



School Counselors on College Advising Constraints

A Ready Texas Study

2023

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School Counselors on College Advising Constraints – A Ready Texas Study

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Executive Summary

In 2013 via House Bill (HB) 5, the Texas Legislature changed graduation requirements by establishing the Foundation High School Program (HSP) and ending the previous graduation requirements commonly known as the 4x4. The 4x4 required Texas students to graduate with four math courses (including Algebra 2), four English language arts courses, four social studies and four science courses.

Students are no longer required to take rigorous courses including Algebra 2 that prepare them for college. And the policy contained in HB 5 states that students must choose an “endorsement” – in essence, their future career path – in eighth grade.

The role of middle school counselors, mostly eighth grade counselors, is now key to helping students make significant life choices as preteens by selecting their endorsements and setting up their high school course plan for their next four years.

To examine the impact of these changes, IDRA conducted Ready Texas: Phase Forward, a qualitative study based on middle school counselor interviews to examine:

1. What effects has HB 5 had on counselors’ abilities to provide services that increase post-secondary access and success for underrepresented and underserved students in Texas?
2. What impact has HB 5 had on students’ experiences as they navigate pathways to post-secondary access and success?

We interviewed eighth grade counselors from regions across the state that serve predominately students of color and students from families with low-incomes. IDRA conducted interviews in 22 school districts; 79% came from smaller rural or non-metropolitan districts. This study concentrated on rural and smaller districts because IDRA’s earlier study, *Ready Texas – A Study of the Implementation of HB5 in Texas and Implications for College Readiness*, found that enrollment in Algebra 2 in those areas dropped 24% after the introduction of new graduation requirements (Bojorquez, 2018).

Key Findings

IDRA’s study resulted in the following findings.

1. More than half of counselors interviewed saw HB 5 as an added burden and unfunded mandate that likely does not have the desired impact of increasing college and career readiness for underrepresented students.
2. Nearly all counselors were skeptical that eighth grade students are developmentally

ready to choose a career path.

3. All counselors reported that implementation of HB 5 requirements increased provision of career awareness information to students. Veteran counselors reported that they had not provided this amount of career information prior to HB 5.
4. Counselors simultaneously expressed that endorsements could possibly open career pathways but that it is impossible for them to predict where any student will land.
5. Few counselors reported knowing if students went on to pursue careers related to their endorsement or receiving feedback on the success of their students post graduation.
6. All counselors reported that their responsibilities to guide students in career exploration often took a backseat to their other duties: supporting student wellness, coordinating all student testing, assisting in creating class schedules, being short- and long-term teacher substitutes, and providing crisis counseling. Counselors reported that less than 30% of their time is spent on college and career counseling duties.
7. Even after a decade of equity goal-setting by Texas school districts counselors said they did not have any direct input into campus equity plans and were left out of key conversations surrounding equitable outcomes around college readiness.
8. When the COVID-19 pandemic began, counselors functioned as liaisons between home and school. Counselor roles became even more chaotic as they cared for students' sudden social alienation, trauma and educational needs.

In Texas, the counseling profession stands at a critical juncture in students' lives. Counselors can directly influence how students see their future selves. Unfortunately, there are few policies or widespread practices to support counselors in providing the best assistance to all students.

Recommendations

The following recommendations reflect our analysis of counselor responses and the research literature.

Texas should address counseling time and funding

Counselor roles must be well-defined, they must have appropriate resources, and they must have the time to provide services to all students.

The state should examine current funding and personnel allocations for counselors and counselor-to-student ratios and fund sustainable recommended ratios that enable counselors to deal with crucial emotional and college and career advice. It is a universal cry from the counselors we interviewed that they simply do not have the resources required to serve their students.

The state should do the following:

- Reduce the assigned responsibilities of school counselors, increasing their time for preparing students for college and career. This includes assigning or hiring personnel to handle standardized tests, freeing up time for counselors who spend a majority of their time on testing.
- Ensure that there is proper funding for mental health professionals in Texas schools.
- Develop a “counselor aide” position to serve as support staff for a counselor’s work.
- Establish a “transition counselor” position whose main duty is to help students choose their endorsements and graduation plans.
- Lower the minimum threshold for the number of students that require at least one counselor (for example, currently, if a school has over 100 students, a full-time counselor is required).
- Increase funding and resources for college and career advising, mental health and counseling that is in direct response to the lingering COVID-19 pandemic effects.
- Reduce counselor-to-student ratios to the 1 to 250 ratio recommended by the American School Counselor Association.
- Report annually on the counselor-to-student ratios for all Texas schools.

Texas should address issues of equity to prepare middle school and high school counselors

Federal Title I, Part A, Sec. 1112(b)(2) under *Every Student Succeeds Act* requires that all schools receiving Title I funds submit an equity plan that addresses racial-ethnic and socio-

economic disparities. A lack of school district vision for equity and how it relates to college and career was clearly evident in many counselor responses concerning underrepresented students. Counselors are ready for leadership around this issue but hesitate or have not given full voice to the equity concerns they have around college and career readiness and success.

Texas should do the following:

- Define equity in college and career pathways as preparing all students for college regardless of endorsement or college expectations.
- Encourage each school district's college and career pathway be grounded on an explicit equity vision that is asset based.
- Require that counselors receive professional development concerning equity and play a central role in defining and implementing a school district's equity vision. Counselors must be able to articulate plans of action that align with equity initiatives.
- Require that counselors' preservice and in-service professional development provide college and career data for their feeder pattern's high-school-to-college success disaggregated by race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status and gender.

Texas should provide counselors data on college readiness, success and endorsement outcomes

Counselors must have information on college readiness, success and endorsement outcomes. There is no mechanism for counselors in Texas to obtain this information.

Counselors consistently expressed feeling their HB 5 advising efforts were unsuccessful. They could not point to best practices. Across most parts of the state, counselors voiced uncertainty about the recommendations they gave and about the college and career advice they provided.

IDRA's analysis indicates that this is largely due to a lack of hard data about (1) students' experiences in high school regarding their course plan and endorsement path, (2) what students do after high school, and (3) any connection between endorsements and what students actually do after high school. There is simply no feedback loop outside of occasional anecdotes. Counselors cannot evaluate the efficacy of their own or their school districts' practices. This is troubling since middle counselors are involved in helping students navigate college to career pathways at a critical juncture.

The state should do the following:

- Require, as part of their regular pre-service and in-service professional development, middle school counselors to review and analyze school district and campus-level data for college readiness to include:
 - Percentage of endorsements earned at their respective secondary campuses;
 - Successes and struggles students face in high school, and

- College course enrollment preparedness data from their respective secondary campuses.
- Provision of school district- or campus-level data to middle school counselors concerning endorsement-to-career outcomes available on a yearly basis. There is precedent for this sort of data as the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) releases high-school-to-college linkage data and career and technical education (CTE) course to employment data.
 - Employment data are available through several repositories in Texas. A school district- or campus-level table that links endorsements to careers after high school is necessary so that counselors can know the efficacy of their efforts.
 - If these tables are modeled like the THECB's "High School to College Linkage" data, aggregate numbers of students not found in employment databases and their corresponding endorsements should be reported.
 - Locally, in addition to student college-going information, secondary campuses should collect information about where graduates are employed after high school.

Texas should equip counselors to engage with families and their community

Counselors should be equipped to assist students' families in navigating the system for college preparation and access. Counselors should receive professional development around equity issues on this topic as well as family engagement models that increase positive relationships among schools, counselors and families.

The state should require school districts to do the following.

- Include the following in professional development topics for counselors:
 - Equity in counseling and college-going access;
 - Concepts surrounding implicit bias and culturally responsive pedagogy; and
 - Family leadership models where parents collaborate with schools around goal setting or policymaking.
- Conduct periodic surveys of high school student interests to better inform counselors on relevant fields for academic and career interests to research and present.
- Leverage community organizations and stakeholders to help counselors provide comprehensive services to their students.
- Engage with workforce development boards to stay up-to-date on local labor market conditions.
- Improve student outreach through technology. The state should provide capacity-

building grants to enable high schools to partner with colleges, universities and private businesses to develop and implement technological tools that improve counseling efficiency. This includes improving communication efforts between the school and students' parents or guardians.

Texas should prepare all students for college

Counselors shared a concern over HB 5's requirement that students choose an endorsement in eighth grade. Counselors consistently reported that this was a developmentally inappropriate age to make this decision. In addition, students who later need to change their endorsement selection are unable to do so without consequences, especially as juniors and seniors, due to locked-in course sequences or prerequisites students would have missed. Policymakers need to acknowledge and address this concern.

