School Counselors' Experiences While Working at Home Through the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to determine how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the experiences of counselors as they transitioned to counseling online. The researchers examined the experiences of 19 counselors in South Texas working with students' grades 4-12. A 3-point scale was used to survey questions posed about their personal being, barriers, and organizational support working from home under protocols of the pandemic. Findings revealed that counselors were stressed working at home during the pandemic.

Keywords: counseling during pandemic; remote counseling; counselor wellbeing

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic produced many challenges within schools and school districts. Anxiety was increased in children during COVID-19 because they were challenged with learning difficulties and adaptation to situations (Çaykus & Mutlu Çaykus, 2020). School closures and changes to remote schooling have hindered counselors' ability to connect and to provide needed support to students. Counselors reported that meeting with students on its own was a challenge, as discrepancies in access to computers and the internet meant that a multitude of students could not connect virtually (Savitz-Romer et al., 2021). Counselors struggled to form meaningful connections due to students being disengaged, which caused a feeling of detachment from support networks within the schools (Savitz-Romer et al., 2021). The ability of school counselors to provide support in a community crisis is documented. COVID-19 represented a community crisis.

It was found the impact of a crisis on the school counselor impacted their ability to support students. Further, Savitz-Romer et al. (2021) noted school counselors sensing emotional fatigue and burnout due to the possibility of non-counseling related responsibilities.

School Counselor Roles, Duties, and Responsibilities

School Counselors have faced many trials in their duties completing their counseling goals, especially during staff shortages brought on by COVID-19 and the ensuing pandemic. Counselors have historically been tasked with additional school duties and assignments which affect their main assignments of providing counseling and outreach to deliver student development and growth (Blake, 2020; Kim & Lambie, 2018; Lambie et al., 2019; Pincus et al., 2020; Randick et al., 2018; Wilder, 2018). One survey of 7,000 counselors revealed that counselors served in a variety of administrative duties that ranged from substitute teaching to student temperature checks. (Savitz-Romer et al., 2021).

The American School Counseling Association (ASCA, 2019) national model provides a data-driven, standards-based framework to guide implementation of a school counseling program which is comprehensive with 80% of the time specifically designed for providing direct school counseling services (Villares et. al., 2022). Comprehensive programming consists of class lessons focused on mental health, group counseling to develop unity, and individual counseling with action plans to promote emotional health (Randick et al., 2018). The COVID – 19 school shutdowns altered the delivery of education to students and forced a reimagining of the delivery of direct services, responsibilities, and roles of the school counselor.

The findings of this study revealed the need for counselors to pursue resiliency and practice self-care more frequently during any crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic as stress and burn out from being unable to conduct school counseling responsibilities and roles were limited to the school model (Litam et al., 2021). As the school counseling profession has historically grappled to concisely delineate roles and responsibilities (DeKruyf et al., 2013), the COVID–19 shut down further spotlighted difficulty in maintaining counselor roles and professional identities (Villares et al., 2022). Ethical Standards of the ASCA (2016) require that school counselors practice wellness and monitor their physical, emotional, and mental health. Additionally, counselors are required to engage in personal growth and professional development throughout their careers (Villares et al., 2022)

Perspective of School Counselors

The educational system was impacted by COVID-19 in several different ways; students suffered academically, socially, and emotionally in addition to the everyday fear that their health might be in jeopardy. Teachers, counselors, and administrators also felt a tremendous amount of stress. School counselors had their share of hardships when it came to counseling students during a pandemic. The pandemic hindered what school counselors were able to assess and intervene by taking the students out of the school setting where their behaviors can easily be observed. Lives were affected and changed by the COVID-19 pandemic. In education, long-term changes are being observed. Like many educators, school counselors were compelled to perform normal counseling activities using online technology in synchronous and asynchronous virtual ways (Akgül & Ergin, 2022). The pandemic period has been a time when counseling with students is critical due to higher than usual levels of stress, isolation, fear, anxiety, lack of social support, etc. Many counselors had to learn how to conduct online counseling with no prior training or experience in how to do so. When it came to online counseling some counselors reported challenges of building trusting relationship with clients, having internet connectivity and technical issues, not having the capacity to observe body language and give empathic responses, and enduring a lack of privacy (Akgül & Ergin, 2022).

