



Leading Edge Advisors School Counseling Study

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School Counseling Study – Phase I – Seattle Public Schools

Overview

The report considers questions that are important – to members of the School Board, to district leaders, to school principals, to teachers, to school counselors, to community-based program managers... and certainly to parents:

- How well does SPS position its students for success after high school?
- How well is the SPS system (Elementary through 12th Grade) preparing its students for success in high school?
- Is SPS preparing all of its students equitably, i.e. are there disparities in the level of preparation of systemically marginalized populations, i.e. Students of Color Farthest From Education Justice (SOCFFEJ) and African American males (AA Males)?
- How might current College and Career structures, programs and practices be contributing to any gaps in preparation for success after high school?
- Which schools in the system are achieving better outcomes for their students, and what can we learn from these “bright sites”?

Why the Focus on School Counseling

Often misunderstood as a measure of academic success, college and career readiness is, in fact, a holistic measure of three elements:

1. **academic proficiency**
2. **social-emotional health, and**
3. **a combined sense of purpose and self-efficacy.**

Professional school counselors are trained to notice and flag any issues compromising this foundation for student success, so that students can be *connected to the appropriate experts* in each of these areas and be supported in a holistic and integrated fashion.

Aside from facilitating student-centered school effectiveness, professional school counselors ensure that all students a) gain awareness of a wide range of post-secondary options; b) participate in experiential opportunities to help them identify both their interests and strengths, and c) engage in multi-year post-secondary planning.

Research shows that schools with effective comprehensive school counseling programs achieve significantly better student outcomes: self-efficacy, academic proficiency, attendance, discipline, high school graduation, college-going for first generation students, and college persistence. School counselors play an outsized role for African American, first-generation and immigrant students.

Summary of Findings¹

How well does SPS position its students for success after high school?

- SPS does not track the success of its graduates who enter the workforce or the military.
- Data from the National Student Clearinghouse and the Seattle Promise program (SPP) suggest that SPS students are not particularly well positioned to succeed in higher education, especially those who identify as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color):
 - 6 years after entering a higher education program, 40% of SPS students have still not earned a certificate or a degree.
 - Only 50% of SPS students who entered SPP persisted into Year 2; 77% of those who exited identified as BIPOC.

How well is the SPS system (from elementary through 12th Grade) preparing its students for success in high school? Are there disparities between different populations of students?

- In 2023, 70% of SPS seniors needed waivers in order to graduate. For these students, the high school degree may obscure a lack of important skills and proficiencies.
- Grade level proficiency data from 2023 suggest that, indeed, a large percentage of SPS students lack the foundational knowledge and skills for success in high school.
 - As early as 3rd grade, we see only 60% of SPS students reading at grade-level proficiency standards. This drops to 40% for SOCFEJ and 28% for AA males.
 - In 7th grade, ELA proficiency remains unchanged. Meanwhile, math proficiency has dropped to 50% for all students, 29% for SOCFEJ and 21% for AA males.
 - Unsurprisingly, discipline rates are 4x higher in middle school for all students and 6-7x higher for SOCFEJ and AA males.
 - In 10th grade, disparities in ELA proficiency between groups persist, while math proficiency overall plummets to less than 50% for all students, less than 25% for SOCFEJ and 12% for AA males.
 - In 12th grade, only 30% of students are “on track” for graduation without a waiver.

How might current structures, programs and practices be contributing to these disparities?

- At the District level, the School Counseling function is understaffed, lacks leadership with direct school counseling experience, and is buried under Academics. All of these factors limit the ability of the department to effectively support schools and school counselors in successfully and holistically attending to all three pillars of college and career readiness.
- In half of SPS elementary schools, school counseling caseloads exceed WA state guidelines; this may be due to schools being told to choose: either a school counselor or a social worker.
- At all school levels, counselors report using their time for activities inappropriate to their role. This reflects both a lack of administrative support and a widespread lack of understanding, including at the District level, of the differences in role between an academic counselor, a mental health counselor and a school counselor.
- Lack of clarity on the critical role of the school counseling function is compounded by a lack of robust performance accountability measures, including at the District level.

