

# How Arizona Public School Counselors Spend Their Time: 1997 Update

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Since spring 1996, regional School To Work (STW) partnerships throughout the state have been involved in a variety of activities designed to help create a comprehensive *statewide system* of school-to-work opportunities for Arizona students. The *School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994* suggests that one element of a statewide system is career counseling for *all* students.

As part of a multi-faceted evaluation of the state's STW initiative coordinated by Morrison Institute for Public Policy on behalf of the Arizona Department of Commerce, School To Work Division (ADC-STW), Arizona public school counselors and their roles and responsibilities are being studied. The hypothesis is that *if* career guidance is emphasized in the schools (in accordance with 1994 Act), *then* one might see a shift in counselors' roles over time to reflect more time spent on counseling activities related to career guidance. Baseline measures of counselor's time use were established in 1996. This briefing paper provides first year trend data on Arizona school counselors and their use of time.<sup>1</sup>

## An Overview of the Counselor Survey

The counselor survey originally was designed in collaboration with the ADC-STW and an independent polling firm—Wright Consulting Services. A primary purpose of the survey was to determine how counselors spend their time and the nature of the counseling services they provide. The survey was modified slightly for the second year as a result of input by staff of the Arizona Counselors' Academy (ACA).

Modifications were designed to measure the extent to which counselors spend time *facilitating* student counseling, in addition to the time spent providing direct services. The facilitation aspect of counselors' duties was *not* measured in the baseline study, and was felt by ACA advisors to be a critical oversight. Facilitation was felt to be an especially important role to measure, given that the ACA is working to promote Comprehensive Competency-Based Guidance (CCBG) counseling. When counselors work within the CCBG framework, the expectation is that they spend less time

one-on-one with students, and more time working with teachers. This is so that guidance is integrated into the classroom and, therefore, reaches more students than one-on-one counseling affords.

## Survey Methodology and Counselor Respondents

Of 1,200 surveys mailed to public school counselors, 467 usable surveys were returned and analyzed. Respondents from the second year parallel those of the first year. Counselors from all 15 counties are represented. They work in schools with varying student enrollments, and in all types of settings (e.g., elementary, junior/middle, high school). Nearly 30 percent of the respondents are men; the remainder are women. Seventeen percent represent minorities.

The sample size yields results that are statistically accurate with a 95% level of confidence. The margin of error is  $\pm 5.2$  percentage points.

Similar to the Fall 1996 survey, respondents to this second annual survey are a highly professional group of counselors with the following characteristics:

- C 95% work full time and are experienced counselors, having practiced their profession for between one to over 20 years
- C 93% are professionally certified as guidance counselors/have a counseling endorsement
- C 67% have attended the Arizona Counselors' Academy at least once to upgrade their knowledge and skills
- C 56% are members of a professional guidance counseling association
- C 48% are members of a teacher/educator union

Most respondents (54%) indicate working with students in grades 9-12. Of the remaining respondents, 25% work with students in grades 6-8, and 20% work with younger children in grades K-5. (One percent did not respond to this question.)

Exactly 18% of the respondents work in schools with fewer than 600 students. Roughly half (47.3%) work in



schools with enrollments between 600 and 1,500 students. The remainder work in schools with enrollments exceeding 1,500. Among all respondents, 14% indicate being the only counselor for the district, irrespective of grade level or size.

There are no radical changes between 1996 and 1997 in how counseling duties are organized or distributed. Most schools assign counselors by grade level (37%) or alphabetically by the student's last name (32%). Less than one-third of counselors (28.9%) indicate that they provide counseling based on a specialty area such as career counseling. However, a few more respondents this year than last year (7 versus 3) indicate specifically that they are charged with providing career counseling and integrating CCBG into the curriculum.

Regarding caseloads, three counselors out of every four (up from two-thirds in 1996) are responsible for more than 300 students each. Given that the American School Counselor Association recommends a maximum caseload of 1:300, Arizona counselors' caseloads are, overall, relatively high.<sup>2</sup>

### How Do Counselors Spend Their Time?

Both the 1996 and 1997 surveys sought to determine the nature of counselors' overall roles and counseling duties. First, counselors were asked to indicate—for an "average" academic year—the percent of their overall duties allocated to the following tasks:

- C counseling students (e.g., one-on-one);
- C working with teachers to facilitate guidance activities in the classroom/planning, developing and delivering curriculum ;
- C responding to crises ;
- C providing "system support " such as preparing budgets, attending meetings, and so forth; and
- C "non-guidance " activities.

