

Study of Pupil Personnel Ratios, Services, and Programs in California

California Department of Education (2003). *Study of Pupil Personnel Ratios, Services, and Programs*. Assembly Bill 722. Counseling and Student Support Office, California Department of Education.

Education researchers, as well as reports from the California Department of Education (CDE), have highlighted the need for more effective pupil support services in public schools in California. In September of 2001, the California Assembly passed Bill 722 (AB 722), which required the CDE to conduct a study of pupil support services and programs in its public schools.

The primary objectives of this study were to:

1. Determine the proper ratio of pupil-to-pupil support personnel necessary to maintain adequate support services
2. Examine the need for pupil support services within individual districts
3. Determine the causes of difficulties in employing credentialed personnel
4. Examine the design and implementation of effective services and programs
5. Examine the quality and student outcomes of pupil support services
6. Examine the relationships between lower pupil to support personnel ratios and pupil well-being, ability to learn, and academic achievement
7. Examine the use of both credentialed and contracted (non-credentialed) support personnel

As defined in AB 722, pupil support personnel included school counselors, school psychologists, and school social workers. For the purposes of this brief, where possible, focus will be on findings related to school counselors, school counseling programs, and student outcomes. The full report can be found on the Center for School Counseling Outcome Research website at <http://www.umass.edu/schoolcounseling/ResearchMonograph3.pdf>. More information is also available on the CDE website at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/cg/rh/>.

Methods

To assess the status of pupil support services in the state, the CDE assembled a work group to oversee and guide the study. The work group consisted of 22 people representing leadership throughout the state in practice, professional associations, college education, and parent and student organizations.

A *Survey of Pupil Support Services* was developed with seven sections corresponding to the seven primary objectives of AB 722. The survey was distributed to a stratified sample of 255 school districts (26% of all districts) representative of the demographics within the state based on the California Basic Educational Data System Salary Survey. It is important to note that of the 985 school districts in California at the time of the study, nearly one third (306 districts) provided no pupil personnel support services and were not included in the study sample. To supplement and confirm the results of the survey, additional input was obtained through online surveys, focus groups, and a literature search. Online versions of the *Survey of Pupil Support*

Services were developed specifically for parents, teachers, school board members, and students. 291 people (130 parents, 125 teachers, 19 school board members, and 17 students) responded to the online surveys. Twelve focus groups were held throughout the state with a total of 270 people, including 140 support services specialists, 81 students, 31 teachers, and 15 parents, nine administrators, and one school board member. Finally, a literature search was conducted which reviewed reports from the profession and several studies which focused specifically on California schools.

Sixty three percent of districts sent the survey responded - 65% of the elementary and unified districts, and 55% of the high school districts. These districts had a total of 2,667,438 students enrolled in the 2001-2002 school year, approximately 44% of California's total K-12 public school enrollment. Most respondents were District Superintendents (36%) or other senior administrators (Assistant Superintendents 17%, Directors 27%, and Associate Superintendents 4%).

Findings

Need for Pupil Support Services

- At least 84% of the districts indicated that they “need more” school-wide prevention and intervention strategies and counseling services, psychological counseling for individuals, groups, and families, and targeted intervention strategies for children and families such as counseling, case management, and crisis intervention.
- Over half (50%-74%) of the districts indicated they need more of all of the services provided by credentialed pupil support personnel. Examples of the 22 specific services provided by school counselors are: providing school-wide prevention and intervention strategies and counseling services; developing, planning, implementing, and evaluating a school counseling and guidance program that includes academic, career, personal, and social development; implementing strategies to improve school attendance; and designing strategies and programs to address problems of adjustment.

Effective Pupil Support Services and Programs

- In general, districts rated existing services and programs as effective, but indicated that services would be more effective with additional personnel.
- Services perceived to be most effective were aligned with district objectives. The three most effective services were: addressing school policies and procedures that inhibit academic success regarding student needs; conducting psycho-educational assessments; and providing services that enhance academic performance.

Ratios of Pupils-to-Pupil Support Personnel

- California has one of the highest student to counselor ratios in the nation. The statewide average was 954:1, while the ratio of the surveyed districts was 877:1. This discrepancy is due to the fact that the 306 districts in the state providing no support services were not included in the sample. 79% of respondents indicated they needed more school counselors.

- “Adequate ratios” – the number of support personnel districts indicated they needed to have effective programs – were determined to be 834:1 for elementary schools, 461:1 for middle and junior high schools, and 364:1 for high schools. The online survey and focus group results indicated much lower ratios were needed. The American School Counselor Association recommends a ratio of 250:1.

Relationship between Ratios of Pupils-to-Pupil Support Personnel and Pupil Well-being, Ability to Learn and Academic Achievement

- Observed correlations between the pupils-to-pupil support personnel ratio and a pupil’s well-being, ability to learn, and academic achievement ranged from -.49 (school safety correlated with ratio, high schools) to .24 (standards test scores – mathematics correlated with ratio, high schools).
- Correlations between pupils-to-pupil support personnel ratios were not found to be significant but did indicate relationships as follows:
 - Lower ratios were not related to higher attendance, but were related to higher school safety.
 - Lower ratios were related to high academic achievement in elementary school, but not in unified or high schools.

