



Culturally-Sustaining School Counseling Model Policy Advocacy Guide

November 2025



Research shows that increased student and family involvement in schools leads to better academic outcomes for students, higher graduation rates and higher rates of college enrollment. When schools are intentional about engaging with students and families, students report increases in their social and emotional well-being, and they and their families are more likely to experience lifelong civic engagement.

When schools engage with families, students are more likely to have higher grades, have better attendance, and graduate and attend college.

Teachers, students and families report experiencing a more positive school climate when meaningful engagement practices are in place. These effects are particularly powerful for students and families who have been historically marginalized and left out of the decision-making processes of their schools.

See the Implementation Resources section of the policy package below for more data and research supporting student and family engagement in schools.

Why Culturally-Sustaining School Counseling Matters

The American School Counselors Association (ASCA) characterizes culturally-sustaining school counseling programs as those that engage all students and the entire school community to create equitable opportunities and outcomes. These counselors uplift diversity and support students from all backgrounds by identifying and addressing racial and social inequities in their schools.

For college and career guidance counseling, specifically, they work to create a culture of college readiness for all students and close gaps in college access for diverse groups. They challenge biases and practices that have limited the opportunities of historically marginalized students to attend and succeed in college and in their careers.

Research finds that school counselors are key to helping students learn about college opportunities and navigate the application process and financial aid. Marginalized students often have less access to college information resources through their social networks.

Note: Advocates may be wary that language around “cultural sustainability” may be difficult to advance in their specific local or state contexts. If that is the case, alternative language (such as “effective,” “quality,” or “responsive” school counseling programs) may be considered. This is further addressed in the advocacy tools provided with this package.

The ASCA national model for school counseling programs has been adopted or adapted by 40 states ASCA advocates for increased funding for school counseling programs and professional development on culturally-sustaining school counseling practices to reduce college enrollment gaps. It is critical that states support and operationalize these recommendations through mandatory staffing, certification and training requirements.

- Strohl, J., Gulish, A., & Morris, C. (2024). The Future of Good Jobs: Projections through 2031. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/cew-the_future_of_good_jobs-fr.pdf

- Fed. Reserve Bank NY. (February 22, 2024). The Labor Market for Recent College Graduates. Federal Reserve Bank of New York. <https://www.newyorkfed.org/research/college-labor-market#--:explore:wages>

School counselors are key influencers in shaping students' understanding of college processes, especially for students from historically marginalized backgrounds.

College counseling in high school and small counselor caseloads give students social capital with college information that they may not otherwise have access to. Efforts to reach underrepresented students require targeted and uniquely-designed outreach that is culturally responsive to the needs of different student groups and that substantially involves their families.

- Bryan, J., Moore-Thomas, C., Day-Vines, N.L., & Holcomb-McCoy, C. (2009). Who Sees the School Counselor for College Information? *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 87(3), 280-291.
- Bryan, J., Moore-Thomas, C., Day-Vines, N.L., & Holcomb-McCoy, C. (2011). School as Social Capital: The Effects of High School College Counseling on College Application Rates. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 89(2), 190-199.
- Cholewa, B., Burkhardt, C.K., & Hull, Michael F. (2018). Are School Counselors Impacting Underrepresented Students' Thinking About Postsecondary Education? A Nationally Representative Survey. *Professional School Counseling*, 19(1). <https://doi.org/10.5330/1096-2409-19.1.144>

Students from historically marginalized backgrounds often face barriers to access to counselors in their schools. High caseloads impede counselors' ability to make meaningful contact with their students for college and career guidance counseling.

School counselor ratios and caseloads impact counselors' abilities to make effective contact with their students for college guidance counseling, which in turn impacts students' decision-making throughout the college-going process. School districts serving higher percentages of historically marginalized students tend to be underfunded for this purpose by state governments and have higher student-to-counselor ratios as a result.

