

HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELING STUDY: CAPSTONE REPORT

Prepared for Mountain View Los Altos Union High
School District

June 2019



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INTRODUCTION

Project Background

In support of its initiative to explore an integrated, holistic counseling and student services program, Mountain View Los Altos Union High School District (MVLA) partnered with Hanover Research (Hanover) to conduct research around the design and implementation of a high-quality high school counseling system that is responsive to the needs of students, parents, staff, and other community stakeholders.

Guiding research questions for the study included:



What are the critical elements of integrated and comprehensive high school counseling systems?



How do high-achieving public and private high schools provide counseling services for students?

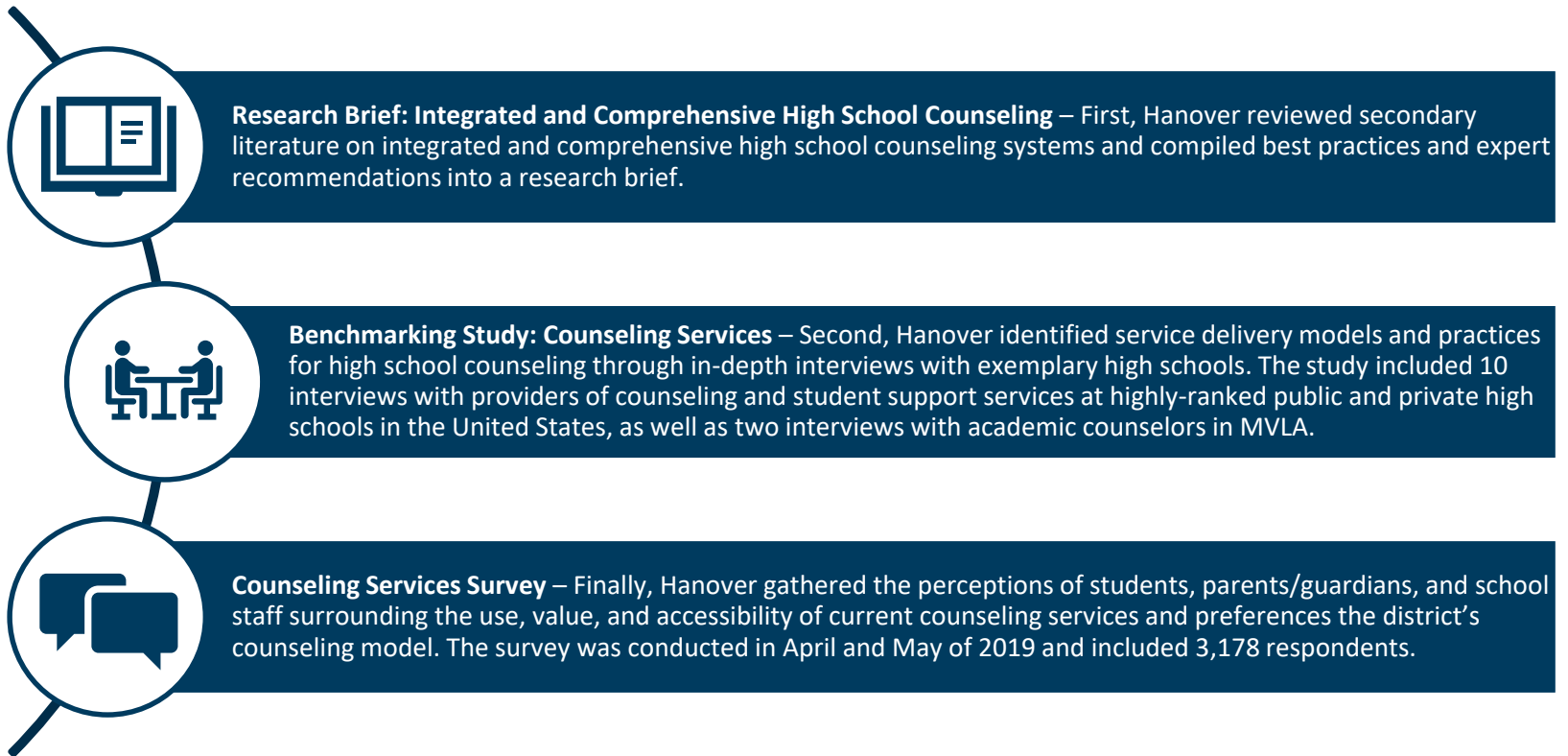


What factors in a comprehensive counseling services program are most valued by students, parents, and staff at MVLA?

INTRODUCTION

Methodological Approach

To complete the multi-phase study, Hanover approached the research questions using a mixed-methods approach through the following projects:



Note: Additional methodological details are provided in the final report for each methodological approach.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COUNSELING SERVICES

RECOMMENDATIONS



Areas of Focus for Redesigning Counseling Services – 1 of 2

- ✓ **Increase the delivery of counseling services through small-group formats, while ensuring that students continue to have access to individual counseling.**
 - At exemplary high schools, whole-class and small-group lessons or workshops allow academic counselors to interact with students more frequently and develop closer relationships.
 - At MVLA, students prefer individual counseling over small-group settings, though most are supportive of having a mix of the two, while parents and staff are most supportive of a mix of one-on-one and small-group delivery models.

