What’s COVID-19 Got to Do With It? Implementing the 2020 Connecticut Comprehensive School Counseling Framework

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Abstract
The Connecticut Comprehensive School Counseling Framework was released in November 2020—8 months into the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to explore the progress made by principals and school counselors in implementing the new framework, and to understand the impact of the pandemic on their efforts to do so. We found significant overlap between the perceptions and priorities expressed by participating principals and school counselors. Particularly noteworthy was the fact that both groups described increased collaboration within their schools.

Keywords
principals, school counselors, comprehensive school counseling, COVID-19, social capital

The Connecticut Comprehensive School Counseling Framework (CCSCF) is intended to provide school counselors in the state with the foundation for supporting, monitoring, and assessing students’ academic, social/emotional, and career development within P–12 settings (Connecticut State Department of Education [CSDE], 2020). Research has shown that collaborative relationships between school counselors and principals also contribute to students’ development (Boyland et al., 2019; DeSimone & Roberts, 2016).

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic that began in 2020 has exacerbated circumstances for students, increasing challenges for educators (U.S. Department of Education, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2021). Mental health concerns among school-aged youth have grown more acute since the pandemic’s onset (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Although most teachers and principals have completed some preservice coursework in child development, they need ongoing training to feel equipped to respond to students’ social/emotional needs (National Commission on Social, Emotional, & Academic Development [NCSEAD], 2019). School counselors, by contrast, undergo extensive preservice training in consulting with families and mental health providers, identifying risk factors associated with behavioral concerns, and accessing community-based resources for students in crisis (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2015). Too few principals capitalize on school counselors’ expertise (Lowery et al., 2018).

During the August 2019 Connecticut School Administrator and Counselor Leadership Forum led by our team of university faculty members, participating principals and school counselors were asked in job-alike groups to identify both “What is working well, and should continue as is?” and “What is not yet happening, but should be?” regarding each of the three domains of the then drafted but unreleased CCSCF (CSDE, 2020). Although overlap was found across groups in all three domains, differences also existed. We launched the current investigation in response to data gathered at that August 2019 forum.

Literature Review
The pandemic has impacted school-aged children emotionally, socially, and academically (Branje & Morris, 2021). In a national survey of youth aged 13–19 following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, participants reported less time spent on academics, increased levels of worry, decreased well-being, and loss of connection to teachers and peers (Margolius et al., 2020). Principals must take this opportunity to reflect on their utilization of school counselors, and on the advantages of principal–school counselor relationships in supporting P–12 students.

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Professional literature examines the impact of the principal—school counselor relationship on perceptions about and adherence to best practices recommended by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) and the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2019a; DeSimone & Roberts, 2016). When school counselors adhere to the best practices of their profession, they more effectively meet the needs of students. In contrast, when school counselors are assigned noncounseling tasks, they are forced to neglect professional activities linked to student success (Lowery et al., 2018). Recent studies explore the importance of principal training in the appropriate utilization of school counselors as a means of enhancing the P–12 school environment (Boyland et al., 2019; Lowery et al., 2018). These studies advocate further exploration into how collaborative relationships between principals and school counselors advance support for students, including those who have particular risk for underachievement.

Students and Barriers to Learning

The widespread disparity between educational outcomes in high-poverty and more affluent districts existed across our nation before COVID-19 (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Students living in high-poverty settings are more likely to have experienced more negative health outcomes as a result of the pandemic, including delays in health care, increases in social isolation, and lower rates of vaccination (McMorrow et al., 2020; White et al., 2021). Moreover, Black and brown students remain more likely to be affected by disparities in educational opportunities (Ladson-Billings, 2021). To address inequities in public schools, principals and school counselors must actively promote equitable practices within their buildings (Boyland et al., 2019; Grissom et al., 2021). This is challenging when schools serving the poorest students tend to have access to the fewest resources. Equitable schools require resources with which to retain effective education professionals, ensure appropriate staff-to-student ratios, and provide services to support students’ physical and mental health (NCSEAD, 2018).