Students should not have to make life choices in the eighth grade. If career exploration resources are not standardized or age-appropriate, equity issues can arise. Texas should do the following.

- Commission a longitudinal study that examines the following research questions:
 - What career outcomes have endorsements yielded since 2014-15? How many students choosing endorsements not explicitly tied to college preparation are employed in the endorsement field they chose after graduation? While students who take less-rigorous endorsements may still go to college, this study can explore sub questions to clarify concerns like:
 - What is happening post-graduation with students choosing specific endorsements?
 - Since Algebra 2 is a critical course for college access, what is happening post-graduation with students in each endorsement who do not take Algebra 2?
 - What are the differences, if any, in outcomes of endorsement programs correlated to (a) school district property wealth; (b) Title I status; and (c) intradistrict campus wealth and poverty status?
- Reinstate the 4x4 course requirements. This means requiring all students to earn four credits each in English, social studies, science and math, including Algebra 2.
- Texas should make all graduation paths or endorsements consistent with requirements for the Texas Top Ten Percent Plan, which provides automatic admission into the state's public universities.
- Provide additional resources for middle school and high school counselors to assist students and their families with college preparation and application.

Methodology

Beginning in January 2019, IDRA conducted focus groups and interviews in 22 school districts, representing all areas of Texas. For the focus groups, IDRA used a set of predetermined general questions (see Appendix) and a short list of probing questions as an overall guide. The focus group and interview questions related to the overall research questions. The focus groups and interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. IDRA researchers analyzed the transcripts to identify common themes and surmised key findings from all themes.

This report provides a summary of the focus group findings and key themes. It also analyzes the similarities, differences, and innovations among middle schools and outlines recommendations for the future.

Language Conventions

Counselors: Unless otherwise noted, *counselors* refers to eighth grade counselors in this report.

They: The pronoun “they” is used in this report as a gender neutral convention. Sentence and paragraph context defines plural/singular subjects.

Characteristics of Sample

IDRA selected a sample of focus groups and interviews with middle school counselors across the state of Texas and included: all the major regions of Texas; different size schools; various demographics, including race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status; and schools in urban, suburban and rural settings. A total of 25 middle schools are represented in the analysis.

IDRA prioritized rural and smaller schools because of its prior quantitative research (Bojorquez, 2018). That analysis showed enrollment in Algebra 2 dropped by 24% by students in rural and smaller school districts as an immediate result of HB 5. Algebra 2 is a gatekeeper course for college preparedness and Texas is largely a geographically rural state, which influenced this study’s methodology.

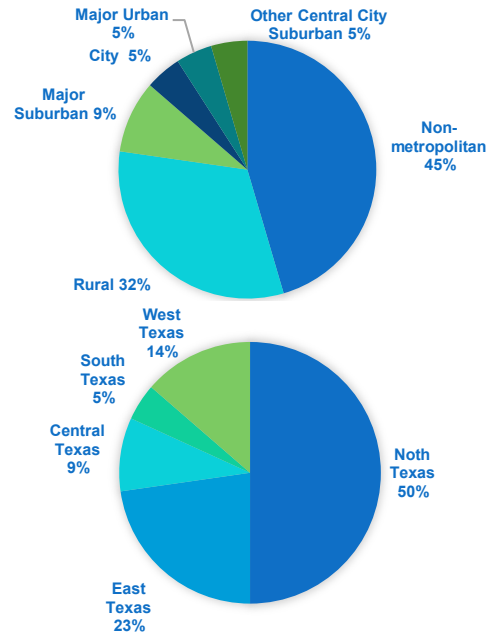
Anonymity

No school district is named in this report. All participants agreed to be interviewed and either signed a consent form or agreed to consent on recording, or both. In order for participants to respond honestly and without fear of being identified, no school district, school or personal names are mentioned in this report. Also, certain products, programs or curricula used by campuses are not referred to by brand name. This is done to diminish the likelihood of tracing study participants back to campuses.

This report, however, does refer to regions (central, north, south, east, west) and school district types (urban, rural, etc.) as we note certain similarities in practices, attitudes and context. IDRA researchers informed participants and school districts of this practice.

School Districts Studied	
District Type	Percent
Non-metropolitan	45%
Rural	32%
Major Suburban	9%
City	5%
Major Urban	5%
Other Central City Suburban	5%

School Districts Studied	
Geographical Region	Percent
North Texas	50%
East Texas	23%
Central Texas	9%
South Texas	5%
West Texas	14%



IDRA’s first focus groups took place in the Texas Panhandle region in person, and the remaining were conducted virtually because of COVID-19 restrictions. Focus groups and interviews lasted about one hour each.

Impact of COVID-19

COVID-19 presented challenges to this study. While by the fall of 2019, some school districts expressed their desire to participate in the study, everything changed in March 2020. Regardless of willingness to be part of this study, school districts simply could not allocate time and resources to do so. We were unable to restart interviews until the fall of 2020. This affected our sampling in South Texas. However, the observations from the school districts in and near those areas aligned with the study’s conclusions.

After the pandemic began, IDRA added questions concerning the effects of COVID-19 on HB 5 practices as well as any general comments on how the school building closures affected their students. These findings are part of the study but are not central to HB 5 legislation and implementation.

Key Themes

The interviewers asked questions (see Appendix) directly tied to the experiences of middle school counselors with HB 5 and impact on students. This analysis focuses on seven salient themes that emerged: (1) descriptions of what was happening then in schools; (2) communication with high schools; (3) issues for counseling practice; (4) impact on students; (5) role of parents and families; (6) impact on underrepresented racial and ethnic student groups; and (7) impact of COVID-19.

Endorsement and Career Exploration Methods Vary Greatly

Key observations include:

- The majority of counselors equated HB 5 with career exploration and not with college preparation.
- Counselors described a variety of methods their campus or district used to explore careers.
- Some counselors reported that their schools were providing as much information about career areas as possible to students.
- Some, not a majority of, counselors explicitly stated that HB 5 worked well for students they believed probably would not go to college.

All counselors reported that HB 5 implementation in middle schools is overwhelmingly performed as career exploration for choosing endorsements toward a career and not as guidance for college preparedness.

All counselors reported that HB 5 implementation in middle schools is overwhelmingly performed as career exploration for choosing endorsements to prepare students for a job and not as guidance for college preparedness. All counselors articulated HB 5 requirements, their roles, and campus and school district responses in that context. The majority of counselors expressed their roles as: (1) leads in assisting students to explore career choices; (2) facilitators of onsite curricula or online classes that expose students to different careers; or (3) collaborators with high school counselors who visited throughout the year (this was the case in very small districts).

All counselors interviewed understood that students chose endorsements based on the assistance counselors gave students. No counselor reported not having a role with HB 5 career exploration requirements. Some counselors in very small school districts reported sharing roles with high school counselors. When asked about best practices in their districts concerning HB 5, the majority of counselors did not receive district-level guidance.

Some schools held a specific class in career and college readiness in the eighth grade or integrated counselor visits into health classes to speak about careers. In other schools, career

content was embedded in existing classes, such as technology, where students researched careers.

Other middle school counselors took students to career workshops or invited speakers to visit. Counselors in larger school districts or rural districts located near larger school districts held traditional college fairs or college nights.

Some schools had representatives from the Texas Workforce Commission lead presentations, some of which were provided to all students in grades 6-8 at the middle schools so that they could get students thinking about their options even earlier.

One school district had a set of three classes, one in each grade level, to help students explore their interests and become more aware of their personal strengths and interests.

Many of the middle schools took students to the high schools for tours (before the pandemic school closures). The counselors discussed personal graduation plans and how they communicated information to students, how students completed the forms, and how the counselors then called parents or guardians in to sign their child's form.

Most counselors explicitly stated that HB 5's career exploration was good for students who were "unlikely to go to college" but that all students could have a chance at going to college. Many counselors wondered if students would actually end up in the careers that correlated to the paths they chose in eighth grade.

Communication Between Middle and High School Counselors is Rare

Key observations include:

- Communication about HB 5 implementation between middle school counselors and high school counselors is rare.
- Most middle school counselors were not aware of their school district's college preparedness data or college, career and military ratings (CCMR). Only one out of 25 counselors knew about the college, career and military ratings data collected for accountability ratings.
- Almost all counselors reported not knowing if students followed the career path chosen as an endorsement in eighth grade.

Data concerning college preparedness and outcomes has been part of the Texas Academic

Counselors reported not knowing college-going data even before HB 5.

Performance Reports and THECB information for several decades. These data have not been a part of the Texas accountability system until recently. As of 2019, TEA included college, career and military ratings in its A-F accountability system. This system assigns a letter grade and number grades for certain outcomes. The system includes data, such as college preparedness indicators and industry-based certifications (*e.g.*, welding, plumbing, food service).

