

Part 6

Wellbeing in the School Ecosystem

Education at a Crossroads: Current Challenges to School Counseling

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Abstract

This paper conceptually examines, outlines, and discusses the various challenges that school counseling faces in today's transforming educational landscape. Depending on their specifics, some challenges can be considered problems and are referred to as "Sisyphus challenges". In contrast, others can be seen as opportunities and are referred to as "Aurora challenges". The author's arguments are chiefly based on analyzing published research and recent blogs on school counseling in Europe and the USA. The paper asserts that to assist students and education specialists in prospering in the 21st century and ultimately contribute to shaping the trajectory of education for generations to come, the challenges to school counseling as a foundation of school systems should be discussed. Sisyphus challenges to school counseling, discussed in this paper, are 1) varied and compounded students' needs, 2) balancing different types of support, 3) tiring workload, 4) lack of resources and funding, 5) barriers to advocacy, and 6) preparing for the job market. Aurora challenges, outlined in the paper, are 1) digital technology integration and the use of Artificial Intelligence, 2) improving collaboration with teachers to boost personalized education, 3) extensive interaction, 4) clarifying the role, 5) from quietness to resonance, and 6) comparing internationally. All the above-listed challenges are metaphorically named. In the conclusion, the author defends that despite the theoretical character of this paper, addressing and discussing the challenges can help school-based counseling come forward and be more effective.

Keywords: school counseling, student needs, balancing support, counselor workload, AI in school counseling, roles of school counselors, school systems

Introduction

In studying foreign systems of Education we should not forget that the things outside the schools matter even more than the things inside the schools, and govern and interpret the things inside.

Michael Sadler (1979, p. 49, [1900])

Echoing the above-cited Sadler's thought, which he expressed in his address at the Guildford Educational Conference 125 years ago, in October 1900, and transferring it to school counseling, it could be said that today, "the things outside the schools" influence school-based counseling even more than "the things inside the schools and govern and interpret" the work of school counselors.

Nowadays, the world is at a crossroads in various aspects – political, social, moral, economic, financial, technological, and environmental (Smith et al., 2010; Fieldman, 2018; UNU-WIDER, 2024; Transparency International, 2024; WEF, 2025). School systems, reflecting "the things outside the schools", are at a crossroads, too. This is not the first time that thinkers have considered education at a crossroads. More than 80 years ago, Jacques Maritain, in his book *Education at the Crossroads*, explored the American education system and debated education as related to "making a man" who possesses "deep-rooted independence with regard to common opinion" (Maritain, 1943).

Without any pretensions of fullness, it could be said that today's rapidly changing world puts school systems worldwide at a crossroads where tomorrow's teaching and learning landscape should be shaped by facing some enormous and unprecedented challenges, like embracing digital technology, rethinking evaluation methods, cultivating equity and inclusion, encouraging entrepreneurial mindset, integrating global citizenship, supporting lifelong learning, etc. To better understand the current development of school systems, to assist students and education specialists to prosper in the 21st century, and eventually to contribute to showing the trajectory of education for generations to come, the challenges to the groundwork of school systems should be discussed. Such a groundwork, a vital component of school systems, that plays a crucial role in supporting students' learning success, individual growth, and mental health, is school counseling.

School counselors are certified/licensed educators who improve student success for all students by implementing a comprehensive school counseling program. [...] As vital members of the school leadership team, school counselors create a school culture of success for all. [...] They lead, advocate and collaborate to promote equity and access for all students by connecting their school counseling program to the school's academic mission and school improvement plan. (American School Counselor Association, 2023, pp. 1-2)

The following thoughts emotionally but precisely describe who the school counselor is:

You must wear your professional cape into the community, be it on school grounds or off. You are a model for empathy and kindness, caring and compassion, knowledge and wisdom. You speak truths, and remain calm. You teach, you lead, you inspire, you challenge, you learn. You have a role that is defined, but it is how you emulate that definition that will result in the counselor you become and the counselor that others believe you to be. (Miller, n.d., para 2)

This paper conceptually examines, outlines, and discusses various challenges school counseling faces in today's rapidly transforming educational landscape. Depending on their specifics, some challenges can be considered problems and are named "Sisyphus challenges", while others can be seen as opportunities and are named "Aurora challenges". The author's arguments are chiefly based on analyzing published research and recent blogs on school counseling in Europe and the USA.

Sisyphus challenges

(Sisyphus is judged to roll a rock up to the top of a mountain and back down to the bottom.)

A mosaic of ever-shifting student demands (Varied and compounded students' needs)

Today's students are more diverse than ever, encompassing a complex of cultural, religious, ethnic, linguistic, socioeconomic, and learning needs. School counselors need to be personally and professionally prepared to address issues such as cultural, religious, and ethnic sensitivity, communication barriers, marginalization, immigrants' inclusion, potential biases and stereotypes, and disabilities. Here, the increasing student mental health needs can be added. Depression, concern, trauma, stress, panic, abuse, obsession, mental health stigma, and other problems become more and more common, impaired by powers such as social media, family disasters, academic burden, economic depression, school and out-of-school violence, and societal instability.