[Note: Words in bold correspond to the legend in Figure 1.]

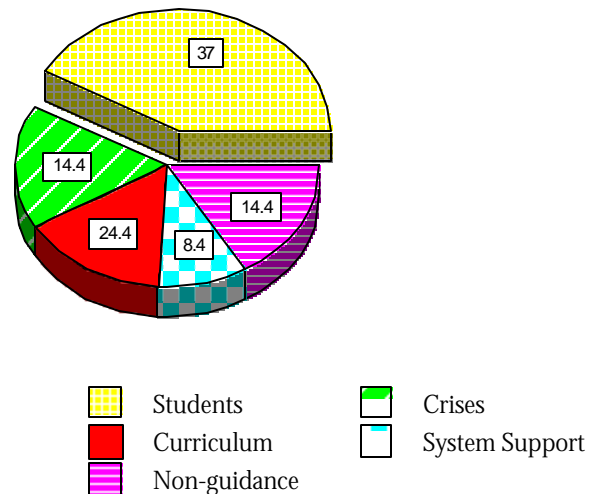
In the first annual counselors' survey (Fall 1996), one-on-one student counseling accounted for the single greatest allocation of time among counselors (37%). Cumulatively, however, more crisis-oriented student counseling and other, non-guidance activities accounted for 63% of Arizona counselors' time.

Figure 1 shows the Fall 1997 distribution of counselors' time. Similar to 1996, one-on-one student counseling accounts for the single greatest allocation of time among counselors (37%). This is followed by time

spent either planning, developing or delivering curriculum or working with teachers to facilitate guidance activities in the classroom (24.4%). Responding to crises and non-guidance activities tie for time use at 14.4%, followed by time spent on "system support" (8.4%).

Figure 1  
**Counselors' overall duties: Percentage of total time spent by task in Fall 1997**

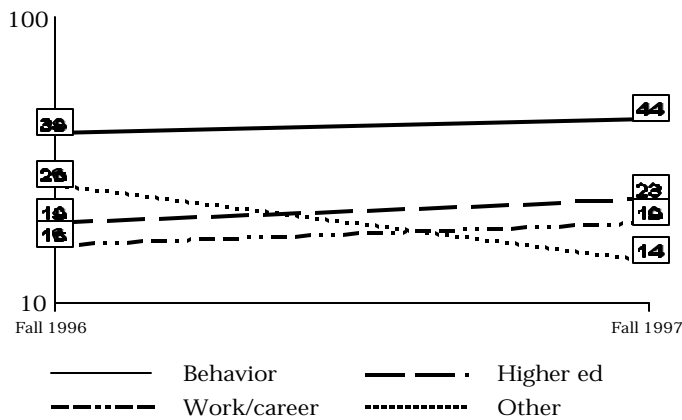
\*Note: Percentages do not add up to 100. Non-responses (missing data) are not reported.



Second, *strictly in terms of counseling students* (i.e., the 37% depicted in Figure 1), counselors were asked to indicate the nature of the counseling provided in terms of four issues: (1) student behavior, (2) higher education, (3) work /career, and (4) "other." Figure 2 shows trend data for the distribution of time spent counseling students on specific issues.

Figure 2 indicates that most one-on-one counseling time is spent on student behavior. In fact, behavioral counseling reportedly rose between Fall 1996 and Fall 1997, from 39 to 44 percent. On a more positive note, there also are modest increases in the amount of time reportedly spent working individually with students on postsecondary issues—either higher education or work/career issues.

Figure 2  
**Student counseling: Percentage of time spent by issue**



Between Fall 1996 and Fall 1997, counseling on higher education shows an increase from 19 to 23 percent, while career counseling shows an increase from 16 to 19 percent. Cumulatively, this is a seven percent gain in time spent working with students individually to plan their postsecondary careers. Finally, one-on-one counseling on “other issues” (e.g., family problems) decreased.

### Counselors’ Job Satisfaction

A majority of the public school counselors responding to the survey are either “very” (32%) or “somewhat” (48%) satisfied working in Arizona’s public school system. However, job satisfaction varies somewhat by the people with whom counselors interact.

Table 1 shows Arizona counselors’ satisfaction relative to working with different groups in 1996 and 1997. Notably, the percentages of counselors who are satisfied working with different groups rose significantly between 1996 and 1997. Specifically, the share of counselors who report being satisfied rose by:

- C 20.7% in working with parents,
- C 15.3% in working with teachers,
- C 15.2% in working with businesses,
- C 14.5% in working with administrators , and
- C 10.4% in working with principals.