Most of the middle school counselors were unaware of how their school districts performed under the new college, career and military ratings accountability system. Some had heard of the new accountability system, but most did not have any specific knowledge. Counselor observations ranged from (1) not knowing whether they should know that data at all; (2) thinking that college, career and military ratings accountability was solely the high school's responsibility; and (3) expecting that training on the subject was yet to come.

Most counselors did not know the college and career plans students chose after they left middle school.

Counselors reported that communication with high school counselors about HB 5 outcomes and implementation was, at best, uneven if it occurred at all. Counselors reported not knowing college-going data even before HB 5. Most counselors did not know the college and career plans students chose after they left middle school. They were only vaguely aware of what happened at high school. The only middle school counselors who knew about high school practices were parents of students who attended high schools in their district. Counselors reported that they only find things out anecdotally from students they have kept in touch with or who come back to visit.

Counselors reported they had misgivings about not knowing the number of students who stayed with the endorsements they chose. They all reported not having data about this concern.

Non-Counseling Work Monopolizes Most Counselor Time

Key observations include:

- Lack of funding for counseling and counselors was a persistent theme throughout this study.
- The majority of counselors report that they do not have enough time to provide college and career counseling.
- Testing (STAAR, language assessment, etc.) is significantly demanding of middle school counselor time.

The general discussion about counseling practice revealed two consistent concerns across all the middle schools: funding and time. Counselors in most school districts perceived funding as a real barrier. Counselors saw HB 5 as an unfunded mandate and, since it was unfunded, they were only able to do the “bare minimum.” Some went as far as saying that they could only offer

Counselors interviewed made it clear that there is no funding for extra teachers or counselors to do the work required by HB 5.

college and career readiness classes. Another stated that they feel successful if they just offer career classes.

Counselors interviewed made it clear that there is no funding for extra teachers or counselors to do the work required by HB 5.

Some middle school counselors felt that funding was perhaps limited for counselors because the role of counselors is not clear. Some stated that their roles are too broad. They were disappointed that no new funding came with the new mandates for college career readiness and choosing endorsements.

With no new dollars allocated, counselors had no additional time or resources to meet the new requirements. One counselor described HB 5 as a “burden” to their daily responsibilities. Counselors used words, such as “another layer,” “more responsibility,” “adding to our job,” “it’s rough,” “one more thing,” and “they don’t change your job; they just add to it.”

There were multiple, rich descriptions of the priority that testing takes on their campuses. Testing is treated as much more important than HB 5 activities or any classes related to career and college readiness. Some middle school counselors had little to do with helping students choose endorsements because, as one stated, they were *teaching* STAAR content. Most saw testing as the priority. They explained how the whole school felt pressure from testing. Even when counselors wanted to provide career day activities, teachers resisted because they did not want to lose a day of STAAR test preparation.

At some schools, the grade-level counselor is responsible for distributing all the testing materials. They reported working at night and on Saturdays to get it all done. The large volume of paperwork hinders counselors’ ability to work with students on even such things as mental health issues. The majority of counselors reported that there are at least three prongs to the job: college and career, social-emotional, and academic. But there is not time for all three.

Many felt the work with career development takes time away from creating guidance lessons for social and emotional development. Middle school counselors reported that the reality is that they just do not have time and resources to do everything. They reported that most counselors were still “hand auditing” and “creating schedules” instead of using their time to work with students.

When IDRA asked counselors what percentage of their time they spend for non-counseling related tasks, there was widespread agreement that they spend most of their time on non-counseling responsibilities. The answers ranged from spending 75% to 100% of their time on non-counseling duties. During testing season, it was 100% of their time on non-counseling tasks. They described situations where they needed to call counselors from their elementary school to help them deal with students facing emergencies. Several middle school counselors used the word “minimal” to describe the percentage of time they actually can do college and career counseling.

Many reported that students need counselors now more than ever. Students face a high degree of social emotional challenges. Counselors expressed frustration because so many other things are on their plates that they are not available to speak to students. In addition to the new requirements for college and career counseling, they listed duties, such as scheduling, course audits, lunchroom duty, bus duty, locker room duty and testing. One counselor even reported that administrators looked to the counselor as the disciplinarian. Many reported that others do not understand their role because, “We’re not teachers, and we’re not administrators.”

Several middle school counselors described their role as the “bridge” to everything and everyone. Parents call them, teachers call them, principals call them and students call them. Everyone wants the counselor to fix things and solve problems. They work with a myriad of programs, including testing and school registration. Counselors often must coordinate documentation and meeting requirements for emergent bilingual students, students in special education and those with accommodations.

Middle school counselors who reported more time spent on college and career counseling suggested it was because the task was shared across teachers and across the curriculum. They particularly liked it when college and career information was shared during advisory periods by teachers. Because counselors have such limited time, they felt that sharing the responsibilities worked well for time management as well as for the repetition from a variety of sources.

Counselors who reported less testing time and more counseling time indicated that their campus leadership created such a positive environment. Simply, it is principals who often set the tone for positive counseling practices. While this is a promising practice, leaving it up to principals rather than setting statewide policies and recommendations can lead to inequitable and inconsistent results for students.

HB 5 Pressures Students to Determine their Future Early

Key observations include:

- Counselors feel that having students choose an endorsement in eighth grade is not realistic or productive.
- If students decide to change to a college-going plan, unless done early, they may not have time to take the appropriate courses.

Many counselors used the word “pressure” to describe the situation where eighth graders must decide their future before they have tried anything.

The majority of counselors expressed reservations about asking students to choose a career path in eighth grade. Many of the counselors questioned whether students were developmentally ready to make such decisions so young. Many used the word “pressure” to describe the situation where eighth graders must decide their future before they have tried anything. Several counselors used the word “unrealistic” to describe the idea that an eighth grader can choose a four-year plan. Many counselors cited their own experience of having changed their majors in college at least twice. Most agreed that high school should be a time for exploration across subjects and interests. Several pointed out that with the additional pressure of career exploration and other requirements, traditional electives at both middle school and high school were severely limited. They felt kids now have less opportunity to experiment.

One middle school counselor described the career exploration process as a “double-edged sword.” It is perceived as a conversation that “must be had.” Part of a counselor’s accountability is making sure that these conversations happen, and they saw that as a positive. Yet, they simultaneously saw this as a huge negative because the students are eighth grade students, and that was entirely too young for them to make such life decisions.

Virtually all counselors were uncomfortable with having students choose a path in eighth grade for several reasons.

- Students should not be expected to decide what they are interested in at such a young age.
- Career exploration is not the same as career experience. Students may be locking into something they think they may like only to find they really do not.
- If students want to change their mind, they should do so before 10th grade, but it can be difficult, if not impossible, because of math and other requirements or because certain course sequences are simply not available by that point.

When asked for clarification on what could be a developmentally appropriate age to choose a career, all counselors repeated the similar refrain about their own indecision in college and career choices. This very vocal concern was simultaneously expressed with their own reports of hope that career exploration was a good thing and that HB 5, at least, forced schools to inform students about different kinds of professions.

Only one counselor believed that choosing a career in eighth grade was a good idea. The same counselor, however, reported that they thought the 4x4 curriculum was best because it prepared students for all eventualities.

HB 5 Neglects Underrepresented Racial and Ethnic Student Groups

The emphasis on career exploration could have the effect of tracking students out of college preparation and into vocational classes.

Key observations include:

- Counselors reported few signs of a positive impact of HB 5 on underrepresented racial and ethnic group students' college-going interest or preparation.
- There was a sense of unease in discussing equity issues in college preparedness.
- The emphasis on career exploration could have the effect of tracking students out of college preparation and into vocational classes.

For underrepresented racial and ethnic group students, only one counselor reported positive college preparedness outcomes from HB 5 implementation at their campus. They stated they had never seen so much interest in college. All others did not see any increase in college interest but saw the potential for increased college preparedness if the school district had more resources that could be used to create the time to help students and families learn more about college opportunities.

One counselor felt that choosing endorsements worked for students “with resources, those with educated parents, those are kids who have seen the world.” However, they felt strongly that it was “not equitable” for all, especially “for kids with no resources, with parents who are often new to our country, they have no experience with our education system, and we’re asking those kids to make the same decisions” in eighth grade.

Counselors repeatedly stated that they were not sure HB 5 had really helped anything and thought it might be hurting some students who did not have “educated” parents or enough resources to understand the decisions they were making.