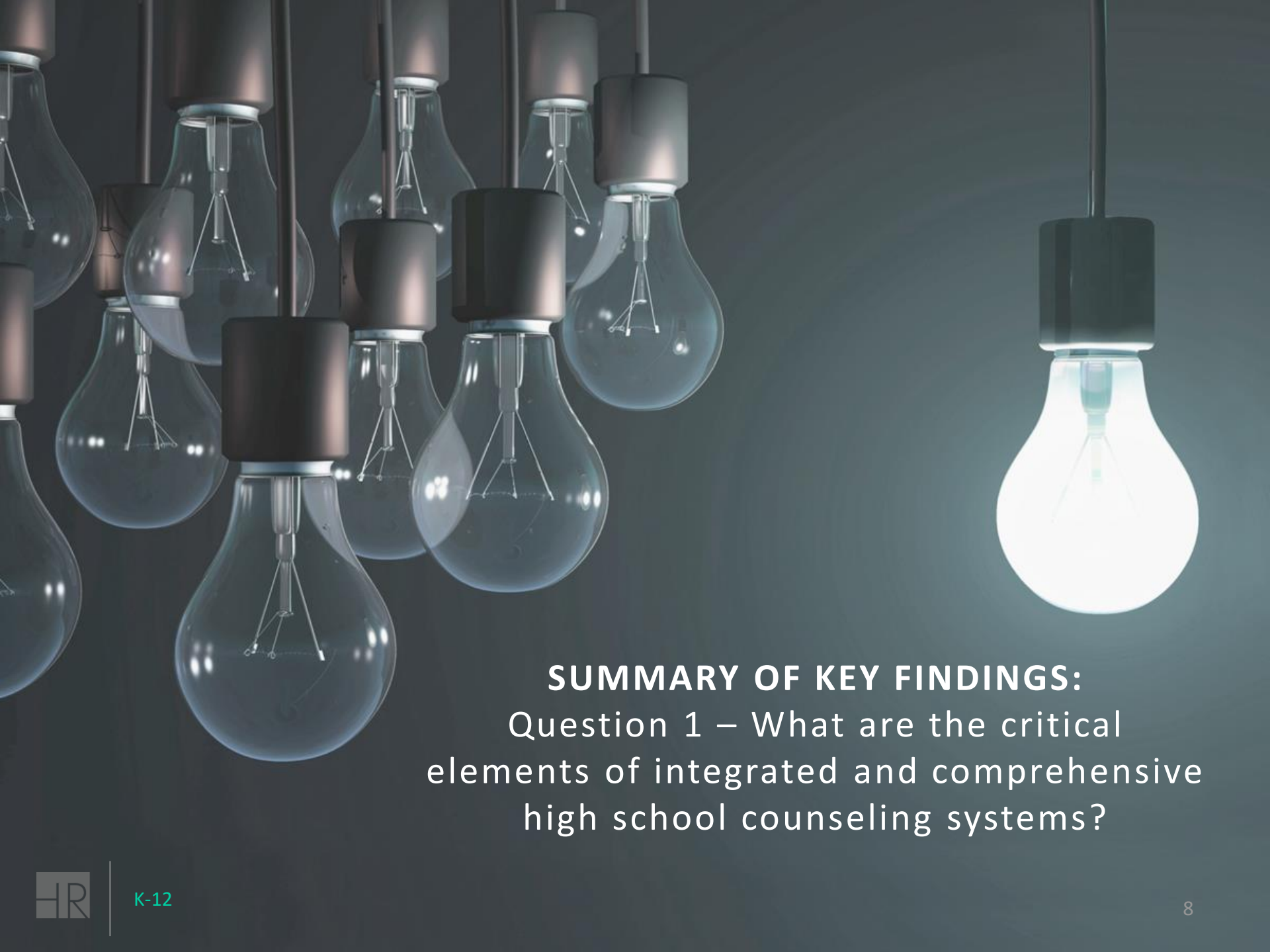
- ✓ **Explore but limit the amount of counseling provided through a whole-class or large-group setting.**
 - The literature surrounding high-quality high school counseling notes that counselors may deliver the counseling core curriculum through whole-class instruction, such as by co-teaching integrated lessons with classroom teachers.
 - Furthermore, several exemplary high schools interviewed for this report use whole-class counseling at select grade levels to increase interaction time with larger numbers of students earlier in their high school career, particularly in schools with large counselor caseloads.
 - However, survey results suggest that MVLA stakeholders are largely not in favor of such a model, with low levels of support reported among students, parents, and staff alike.