Recognizing the unique educational needs of students experiencing poverty is critical. Students from low-income backgrounds have increased exposure to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), lower literacy rates, limited access to advanced-level courses, and lower rates of college access (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Lavalle, 2018). Strong principal–school counselor partnerships can support the unique needs in high-poverty schools. In fact, principals’ relationships with school faculty—particularly with school counselors—are theorized to contribute to social capital within school settings and build networks that provide resources to support students (Bourdieu, 1986; Boyland et al., 2019).

School Counselors as Partners in Student Success

Student achievement is a shared goal among educators; recognizing barriers to student achievement and working within a multitiered system of supports (MTSS) approach—that is, making data-informed decisions about integrating academic and behavioral interventions—are hallmarks of a school counselor’s training (ASCA, 2019a; Goodman-Scott et al., 2020). Through collaborative efforts, school counselors work with principals to ensure equity and positively impact student learning; both benefit from learning more about each other’s roles and responsibilities (DeSimone & Roberts, 2016; Lowery et al., 2018).

Since 2003, ASCA has provided the profession with a framework for designing, implementing, and evaluating comprehensive programs focused on the academic, social/emotional, and career development of P–12 students. The ASCA National Model places emphasis on preventative and responsive services to support each student’s success, with accountability measures central to understanding effectiveness of interventions (ASCA, 2019a). Within the model, the ASCA School Counselor Professional Standards and Competencies (ASCA, 2019b) reinforce collaboration with stakeholders, including administrators, to increase student achievement (i.e., M.5, B-SS.6, B-PA.7), and address commitment to relevant professional development (i.e., B-PF.4). Researchers emphasize the importance of school counselors having opportunities to reinforce their knowledge and remain current in the profession (Griffen & Hallett, 2017; Savitz-Romer, 2019).

A number of the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL; National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015) likewise highlight the importance of collaboration to support student success (i.e., 1.e., 2.b, 8.e., 10.h.). The alignment of the principal and school counseling professional standards extends the rationale for a joint commitment to pursue effective partnerships for the benefit of all students (Geiger & Oehrtman, 2020; Hines et al., 2020). From their synthesis of 2 decades’ worth of research on how principals positively impact students and schools, Grissom et al. (2021) identified as crucial the collaboration in which principals engage with faculty members. These authors emphasized the importance of principals’ strategic management of personnel (i.e., their careful selection and purposeful deployment of professionals to meet students’ needs; Grissom et al., 2021). This latter finding is consistent with recommendations that principals optimize school counselors’ time to work directly with students by ridding them of noncounseling tasks (Boyland et al., 2019; Geesa et al., 2019).

The Connecticut Comprehensive School Counseling Framework

The CSDE and the Connecticut School Counselor Association (CSCA) worked in concert to develop the 2020 CCSCF (CSDE, 2020) and to secure its approval by the Connecticut State Board of Education. The CCSCF aligns with the ASCA National Model and remains focused on three developmental domains of all students (i.e., academic, career, and social/emotional). Notable differences in the CCSCF include an expansion of the four...
components of the ASCA National Model to more action-oriented procedures clearly denoting the work of school counselors (i.e., define; build, implement, monitor; deliver; assess, act, announce) and emphasizing six overarching themes (i.e., leadership, equity, advocacy, collaboration, accountability, and systemic change; CSDE, 2020). Collaboration is explicitly defined as:

Building healthy and ethical internal and external relationships to support students and create a safe school environment that promotes the vision and mission of the CCSCF, student success, and advocacy. All involved parties work together to successfully design systems that are intentional and reflective in nature, and to develop a culture of learning and understanding. (CSDE, 2020)

Given increased mental health needs among youth and the rollout of the 2020 CCSCF during the pandemic, we sought to answer the following research questions: What have principals and school counselors done, or planned to do, to alter counseling programs in response to the release of the 2020 CCSCF? How have partnerships between principals and school counselors changed in response to the new CCSCF and/or the COVID-19 pandemic?

**Methods**

We utilized a mixed-methods study to answer our research questions and applied purposive sampling, selecting specific members of the population to participate in the study surveys.