Throughout this study, counselors were consistently skeptical in their statements about almost every aspect of HB 5 implementation. Counselors repeatedly stated that they were not sure HB 5 had really helped anything and thought it might be hurting some students who did not have “educated” parents or enough resources to understand the decisions they were making. This sentiment was repeated by several counselors who wondered if underrepresented students received enough information about navigating the U.S. college system. They did not perceive HB 5 as a remedy for that situation and rather pointed to remedies like AVID or Go Center programs that are explicitly designed for broadening college access.

Others noted that perceptions and realities around funding presented special challenges for underrepresented students and that HB 5 did not address those issues at all. For example, paying for college is a substantial challenge, so some middle schools focus on sharing resources about where students can get more help at high school with understanding FAFSA and scholarships. This is meaningful since the perception that college is out of their means discourages students pursuing college-going paths.

Many underrepresented students just have not had those conversations in school about either

college or career. Students do not “see that there is a future beyond high school... they kind of don’t see beyond and see what they can do.”

One counselor reported that their underrepresented students had many survival issues outside of school. Some were living with grandparents or in foster homes. Some were having to move often for housing. They had low reading scores and did not see higher education or career schools as a possibility. Students in their school district only knew about jobs in lumber or timber or driving trucks. They had no exposure to life outside their small town. The counselors’ goals were to expose them to careers and colleges outside of the area but said HB 5 had nothing to do with such goals.

One counselor expressed that the school district’s vision for all students, especially underrepresented students, was to increase opportunities for all. They said it reinforces the idea that their schools give all students the opportunity to be successful and excel. Their district emphasized striving for success at the beginning of the school year so that staff know that they are all committed to the students’ success. Everyone (families, teachers, students) must be on the same page.

Several counselors noted that there were pros and cons in HB 5 for underrepresented students. On the positive side, choosing an endorsement gave them a plan that may help them be prepared. The negative is that it depends on which endorsement or track it is. It could limit what they hope to gain.

Federal law requires schools receiving Title I funds to submit an equity plan that addresses racial-ethnic or socio-economic disparities. It is not evident from counselor responses that college and career outcomes are an explicit part of school district’s equity plans. Most counselors interviewed expressed concern with equity issues. When asked to elaborate on equity, there was usually a sense of unease about defining it. A few defined *equity* from a deficit lens that viewed students and families as broken or in need of fixing due to situations stemming from poverty.

More School Support is Needed to Help Families Navigate the HB 5 System

Key observations include:

- Counselors reported that their students’ parents wanted them to go to college.
- Counselors reported that many families did not know how to navigate the system or what to ask.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, counselors functioned as liaisons between home and school.

Counselors serving primarily students of color said they had never heard a parent say that they did not want their children to go to college.

Counselors expressed that authentic and full family engagement in the career and college preparation process was the best way to ensure student success. Yet, their experience was rarely considered successful.

A few counselors, those from parts of the state where the majority of students are Latino or Black, expressed that most parents wanted their students to go to college. Some in those areas said they had never heard a parent say that they did not want their children to go to college. Counselors stated that parents often were not prepared to help students with that goal and that certain obstacles repeatedly presented themselves.

Many counselors said that parents care and want the best for their children, but that poverty and economic struggles created barriers. These counselors stated that parents and families experiencing economic hardships needed guidance and opportunities to meet with counselors in order to understand things like the FAFSA and the Federal Pell Grant.

Counselors reported having success with families by offering information sessions multiple times during the year. They also found that holding the sessions on the same day as parent-teacher conferences worked well. They mentioned that a short, concise 30-minute session better accommodated parents' schedules than the longer sessions. Presentations were in Spanish and English, and that, too, aided engagement. These counselors seemed to understand the cultural and socio-economic hardships parents experiencing poverty endure.

A few counselors, not the majority, described at length the negative situations they had with some parents and students concerning college. These counselors expressed their opinion that (1) some students have "grown up in a culture" where they do not plan a career, (2) they follow in their parents' and grandparents' and great-grandparents' footsteps, and they go do what the family does, and (3) have "no concept" of what a future means to them.

These counselors also claimed that parents of female Latino students sometimes "do not want them to travel anywhere outside of the city" after high school. They report that these parents want their children to start at a community college and do not want them to stay in a dormitory.

This is a complex situation because there is dignity in all employment, and counselors must respect how families make a living as well as any discomfort they may perceive. However, IDRA observed that in places where Latino and Black students have long been a part of a community, counselors did not tend to report these kind of deficit attitudes. While neither the sample sizes nor the methodology allows for these correlations most counselors seemed to understand cultural nuances and reported overwhelmingly that parents in their school district saw college as the most important goal for their students.

COVID-19 Limited College Counseling

Key observations include:

- Students were anxious about COVID-19.
- Counseling focused mainly on mental health issues.
- Counselor administrative duties increased.
- Technology may present new opportunities for counselors.

For participants interviewed during this period, IDRA asked about the impact of COVID-19 on students and counseling. Originally, we did not design this study with issues concerning mental health or well-being in mind but shifted given the shared reality that all counselors and students were living through.

Students had mixed feelings about returning to school. They wanted to see their friends but were afraid of catching COVID-19 and bringing it home to their families. Students were stressed by illnesses in their families, the loss of loved ones and economic issues at home. Counselors often heard that students were struggling emotionally because of what they saw in students' posts on social media.

Some counselors mentioned that they had not talked to students about college and career during COVID-19 school closures.

When students reached out, counselors found it difficult to conduct therapy or communicate well with students on virtual platforms. There were challenges when the relationships could not be in person. They found it difficult to respond to the high volume of calls and emails. They found that they had to get creative because students were so used to just stopping by with concerns and issues.

No one had ever done virtual counseling, so it was a challenge to figure out ways of providing the services that were meaningful to students. One issue was how to keep confidentiality when communicating virtually. Counselors had no idea who else was in the room when they were talking with students or even who else had access to their emails with students.

One counselor expressed the emphasis on surviving "in the here and now" because of all the COVID-19 challenges. Some counselors mentioned that they had not talked to students about college and career during this time. They indicated that parents were at a point where surviving COVID-19 was the only thing that mattered. One counselor stated that they had not had any student express interest for their future because of COVID-19.

Counselors managed much more paperwork and administrative duties. Many had increased scheduling and registration responsibilities. They had to have all documents online and then double-check everything before a student was registered and found it very time-consuming. Another new task was finding resources for families. Some families needed food or housing assistance. Some struggled with how to manage their own family at home.

Although it was hard to find and share online resources, many middle school counselors found ways to do so and believe that some of the new technology has helped to share information more rapidly. Many feel that they have had to learn a lot about technology in a very short amount of time but that it has been a good tool that will help move forward. One school counselor shared that their school district had created a Google Classroom just to check in on students. In that case, they were successful in reaching 80% of students. It was the 20% who did not respond that they worried about. Technology had helped in some ways, but it still was not enough to reach all students and serve them well.

Appendix

Questions

Research Questions

1. What effects has HB 5 had on counselors' abilities to provide services that increase post-secondary access and success for underrepresented and underserved students in Texas?
2. What are the best counseling practices that school systems can adopt to increase secondary access and success for underrepresented and underserved students in Texas?
3. What are the major challenges that counselors face in providing services that increase post-secondary access and success for underrepresented and underserved students in Texas in the HB 5 context?
4. What impact has HB 5 had on students' experiences as they navigate pathways to post-secondary access and success?
5. What impact does choosing an endorsement in eighth grade have on middle school students' sense of self-efficacy to navigate pathways to post-secondary access and success?
6. What impact do endorsements have on 11th and 12th grade students' ability to navigate pathways to post-secondary access and success?

Counselor Questions

1. What are the most innovative practices that you've seen your school or others establish for helping underrepresented students prepare for a college-going future? What are the most innovative practices that you would like to share helping underrepresented students prepare for a college-going future?
2. How has HB 5 impacted your counseling practices?
3. In the HB 5 era, what challenges do you see in helping underrepresented students prepare for a college-going future?
4. Describe how you help students choose endorsements.
5. Describe students' experiences choosing an endorsement.
6. The new Texas accountability system tells us how well we are preparing students for success after high school. "Closing the Gaps" for underrepresented racial and ethnic groups is one of the three performance domains measured by the Texas accountability system. Also, the new system measures college, career and military readiness as 40% of a high school and school district's letter-grade performance. How has HB 5 impacted these performance measures for "Closing the Gaps" between student groups?
7. Is your school district a Distinguished Level of Achievement by default district? If not,
 - a. Under what circumstances would you suggest a student not follow the distinguished level

of achievement? What factors play into your suggestions in such a case?