- Education Trust, Reach Higher & ASCA. (February 2019). School Counselors Matter. American School Counselor Association. <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/getmedia/b079d17d-6265-4166-a120-3b1f56077649/School-Counselors-Matter.pdf>
- Brown, C.H., & Knight, D.S. (2024). Student-to-School Counselor Ratios: Understanding the History and Ethics Behind Professional Staffing Recommendations and Realities in the United States (EdWorkingPaper: 24-977). Annenberg Institute at Brown University. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10508422.2024.2342520>
- Bryan, J., Kim, J., & Liu, C. (2021). School Counseling College-Going Culture: Counselors' Influence on Students' College-Going Decisions. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 100(1), 39-55. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcad.12408>
- Latham Sikes, C. (2025). *A Community-Based Study on the Impact of Texas' SB 17 on Marginalized College-Going Students: Preliminary Findings – Roundtable Report*. IDRA. <https://idra.news/AA-SB17studyPrelimReport>

School counselors require sufficient resources and stronger protections on their work time to be able to provide effective college and career guidance counseling to all students.

Counselors are saddled with too many non-essential tasks, including testing

administration and other administrative duties, to be able to carve out adequate time for college guidance counseling. In schools serving higher percentages of students from low-income backgrounds, counselors spend even less time on college guidance counseling than do those in more affluent school districts.

- Clinedinst, M. (2019). State of College Admission 2019. National Association for College Admission Counseling. https://nacacnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/soca2019_all.pdf
- Bojorquez, H. (2023). *School Counselors on College Advising Constraints – A Ready Texas Study*. IDRA. <https://idra.news/ReadyTx23p>

Culturally-sustaining school counseling programs can best support college readiness and access for all students, especially for students from historically marginalized backgrounds.

Culturally-sustaining school counseling programs have the potential to reduce disparities in college access for historically underrepresented students. Components of such programs include individualized college guidance counseling that responds to the needs of students' unique identities and backgrounds, recognition of implicit and structural biases within school counselor programs, and family engagement strategies that engage families that are traditionally left out of college and career guidance processes.

- Boysen, G.A. (2010). Integrating Implicit Bias Into Counselor Education. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 49(4), 210-227. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6978.2010.tb00099.x>
- Bryan, J., Kim, J., & Liu, C. (2023). How the Culture in School Counseling Programs Shapes College-Going Outcomes: Do the Effects Vary by Race? *Professional School Counseling*, 27(1a). <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2156759X231153392>
- Shure, L. West-Olatunji, C., & Cholewa, B. (2019). Investigating the Relationship between School Counselor Recommendations and Student Cultural Behavioral Styles. *Journal of Negro Education*, 88(4), 454-466. <https://doi.org/10.7709/jnegroeducation.88.4.0454>
- Vannest, R.J., Grey, L.D., Vannest, J.L., & Smith, J.B. (2023). Systemic Racism and Implicit Bias Influencing US School Counseling. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling*, 45(4), 594-612. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10447-023-09527-y>
- Vela-Gude, L., Cavazos J., Johnson, M.B., Fielding, C., Cavazos, A.G., Campos, L., & Iliana Rodríguez. (April 2009). 'My Counselors Were Never There': Perceptions from Latino College Students. *Professional School Counseling*, 12(4), 272-279. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42732870>
- Bojorquez, H. (2019). *College Bound and Determined*. IDRA. <https://idra.news/CollegeBound>



Advocacy Resources

Change State-level Legislation

Below are key steps for getting state-level legislation in place.

- **See what the current law is in your state about school counseling** (see how on the next page).
- **Meet with your state-level representative and senator offices.** Talk about your story and show them IDRA's model policy. Ask them to introduce or sponsor this legislation.



See steps in our infographic: How to Meet with Your Elected Official (<https://idra.news/HowtoMeetwithYourElectedOfficial>)

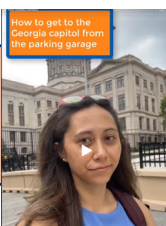
If you can, bring together several people from your community for your meeting with the legislator(s).

If your legislator(s) are interested in proceeding, they can outline for you some strategies for success, including key timelines and probable legislative partners.



Review the **Student Advocacy Guide** put together by Children's Defense Fund – Texas to learn how to tell your and your community's story in support of change.