**Participants and Data Collection**

School counselors and principals working in Connecticut schools were invited to participate in this concurrent, mixed-methods study. The link to our self-designed survey was emailed to 722 individuals: 542 professional members of the state’s association for school counselors and 180 principals who had recently supervised school leadership interns. We sent reminders to all recipients 2 weeks after the initial invitation. We sent a separate email to the 150 attendees of the August 2019 Connecticut School Administrator and Counselor Leadership Forum, all of whom were included on the first two distribution lists.

While 124 individuals consented to participate in the investigation, the N of 68 represents those who completed all selected-response items on the survey. Of these 68 participants, 41 (60.3%) were school counselors, 16 (23.5%) were principals, and 11 (16.2%) were identified as “other educators” (e.g., preservice principals, teachers). Eleven of the 68 (16%) had attended the August 2019 forum. Of these, eight (72.7%) were school counselors, two (18.2%) were principals, and one (9.1%) was a department head.

**Measures**

This investigation employed an equal-status concurrent design, with newly collected quantitative and qualitative data bearing equal weight, while also including elements of sequential design, with the quantitative items included in the survey based directly upon qualitative data that had been collected previously (Johnson & Christenson, 2017).

The terminology used in the instrument’s selected-response items was drawn verbatim from answers that school counselors and principals had provided when completing an open-ended questionnaire in role-alike groups at the August 2019 forum. We designed the survey’s open-response items to solicit qualitative information about participants’ experiences implementing the CCSCF while helping their schools navigate COVID-19.

Following a series of questions in which participants were asked to identify their current roles, the names of their schools and districts, the grades served by their schools, and the levels of urbanicity of the communities served by their schools, the main portion of the survey asked participants about their current priorities and perceptions regarding school counseling activities. Participants were asked to indicate where their school stands regarding 33 specific tasks that had been mentioned by attendees at the August 2019 forum. We conducted a reliability analysis to determine the internal consistency of these survey items pertaining to the three domains. All participant responses were included in the analysis. The analyses for academic development, social/emotional development, and career development indicated Cronbach’s alphas of 0.76, 0.71, and 0.96, respectively, which satisfied the conventionally acceptable Cronbach’s alpha threshold of 0.65–0.80 for social science research (Vaske et al., 2017).

Next, participants were asked to indicate which of eight specific action steps they had taken or planned to take to alter their school’s school counseling program in response to the 2020 CCSCF. They also had the option of listing any additional steps they had taken. The survey concluded with three open-response items, asking participants to describe whether/in what way(s) their work with their principal/school counselor had changed as a result of the new framework, to describe whether/in what way(s) their work with their principal/school counselor had changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and to identify in which area(s) they wished to receive professional development. Both selected- and open-response items were included on the survey for purposes of complementarity; that is, to seek “elaboration…. illustration, [and] clarification of the results from one method with the results from the other” (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017, p. 110).

**Data Analysis**

After quantitative data from the aggregated survey results were cleaned and coded, we conducted statistical analyses using Jamovi software. Overall, the quantitative data analysis in this
study was explorative, using descriptive and inferential statistics.

For each of the survey items relating to the three development domains, participants were asked to rate specific tasks on a 4-point Likert-type scale (1 = Not a priority; 2 = A priority, but not yet happening; 3 = A priority on which we are working; 4 = A priority achieved). The fourth selected-response item asked participants to identify which (if any) framework-specific actions they had taken in response to the publication of the CCSCF. Descriptive statistics were calculated, including frequency and percentage distributions, for all four items.

To compare the responses provided by principals, school counselors, and other educators, we used inferential statistics. The independent variable, measured at the three-level categorical level, was the participant’s position. The dependent variable, measured at the categorical level, was participants’ responses. Because of the study’s low sample size, and because a normal distribution was not assumed, we used the nonparametric Kruskal-Wallis H test.

Qualitative data gathered through written responses to open-ended questions were disaggregated by participant position, as well as by school/district, to determine whether participants working in the same jurisdictions expressed similar priorities and perceptions. Members of the research team worked first individually then collectively to read participants’ responses to open-ended items, generate codes based on those responses, study the codes for emerging patterns, and identify illustrative examples of those patterns (Lareau, 2021).