School counselors use interactions with students as a way to form a relationship and establish rapport with students. Meeting with students virtually makes forming a close connection extremely hard. Counselors in hybrid or remote environments are not able to touch base with a student informally in the hallway or lunchroom. Identifying kids who need help coping with anxiety and isolation is more difficult. Parents, siblings or family members can listen to virtual counseling sessions, putting confidentiality on the line. Cameras are allowed to be kept off which makes connecting with students more difficult. Building rapport can be difficult even if cameras are one (Klein, 2021). The lack of confidentiality while conducting counseling from home is a major downfall and had many feelings concerned about the ethics online counseling posed. Many counselors had concerns relating to the increased challenges regarding confidentiality, communication at the personal level via text or video, effective use of a variety of online platforms (O'Connor, 2022).

Another issue was safety. A student, who is being abused, neglected, or in an unsafe environment, can report the information to a counselor over an online platform. There were also major declines in attendance to online sessions due to many different factors, making it harder for counselors and teachers to keep up with their students. Besides the challenges of attendance and online learning, there were many other issues that affected students in a negative way. The challenges students faced with online learning appeared shallow compared to issues students were facing outside of school: familial responsibilities, health, and financial difficulties (Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2021).

School counselors are also involved with students who have disabilities, and those students require specialized instruction. Unfortunately, online learning was not able to adapt to the needs of many of these students. The Government Accountability Office reported in fall 2020, school districts they surveyed encountered various instructional factors that made it more difficult to service special education students via distance learning. (Department of Education – Office for Civil Rights, 2021). The hardships and challenges were heightened by the pandemic and affected students, teachers, and school counselors. Dealing with health issues, death, grief, and loss was another component that resulted from the deadly virus COVID-19.

Post-COVID measures will require school counselors to identify behavioral issues possibly caused by circumstances surrounding response to COVID-19. They will be called on to work with parents, teachers, and administrators (Pincus et al., 2020). Expected is that mental health disorders and behavioral issues will arise during the post-COVID-19 era. All school officials will have to work together to bring back the positive school environment for students to feel safe at school again. A positive school climate is built through trusted relationships among school counselors, administrations, students, and staff. Trust builds a sense of belonging in youth and child. A sense of belonging with social settings yields academic achievement and emotional resilience (Lapan et al., 2014).

Responsive school counseling programs in integrated school environments positively influence protective outcomes among youth. Attendance, at-risk youth outcomes, academic achievement, assessment scores all improve. Safety and security is paramount when dealing with violence, crises, student difficulties, and trauma. Lessons to increase empathy and awareness provided by school counselors improve the climate within a school and reduce negative experiences among students (Pincus et al., 2020). Schools will need to prepare and devise interventions to help students with academic regression, emotional and social development, and mental health disorders resulting from the pandemic.

During the COVID 19 pandemic school counselors found little to no direction when requested to step in and perform non-counseling tasks that included coordinating technology, substitute teaching, and a variety of other duties. At this critical time when students needed them the most, school counselors were burdened with constraints that inhibited their ability to guide their students (Savitz-Romer et al., 2021).

Methodology

Population and Sample

The population targeted for this study included school counselors working across South Texas, U.S. within 13 counties. South Texas is a unique and diverse area. South Texas's social vulnerability is high compared to the Texas state average of 43 of 100. Social vulnerability is an indexed measure of 29 indicators of community resilience to hazards (University of South Carolina, n.d.). South Texas includes Nueces County where the social vulnerability index is 59 and Brooks County where the social vulnerability index is 83 of 100 (Federal Emergency Management Administration [FEMA], 2021). South Texas ranks nationally as medium to very high in terms of social vulnerability (University of South Carolina, n.d.)

All counselors in Texas Education Agency Region 2 were included in the sample surveyed. Region 2 is comprised mostly (67%) of students who are disadvantaged economically. Students represent mostly Hispanic (75%), some White (20%) and a small minority of African American (2%) students. Eleven percent of students in Region 2 were special education designated. Two percent of school-aged students drop out (Texas Education Agency, 2020).

Instrument and Data Collection

SurveyMonkey was used to administer a questionnaire which measured school counselor experiences during the initial 2020-2021 year of the COVID-19 pandemic. At this time, counselors were compelled to use remote applications for their work. Domains of individual preparedness,

personal wellbeing, cultural differences, individual preparedness, communications, technical difficulties, and administrative support were measured by the 30-item questionnaire. Items in a national databank of questions about working during a crisis (TNTP, 2021) served as the basis for the questionnaire. Items were adapted to fit the COVID-19 situation.