- b. Under what circumstances would you suggest a student follow the distinguished level of achievement? What factors play into your suggestions in such a case?
8. What factors come into play when helping students choose endorsements?
9. Choosing an endorsement is meant to assist in making career choices in the future. What are the pros and cons of asking students to choose an endorsement in eighth grade? Does it affect their sense of self-efficacy or their college-going identity?
10. How have endorsements affected students' college and career paths and decisions in 11th and 12th grade?
11. In your experience, describe the role families, parents and caretakers have in choosing an endorsement.

Probing Questions

1. Is it developmentally appropriate for this sort of choice to be made in the eighth grade?
2. If you are able to somehow wave the magic wand in order to get things done to increase the number of underrepresented students – both racial-ethnic and socioeconomic – into college and career readiness, what is it that you think you would like to do, that you think should happen?
3. What is the percentage of time that you are spending on non-counseling related issues?
4. How many of you belong to a professional organization for counselors?

Review of Requirements, Practices, Regulations and Issues Regarding Texas Counselors

Counseling Legislation in Texas

Below is a timeline of legislation concerning or relevant to counseling in Texas.

- 1946** The *George-Barden Act* of 1946 was the first federal legislation to provide funding to counselor training and research (TEA, 1996).
- 1958** The *National Defense Education Act* mandated that “guidance” was a collection of services related to psychology in schools (TEA, 1996).
- 1990** The Texas Legislature directed the State Board of Education (SBOE) to conduct a “sunset review” of all existing TEA rules, eventually impacting a series of changes that directly impacted guidance counseling (TEA, 1996).
- 1990** TEA’s guidance advisory committee defined counseling programs in Texas and established goals (TCA, 2017).
- 1991** The Texas Legislature amended school finance provisions to earmark \$5 million of the state’s compensatory education allotment for elementary school counseling programs.
- 1993** The compensatory education allotment amount was increased to \$7.5 million, with preference given to elementary schools in school districts with higher percentages of students at a higher risk for failure (TEA, 1996).
- 2001** The Texas Education Code Chapter 33 required all Texas public schools to implement a comprehensive counseling program (TCA, 2017).
- 2002** *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) was signed into law. It is credited for creating test-based accountability in the United States, increasing the importance placed on student outcomes and adding another dimension to the role that school counselors play on campus (Von der Embse & Hasson, 2012).
- 2007** The Texas Legislature began adding sections to the Texas Education Code focused on college counseling requirements (Cumpton & Giani, 2014).
- 2011** The Legislature cut \$5.4 billion in public education funds, leading to numerous school districts cutting counselors to balance their budgets (Cumpton & Giani, 2014).
- 2013** The Texas Legislature passed HB 5, which radically altered the degree and program requirements for high school graduation. These changes had a large impact on counselors, who were now required to take on additional work providing students with endorsement information and meeting

individually with each eighth grader to ensure that they select an endorsement and understand the labor and market potential of these career paths (Cumpton & Giani, 2014; IDRA, 2013).

- 2015** The *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) replaced NCLB as the nation's education law. Though the new law allows flexibility in the ways that states may administer standardized tests, they are still the determinative factor in student and school success (Gewertz, 2018).
- 2019:** The Texas Legislature passed a major school safety bill, Senate Bill (SB) 11, requiring school districts to create behavior threat assessment teams and sets additional standards for emergency response plans. It also created a Child Mental Health Care Consortium. Schools are required to provide courses on mental health and suicide prevention in the curricula. The measure also requires that police officers in every school district receive youth-focused training. While it is critical that police officers receive this training, it is also important to limit police interactions with students (Craven, 2019). Though the bill was originally supposed to include loan payment assistance to school counselors and psychologists, it was stripped by the House sponsor (Samuels, 2019).
- 2021:** The Texas Legislature passed SB 179, which expanded school counselors' capacity to deliver critical counseling services to students. The measure instructs school districts to adopt a policy that requires school counselors to spend at least 80% of their work time on actual counseling to support the academic and emotional needs of the students. SB 179 was intended to boost access to mental health services for students grappling with mental and emotional health concerns from prolonged stress and social alienation brought forth by the COVID-19 pandemic (Quintanilla-Muñoz, 2021).
- 2023:** Texas Legislature passed SB 763, allowing religious chaplains to act as untrained and unlicensed school counselors, including in mental health roles for students. It also allows volunteer chaplains.

School Counseling Requirements

Counselors in Texas are expected to fill myriad roles for students and staff. They provide academic advising, course selection, career planning, post-secondary education information, social-emotional health guidance, social media training, and suicide prevention (Shuman, et al., 2019). The state of Texas has set high standards school counselors, but many counselors are in schools faced with inadequate funding and have heavy workloads (Lamar University, 2017). Texas school counselors must (ASCA, 2018):

- Obtain a master's degree from an accredited institution of higher education.
- Successfully complete a counselor education program.
- Accrue two years of classroom teaching experience.
- Have a minimum score of 240 on the school counselor exam.
- Pass a national fingerprint background check.

According to the Texas Education Code, the general duties of a school counselor in the state are as follows (TX. EDUC § 33.006, 2017):

- Counsel students to fully develop each student's academic, career and social abilities.

- Participate in planning, implementing and evaluating a comprehensive developmental guidance program to serve students and address any special needs, particularly:
 - Students who are at-risk of dropping out of school, becoming involved in substance abuse, participating in gang activity, or committing suicide.
 - Students who need modified instruction.
 - Students who are gifted and talented, with an emphasis on disadvantaged gifted and talented students.
- Consult a students' parents or guardians and issue referrals as needed.
- Consult with school staff, parents and other community stakeholders to help increase the effectiveness of student education and promote student success.
- Coordinate people and resources in the home, school and community.
- With staff assistance, interpret standardized test results and other assessment data to help students make career and education plans.
- Deliver classroom guidance activities or serve as a consultant to teachers forming lessons based on the campus' guidance curricula.
- Serve as an impartial, nonreporting resource for interpersonal conflicts and discord involving two or more students, including bullying accusations.

Additionally, the Texas Education Code provides that school counselors at all levels, including those at open-enrollment charter schools, shall advise students and parents or guardians about the importance of a post-secondary education, coursework necessary for preparing students for college, and financial aid availability and requirements (TX. EDUC § 33.007, 2017). This includes making students and guardians aware of the availability of school district programs under which a student may earn college credit, including advanced placement programs, dual credit programs, joint high school and college credit programs and international baccalaureate programs (TX EDUC § 33.007, 2017).

Background to Counseling and Guidance in Texas

The first mention of counselors in the history of Texas education was in the early 1900s with a recommendation that schools include a vocational expert to help students select a career path (TEA, 1996). The vocational movement continued into the 1920s, with counselors serving the role of helping students find a career or vocational path. In the 1930s and 1940s, advances in the treatment and knowledge of mental health led to awareness of psychologically aiding students.

The *George-Barden Act* of 1946 was the first federal legislation that provided funding to counselor training and research. The support encouraged the field to consider counselor qualifications and what should be included in guidance counselor training programs. The 1958 *National Defense Education Act* made it clear that guidance was a collection of services related to psychology in schools (TEA, 1996).

It was not until the 1960s that a strong elementary counseling and guidance program appeared. Its role in the school was developmental rather than crisis-oriented, focusing on helping both teachers and students engage in a positive school climate. In 1971, the University of Missouri at Columbia obtained a grant from

the U.S. Office of Education to help all states develop guides for career guidance, counseling and placement. The development of counseling models continued through the 1980s and 1990s, including TEA's guide for school counseling and guidance programs (TEA, 1996). This movement from reactive to proactive counseling is reflected in TEA's efforts in the 1990s to evolve the role of counselors in public schools.

Texas Counseling Shift in the 1990s (From Reactive to Proactive)		
Program Area	Reactive Counseling	Proactive Counseling
Program Design (Input)	Intervention & crisis oriented only Unstructured programs	Planned, based on needs assessment and priorities Prevention oriented Designed programs
Program Resources and Organization (Process)	Emphasis on services Information dissemination Clerical and task-oriented Counselors only Unmeasured results	Emphasis on program Developmental curriculum Student goal attainment oriented Involves all school staff and the community Evaluated, based on evaluation results
Program Access/Results (Outputs)	Individual guidance and counseling only Uneven student services	Group guidance and counseling Consistent services to all students

Source: TEA, 1996

From the 1980s to the 1990s, numerous stakeholders called for strong, comprehensive guidance programs for the overall success of public school students (TEA, 1996). The role of the counselor in this revised guidance from the 1990s included the following.

Texas Counselor Roles, 1990	
Aspect	Duties
Guidance	Teaching school developmental guidance curriculum. Assisting educators in teaching guidance curriculum. Guiding students, both individuals and groups, through the development of educational, career and personal plans.
Counseling	Counseling students individually about concerns. Counseling with small groups of students about their concerns. Using theories and techniques appropriate for school counseling.
Consultation	Consulting with parents, teachers, administrators and other relevant individuals to improve their work with students.