Reflexivity Statement

We, as researchers, previously served as school counselors at the P–12 level. Now, two researchers teach in our university’s school counselor preparation program and two researchers teach preschool principals. As a result of our former professional roles and our current work at the university level, we have long promoted comprehensive school counseling programs, including by advocating for more deliberate working relationships between principals and school counselors.

Results

The first objective of this mixed-methods study was to learn what participating principals and school counselors have done or plan to do to alter their school counseling programs in response to the release of the 2020 CCSCF, particularly considering the responses from the August 2019 forum attendees. Our quantitative results attend to this objective. The second objective of this study was to learn in what ways the partnerships between participating principals and school counselors have changed due to the 2020 CCSCF and/or the pandemic. Our qualitative findings address this objective.

Quantitative Results

The first three selected-response items—each of which focused on one of the school counseling domains—asked participants to rate numerous domain-specific tasks on a 4-point Likert-type scale. The initial analysis was not intended to show statistical significance, but rather to describe the basic features of the data in each domain. Table 1 displays how participants responded when asked to indicate where their respective schools were regarding the 33 tasks.

To gauge whether participants responded differently according to their roles, we conducted a Kruskal-Wallis H test for all 33 tasks (eight listed under the academic development domain, 10 under social/emotional development, and 15 under career development). The independent variable, measured at the three-level categorical level, was the participant’s position (principal, school counselor, or other educator). The dependent variable, measured at the categorical level, was the participant’s rating of each task.

For 32 of the 33 enumerated tasks, we found no significant differences between participants’ roles and their responses. The sole exception was for the task, “Time spent for individual and group counseling,” within the social/emotional domain, for which the Kruskal-Wallis H test revealed a statistically significant difference in responses according to the distinct positions held by participants ($\chi^2 = 7.06, p = 0.02$). These results might have been different had individual counseling and group counseling been included separately.

Based on pairwise comparisons, principals (37%) have a significantly higher agreement rate ($p < .05$) than school counselors (20%) and other educators (18%) regarding time spent for individual and group counseling. The effect size was calculated using Omega Squared ($\epsilon^2$) to be 0.105, which corresponds to a medium effect (Field, 2013; Rea & Parker, 1992). Due to space considerations, only statistically significant results are presented (see Tables 2 and 3).

The fourth selected-response item asked participants to indicate which of eight listed action steps they had taken or planned to take to implement the 2020 CCSCF. As with the earlier three items, we found no statistically significant difference between the responses of school counselors, principals, and other educators. However, this item yielded a notable result. Specifically, the 11 participants who had attended the August 2019 forum were more likely than the 57 who had not attended the event to have taken, or to have planned to take, steps toward implementing the 2020 CCSCF. A majority of all participants indicated that they had not taken or planned to take the eight action steps. A closer analysis of the minority who responded affirmatively revealed that they were more likely to have attended the August 2019 forum.

Qualitative Results

Participants were afforded four opportunities to provide open-ended answers. The first such item invited participants to identify actions—beyond those listed within the item itself—that they had taken or planned to take in response to the publication of the 2020 CCSCF.
Action steps taken to implement the 2020 CCSCF. Five individuals submitted responses to this item. One principal indicated that their school was now “adequately staffed.” A school counseling director reported having “added outside counseling.” One of the three responding school counselors reported their district as “still working on the shift from Guidance to School Counselor.”

Changes to work between principals and school counselors as a result of the CCSCF. Twenty-six school counselors, 10 administrators, and five others responded to this item. Responses clustered around four themes: incremental changes, specific changes, professional learning, and increased collaboration.

Table 1. Participant Responses Regarding 33 Tasks.