A 3-point ordinal scale was used to keep response to items simple during an intense time for school counselors. Questions asked were assessed by two regional school counselors for face validity. Approval from district level school leadership as well as Institutional Review Board approval was sought and received. Grades counseled and year of birth were collected and reported. Year of birth was used to determine age.

Results

Nineteen school counselors voluntarily participated in the survey and answered most questions. All counselors reported counseling at least two grade levels. Between 32% and 42% of school counselors reported counseling at the 4th through 8th grades. Between 47% and 53% of school counselors reported counseling at the 9th through 12th grade levels. Figure 1 displays number of grades counseled. Figure 2 presents percentages of counselors represented in the survey by age. Most counselors were between the ages of 36 and 50. One-third of them were over 50 years of age.

Figure 1
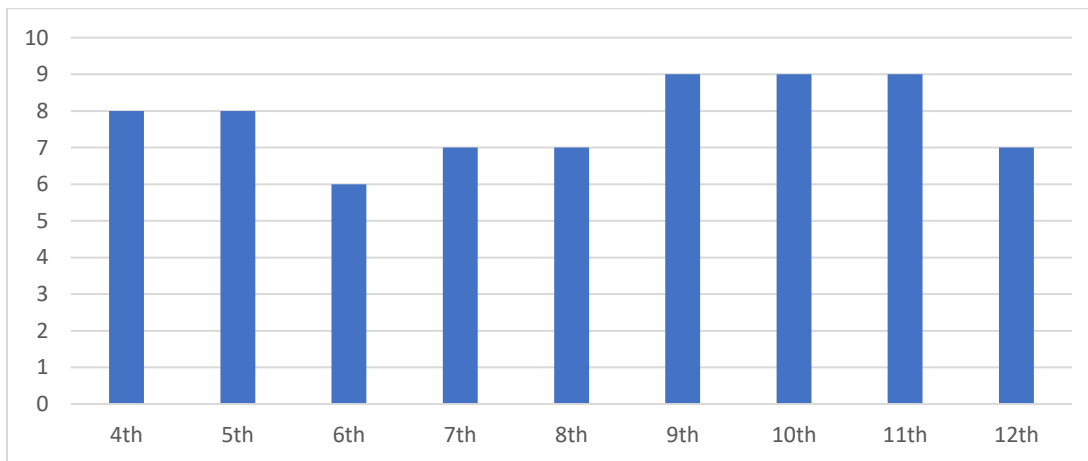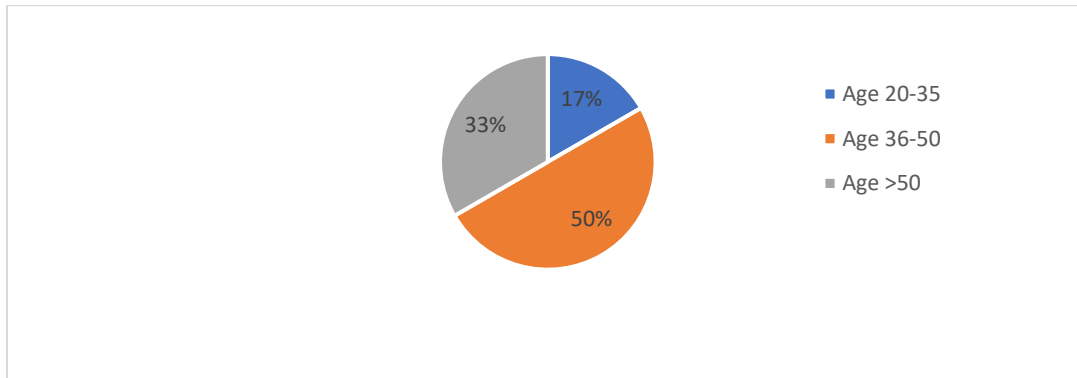
Number of Grades Counseled

Figure 2

Respondent Age Percentage Distribution

The following sections present results for counselor well-being, barriers they faced, organizational support, and needs for the future. Descriptive statistics and Spearman *rho* correlations are presented as bivariate measures of association.