Conversely, the share of counselors who report being dissatisfied went down—especially in terms of working with local businesses and parents.

Table 1  
**Counselor satisfaction by constituent group (N=374)**

Group	% very-somewhat satisfied		% very-somewhat dissatisfied	
	1996	1997	1996	1997
Teachers	73.2	88.5	10.6	11.2
Principals	71.6	82.0	12.7	17.4
Local businesses	65.4	80.6	15.6	12.3
Parents	60.5	81.2	22.7	18.1
District administrators	52.5	67.0	31.5	31.2

Note: Percentages do not add up to 100. Non-responses (missing data) are not reported.

### Discussion

Counselors polled in both 1996 and 1997 are very similar. Most work with high school students, in schools with enrollments between 600 and 1,500 and have caseloads exceeding 300 students. In spite of high caseloads, fully 80% of the counselors responding to the survey are satisfied working in Arizona’s public school system, and increasingly more satisfied in working with parents and employers than they were in the past year.

The ways in which counselors spend their time appears relatively stable between 1996 and 1997, although exact trends cannot be reported since the instrument was modified in 1997. The question is: Do Arizona counselors spend their time appropriately?

The state model for Comprehensive Competency-Based Guidance (CCBG) recommends that counselors restructure their time in terms of delivering guidance programs. The CCBG framework therefore provides a means to assess Arizona counselors’ use of time. Table 2<sup>3</sup> compares Arizona counselors’ reported (actual) time use with CCBG recommendations.

Table 2 indicates that time spent either developing or facilitating the presentation of guidance curriculum (24.4%) is relatively low compared with CCBG guidelines, as is time (8.4%) spent on system support (e.g., outreach, management activities). On the other hand, the cumulative amount of time spent responding to crises and behavior (35.4%) is relatively high, and

time spent on non-guidance activities (14.4%) is well over recommended guidelines .

Table 2

**Arizona Counselors' Time Use: A Comparison with CCBG Recommendations**

Delivery Strategy	CCBG Range	AZ % (Actual)
Developing/facilitating guidance curriculum	25-50%	24.4%
Individual academic/career planning (1-on-1)	5-35%	16% [Includes individual higher ed & work/career counseling]
Responsive services (student initiated crisis & personal counseling)	20-30%	35.4% [Includes individual other & behavioral counseling]
System support	10-15%	8.4%
Non-guidance	0%	14.4%

Note: CCBG ranges allow for difference among counselors depending on grade level served. Percentages do not add up to 100. Non-responses (missing data) are not reported.

The 16% of time spent by Arizona counselors working individually with students on personal and career development is within CCBG guidelines. However, it is considered a relatively high allocation of time if younger students are involved and, conversely, a low allocation if dealing with older students. Nevertheless, what is perhaps most important about this 16% is that it represents an increase in time spent working with students on individual planning—an increase that is statistically significant.

This increase occurred during the first full year (1996-97) of implementing STW statewide in Arizona schools. Thus, while the first annual counselor's survey was conducted prior to any widespread implementation of STW, the second polling occurred after a full year of implementation. During the implementation year, several events took place involving public school counselors.

At the state level, the summer 1997 ACA and year-round mini-academies featured presentations on STW and the role of career counseling. ACA training reached nearly 500 counselors in 55 school districts and 14 counties. Regional STW partnerships also

sponsored professional development activities that included public school counselors. Moreover, STW partnerships reported 1,982 contacts targeting counselors between January and the fall 1997 polling and specifically targeted over 200,000 employers, parents, and others to inform constituents about the value of career education, opportunities, and counseling. Partnerships have facilitated school-business linkages statewide in concert and collaboration with other statewide initiatives such as Tech Prep.


This paper does *not* claim that STW implementation is responsible for modest shifts in counseling on postsecondary issues or increased counselor satisfaction working with select constituent groups. It does, however, pose the question of a possible relationship between counselors and others' increased exposure to STW—and the value STW places on career counseling—and changes in counselors' time use and job satisfaction. This is a question this longitudinal study will seek to answer.

**Endnotes**

1. First year data are summarized in Vandegrift and Wright (January 1997). [Arizona STW Briefing Paper #4.]
2. This recommendation also is endorsed by the College Board, national associations for both Elementary and Secondary Principals, and the National Board of Certified Counselors.
3. Table 2 reflects the 37% of time that Arizona counselors spend on one-on-one counseling prorated by delivery strategy.

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School To Work is a division of the Arizona Department of Commerce, Office of Workforce Development Policy.

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