| Domain                                | Topic                                           | Not a priority (%) | Priority, not yet happening (%) | Priority in progress (%) | Priority achieved (%) |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| Academic development                  | Tiered interventions for students               | 2.9                | 8.8                             | 67.6                     | 20.6                  |
|                                       | Appropriate school counselor-student ratios    | 7.4                | 13.2                            | 20.6                     | 58.8                  |
|                                       | Classroom guidance lessons                     | 11.8               | 10.3                            | 42.6                     | 35.3                  |
|                                       | Attendance monitoring                          | 3                  | 13.4                            | 44.80                    | 38.8                  |
|                                       | Study skills instruction                       | 23.9               | 28.4                            | 35.8                     | 11.9                  |
|                                       | Dedicated counselor – transition years         | 57.4               | 8.8                             | 8.8                      | 25.0                  |
|                                       | Services for gifted/talented students          | 54.4               | 25                              | 4.4                      | 16.2                  |
|                                       | Family support/engagement                      | 2.9                | 8.8                             | 67.6                     | 20.6                  |
|                                       | Use of available data                          | 3                  | 10.4                            | 70.1                     | 16.4                  |
|                                       | Professional development for faculty and staff | 0                  | 11.9                            | 64.2                     | 23.9                  |
| Social/ emotional development         | PBIS/tiers of intervention                    | 6.1                | 18.2                            | 63.6                     | 12.1                  |
|                                       | Restorative practices                          | 8.8                | 23.5                            | 57.4                     | 10.3                  |
|                                       | Effective advisory                             | 1.5                | 10.4                            | 52.2                     | 35.8                  |
|                                       | Crisis protocols/response                      | 19.1               | 17.6                            | 57.4                     | 5.9                   |
|                                       | School-wide SEL programming                    | 0.0                | 20.6                            | 60.3                     | 19.1                  |
|                                       | Universal faculty support for SEL              | 13.2               | 30.9                            | 45.6                     | 10.3                  |
|                                       | Effective communication about SEL              | 5.9                | 35.3                            | 45.6                     | 13.2                  |
|                                       | Time for individual and group counseling       | 7.4                | 19.1                            | 50.0                     | 23.5                  |
| College readiness and career development | Partnerships with colleges – early experiences | 31.8               | 6.1                             | 24.2                     | 37.9                  |
|                                       | SAT during the school day                      | 29.4               | 1.5                             | 8.8                      | 60.3                  |
|                                       | On-site admissions                             | 40.3               | 11.9                            | 14.9                     | 32.8                  |
|                                       | College and career center                      | 41.8               | 13.4                            | 17.9                     | 26.9                  |
|                                       | College and career counseling                 | 26.9               | 6.0                             | 32.8                     | 34.3                  |
|                                       | Naviance                                       | 26.9               | 3.0                             | 17.9                     | 52.2                  |
|                                       | Workshops and meetings for families            | 27.9               | 5.9                             | 25.0                     | 41.2                  |
|                                       | College representative visits                  | 32.8               | 6.0                             | 13.4                     | 47.8                  |
|                                       | Technology for communications about college readiness and career development | 30.8 | 12.3 | 21.5 | 35.4 |
|                                       | Elementary-level awareness of college readiness and career development | 48.4 | 20.3 | 21.9 | 9.4 |
|                                       | Info for families with significant financial need | 29.9 | 9.0 | 37.3 | 23.9 |
|                                       | Ongoing professional development for counselors about college readiness and career development | 40.9 | 19.7 | 19.7 | 19.7 |
|                                       | Opportunities for students to intern and job shadow | 42.4 | 6.1 | 30.3 | 21.2 |
|                                       | Universal faculty awareness about college readiness and career development | 40.9 | 18.2 | 36.4 | 4.5 |
|                                       | Info for students not going right to college   | 31.8               | 12.1                            | 37.9                     | 18.2                  |

Table 2. Kruskal-Wallis: Time Spent for Individual and Group Counseling by Position.

| Time spent for individual and group counseling | $\chi^2$ | df | $p$ | $\epsilon^2$ |
|-------------------------------------------------|---------|----|-----|--------------|
| 7.06                                            | 2       | 0.029 | 0.105 |

Table 3. Pairwise Comparisons: Time Spent for Individual and Group Counseling by Position.

| Principal | School counselor | W | p   |
|-----------|------------------|---|-----|
| School counselor | Other | -3.407 | 0.042 |
| Principal | Other            | -3.213 | 0.060 |
| School counselor | Other | -0.795 | 0.840 |
**Incremental changes.** Nine school counselors indicated that their work with principals had not changed as a result of the CCSCF. Two indicated that their principals were unaware of the framework. Two principals indicated that their work with school counselors had not yet changed as a result of the CCSCF. Several participants indicated that they were working with colleagues to unpack the CCSCF, two cited work that they had done to incorporate new standards, and several others indicated that they were undertaking surveys to gauge the alignment of their existing school counseling programs to the needs of their schools.