Well-Being

Compared to January 2020, (74%) counselors felt good about themselves most of the time. Nearly one-quarter (24%) of school counselors did not feel good about themselves during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021 as can be noted in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Percentage Distribution of Question "Compared to January 2020, I Feel Good About Myself."
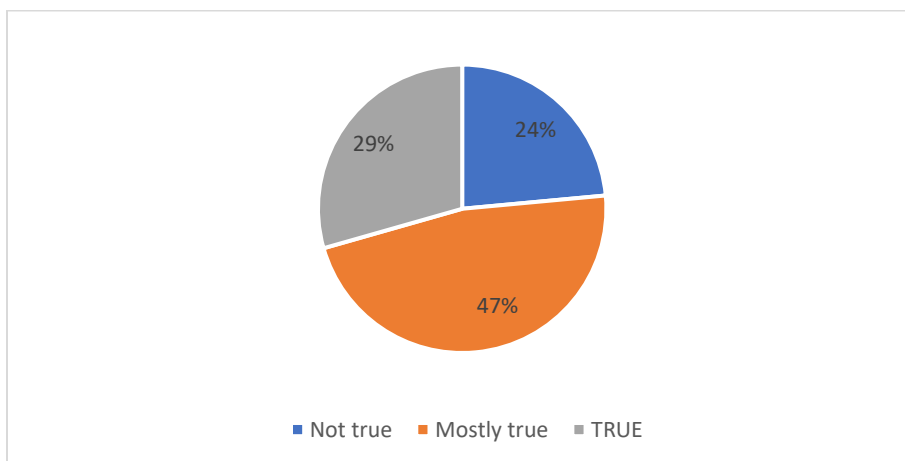

Figure 4 presents measures of counselor well-being while working from home during the pandemic. Time to interact socially became worse for 82% of counselors who responded to the survey. Stress and frustration were very strongly associated ($r_s = .99$) and became worse according

to 78% of counselors. Though eating habits became worse for 42% of counselors, exercise habits improved for about the same percentage of counselors. The financial status of counselors stayed the same for most (65%) counselors but worsened for one-third (33%) of counselors. Some (6%) counselors' financial status improved during the pandemic.

Figure 4

*Counselor Well-Being Question Item Distributions*
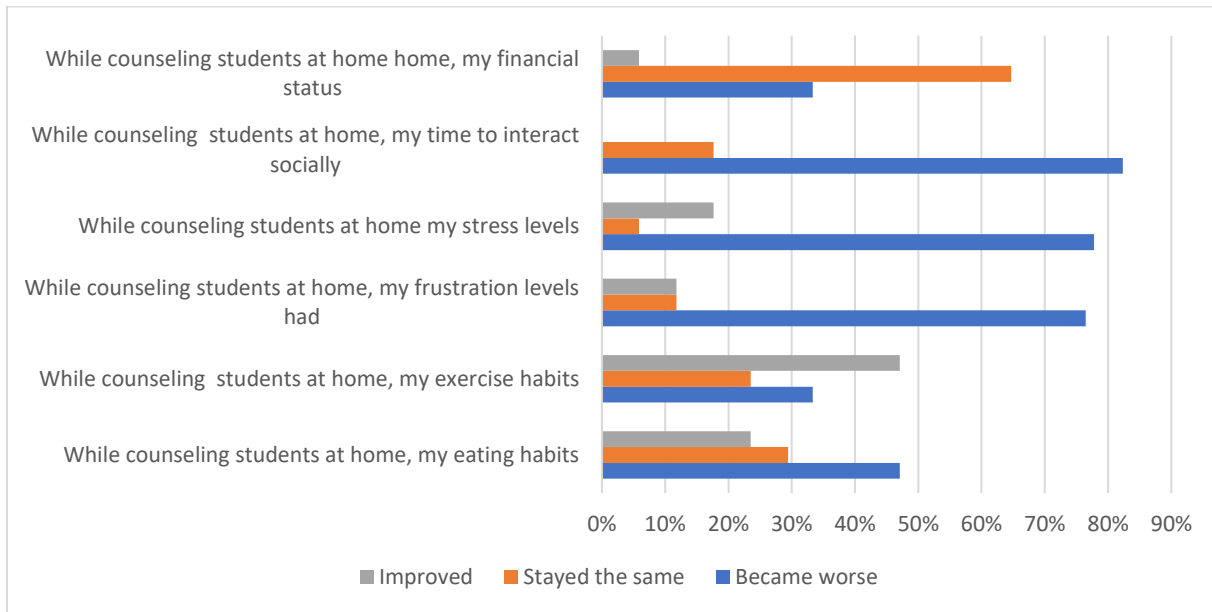
Barriers

Several barriers were experienced by counselors working at home during the pandemic as illustrated by Figure 5. The biggest barrier was a lack of assuredness about how to best adapt student materials for a virtual environment. Lack of assuredness was reported as true or mostly true by 64% of counselors. Not having quiet space to complete work was reported by 58% of counselors working from home. Good internet connectivity was a barrier for 37% of counselors and not having a good computer or tablet was reported by approximately one-third (32%) of counselors.