RECOMMENDATIONS



Areas of Focus for Redesigning Counseling Services – 2 of 2

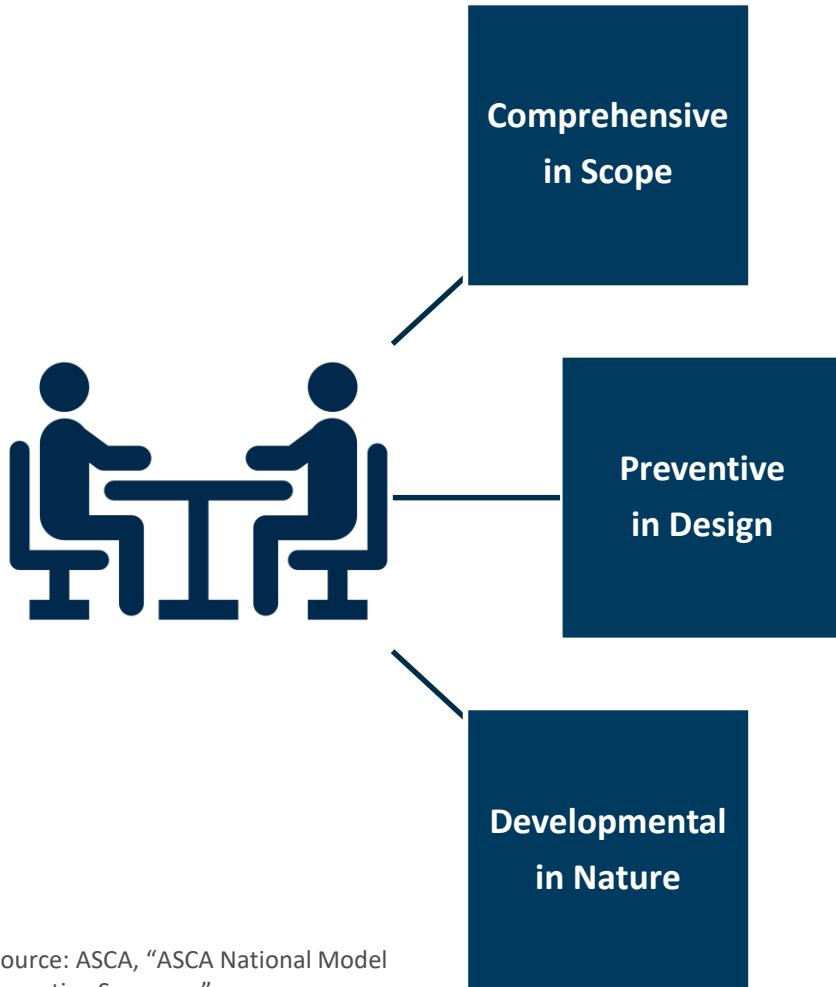
- ✓ **Shift to a counseling model that invites parents to attend some but not all meetings.**
 - At MVLA, the majority of all stakeholder groups surveyed prefer this approach, including staff, parents, and students.
 - Academic counselors interviewed for this study suggest that holding selected meetings with just students will help build stronger student-counselor relationships.
- ✓ **Integrate counseling and other support services into a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) framework to facilitate collaboration and ensure the efficient provision of services.**
 - Key features of integrated student support systems include needs assessments, community partnerships, coordination of supports, integration within schools, and data collection and tracking.
 - Several interviewees from exemplary public and private high schools schedule regular inter-departmental meetings to facilitate communication and collaboration across counseling and broader student support services staff. This collaboration model, however, may depend on reduced student caseloads.
- ✓ **Pursue a wellness-focused approach for the counseling and student services center.**
 - Multiple interviewees from exemplary public schools recommend referring to counseling centers more broadly as “wellness centers” to emphasize that counselors are focused on supporting students holistically.
 - Interviewees from exemplar schools also note that emphasizing a culture of wellness can support student health as well as improved related collaboration across staff.



SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS:
Question 1 – What are the critical elements of integrated and comprehensive high school counseling systems?

KEY FINDINGS

Defining Comprehensive Counseling



Source: ASCA, “ASCA National Model Executive Summary”

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) defines comprehensive school counseling program as “comprehensive in scope, preventive in design, and developmental in nature” (ASCA, “ASCA National Model Executive Summary”). ASCA’s National Model is characterized by the following direct services:

- **School Counseling Core Curriculum:** structured lessons designed to help students attain desired competencies and provide students with developmentally-appropriate knowledge, attitudes, and skills;
- **Individual Student Planning:** counselors coordinate ongoing, systematic activities designed to assist students in establishing personal goals and developing future plans; and
- **Responsive Services:** activities designed to meet students’ immediate needs and concerns, potentially including counseling in individual or small-group settings or crisis response.