**Specific changes.** Numerous school counselors and principals responded to this item by citing specific changes or changes in emphasis that they and their counterparts had agreed to make in response to the framework. An acknowledgement of an increase in students’ needs for emotional support was common to many of these responses. Several participants indicated that personnel had been added in their schools and/or that school counselors had certain noncounseling duties removed so that they could be more available to students.

One principal explained that the school counselors’ “role in supporting restorative practice along with administration has… increased.” Similarly, another principal indicated that their work with their school’s counselors had renewed their own “focus on socio-emotional well-being of students instead of just using suspensions and detentions as a solution.”

**Professional learning.** Two principals reported having identified with their school counselors the latter’s need for additional professional learning opportunities, particularly in providing tiered social/emotional supports for students. Two school counselors reported the same information, with another explaining that they and their fellow school counselors were given the chance to learn “the new framework together during our collaborative PLC time.”

**Increased collaboration.** Two teachers from the same school reported that, since the release of the 2020 CCSCF, “there has been more time for collaboration with the school counselor.” One school counselor mentioned that they and their principal were now “going out to SRBI (scientific research-based interventions)/MTSS meetings to help with practices.” Another shared having been “charged with creating a departmental advisory council.” A third reported “starting to establish a district-wide school counseling curriculum with Central Office.”

**Changes to work between principals and school counselors as a result of COVID-19.** The third open-ended response question yielded the highest number of responses from study participants; 26 school counselors, 10 principals, and seven others provided responses to this item. Through our analysis, three themes surfaced related to changes between principals and school counselors as a result of COVID-19: prioritizing student social/emotional well-being, engaging students and families, and counselor–administrator interactions.

**Prioritizing student social/emotional well-being.** One teacher lamented that there had been “more acceleration/content-based teaching,” that they had been required to be “less SEL (social/emotional learning) focused,” and that there were “no more restorative practices.” Although others also mentioned a renewed focus on academics, most participants (22) also expressed that students’ social/emotional and mental well-being were still being prioritized.

One school counselor explained, “We have seen a huge increase in mental health concerns.” A principal from that school counselor’s school acknowledged, “Mental health issues seem to be [at] an all-time high, whether pandemic-related or not.” A middle school principal from another district expressed, “Students’ behavior seems to have been greatly impacted by COVID-19. They are having difficulties getting along and the social maturation process seems to have slowed.”

**Engaging students and families.** Several participants shared that a great deal of energy was being expended on the part of school counselors and principals to support student attendance and engagement. One principal explained, “School counselors are working hard to get anxious students to attend school on a regular basis as well as supporting their families.” A department head wrote of a “larger focus on bringing students back to the school and engaging those that are unengaged with school.”

One school counselor explained that they were now completing more home visits. Another wrote that they were making “many more calls to parents/guardians,” and had been given “a separate phone number [to] text with families for added connections.”

**Principal–school counselor interactions.** Specifically, regarding how the work between principals and school counselors changed due to the pandemic, one school counselor shared, “It has recently improved to be a more team-centered approach.” One school counselor described now being “part of the district student success team.” A second shared, “Our administrator has let me take on a new role as the SEL coordinator.” Another mentioned that, now, “One of the main roles of the school counselor is to provide Tier 1 interventions, classroom lessons on SEL needs, and provide individual/small group counseling on SEL strategies.” Still another described an increase in consultations with teachers, writing of “many more conversations about SEL and attempts to provide support for students.”

A teacher described that her school’s counselor “regularly make[s] rounds throughout the building [checking] in on students she sees both formally and informally.” One principal reported that their school counselor was now an “active member of behavior intervention meetings.” Another explained that the “counselor’s job has become more protected/valued.” One school counselor described how the “increase in mental health needs” among students had allowed for “more collaboration with administrators.” Another wrote that school counselors and
principals now “work very collaboratively in addressing the needs of the students.” A third cited leaders’ “increased respect for the school counseling profession.”