Coordination	Consulting with parents, teachers, administrators and other relevant individuals to improve their work with students.
Assessment	Using student data (other than test and appraisal results) for assessment purposes. Interpreting test results appropriately. Helping plan and evaluate the school district or campus' standardized testing programs.
Program Management	Plan, implement and evaluate a comprehensive program of guidance to include counseling services. Supervise the activities of clerical, paraprofessional and volunteer personnel.

Source: TEA, 1996

According to TEA, counseling in schools went through a shift around 2001 when the SBOE ceased certification for “counselor,” “special education counselor,” and “vocational counselor” in favor of a single “school counselor” certification (TEA, 2019).

The Duties of Texas School Counselors

The Texas Model for Comprehensive School Counseling Programs contains information on school counseling in Texas and the current requirements and responsibilities expected of counselors in the state. The model has evolved as the Texas Legislature and TEA have refined the duties and responsibilities for public school counselors. (TEA, 2018)

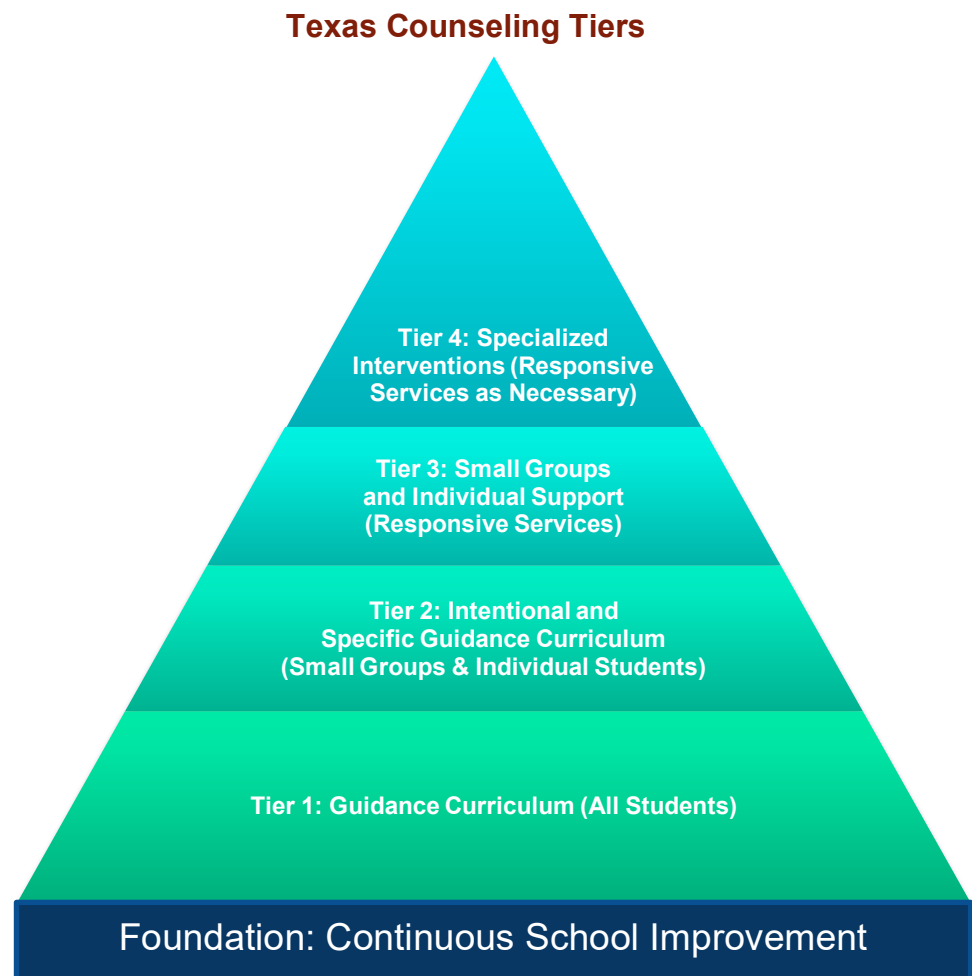
According to information from the Texas Counseling Association, the service delivery model for Texas counselors consists of (2017) of the following.

Guidance Curriculum: Helping all students develop transferrable skills in all areas. Guidance curricula are taught in units and through differentiated learning activities both in the classroom and with smaller student groups.

Responsive Services: Intervening on behalf of students whose immediate concerns put their continued educational, career, personal and social development at risk based on the level of need being preventative, remedial or crisis.

Individual Planning: Guiding all students as they plan, monitor and manage their educational, career, social and personal development.

System Support: Providing services and management activities to indirectly benefit students. Delivering data analysis and accountability services to assure the delivery of a high-quality guidance program.



Source: TCA, 2017

Texas counselors are expected to perform various non-counseling duties to support their school. Non-counseling duties are generally described as administrative or clerical (TCA, 2017). These duties do not necessarily have to be completed or carried out by the counselor. Administrators also often assign counselors duties unrelated to counseling, such as lunch duty, discipline or test administration (TCA, 2017). These responsibilities take away time that counselors could be focusing on their occupational obligations.

The Texas Counseling Association (TCA) provides a list of duties that it determined are appropriate and inappropriate for school counselors. These include the following.

Example of School Counselor Activities	
Appropriate Professional Counselor Activities	Inappropriate Professional Counselor Activities
<p>Academic planning for individual students.</p> <p>Interpreting cognitive, aptitude and achievement data.</p> <p>Providing counseling to tardy or absent students.</p> <p>Counseling students with disciplinary issues (addressing the school dress code, as an example)</p> <p>Collaborating with teachers to present counseling core curriculum lessons.</p> <p>Analyzing GPA averages in relation to student achievement.</p> <p>Interpreting student records.</p> <p>Providing teachers with classroom management strategies</p> <p>Ensuring student records are maintained in compliance with state and federal regulations.</p> <p>Helping school personnel identify and resolve student needs and problems.</p> <p>Providing individual and small group sessions to students.</p> <p>Advocating for students at individual education plan meetings, student study teams and school attendance review boards.</p> <p>Analyzing disaggregated data.</p>	<p>Coordinating paperwork or data entry for new students.</p> <p>Coordinating cognitive, aptitude and achievement testing programs.</p> <p>Signing excuses for students who are tardy or absent for reasons other than time spent with school counselor.</p> <p>Performing disciplinary actions or assigning consequences.</p> <p>Sending home inappropriately dressed students.</p> <p>Teaching classes for absent educators.</p> <p>Computing grade-point averages.</p> <p>Maintaining student records.</p> <p>Supervising classrooms or common areas (duty).</p> <p>Keeping clerical records.</p> <p>Assisting with duties in the principal's office.</p> <p>Providing therapy or long-term counseling to address psychological disorders.</p> <p>Coordinating schoolwide individual education plans, student study teams and school attendance review boards.</p> <p>Serving as a data entry clerk.</p>

Source: TCA, 2017

TCA also prescribes a ratio tailored from primary to secondary school.

Recommended Percentages for Counselor Service Components			
Service Delivery Component	Elementary Counseling Program	Middle School Counseling Program	High School Counseling Program
Guidance Curriculum	35% – 45%	35% – 40%	15% – 25%
Individual Planning	5% - 10%	15% - 25%	25% - 35%
Responsive Services	30% - 40%	30% - 40%	25% - 35%
System Support	10% - 15%	10% - 15%	15% - 20%

Source: TCA, 2017

Recommended percentages and ratios are helpful for informing the profession, but the role of the school counselor in Texas has been subject to legislative oversight that introduced harsh realities and restrictions. The budget cuts in 2011, though partially restored in 2013, had public school districts reduce their overall number of school counselors to aid their tightened budgets, leaving the remaining counselors with more work (Cesar & Vara-Orta, 2015).

Even though counselors have historically been expected to help their students navigate the path from secondary school to post-secondary success, their workload in helping students ballooned in Texas with the passage of HB 5. Starting with eighth graders, counselors must help students navigate more graduation options and endorsements, track their progress and have their parents sign-off on their decisions. This task can be overwhelmingly difficult depending on a counselor's existing caseload. Unsurprisingly, the workload for counselors is highly dependent on the wealth of their school districts and the amount of money that the districts are willing to put toward providing counselors compared to other needs. (Cesar & Vara-Orta, 2015)

Counselor-Student Ratios

The American School Counselor Association recommends a counselor-to-student ratio of 1 to 250 (Phillips, 2018; ASCA, 2022). The Texas counselor-to-student ratio was 1 to 390 in the 2021-22 school year, providing just 13,911 counselors for a statewide enrollment of almost 5.5 million students (ASCA, 2022). This is only slightly below the nation's average of 1 to 408 (ASCA, 2022).