¹ These findings are based on data made available by the District between January and June 2024.

Which schools in the system are achieving better outcomes for their students, and what can we learn from these “bright sites”?

- While data made available from the District did not allow us to assess the extent to which each school had an effective comprehensive school counseling function, one or more schools in each region were identified as bright sites based on exemplary achievement of one or more student outcomes. Some schools were both bright sites for some outcomes and cloudy sites for others, suggesting that all schools would have something to gain from peer collaboration and a facilitated exchange of promising practices. (See the pg 38 in the full report for a list of bright and cloudy sites, and the report’s appendix for additional details.)

NEXT STEPS

Four key questions emerge from this first phase of analysis:

- **What might be possible if SPS school counselors were supported** to do the work they were trained to do?
- **What would it look like, at all levels,** for SPS school counselors to be adequately supported in their role?
- **What would that require** of the District, principals, teaching staff, and school health staff?
- **How might we start to put some of these elements in place?**

Phase II: Learning from the Bright Sites

This first phase of work was limited by data available at the District Level. While these data enabled us to make recommendations for adjustments in structures, systems and practices at the District level, for lasting and tangible benefit to students, we need to engage the school sites.

Phase II Questions:

- To what extent are the individuals who perform school counseling duties in schools professionally trained school counselors? How do they understand their role?
- According to school staff, what District-level structures and systems are working well to support school counselors to engage in the three aspects of college and career readiness AND the overall data-informed quality-control function for the school? What gaps might need to be addressed?
- At the school level, what structures and systems are in place to support effective school counseling, including data-informed solutions to systemic issues?
- By what measures, and by whom, are school counselors being held accountable?
- What can we learn from the structures, systems and practices at bright sites in the SPS system – schools we have identified as well as schools that self-identify as having a robust comprehensive school counseling system that works for all students, including Students of Color Farthest From Educational Justice?

Phase II Approach

- A. **Build awareness** of the Phase I findings (all schools)
 - Level-set our understanding of the current state of school counseling at the District level
 - Encourage trust-building through transparent and open dialogue about these findings
 - What resonates? What did we miss or misunderstand? What questions arise?
- B. **Understand the realities** at the school level; build trust (all or subset of schools)
 - Brief survey to principals and school counseling staff to 1) understand the range of structures, resource choices, beliefs and practices in place across the SPS system; and 2) create a shortlist of self-identified school counseling bright sites.
 - Conduct a deeper dive into self-identified bright sites. Develop accessible case studies on the factors contributing to the success of these bright sites.
- C. **Establish facilitated learning collaboratives** (subset of schools)
 - Invite schools to participate in facilitated peer learning clusters with bright sites. Depending on interest and funding, clusters may be organized by school level and region (see page 38 in full report for possible clusters).
 - Schools meet with their clusters on a regular cadence to apply insights from the bright sites to their own challenges, opportunities and progress in establishing comprehensive school counseling programs.
- D. **Co-design experiments (with progress indicators)** (subset of schools)
 - Each school participating in a facilitated cluster designs a short-term learning experiment that has the potential to improve student outcomes within existing budget and other constraints (all or subset/s of schools). Experiments have goals, actions, outcome targets, and an associated data collection process.
 - Schools present their experiments and the outcomes as they emerge to their clusters, encouraging collective analysis, learning and iterative improvement.
 - Successful experiments are shared across the system as models for continued learning.

Who We Are

Shamsah Ebrahim, Ph.D. (she/her) is the Founder and Principal Consultant of **Leading Edge Advisors**, a Washington-based consulting firm specializing in strategic learning, evaluation and organizational effectiveness services for the social sector. She brings more than 15 years of transformational change leadership in education, non-profit and community-based organizations, public institutions and collective impact networks; including several engagements with Seattle Public Schools. Shamsah's passion for equity and social justice informs both her collaborative approach and her choice of clients.

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