**Areas in which additional professional learning is desired.** The final open-ended question resulted in responses from 23 school counselors, nine principals, and six others. Responses clustered around specific topics for professional learning and optimizing school counseling programs.

Specific topics for professional learning. Participants listed several areas in which they had already begun to receive professional development. One principal wrote, “We are working with an ASCA mentor for the next year to support our counseling department.” Another shared, “We are now… focusing on MTSS as a school.”

Tiered social and emotional supports emerged repeatedly in responses from school counselors, principals, teachers, and a director of school counseling. One responding teacher expressed a desire to learn how they could “better support my students who receive counseling.” Participants in all roles cited student anxiety as a topic they wished to learn more about.

Three school counselors indicated that they wished to become better versed in issues of sexuality and gender identity. Several participants cited trauma as an area they wished to learn more about. Three other participants expressed a desire to learn more about restorative practices. Another three participants wrote of wanting to become more effective at supporting English learners and their families. Several participants indicated a desire to learn more about effective school advisory programs.

Optimizing school counseling programs. Several school counselors expressed a desire for guidance in implementing the framework. Numerous other participants wrote of the benefit that they, teachers, and principals would all derive from being afforded opportunities to learn about the framework. Several participants wrote specifically of how studying the framework would lead to greater role clarity and better working relationships between school counselors, principals, and other educators.

**Discussion**

Participants’ coalescence around 32 of 33 domain-specific tasks suggests more similarities than differences in the way these educator groups view comprehensive school counseling programs. This finding aligns with and supports previous studies highlighting the importance of principal training in the appropriate utilization of school counselors as a means of enhancing the P–12 school environment (Boyland et al., 2019; Lowery et al., 2018), and represents a shift over time in administrator perceptions of school counseling activities versus noncounseling activities (DeSimone & Roberts, 2016; Lowery et al., 2018).

Only 11 of the 150 August 2019 forum attendees participated in the current study. Having expected a much greater response rate than materialized from attendees of the 2019 forum, we failed to anticipate how participants who had not been present at that event might interpret certain selected-response items differently than forum attendees had when expressing the views on which the items were based. Nevertheless, the cross-role agreement that we found in our analyses of the quantitative data was likewise present in our qualitative data. Participants’ answers did not vary appreciably by role in the three entirely open-response items.

Although not based on roles, we did identify one discrepancy between participants who had attended the August 2019 forum and those who had not: Participants who attended the forum were more likely than participants who did not attend to report having taken steps to implement the 2020 CCSCF. Even though the CCSCF was still in draft form at that time, forum participants had exposure to the CCSCF and were given opportunities to discuss it. This finding reinforces the vital role that engaging in ongoing professional development plays for school counselors (ASCA, 2019a).

Unsurprisingly, given the trend of heightened social/emotional and behavioral concerns among children and adolescents nationwide (U.S. Department of Education, 2021), our participants—irrespective of role—expressed widespread concern about students’ mental health. With very few exceptions, participants reported that principals had developed a greater appreciation of the work that school counselors ought to be doing (ASCA, 2019a; CSDE, 2020), and were increasingly relieving school counselors of noncounseling duties so that they could do the work for which they had prepared (CACREP, 2015; DeSimone & Roberts, 2016; Lowery et al., 2018).

Numerous school counselors described how they have been invited by school or district administrators to participate in or lead student support initiatives. Likewise, many participants described increased consultation between school counselors, teachers, and principals. Multiple principals described having been influenced—notably, in matters of student discipline—by their schools’ counselors. These developments reflect the expectation that school counselors “participate in the school improvement process to bring the school counseling perspective to the development of school goals” (ASCA, 2019a, p. 10).

Our findings reveal that participating principals and school counselors have lately been required to work much more closely together, and have deepened their professional relationships with one another. As Boyland et al. (2019) might put it, they have increased their *micro-level social capital*. Connected to earlier research (e.g., Geiger & Oehrtman, 2020; Hines et al., 2020), students are likely to be the beneficiaries of such increased joint efforts to support their academic, career, and social/emotional development.

