

School Counselor

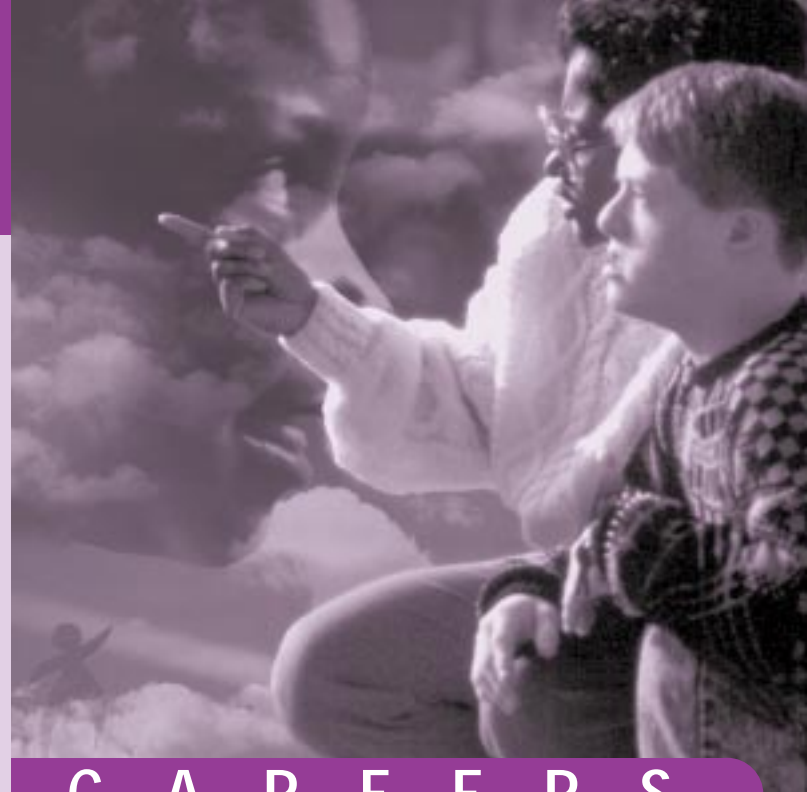
Making

A

DIFFERENCE in the **lives** of **students** with **special needs**

A fourth-grade teacher is distressed because a few of her students are teasing and ridiculing a classmate who stutters. An eighth-grade girl who earned A's in math and science on the past ten report cards just received D's for the current marking period. A high school junior who is mildly mentally retarded wants a part-time summer job but doesn't know how to find one.

Who can help teachers and students with problems like these? School counselors.



C A R E E R S

in Special Education and Related Services

School counselors are perceived as problem-solvers.

A more accurate description is to describe them as professionally trained educators who help students, parents, and teachers solve problems. In the examples listed above, a school counselor could:

Offer to observe the fourth-grade classroom and later privately offer suggestions to the teacher for ways to deal more effectively with the inconsiderate children who are teasing the



child who stutters. The counselor could also teach a special unit to the entire class about teamwork, cooperation, kindness. If the child who stutters is not already receiving special education services to address that problem, the counselor would probably recommend that the child be referred to the school psychologist and/or speech-language pathologist for testing and evaluation.

Make an appointment with the science and math teachers to find out if they know why this particular student's grades have dropped so drastically. Perhaps the parents of the child are in the process of a divorce. Maybe a death has occurred in the student's immediate family. Could an undiagnosed illness be responsible? Based on the information provided, the counselor would determine the next appropriate steps.

Coordinate information that would be useful to the job-seeking student. According to the student's special education teachers, what are the student's strongest skills? Are the parents in favor of summer employment and can they provide transportation to the job site? Does the student know where to get a job application, how to complete it, and how to interview for a job? Does the school's counseling/career center have current lists of area job openings?

Nature of Work

Counselors are employed by business, government, private practice, healthcare organizations, and schools. The nation's public schools, in fact, provide more jobs for more counselors than any other single employer. Since 1975, when the Education for All Handicapped Children Act was passed, the number of specialists in schools has increased. Students with disabilities need the services of occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech-language pathologists, counselors, and other health professionals.

Many school systems assign caseloads in the counseling department on an alphabetical basis. In a large school, a caseload of 300-400 students is not unusual. A 400-person caseload includes students with such disabilities as deaf and hard of hearing, visual impairments, orthopedic impairments, cognitive and learning disabilities, autism, and emotional disabilities.