Figure 5

Perceived Barriers in Remote Counseling Percentage Distribution
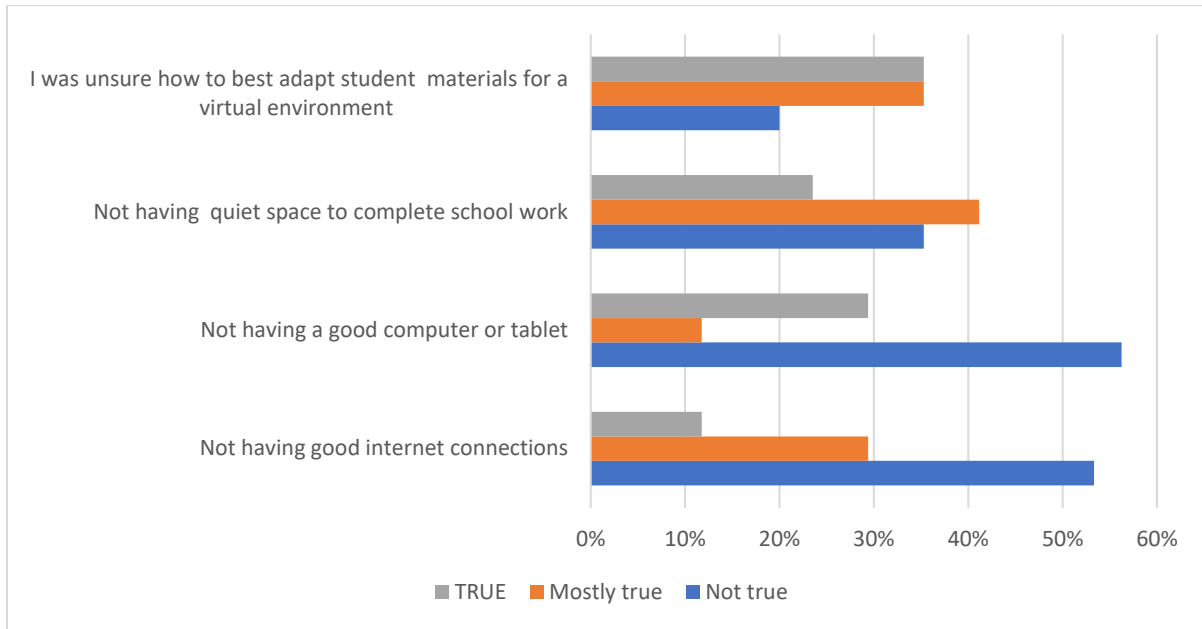

Organizational Support

Though all counselor respondents knew who to get in touch with for support, had regular contact with their supervisor (94%), and continued to work as a team (89%) during the pandemic; counselors received less positive feedback (76%) and felt disconnected (78%) from their school communities. Figure 6 presents organizational support indicators.