Quality and Student Outcomes of Pupil Support Services

- Districts consistently rated student outcomes related to attendance, behavior, and academic achievement as primary measures of assessing the quality of the pupil personnel services. Career related measures were ranked considerably lower, and personal/social outcomes such as decreases in anxiety, depression, and suicidal tendencies were considered least important.
- Nearly all of the districts surveyed use student outcomes and the number of services provided as measures of the effectiveness of pupil support services.

Use, Recruitment, and Retention of Credentialed Personnel

- Over 84% of pupil support services are provided by credentialed school counselors, psychologists, and social workers.
- Major difficulties in recruiting credentialed personnel are district budget limitations and shortages of qualified applicants.
- Major difficulties in retaining credentialed personnel are inadequate salaries and benefits, disparity between job expectations and job reality, and lack of opportunities for career enhancement and professional growth.
- District budget limitations result from a lack of defined funding for pupil personnel services.

Implications

The implications of this study are important for students and families in California and for the structure and services provided by public schools across the country. Educators, administrators, and elected state government representatives in California have recognized a serious deficiency in the pupil personnel services and programs provided to students and the critical importance of those services to student success. Because districts generally rated existing programs and

services as effective, it can be inferred the deficiency relates to severely limited student access to services due to the unacceptably high pupil-to-pupil support personnel ratio. The unfortunate consequence is that all students cannot be well served and all students are not benefiting from the positively perceived work of the available pupil support personnel. Having an appropriate pupil-to-school counselor ratio is vital.

The findings of this study highlight several important considerations regarding pupil personnel services.

- Districts overwhelmingly recognized the need for more pupil support personnel, and identified the major obstacle to increased staffing as district budget limitations.
- The majority of districts called for more services in almost all categories identified for pupil support. This implies a strong recognition of the value of credentialed personnel who have both breadth and depth in their training.
- Two of the three top most-needed services identified in this study related to individual counseling and interventions for students and families. Providing these services effectively requires lower pupil-to-pupil support services personnel ratios.
- While it is apparent that individual access to services would be improved with more pupil personnel staff, most of the outcomes districts identified as measures of a counseling program's effectiveness are systemic and affect large groups or populations within the school. The top priority identified by districts was the need for more school-wide prevention and intervention strategies. This calls for the development of a comprehensive pupil support program that serves all students proactively through prevention programs, and reactively through intervention strategies. Given the realities of funding shortfalls and the complex and growing needs of students and families, simply hiring more pupil support personnel to provide more individual support is only a partial solution. Hiring more support personnel, particularly school counselors, trained in comprehensive developmental models is needed.
- It is particularly interesting to note the lack of significant correlation found between pupil-to-pupil support service personnel when, in fact, there is a growing body of research that clearly indicates significant, positive relationships between school counseling activities and student outcomes. This may be attributable to the extremely high student to support personnel ratio in the state of California. The high caseloads support personnel carry may not permit them to provide effective services.

Critical Perspective

As is noted in several places throughout the report, the largest factor that must be kept in mind when interpreting the results of this study is that the schools most in need of pupil support personnel were not included in the study. The results of this study are based only on those districts that provided support services already – nearly one-third (306 of the 985 districts) did not provide any pupil support services when this study was conducted in 2001-2002. Therefore, the results are not representative of all districts in the state of California, but representative only of districts that were already providing some level of support services.

With that in mind, the majority of respondents indicated they needed more pupil support services across all service categories. Well-qualified, credentialed personnel are needed to fill these roles to deliver the programs and services that were identified. The American School Counselor Association's National Model (ASCA, 2003) outlines a comprehensive, developmental model for creating a school counseling program that is data-driven and provides services for all students. The ASCA National Model provides a guideline for the role and responsibilities of school counselors to address the needs of students and the schools that serve them both now and in the future.

Despite its shortcomings, the No Child Left Behind Act highlights the importance of using measurable student outcomes of educational programming to assess effectiveness. Counselors operating from the ASCA National Model will be able to address the needs of all students within this context to help them achieve academically, socially, and in their post-secondary careers.

Opportunities for counselor training and professional development using the ASCA National Model as a foundation of school counseling programs exist. The ASCA web site provides more information about the ASCA National Model at www.schoolcounselor.org. The Center for School Counseling Outcome Research strongly supports the implementation of school counseling programs using this model and conducts a summer training institute annually. More information is available on the Center website at www.umass.edu/schoolcounseling. Nationally, a number of graduate programs have adopted the National Model as a basis for their curriculum and have partnered with The Education Trust to prepare future counselors with the skills needed to provide counseling services to *all* students. More information is available at www.edtrust.org.

Reference

American School Counselor Association. (2003). *The ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs*. Alexandria, VA. Author.

Katherine Gray, President, Massachusetts School Counselors Association

David Elsner, Graduate Student, UMass Amherst

Tim Poynton, Research Fellow, Center for School Counseling Outcome Research

The Center for School Counseling Outcome Research is dedicated to enhancing school counseling by grounding practice in research. The Center publishes periodic Research Briefs that review research that is especially relevant to improving practice. The complete collection of briefs is available on the Center's website, <http://www.umass.edu/schoolcounseling>.