School counselors are trained to confer with all enrollees, regardless of each student's abilities or disabilities. They also work closely with principals, teachers, health professionals, and parents. The difference between elementary and secondary counselors' jobs can be substantial.

Both are committed to dealing with personal, family, and social problems in the student's school and career development caseloads. Counselors in middle school and high school might have more individual counseling cases than those in elementary schools.

"An 11th grade student recently came into my office looking for support," said a high school counselor with a caseload of 300. "The girl has a disability in reading and reading comprehension, but her writing skills are above average and she plans to attend college. She's enrolled in a general, academic English class and wants to stay there. Her English teacher was skeptical about the girl's ability to keep up with all the reading assignments in the class." The counselor arranged a meeting with the girl's school case manager, and conferred with the English teacher and the girl's parents. "We all decided to support this student by working out a plan where she could get extra reading assistance at home and at school. It's been very successful."

High school counselors typically help students plan their academic program; develop and maintain records on students; coordinate information about entrance requirements, loans, and scholarships for colleges and vocational schools; interpret standardized testing; and undertake research projects. They are also expected to be knowledgeable about school policy on attendance; dress code; alcohol and drug abuse; pregnancy; weapons; and a variety of other issues that affect student behavior. Counselors often become a part of a school's evaluation and review

team to ensure equal opportunity for all students to participate fully in his or her education process. In order to assist some students it may mean developing a plan that will include referrals to medical, community, and law enforcement agencies.

Secondary school counselors see students in a variety of settings including individually in their office, classroom settings, hallways or lunchrooms, at career day, athletic events, and the like. One secondary counselor described a team teaching program that he oversees in two of his school's science classes:

"These general education science classes include as many as a dozen students who are receiving special education services. They can be successful in the class only if we provide support services such as: providing a special education teacher or aide in the classroom to rotate in these classes, provide notetakers or notes from the teacher, interpreters, peer tutoring, or extra study or test time. When the teacher is finished talking and the students begin their homework or lab exercises, in this situation, an extra teacher available in the classroom was a great help and his/her presence was very discreet."

Elementary school counselors more frequently work directly with teachers and their classes. They are called upon to present special topics on difficult subjects. One counselor remembered being asked to talk to a class of second graders because the teacher reported, "I'm having trouble with stealing in my class. Can you help?"

In another instance, an elementary counselor was invited to teach methods for conflict-resolution to her school's third, fourth, and fifth graders once a month. After one presentation, she distributed ungraded worksheets for the children. During the quiet time while the class was completing the worksheets, one girl screamed to a nearby boy, "Stop looking at my paper!"

The boy, who had mild mental retardation, was confused and hurt; he didn't understand the directions and was looking at the girl's paper to see how she did it. The counselor calmed the class and later privately talked to both children about how they might have handled the same situation in a more appropriate manner. Elementary and middle school counselors generally spend more time on discipline problems and prevention than do their high school colleagues.

Sometimes a teacher will notice a developmental delay in a student and request testing for example, when a kindergarten teacher comments that a student can hold a wooden game piece but cannot move it on a path on a board game. The teacher may request the special education team, including the school counselor, to review and refer the student for appropriate testing and recommendations that will help the student reach his or her educational goals.



Eric Kinneman
School Counselor
Falls Church, Virginia

Eric Kinneman is a full-time school counselor. The school is comprised of over 1,400 students in Grades 9 through 12. Approximately 10 % of the student body receive special services for learning disabilities or physical disabilities. Eric is one of six counselors in a department that also includes a guidance director and three fulltime secretaries. By state law, Eric is mandated to spend 60% of his time providing direct services to students and/or parents.

As a teenager and young adult, Eric enjoyed his experiences as a summer camp counselor, a referee for youth sports, and participating in other activities involving children. After earning a bachelor's degree in elementary education from Virginia's George Mason University in 1980 and teaching briefly, he discovered that 'talking to students about personal issues and planning for the future was more stimulating than teaching them reading or writing, or grading spelling tests.' In 1988 he received a master's in counseling. Before his current job, he held counseling positions in both elementary and middle school.

Eric's caseload is now approximately 250 students, assigned to him alphabetically. "My job is very creative, thanks to the outstanding leadership in our school. It's really important to me that the principal supports the guidance department. I refuse to sequester myself in my office and not be approachable. I see students in the hallways, at athletic events, in the lunchroom, and in classrooms as well as in my office." he said.

Daily Schedule: The routine varies, but Eric usually works with individual students to discuss personal issues, curriculum issues, and future plans; works with teachers and administrators to plan ways to help students work more productively; talks with parents on the phone or in person; and arranges teacher-parent conferences.