The number of counselors employed by school districts across the state and whether they have time to meet students one-on-one depends on each school's finances and priorities. When counselors have larger caseloads, most of their time tends to be taken up with academic tasks, such as aptitude tests and course recommendations. This time is further limited if they are expected to do additional duties, like monitoring lunch (Phillips, 2018). Additionally, the state's minimum salary in 2022-23 began at \$33,660 for entry-level counselors on a 10-month contract and \$54,540 for those with at least 20 years of experience (TEA, 2023). Comparing the 10th percentile in median school counselor salaries, Texas ranks 26 nationally (APS, 2022).

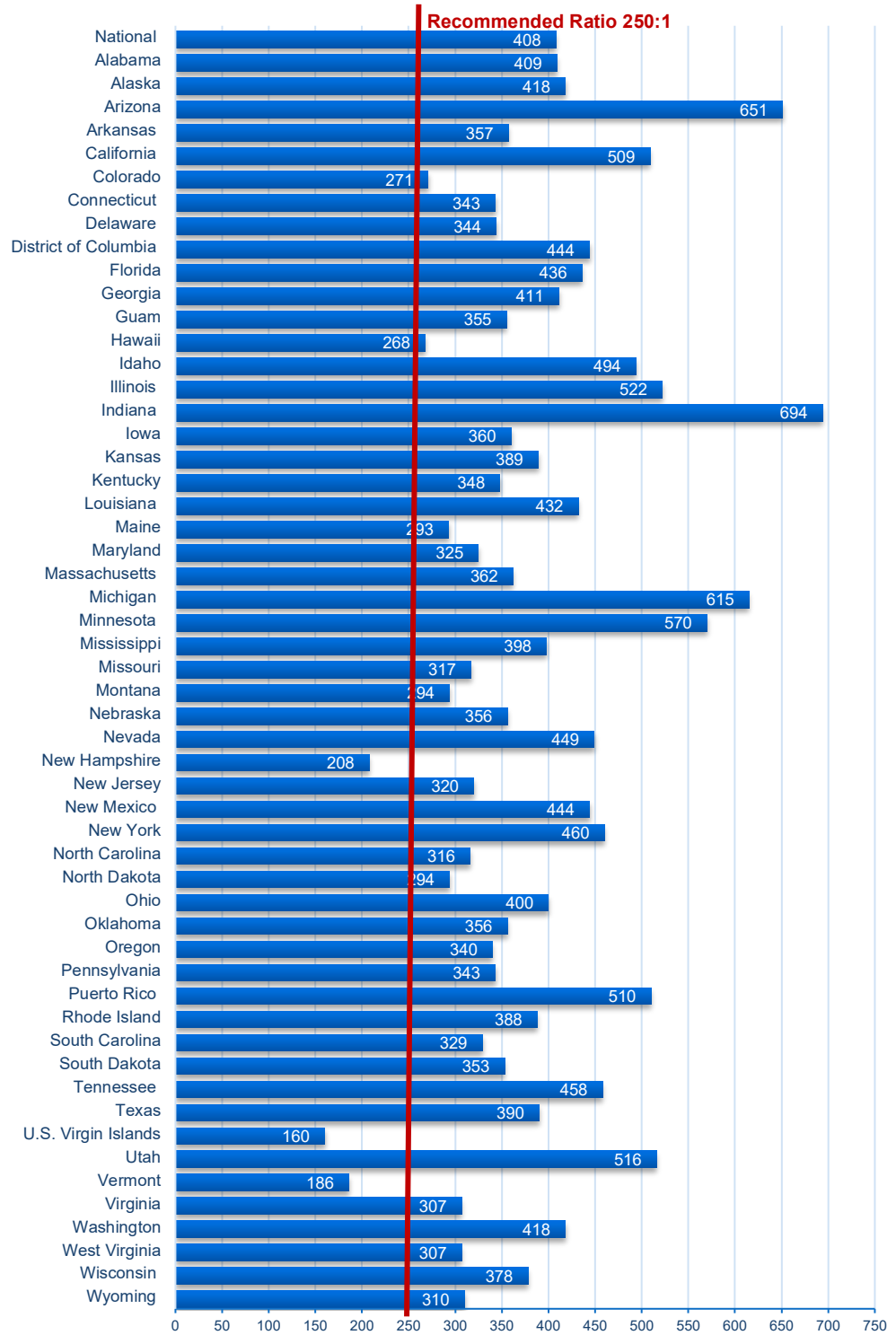
Mental health advocates also say that hiring more counselors is not enough to help students – additional resources and positions are required to assist counselors to meet all student needs. Quality mental health services in a school setting require collaboration among counselors and other positions that are often underfunded and underrepresented in schools, such as school nurses, social workers and campus psychologists (Taboada, 2018).

These counselors tend to be overworked and struggle to meet the needs of an increasingly anxious student body, with many facing depression and mental health challenges: a recent study showed that one in eight Texas high school students attempted suicide in 2017 (Taboada, 2018).

Additionally, those who enter the school counseling profession often are not from the same demographic backgrounds of the students they serve. In 2014, only 27% of counselors were Latino, compared to 54% of Texas students. The share of Black counselors (14%) was similar to the student body make up of 13%. Nearly 90% of counselors were women (Cumpton & Giani, 2014).

Nationally, school counselors are still primarily white and female. According to American School Counselor Association data from 2017-18, 76% of ASCA counselors were white, 11% were Black, 3% were Asian American, 6% were Latino, and 1% were American Indian/Alaskan Native. Additionally, 85% of ASCA counselors were female (2020).

U.S. Counselor-to-Student Ratios, 2021-22



Data source: American School Counselor Association, 2023

Background of Texas Graduation Requirements

Timeline

1997-98: Minimum High School Program, Recommended High School Program & Distinguished Achievement Plan

Students entering the ninth grade in the 1997-98 school year were the first students required to graduate under Texas' Minimum High School Program (HSP), Recommended HSP or Distinguished Achievement Plan (DAP). The Recommended HSP and the DAP were designed to more closely align high school coursework with college admission requirements, better preparing all students with the knowledge and credits they would need to pursue college.

2004-05: Default Recommended HSP

The Recommended HSP was established as the standard graduation plan for public high school students.

2006: 4x4

To promote college and career readiness, Texas increased the overall number of credits required for graduation from 24 to 26 with the 4x4 curriculum. The 4x4 required all students to complete four credits each in English, mathematics, science and social studies. This new requirement was incorporated into the Recommended HSP and DAP for incoming freshmen in 2007-08.

Student outcomes under the established graduation plans improved over time in college readiness, high school graduation, college completion and earnings (Mellor, Stoker, & Reese, 2015; IDRA, 2016). Additionally, more students were taking and mastering higher level math courses under the 4x4 system. Schools also saw an overall reduction in the achievement gap between students in families with high and low-incomes (Wiseman, et al., 2015; IDRA, 2016).

2009: Differentiated Curriculum Tracks

In the 2009 legislative session, a group of policymakers developed an accountability reform plan to go beyond adjusting rating and reporting requirements. Approved reforms included differentiated curriculum tracks created for minimum, college bound and career-technical students. *Minimum*, in this case, referred to students who had been retained at least once prior to the 10th grade and had parent approval to opt-out of the Recommended HSP. The *career-technical track* diverted students and required fewer and less stringent math and science courses in the upper high school grades. Overall, these changes represented a move toward a tracking system that risked placing students of color and students in families with low incomes into vocational curricula, while affluent students would still access college preparatory courses (Cortez, 2009).

2013: House Bill 5

House Bill 5 was introduced in Texas' 83rd legislative session and, in June 2013, Texas Governor Rick Perry signed HB 5 into law. HB 5 replaced the former program. Lawmakers stated that the sweeping changes were intended to maintain "rigorous standards" for students bound for college while allowing those "not interested" in pursuing a college education to focus on career and the technical skills needed for a job after graduation (Stutz, 2014). Additionally, the law reduced the number of state assessments required for graduation from 15 to five (Mellor, Stoker & Reese, 2015).

The impetus to change the state's graduation requirements came from two different directions. Some proponents, including some school leaders, felt challenged and ill-equipped to meet accountability requirements that measure the number of students who graduate and the number who are college ready. And some business manufacturing interests felt that too many Texas high school graduates were not sufficiently prepared to go directly into their workplaces. Despite objections by education and civil rights advocates, parents, community and business leaders, and many school leaders, bill proponents succeeded in convincing the majority of Texas policymakers that it was acceptable to "parcel out one set of opportunities for some and minimal expectations for others" (Cortez, 2013).