<https://cdf.texas.org/policy/policy-priorities/education/student-advocacy-guide>



How to get to the Georgia capital from the parking garage

Watch IDRA's TikTok and Instagram accounts for videos with tons of advocacy tips: <https://idra.news/Social> (Also available on our SEEN website: <https://idrasedn.org>)



Testify: Once a bill has been introduced and there is a hearing on it, you can submit testimony. Include data about the problem in your school district to show that yours is not an isolated incident. Find out the procedures for signing up to testify and rules about testimony length. See our bilingual infographics for Georgia and Texas as examples.

- Georgia: <https://idra.news/HowToTestifyGa>
- Texas: <https://idra.news/HowToTestify>



Change School Board Policy

Below are key steps for working with your school board.



See what the current policies are in your school district regarding school counseling. Use IDRA's model policy brief as a frame.

- **Contact your local school board representatives** using School Board Spotlight's search tool: <https://schoolboardspotlight.org/find>
- Use HEAL Together's **Equity Policy Toolkit** to learn how to engage school boards in equitable policy change, including resources on prohibiting bullying, bias incidents, harassment and hate: https://raceforward.org/system/files/2024-02/Equity_Policies_Toolkit_for_School_Boards-2.pdf
- Learn about school board powers and responsibilities using the Education Law Center's **School Board Fact Sheet**: <https://www.elc-pa.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/School-Board-Its-Power-How-to-Advocate-2023.pdf>



Meet with a school board member. Talk about your story and show them IDRA's model policy. Ask them to address this issue and support a policy change.

If member(s) are interested in proceeding, they can outline for you some strategies for success, including key timelines and probable legislative partners.

- Get insight on **how to prepare for and participate in a meeting with a state or local policymaker**: <https://www.idra.org/resource-center/how-to-meet-with-your-elected-official-infographic>



Speak at your school board meeting. Typically, agendas for school board meetings include time for public comments. Be sure to check if there are procedures in place to sign up for a speaking time or if you can simply show up unannounced.

Prepare your remarks in advance and be clear that you are asking for the board to take action to adopt policy for student and family engagement.



See IDRA's 10 Tips for Speaking with Reporters

In the advocacy space, there are many opportunities to chat with the local, state and national media about your movement, topic or subject area you know about. Having news articles, television interviews, and other media opportunities is a great way to broadcast your message and broaden your scope of interested people.

<https://idra.news/ReporterTipsInfographic>



See IDRA's Infographic: How to Get Media Coverage for Advocacy

Media coverage is an integral part of advocacy work. Since most of us are not journalists, pitching to the media and knowing what to say to reporters may feel challenging. Here you can see some tips to get a journalist's attention and reach a wider audience.

<https://idra.news/MediaAdvocacyInfographic>





- **Schools should prepare all students to access and succeed in college** even if some students may ultimately choose not to enroll. When schools do not prepare students, schools are denying students the opportunity to choose college for their future.
- **College degrees open new doors for students in their lives and in their careers.** People with college degrees earn more and have more opportunities than those who do not. Employers are looking for education beyond high school now more than ever.
- **Every child deserves access to a school counselor who can provide them counseling related to their culture and background, and college and career guidance.** But in underfunded school districts, especially those serving historically excluded students, there often are not enough counselors to go around. Fair and equitable funding can change that.
- **School counselors need more support to focus on what matters most: helping students access and succeed in college.** Too often, counselors are overwhelmed, short-staffed and pulled into duties that take them away from students. Counselors need time, tools, and resources to offer meaningful, culturally curated guidance.
- **Many students do not have equal access to college information resources at home or in their community. That is where school counselors come in.** But it is not just about giving information. It is about giving it in a way that honors students' backgrounds and builds real trust.
- **Underrepresented students need school counselors who understand how college admissions processes are changing, especially as equity efforts are being challenged across the country.** Different student groups rely on counselors in different ways, so culturally supportive, personalized and informed support is more important than ever.
- **Too often, underrepresented students are steered away from challenging classes that prepare them for college and careers.** School counselors can help change this by promoting high expectations for all students, reviewing school practices that disproportionately harm certain students' ability to attend college, and advocating for equitable access to rigorous courses that are known to lead to greater college access and success.
- **The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) offers training to help school counselors better support all students in culturally sustaining ways.** States could consider partnering with ASCA or offering similar annual training to strengthen college access and help close enrollment gaps for historically excluded students.

IDRA is an independent, non-profit organization. Our mission is to achieve equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college.

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