"Providing support and information so that kids can be responsible for their own lives is very satisfying"

Several times a year, Eric conducts guidance lessons in selected classrooms. In the fall, freshmen receive his suggestions about the transition into high school. In the winter, seniors learn about postsecondary options, processes, and deadlines. Throughout the year, Eric interacts closely with the faculty who teach students with learning disabilities. He attends Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings, serves on a screening committee to determine if testing is appropriate, meets with parents, and counsels students about career options. "I try to provide the same level of service to a student with disabilities as I do to a general education student," he added. "Special education students have a variety of needs and working with them is a positive challenge which enables me to use all of my tools and skills as a counselor. Helping other staff members recognize the special needs of the student with disabilities is something that I spend a lot of time doing. Classroom teachers and school administrators are interested in how to work more effectively with students with disabilities, and I attend inservice programs to improve my own understanding and knowledge so that I can share with other professionals in the school. A guidance counselor can be a tremendous facilitator in helping students with disabilities receive as many services as possible."

Challenges: "This career can be very discouraging when you're dealing with issues like teenage pregnancy. I counseled a pregnant 12-year-old when I was in middle school. It's also not easy to meet with parents or students who are initially hostile because the student has serious academic or personal problems. I'm a very positive person by nature, so even when the problems seem overwhelming, I always look for the possibilities, not what should have been."

Satisfaction: "Providing support and information so that kids can be responsible for their own lives is very satisfying. Two recent cases come to mind. One student with physical disabilities and his parents expressed interest in the student receiving technical training in another school. I was aware of a vocational school in the county, knew the ramifications of changing his schedule and transportation, and knew whether the graduation requirements would still be filled. I worked with several people to properly enroll the student offsite in the vocational school for part of the day. It meant a lot of coordinating for me but the transfer was very successful. Another student walked into my office without an appointment and stated, 'I'm a drug addict and I need help. But don't tell my parents.' I explained to him that I could only help him if his parents were involved. He agreed, and I was able to arrange for him to be admitted into a treatment program. It feels good to help people solve a problem."

Education Required

School counselors are required in all states to have a master's degree or equivalent in counseling, educational psychology, or counseling psychology. Specialized courses in management evaluation of a guidance program are also required. All states require school counselors to be licensed by the state (requirements vary), but national certification is voluntary. To be nationally certified by the National Board of Certified Counselors (NBCC), a counselor must have a master's degree in counseling from an accredited institution, have a minimum two years of supervised professional counseling experience and pass the NBCC exam.

In 1995-96, 105 accredited graduate programs existed in the field of counseling. Graduate students study human growth and development, social and cultural foundations, relationships, career development, research and evaluation, appraisal, and professional orientation. Accredited programs require a supervised clinical experience.

Personal Qualities

School counselors have strong desires to help students with educational, emotional, and vocational needs. They are patient, resourceful, and inspire respect, trust, and confidence. School counselors possess leadership skills, excellent listening skills, and are able to work both independently and as part of a team. These professionals follow a code of ethics in their jobs. They are trained to put into perspective the wide range of minor and major problems that they encounter in their caseloads.

Job Outlook and Advancement

Employment of all counselors is expected to grow faster than the average for all occupations through 2005. Jobs in schools are also expected to increase as enrollments grow, although some positions could be eliminated due to budget cuts. In the 1996-97 school year, counselors held 8,971 (fully certified) and 569 (not fully certified) jobs. Projections for 2005 are for a 23% increase in counselor jobs.

Advancement opportunities are available in larger schools and school systems as directors or supervisors. Some school psychologists and special education administrators began their careers as counselors.



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How to Prepare for a Career

Aspiring school counselors should take high school classes in English, psychology, biology, and communications. In school, volunteer to be a peer helper to a counselor, tutor a student, or be on the student peer mediation team. Work in a recreation program with special needs students, day camp, Special Olympics, or other children's activities.

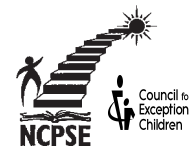
RESOURCES

American Counseling Association

5999 Stevenson Avenue
Alexandria, Virginia 22304
800-347-6647
703-823-9800
703-823-0252 Fax
www.counseling.org

American School Counseling Association

801 North Fairfax Street, Suite 310
Alexandria, VA 22314
800-306-4722
703-683-2722
703-683-1619 Fax
asca@erol.com
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