

# School Counselor Burnout: A Narrative Review of the Literature

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**Abstract—** This narrative literature review examines the multifaceted nature of burnout among school counselors, a prevalent concern significantly impacting counselor well-being and student support. The review synthesized research from 2005-2024 on the causes, consequences, and potential interventions for burnout. Key findings reveal that excessive workloads, ambiguous roles, and inadequate administrative support are significant contributors to burnout. The effectiveness of self-care and hope-building interventions is also explored. The review concludes that addressing school counselor burnout necessitates a comprehensive strategy encompassing individual coping mechanisms, organizational support, and systemic reforms to prioritize both counselor well-being and student success and also emphasizing the need for further research like a more holistic approach, including evidence-based strategies and address the unique challenges faced by school counselors.

**Keywords—** school counselor burn out, burn out prevention, burnout intervention, administrative support, and self-care.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The school counseling profession, while deeply rewarding, faces a significant challenge: widespread burnout among its practitioners. A number of researchers (Cherniss, 1980; Edelwich and Brodsky, 1980; Farber, 1983; Maslach, 1982; and Pines, 2011) have indicated that burnout is a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment that typically occurs among individuals who are into long-term involvement with people in situations that are emotionally demanding.

Experiencing burnout significantly impacts counselors' well-being and their ability to effectively support students. Contributing factors include excessive workloads and caseloads exceeding recommended ratios (Mullen et al., 2021; Bardhoshi et al., 2021), coupled with extensive non-counseling duties, ambiguous roles and responsibilities (Mullen et al., 2023; Bardhoshi et al., 2014), and inadequate administrative support (Fannon, 2021). The rising mental health needs of students in the post-COVID era (Alexander et al., 2022) further exacerbate these challenges, particularly given the growing concern of youth suicide rates (CDC, 2020-2021). This narrative literature review examines the multifaceted nature of school counselor burnout, exploring the interplay of individual, organizational, and systemic factors, and assessing the effectiveness of existing interventions to improve counselor well-being and student support.

## II. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a narrative review methodology to examine existing literature on the causes, consequences, and interventions related to school counselor burnout. This approach offers a comprehensive overview of the

topic by summarizing and synthesizing existing research without the rigid constraints of systematic review protocols (Rammal, 2023; Skelly et al., 2019). A literature search was conducted utilizing the following keywords: ("counselors burnout" OR "burnout" OR "school counselor burnout" OR "burnout prevention" OR "counselor self-care" OR "self-care") AND ("counselors' role" OR "school counselors" OR "counselors' well-being" OR "well-being" OR "school counseling" OR "school burnout" OR "causes of burnout" OR "coping strategies" OR "burnout prevention"). These articles were analyzed and synthesized to present the findings related to school counselor's burnout as well as its causes, consequences and interventions. For the inclusion criteria, this study focuses on articles related to school counselors burnout that have been peer-reviewed and published within the last 19 years (2005-2024) to ensure the relevance and appropriateness of the findings. Definition of burnout was retrieved from two books and 1980 to 2010. For the exclusion criteria, all articles that are not involved in the topics mentioned above were excluded.