Bullets summarized with some language verbatim from: ASCA, 2014

KEY FINDINGS



Integrating Comprehensive School Counseling with Broader Supports

- Effective implementation of the ASCA National Model requires counselors to collaborate with other support services professionals, including school psychologists, nurses, and social workers, as well as with teachers, administrators, parents, and students (ACSA, 2017).
- Accordingly, schools should integrate comprehensive counseling services into a **multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS)**, as shown in the example to the right (Ziomek-Daigle, 2016).
- Within this system, school counselors work in a school-based team with other student services professionals. Integrating student services within the MTSS model helps to avoid fragmentation or duplication of supports (University of South Florida – Student Support Services Project).

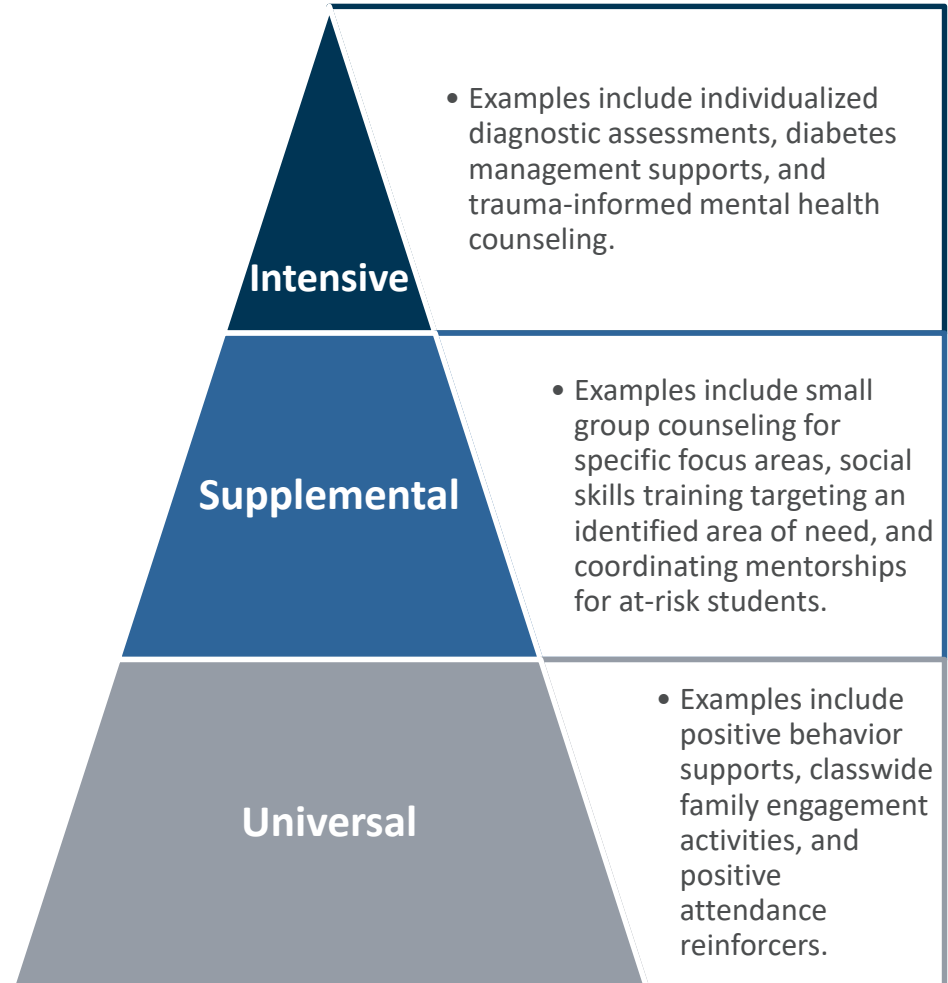


Figure created using language verbatim from: University of South Florida – Student Support Services Project



SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS:
Question 2 – How do high-achieving
public and private high schools provide
counseling services for students?

KEY FINDINGS



Counseling Services – Curricula and Student Meetings

“We did what we call a backwards design model in terms of deciding what are the outcomes we want for freshmen, for sophomores, for juniors, and seniors and then kind of work backwards on how to put that curriculum in place.”

**-Dr. Lara Cummings,
Glenbrook South High School (IL)**



- **Academic counselors commonly deliver counseling curricula through a combination of individual and group settings.** Public school counselors, especially those with large caseloads, increase their interactions with students by leading presentations and lessons, for example, during advisory or other established class time. Counseling staff can then prioritize individual meetings with students as they progress through high school. Mental health counseling supports are typically provided based on student need.
- **Interviewed high schools vary in whether all students meet with a counselor individually each year.** For example, at one public high school, students in Grades 9 and 10 attend monthly after-school group meetings with their counselor, while students in Grades 11 and 12 attend required individual meetings.

Spotlight: Engaging Parents in Counseling Services

Schools vary in the level of involvement of parents in the counseling process. Typically, schools work with parents when there are particular concerns about their child. Other schools, like MVLA, take a more proactive approach and invite parents to regular counseling sessions with students. Strategies include:

- Townsend Harris High School (NY) has a dedicated Parent Coordinator who assists in keeping parents informed.
- An anonymous public high school (CA) began a student-moderated discussion—“What I Wish My Parents Knew”—to help connect parents to student experiences.