Figure 6

Organizational Support Indicators for Counselors
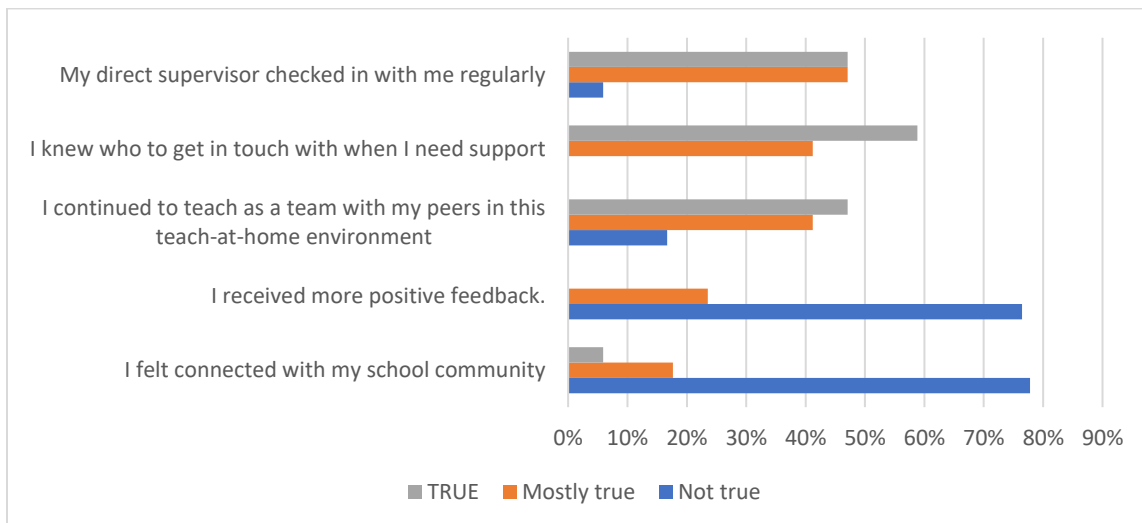
Though administrators checked in regularly with counselors (See Figure 6), counselors talking with administrators at least once a week was positively and largely associated with assuredness about how to best adapt student materials ($r_s = .57$). Lack of assuredness was largely and positively associated with a negative change in financial status among counselors ($r_s = .53$).

Preparing Counselors for the Future

No responding counselor felt truly prepared for the next upcoming school year working at home during the pandemic. Forty-two percent (42%) of counselors felt truly unprepared. Four variables were strongly associated with preparedness: financial status ($r_s = .68$), parental support for virtual counseling ($r_s = .59$), continued team teaching with peers ($r_s = .55$), and feeling good compared to January 2020 ($r_s = .53$).

Discussion

The focus of the survey was to determine how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the experiences of counselors as they moved to counseling online during the COVID-19 pandemic. The fact that almost a quarter of respondents felt less good about themselves compared to January 2020 is concerning. The fact that 74% of counselors felt mostly or entirely good about themselves, may have resulted from fewer alternate and competing school duties assigned to them during the pandemic unlike before COVID-19 (Blake, 2020; Kim & Lambie, 2018; Lambie et al., 2019; Pincus et al., 2020; Randick et al., 2018; Wilder, 2018). Their relative stable financial condition compared to people who lost employment and income during the pandemic may have further contributed to their feelings.

The increased stress and frustration levels experienced while interacting with students did not make school counselors' jobs easier. Adapting student material to a virtual environment and a lack of quiet space to work hindered interactions with students more than technical constraints such as internet connectivity and hardware limitations. These findings align with findings by Savitz-Romer et al. (2021).

Administrative support, as evidenced by minimally weekly contact between counselors and administration, appeared helpful in adapting course materials as did knowledge about administrative support services. These communications did not enhance positive feedback or connectedness with the school community among counselors. The communications in conjunction with concerns about student privacy and safety as reported by O'Connor (2022), could explain the increased stress and feelings of frustration among counselors working during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Personal wellbeing of counselors was impacted by the pandemic conditions. A parallel study among teachers in the same region and over the same time period also indicated higher stress and frustration levels, greater social isolation and poor eating habits. While teachers reported deteriorated exercise patterns (Garza et al., 2022), counselors reported the opposite.

There were many reported changes and concerns in this study. There was a lack of positive feedback in this new counseling environment. It is not surprising that respondents felt uncertain about the upcoming school year, especially those experiencing financial hardship and lacking parental support for virtual counseling.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the results of the current study, counselors were stressed working at home during the pandemic. Stress was brought on by not having a quiet place to work, lack of assuredness about how to adapt materials for the virtual work environment, social isolation, diminished financial status, and absence of positive feedback and focused conversations with their supervisors. Stress resulted in worsened eating habits but better exercise habits. Counselors felt better prepared for the upcoming school year if their financial status was certain, their work team strong, and parents were supportive of their virtual work. The following recommended practices are strongly encouraged to support counselors during crises based on the findings of the present study.

- Have regular focused talks with administrators (and not just check-ins) about how to adapt materials, and what to do.
- Provide positive feedback from administrators and parents to counselors for the work they do.
- Ensure and reassured financial stability for work.
- Offer an eating habits wellness program.
- Create opportunities for social interaction generally and connection to the school community specifically.

Future research recommendations are offered based on the results of the present study.

- A qualitative study to hear the voices of the counselors to determine themes that would provide beneficial feedback.
- A comparison of urban and rural counselors to understand if differences exist between them.
- An expansion of the present study to a wider geographical area.

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