Summary of HB 5's Major Changes

Graduation Requirements

HB 5's foundation-plus-endorsement high school program represents a major shift in the way that Texas public high school students pursue their degrees. Essentially, the Texas diploma is no longer standard across the state. Students are not required to take English 4, Algebra 2, both chemistry and physics, speech, and both world history and world geography. The requirements now allow a choice of either world history or world geography or a combination of the two. Chemistry was replaced with a choice of integrated physics and chemistry (IPC) or other science course. Though not technically a course requirement, students must demonstrate proficiency in speech (which can be accomplished with a ½ credit class).

Endorsements

The new default curriculum under HB 5 introduced “endorsements” requiring each student to choose one or more of five endorsements, with corresponding core content courses depending on the endorsement’s focus. Endorsements are considered career “pathways” for students to take in high school. Endorsement choices require parent approval and written notice from the students as they enter ninth grade. The five endorsements are the following.

- **Multidisciplinary Studies** – This endorsement allows a student to select courses from the curriculum of each of the other endorsement areas and earn credits in a variety of advanced courses from multiple content areas.
- **Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM)** – This endorsement requires students to earn four or five credits in science, math or computer science, including Algebra 2, chemistry, and physics or principles of technology.
- **Business and Industry** – This endorsement includes courses related to database management, information technology, communications, accounting, finance, marketing, graphic design, architecture, construction, welding, logistics, automotive technology, agricultural science, and heating, ventilation, and air conditioning.
- **Public Service** – This endorsement includes courses on health sciences and occupations, education and training, law enforcement, culinary arts and hospitality.
- **Arts and Humanities** – This endorsement includes courses related to political science, world languages, cultural studies, English literature, history, and fine arts. Students may substitute the advanced science requirement with a different course related to their endorsement if their parent or guardian provides written permission.

The content and rigor of individual courses may differ from one endorsement to another and by district or even within districts (IDRA, 2013).

School districts are not required to offer all five endorsements. Each school district must make courses available that allow students to complete the curriculum for at least one endorsement. If a school district can only offer one endorsement, it must offer the multidisciplinary studies curriculum. Capacity continues to be an issue for many school districts in Texas, and this is a determinative factor in the endorsements and course options that districts are offering (IDRA, 2016). A school district “must permit a student to

choose, at any time, to earn an endorsement other than the endorsement the student previously indicated” (TEA, 2014).

HB 5 allows students graduate without earning an endorsement if, after the student’s sophomore year, the school counselor advises them and their guardian(s) about specific benefits of graduating with one or more endorsements (which includes expectations of colleges). The student’s guardian may then file written permission with the school counselor that the student will graduate under the foundation high school program without earning an endorsement (TEA, 2014). The foundation without endorsement graduation plan only requires 22 course credits rather than the 26 credits under the foundation with endorsement.

According to AIR’s survey on school district implementation of HB 5 (72% responded), 56% of school districts offered all five endorsements, while 6% only offered one (Mellor, Stoker & Muhsani, 2017; IDRA, 2016). Additionally, the preparation and training of school counselors to assist with disseminating information, working with parents, and helping students succeed is a significant concern for school capacity and endorsements (IDRA, 2016).

Texas Current and Former Graduation Plan Comparison			
Courses	Before HB 5		After HB 5
	Recommended Plan	Distinguished Plan	Foundation Plus Endorsement
English Language Arts	4: English I, II, III, IV	4: English I, II, III, IV	4: English I, II, III, and an advanced English course
Mathematics	4: Algebra I, Algebra 2, Geometry, and a 4 th course	4: Algebra I, Algebra 2, Geometry, and a 4 th course	4: Algebra I, Geometry, advanced mathematics course, plus a 4 th course
Science	4: Biology, Chemistry, Physics, and a lab-based course	4: Biology, Chemistry, Physics, and a lab-based course	4: Biology; Integrated Physics and Chemistry, Chemistry, or Physics; an advanced science course; plus a 4 th course
Social Studies, Economics	4: World History, World Geography, U.S. History since Reconstruction, U.S. Government (½ credit), Economics (½ credit)	4: World History, World Geography, U.S. History since Reconstruction, and U.S. Government (½ credit), Economics (½ credit)	3: World History <i>or</i> World Geography, U.S. History, U.S. Government (½ credit), Economics (½ credit)
Languages other than English	2: Any two levels in the same language	3: Any three levels in the same language	2: Choice of languages other than English <i>or</i> Computer Science I, II or III
Physical Education	1	1	1
Fine Arts	1	1	1
Speech or Communications	0.5	0.5	0.5 (or other way to demonstrate proficiency)
Electives	5.5	4.5	7 (includes two for endorsement)
Total Credits	26	26	26

Distinguished Level of Achievement

Students can earn the Distinguished Level of Achievement designation by successfully completing four credits in mathematics, which must include Algebra 2; four credits in science; all remaining foundation curriculum requirements; and the curriculum requirements for at least one endorsement.

The Texas Top Ten Percent Plan originally applied to all high school graduates. HB 5 limited eligibility for automatic admission in Texas public universities to students who earn the Distinguished Level of Achievement.

Local control and implementation of the Foundation HSP within individual school districts can still play a large part in preparing students for college, even with the 4x4 plan gone. School districts can encourage and even require their students to take a high-quality curriculum that prepares them for college entrance and graduation. This includes requiring Algebra 2 for students to earn the Distinguished Level of Achievement as well as requiring English IV, chemistry, physics, world history and world geography. Until HB 5, most Texas students were already taking these courses.

In response to HB 5, some school districts called for establishing the Distinguished Level of Achievement designation as their default plan. Even the City of San Antonio passed a resolution encouraging all local school districts to take this approach to ensure that students will be prepared for college and that the city's PreK4SA and Café College will be properly aligned. Pharr-San Juan-Alamo ISD worked with its local stakeholders to set the Distinguished Level of Achievement as the default (IDRA, 2016). Equipped with data, parents in some communities navigated the new sea of information on endorsements for their students and are advocating the best education possible, including college readiness. IDRA Education CAFEs, including ARISE Adelante, pressed their schools and the State Board of Education to ensure their children were on paths to college.

Algebra 2

Algebra 2 is optional under the default high school graduation program. Students are no longer required to take Algebra 2 unless they pursue the Distinguished Level of Achievement designation or choose the STEM endorsement. School districts can set the Distinguished Level of Achievement designation as their default graduation plan. As part of HB 5, the State Board of Education developed two additional math courses, Algebraic Reasoning and Statistics, that students may choose as third- and fourth-year alternatives to traditional advanced math courses, like Algebra 2 (Mellor, Stoker & Reese, 2015).

School districts are required to notify parents of high school students about the consequences of their students not taking Algebra 2, including exclusion from Texas Top 10 Percent Plan eligibility and potential qualifications for the TEXAS grant program.

College admission requirements align with upper-level math. Taking Algebra 2, at a minimum, is necessary to best prepare students for public universities in Texas (Johnson, 2018). Education advocates have expressed concern that the new high school graduation requirements prevent students from attending college right away or severely limit their options (IDRA, 2016).

Automatic College Admission

For students to be eligible for automatic admission into a state university upon graduation from high school, HB 5 requires that they either (1) earn the Distinguished Level of Achievement designation under the

Foundation HSP or (2) satisfy the college readiness benchmarks on the ACT assessment or a score of at least 1,500 out of 2,400 on the SAT.

Performance Acknowledgement

Students can earn a “performance acknowledgement” on their diplomas and transcripts for earning:

- outstanding performance in a dual credit course; in bilingualism and biliteracy; on a college AP test or IB exam; or on the PSAT, ACT-Plan, SAT, or ACT; or
- a nationally- or internationally-recognized business or industry certification or license.

Career and Technology Education Courses Developed through Local Partnerships

Districts can develop career and technology (CTE) courses in partnership with public or private institutions of higher education or local business, labor and community leaders. CTE courses allow students to obtain industry-recognized credentials or certificates.

College Preparatory Courses

TEA is no longer responsible for developing college preparatory courses, placing the responsibility on school districts to partner with at least one institution of higher education to develop and provide college preparatory courses in English language arts and math. Credits earned with these courses can be applied to the foundation school program as an advanced credit.

High School Personal Graduation Plan

TEA must provide, in English and Spanish, information on the advantages of the Distinguished Level of Achievement designation and each endorsement. Additionally, the school must review personal graduation plan options to include providing information on endorsements and the Distinguished Level of Achievement designation with all students entering the ninth grade and their parent or guardian.

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