Counseling Services – Wellness Approaches and Mental Health

- **Four of the nine participating institutions implement some type of wellness-focused curriculum, created either by their counseling department or by another department at the institution.** This practice was more common across private and similarly selective public high schools. Schools that take a “wellness” approach to school counseling focus on a variety of student outcomes, including mental health and study skills in addition to future planning and the post-secondary transition. For example, an interviewee from Strake Jesuit College Prep (TX) describes the school’s new counseling class—part of the school’s larger curriculum within the academic schedule—as follows:



“We’re going in and talking about everything from executive functioning within the classroom, test-taking strategies all the way through more basic operational things like course selection for the next semester.”

- **Counselors emphasize the importance of training students to identify mental health concerns among their peers.** Across schools, students are typically referred by a community member or self-referred to receive mental health counseling. In multiple schools, counselors rely partially on students to refer friends and peers. Notably, one California private school trains students to identify symptoms of depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues, while a California public school trains students to serve as peer counselors.

KEY FINDINGS



Collaboration and Integration

“It’s very common, I should say, for a student to come down with a discipline issue and the dean to reach out to the [psychologist], social worker, or guidance counselor, or some combination of that and have them join with the student to talk about discipline. It’s a very team-oriented approach.”

- Dr. Lara Cummings,
Glenbrook South High School (IL)



While separate by design, student counseling and other support staff professionals collaborate to varying degrees with each other, staff in other offices, parents, and community providers:

- **Regular inter-departmental meetings can facilitate communication and collaboration across staff, but may require reduced student caseloads.** For example, Glenbrook South High School organizes its student supports professionals into 12 teams, each comprising a counselor, psychologist, social worker, and academic dean. Weekly meetings allow teams, which support an average of only 250 students, to coordinate supports for high-need students. One New England boarding school has a similar framework of weekly and monthly meetings involving counseling staff, department leaders, and deans to coordinate supports for struggling students.
- **Schools commonly refer students with more serious or long-term needs to external mental health providers.** One public high school hosts an annual "mental health fair" to build relationships between students, school counseling staff, and community service providers, while another public school coordinates with external providers to deliver services on-site, in cases where students and families are unable to access services in the community. Lower student caseloads at a California private school allow counselors to check-in with students' outside therapists to discuss how best to support student needs.

KEY FINDINGS

Facility Design



“For me, ‘wellness’ refers both to... a not-so-narrow range of services that we provide and also having [...] a launching pad mentality that we are promoting healthy habits in the community proactively with things like mindfulness, health education... and things like that.”

- Anonymous New England Boarding School



- **Counseling centers aim to strike a balance between privacy and openness.** Counselors want students to feel invited to access counseling services while providing – and conveying a sense of – privacy. Interviewed counselors and directors of counseling programs emphasize the importance of sound-proof rooms and the availability of multiple entrances and exits that afford additional privacy. One public high school's comprehensive counseling office is housed within a welcoming glass structure that includes private offices for confidential discussions, as well as adjacent conference rooms for small-group meetings.
- **Building names make an impact on how services are perceived.** Two public high schools emphasize that their counselors are housed in “wellness centers” rather than “counseling centers,” which helps to shift students’ mindset toward counseling services, which are often perceived as exclusively academic.
- **Counselors indicate that strong academic and mental health counseling supports and facilities can only go so far in supporting student success and health.** To support the mission of counseling programs, schools must more broadly commit to supporting student wellness, which may include examinations of current policies and practices or a realignment of counseling curricula and focus.



SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS:

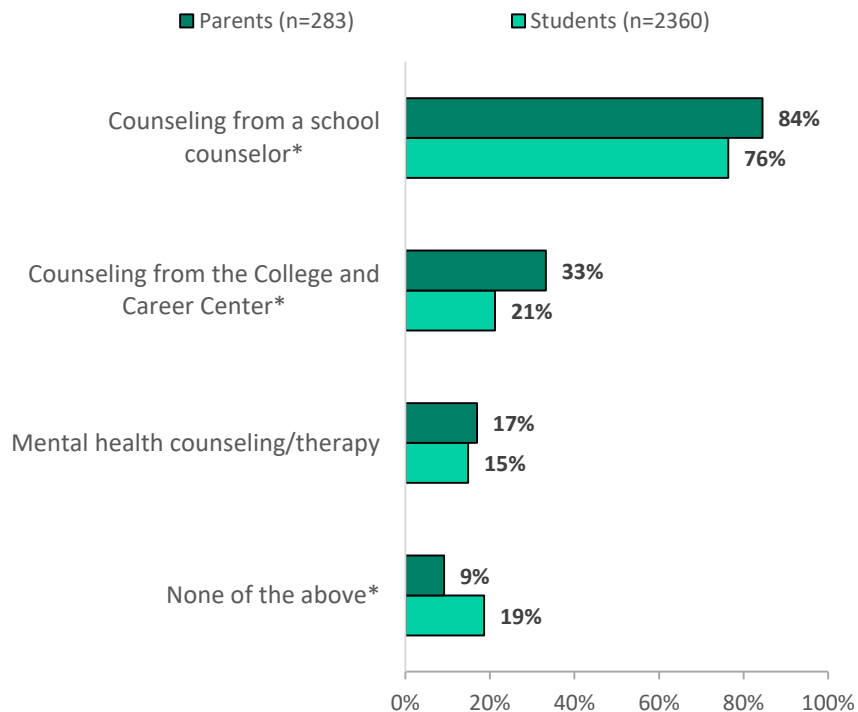
Question 3 – What factors in a comprehensive counseling services program are most valued by students, parents, and staff at MVLA?

