefits of professional development except for a 2015 study published in the Association's journal. That study's authors applied basic linear regression to survey responses gathered from several hundred counselors in one state. The results suggested counselors apply some of what they learn but presented no evidence of an impact on student outcomes, which the authors did not assess.

19. See John C. Carey et al. (2018), “Competence in Program Evaluation and Research Assessed by State School Counselor Licensure,” *Professional School Counseling* 22(1); and Qi Shi and John Carey (2021), “School Counselor Multicultural Counseling Competence Assessed by State School Counselor Licensure Examinations,” *Journal of School-Based Counseling Policy and Evaluation* 3(2): 79-90.

20. See American School Counselor Association (2024), “The School Counselor and High-Stakes Testing,” retrieved from <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/Standards-Positions/Position-Statements/ASCA-Position-Statements/The-School-Counselor-and-High-Stakes-Testing>, accessed July 20, 2024.

CONCLUSION

School counselors' role in student success cannot be understated. Available evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates their positive impact on students' intellectual and emotional development. Yet they face varied challenges in the workplace, including elevated caseloads. One way to relieve that stress is to increase the number of school counselors by easing the path to licensure. Improving the clarity of license requirements and costs, revising required education and professional development mandates, and eliminating mandatory exams are reforms with benefits for counselors and, by extension, the students they serve.