No less important, the school counselors and principals in this study have almost certainly enhanced what Boyland et al. (2019) term *macro-level social capital*: the knowledge and understanding that educators possess about the families and communities they
serve. Bourdieu’s (1986) much earlier characterization of social capital as a person’s access to institutional resources or contextual understanding echoes this description. Both definitions underscore the imperative that preservice school counselors and principals be trained to “pool their collective resources through teamwork” (Boyland et al., 2019, p. 192). By working in concert, principals and school counselors magnify their impacts on students, families, and school communities.

Implications

Our findings highlight the need for principals and school counselors to advocate for the resources necessary for comprehensive school counseling programs. They demonstrate that principals must relieve school counselors of noncounseling duties (ASCA, 2019a; Geesa et al., 2019). School counselors’ roles within their schools are often ambiguous, in large part because they are regularly observed completing such clerical tasks as record keeping, or serving in such quasi-administrative roles as test coordinator, at the behest of principals (Chandler et al., 2018; Geesa et al., 2019; Savitz-Romer, 2019).

Our findings underscore the need for school administrators and other educators to be made aware not only of appropriate responsibilities for school counselors, but also of the expertise that they possess (ASCA, 2019a; Chandler et al., 2018). Participants who attended the August 2019 forum were far more likely to have taken steps to implement the 2020 CCSCF than those who did not attend the forum, which illustrates the importance of such targeted professional development (Dahir & Stone, 2012; Geesa et al., 2019).

Our findings reinforce the need for schools and districts to prioritize ongoing professional development for school counselors. Despite increasing complexities associated with supporting students’ academic, social/emotional, and career development, school counselors are often overlooked when district professional development plans are being made. Consequently, school counselors’ opportunities to expand their knowledge are limited, unless they seek professional development from outside their districts (Griffin & Hallett, 2017; Savitz-Romer, 2019).

Finally, our findings underscore the importance and impact of effective partnerships between principals and school counselors (Geiger & Oehrtman, 2020; Hines et al., 2020). Our findings also reinforce the imperative that those who prepare principals and school counselors both champion and model effective collaboration (Boyland et al., 2019; Lowery et al., 2018).

Recommendations for Future Research

Given the release of the 2020 CCSCF during the COVID-19 pandemic, schools’ implementation of the framework and its impact on schools’ support for students remain topics that require robust investigation. The pandemic provided principals and school counselors opportunities to work together to help their schools navigate the pandemic, and studying the degree to which those partnerships continue if/when the public health crisis ends will be crucial.

Limitations

One limitation of this investigation was our sample size of only 68 participants. Invitations for study participation were sent in fall 2021, when educators were stretched to capacity helping their schools navigate the pandemic. The relatively small sample size for quantitative analysis is more than offset, however, by the richness of participants’ qualitative responses.

Individual participants were not asked to identify their gender, race/ethnicity, or years of service. This limited further understanding of whether certain groups were any more likely to have begun implementing the CCSCF or to have altered their collaboration with counterparts. Our focus on a single state may limit the replicability in anticipated results. The context of this study, however, was important in understanding the rollout of Connecticut’s newly updated framework for comprehensive school counseling (CSDE, 2020).

Conclusion

The CCSCF’s (CSDE, 2020) release was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We recognize that this chance occurrence may have mutually benefitted both principals and school counselors. Principals more readily observed increased student mental health and learning concerns, and looked to their schools’ support service professionals in response; school counselors found themselves providing dramatically increased direct counseling services, with less time to complete quasi-administrative tasks. The release of the CCSCF in the midst of the pandemic may have spurred principals to take note of what school counseling programs in their schools should model. School counselors were provided with an updated framework, reinforcing their role and impact on student success when implemented with fidelity.

Despite the disruption that it has wrought, the pandemic has compelled principals and school counselors to join efforts, thereby enhancing both their micro- and macro-level social capital (Boyland et al., 2019). Our findings suggest that professional development is nevertheless necessary for practitioners to become familiar with the 2020 CCSCF and consider the changes needed within their schools’ programs (ASCA, 2019a). While impeding the formal rollout of the 2020 CCSCF, the emergency has nevertheless illuminated for all Connecticut educators—chiefly, principals—the need for comprehensive school counseling programs to foster the success of students.

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