KEY FINDINGS



Use and Accessibility of Counseling Services – 1 of 2

Which of the following student services has your child/have you used while in school at MVLA?
Please select all that apply.



Note: An asterisk (*) indicates a statistically significant difference between respondent groups. Percentages sum to more than 100 because respondents could select multiple options.

Most students report receiving counseling from a school counselor while other counseling services are less commonly used.

- Seventy-six percent of **students** indicate having received counseling from school counselors while less than a quarter indicate having received counseling from the College and Career Center (21%) or mental health counseling/therapy (15%).
- Nearly one of every five **students** (19%) report that they did not receive any of these three types of counseling services.
- Parents** are *more* likely than students to report that their child received counseling from school counselors and the College and Career Center and *less* likely to report that their child did not receive any of the three types of counseling services.

KEY FINDINGS

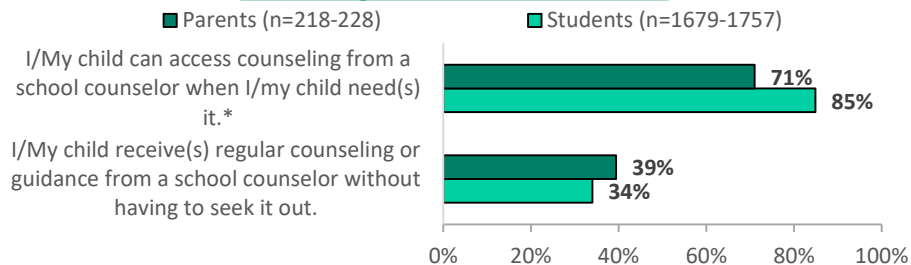


Use and Accessibility of Counseling Services – 2 of 2

Please indicate how much you disagree or agree with the following statements with regard to...

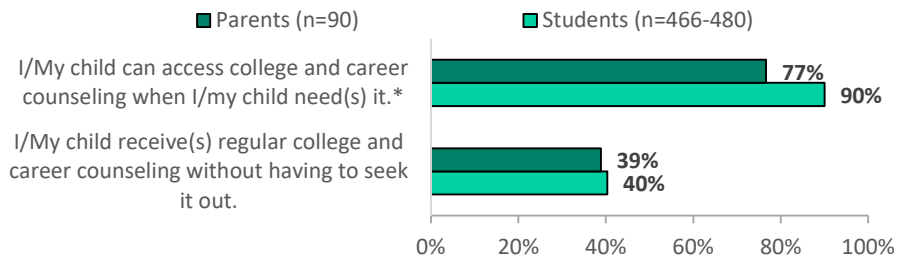
% Somewhat Agree + Strongly Agree

counseling from a school counselor:

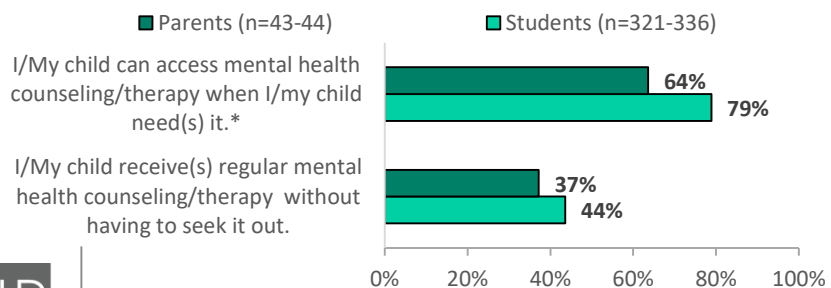


counseling provided through the College and Career Center:

Center:



mental health counseling/therapy:



Most students view the range of counseling services as accessible when they needed it, but are less likely to receive regular counseling without having to seek it out.