### **III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The extant literature extensively documents school counselor burnout. Research consistently reveals high levels of burnout among school counselors, significantly impacting their self-efficacy and their ability to effectively support students (Niles et al., 2024). Multiple contributing factors exist, including excessive workloads often exceeding recommended student-to-counselor ratios, unclear roles and responsibilities, inadequate administrative support, and systemic issues within the school environment (Fannon et al., 2021). The relationship between years of experience and burnout remains a subject of ongoing debate. While some studies suggest a negative correlation (Wilkerson & Bellini, 2006; Mullen et al., 2018), indicating higher burnout among newer counselors, others report a positive correlation (Butler & Constantine, 2005; Wilkerson, 2009), suggesting burnout increases with years in the profession. This discrepancy may point to the importance of factors like workload, support systems, and self-care strategies influencing the burnout trajectory over time. The existing literature consistently demonstrates a negative effect that unclear roles and responsibilities also have on school counselors, leading to a higher level of burnout (Mullen et al., 2018). Conflicting demands and unclear roles contribute significantly to stress and role conflict (Bardhoshi, Schweinle, & Duncan, 2014). A lack of administrative support further exacerbates burnout (Bardhoshi et al., 2014), with inadequate resources, insufficient staffing, and limited time for counseling being consistently identified as key issues. Individual factors, such as personality traits and coping mechanisms, also affect burnout risk (Wachter, Clemens, & Lewis, 2008). Age and experience are also correlated with burnout levels (Fannon, 2021). Further, while often presented as a solution, the role of self-care and self-compassion must be considered. It's clear from existing literature that self-care alone is insufficient as a preventative measure (Fannon, 2021; Sylvester-Nwosu & Martin, 2020). Low self-efficacy and perfectionistic tendencies can also exacerbate burnout (Wachter et al., 2008). Demographic factors such as age, experience, and ethnicity also play a complex role. While burnout presents a major concern for the profession, studies demonstrate that hope and self-compassion act as protective factors; that is to say they reduce the negative influence of burnout and increase self-efficacy.

The previous sections highlighted the high prevalence of burnout among school counselors and the multiple factors contributing to this concerning phenomenon. Addressing this necessitates a multifaceted approach

incorporating individual strategies, systemic changes, and organizational support. Research offers several promising interventions, although more evidence-based strategies are still needed (Fannon, 2021). One crucial aspect of mitigating burnout involves enhancing individual coping mechanisms. While self-care is frequently suggested as a solution (Sylvester-Nwosu & Martin, 2020), simply recommending it is insufficient. This requires a more proactive and holistic approach. Literature highlights the need for more education and evidence-based self-care programs. Creating professional cohorts with regular supervisor meetings seems promising (Kovac et al., 2017; Hughes & Kleist, 2005). First-semester experiences of counselor education doctoral students. facilitating support, peer connection, and professional validation. Likewise, fostering a proactive approach to self-care involves addressing individual factors contributing to burnout – recognizing the limitations of a completely self-directed approach. Importantly, research points to the role of hope as a significant protective factor against burnout and improving self-efficacy (Pedrotti et al., 2008; Niles et al., 2024), suggesting the use of hope-focused interventions. Hope-Action Theory (Niles et al., 2014; Yoon et al., 2019) provides a valuable framework, aiding skill development in self-reflection, envisioning possibilities, setting achievable goals, and proactive adaptation. Practical applications include goal-setting, guided imagery, journaling, creating vision boards, and identifying support networks or mentors (Amundson et al., 2020; Duggleby et al., 2007). These activities actively cultivate hope, promote well-being, and are feasible in a busy environment. Emphasizing self-compassion alongside self-care is also crucial for preventing burnout. While individual strategies are beneficial, systemic changes are critical. The literature overwhelmingly points to the importance of reducing excessive workloads (Mullen et al., 2021; Bardhoshi et al., 2014), improving student-to-counselor ratios, clarifying roles and responsibilities (Mullen et al., 2018; Bardhoshi et al., 2014; Stephan, 2021), and bolstering administrative support. Inadequate resources, insufficient staffing, and limited time fundamentally contribute to burnout (Bardhoshi et al., 2014). Administrators who lack an understanding of a school counselor's role and its challenges are also crucial barriers to alleviate (Savitz-Romer, 2019). Addressing systemic issues requires a significant investment in school counseling reform, redefining philanthropic investments to directly support counselors' professional roles and their necessary work, to enable appropriate staffing levels (Goodman & Zoomed 2022). This includes advocating for the recommended student-to-counselor ratios providing professional development focused on stress management and coping strategies and implementing mentorship programs for newer counselors in the profession (Wardle & Mayorga 2016).

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

Addressing school counselor burnout demands a comprehensive, integrated approach encompassing individual strategies (self-care, hope-building), and significant organizational and systemic reforms.

The recommendations made here are only initial steps on the path towards improved well-being for school counselors and enhanced student outcomes.

Further research, particularly on program effectiveness and culturally sensitive approaches, is crucial. Continued collaboration among school administrators, counselors, and policymakers is essential to create a supportive environment prioritizing both counselor well-being and student success

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