- **Students** view counseling through the College and Career Center as the most accessible (90% agree or strongly agree that they can access this counseling when needed) and mental health counseling/therapy as the least accessible (79%).
- **Students** are less likely to agree that they receive counseling regularly without having to seek it out – 34 percent receive regular counseling or guidance from a school counselor without seeking out, 40 percent receive regular college or career counseling, and 44 percent receive regular mental health counseling.
- **Parents** are significantly *less* likely than students to agree that their child can access all three types of counseling services when they need it.

Note: Only parent and student respondents who indicated that their child/they had used these services saw these respective questions. An asterisk (*) indicates a statistically significant difference between respondent groups.

KEY FINDINGS

Academic Counselor Workloads and Areas of Focus



“A lot of our work is spent talking about the **college application process** [...] Those individual appointments take up the lion's share of our day and then the lion's share of our work, overall.”

-Academic Counselor, Mountain View High School

“... it's very **focused on academic success and planning for next steps after high school**. That's a significant focus of what we spend time in those meetings doing. It's different than the National School Counseling recommended school counseling model, which is more three-pronged, where you build your program around academic development, personal development, and then college and career development.”

-Academic Counselor, Los Altos High School

Both Mountain View and Los Altos High Schools have a staff of seven academic counselors, one of whom is considered an at-risk counselor who works with students who have been referred to them. The academic counselors spend most of their time in one-on-one meetings that occur for a half hour once a year with each student and their family.

Counselors in MVLA have developed a standardized curriculum to guide individual meetings with students, which account for the majority of counselors' time. This curriculum focuses on academics and post-secondary planning: within one-on-one meetings, counselors discuss academic strengths and weaknesses, student goals, and the ways in which the counseling office can support students.

KEY FINDINGS

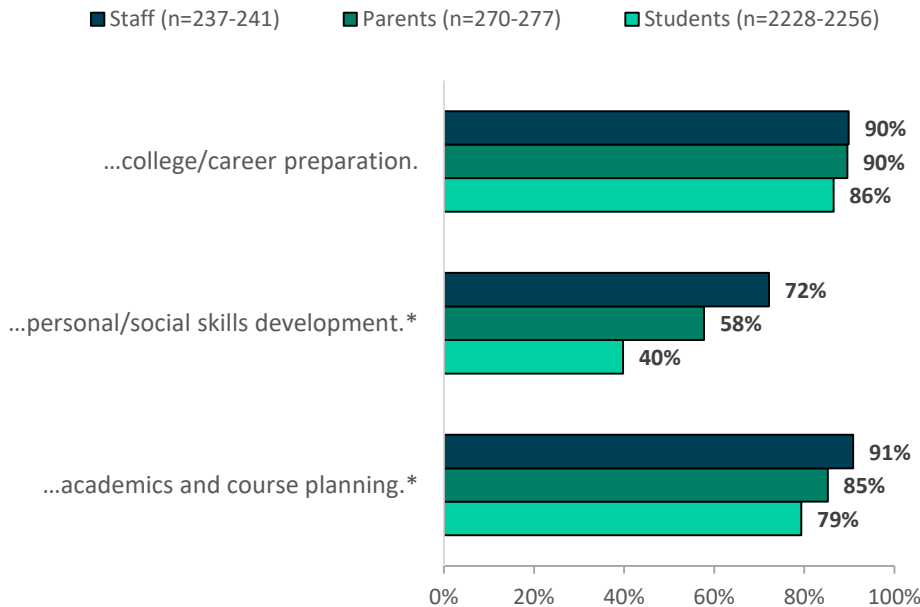


Priorities for Counseling Services

Please indicate how much you disagree or agree with the following statements:

I believe school counselors should spend time working with students on.../I would like my child's/my school counselor to spend time working with my child/me on...

% Somewhat Agree + Strongly Agree



Note: An asterisk (*) indicates a statistically significant difference between two or more respondent groups.

All stakeholders view college and career preparation and academic and course planning as priorities for school counselors. College and career preparation received the strongest consensus on where school counselors should spend their time (90% of staff, 90% of parents, and 86% of students agree or strongly agree). Almost all staff (91%) also agree that school counselors should work with students on academics and course planning, as well as 85% of parents and 79% of students.

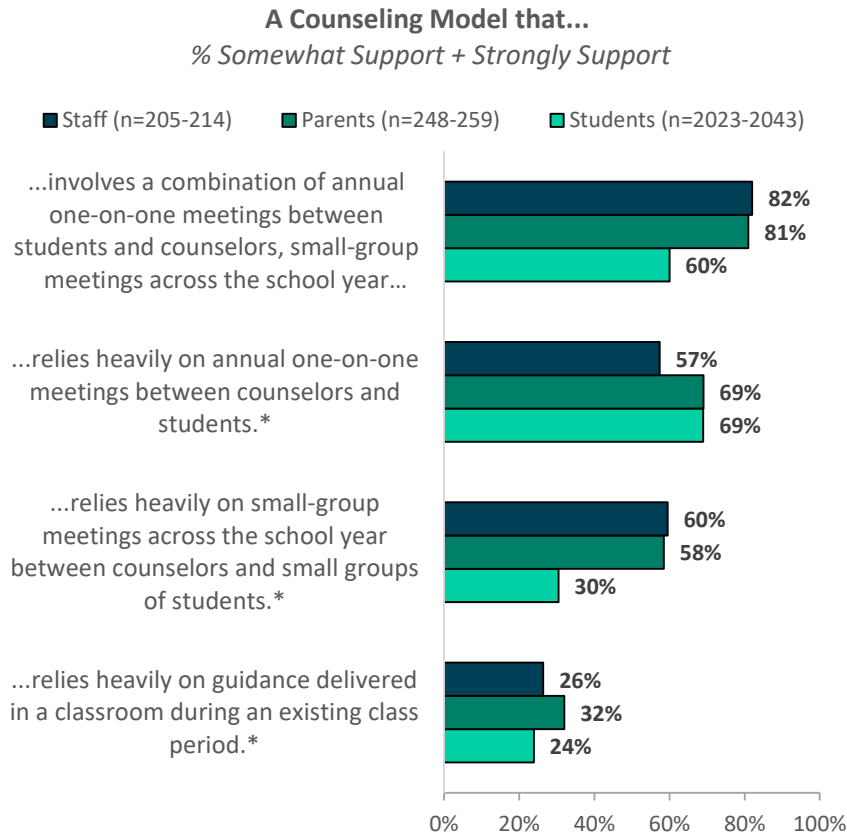
In contrast, personal/social skills development is consistently viewed as a lower priority for school counselors by all three stakeholder groups (72% of staff, 58% of parents, and 40% of students).

KEY FINDINGS



Preferences for Counseling Model – Meeting Structures

Please rate your level of opposition or support for the following school counseling models (noting that parent involvement could vary within each of these models):



Note: An asterisk (*) indicates a statistically significant difference between two or more respondent groups.

Stakeholders support a counseling model that relies on a mix of individual and small-group meetings.

- While **students** consistently show a stronger preference for individual meetings with counselors, most also support a model that relies on both individual and small-group formats. Overall, 69 percent of students somewhat or strongly support a counseling model that relies heavily on annual individual meetings between counselors and students. However, 60 percent of students also support a model that uses a combination of the two. Only 30 percent of students support a model that relies heavily on small-group meetings.
- Staff and parents** are more supportive than students of counseling in small-group settings but are most supportive of a model that relies on a combination of both individual and small-group meetings.

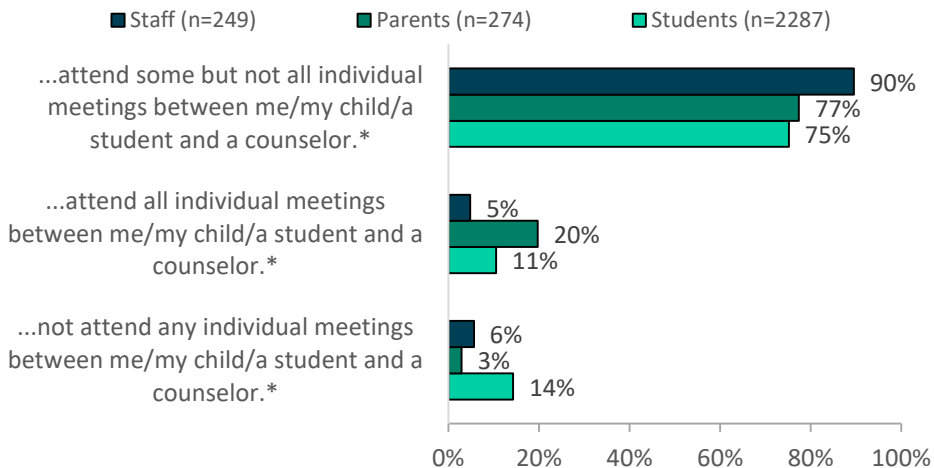
KEY FINDINGS



Preference for Counseling Model – Parental Involvement

Please indicate how much you believe parents should/you would like to/you would like one of your parents or guardians to be involved in individual meetings between students and counselors.

My parent or guardian/I/A parent or guardian should...



Note: An asterisk (*) indicates a statistically significant difference between two or more respondent groups.

“We love that parents are so involved here, but they're always present in these meetings. So we don't have time built-in with students where parents aren't there. And so it limits our ability to really get to know the kids.”

-Academic Counselor, Los Altos High School

Currently, MVLA parents are not required to attend their child’s annual meeting with his or her counselor; however, the counseling department invites parents to do so.

According to the results of the survey, **the majority of all stakeholder groups believe that parents should attend some but not all individual counseling meetings.** This is the preferred approach for 90% of staff, 77% of parents, and 75% of students.

Interviews with academic counselors at both district high schools suggest a similar point of view: **while MVLA counselors value parent involvement, they express concern that this involvement can interfere with their opportunity to develop strong relationships with students.**

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K-12

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