Counselors must be trained in recognizing the signs and symptoms of mental health issues and providing appropriate support. This may involve referring students to outside resources, such as therapists or psychologists, or implementing school-based interventions to promote mental wellbeing (NexPath, n.d.-a).

Emergencies, crises, and student wellbeing are constant concerns for school counselors. Being prepared to handle crises and ensuring the wellbeing and safety of students is a daunting responsibility that they grapple (Bullock, 2023).

Students expect

... school counselors to be: active, balancing, careful, communicative, competent, complex, confident, creative, curious, defending, discreet, educative, experienced, exact, flexible, honest, inspiring, interesting, kind, learning, loyal, moral, motivating, multifunctional, objective, open, original, patient, positive, reliable, searching, seeing, sensitive, smiling, social, supportive, sympathetic, tolerant, understanding, useful, variable. (Popov & Spasenović, 2020, pp. 39-40)

Walking a tightrope between competing supports (Balancing different types of support)

Generally, school counselors provide academic, social, and emotional support. Performing their role, they sometimes have to balance between these types of support while trying to act effectively.

This balancing act can be particularly challenging because academic and emotional support often intersect. For example, a student struggling with anxiety or depression may find it difficult to focus on their studies, leading to a decline in academic performance.

In such cases, school counselors need to address both the emotional issues and the academic challenges simultaneously (NexPath, n.d.-a).

Further, balancing between the needs of individual students and the interests and wellbeing of a group of students is an overriding concern. School counselors make individual and group consultations, which have different methods, goals, and results. When a student attends both forms of consultation, some contradictions may appear.

High-stakes testing and the pressure associated with standardized assessments pose a challenge for school counselors. Helping students manage test anxiety and ensuring they perform their best while understanding the significance of these assessments is a delicate balance (Bullock, 2023). An additional delicate balance is between parental expectations and the best interests of students. Navigating parental expectations and participation can be challenging. School counselors should delicately and fairly align parental plans and students' interests, needs, and possibilities.

Another important point is that school counselors must navigate ethical dilemmas, such as balancing student confidentiality with mandatory reporting requirements (Stone, 2005). Here, the balance of autonomy and control in school counselors' work, as defined in normative national documents and internal school regulations, plays a crucial role in counselors' decisions.

An endless treadmill of tasks (Tiring workload)

School counselors are often overwhelmed with heavy caseloads, making it difficult to provide personalized attention to each student. Balancing administrative tasks, meetings, and one-on-one counseling within a limited time frame is a persistent struggle (Bullock, 2023).

Furthermore, school counselors often face time constraints that can impede their ability to provide adequate support. They have numerous responsibilities, including conducting assessments, meeting with students, collaborating with teachers, and attending meetings. With limited time available, it can be challenging for counselors to dedicate sufficient attention to each student's academic and emotional needs (NexPath, n.d.-a).

School counselors often work on disproportionately high caseloads, far beyond the recommended ratio of students per counselor. In the USA, the ASCA ratio is 250 students per counselor. In Europe, ratios vary between 300 and 500 in different countries. In many underfunded schools, counselors may be responsible for a larger number of students. This prevents counselors from providing individualized support. A study on the student-to-counselor ratio in the USA reports that the national average is 444 students per counselor, and in some states, the ratio exceeds 700 students per counselor (Rock, 2023).

The personal communication of the author of this paper with experts in school counseling in countries in Central and Southeast Europe gives pieces of evidence that the student-per-counselor ratios often exceed the ratios proclaimed in normative documents.

The multifunctional nature of school counseling often makes school counselors "wear many hats", from providing academic advising and college readiness support to addressing behavioral issues and mental health concerns. In some cases, counselors are assigned non-counseling duties, such as administrative tasks or standardized testing coordination, which detract from their ability to focus on student wellbeing and development.

A feast of empty plates (Lack of resources and funding)

Inadequate resources and funding affect the ability of high school counselors to offer comprehensive guidance and support to students. This includes limitations in technology, materials, and professional development opportunities (Bullock, 2023).

The lack of resources can hinder their ability to address students' academic and emotional needs effectively. School counselors must find creative ways to maximize their impact, such as implementing group counseling sessions or collaborating with teachers and parents to provide comprehensive support (NexPath, n.d.-a). The lack of resources usually concerns students with various disabilities, students from different backgrounds, and marginalized groups.

The lack of funding mainly leads to a higher student-per-counselor ratio, as discussed above. But it also prevents school counselors from accessing specialized programs, enrolling in in-service training programs for professional development, and attending school counseling conferences at home and abroad. They often spend countless hours searching and writing applications for grants, hoping to get additional funding.

A maze with shifting walls (Barriers to advocacy)

One of the main roles school counselors play is to advocate for students. This advocacy role usually has three aspects: a) advocate for students in case of conflicts between students and teachers, or before school boards, local commissions, and other bodies responsible for making decisions on student behavior; b) advocate for systemic strategy change of rules, programs, procedures; and c) advocate for their profession before school directors, local authorities, and national policymakers.

Regarding advocacy for students, education policies at the national, regional (provincial or state), or municipal level may not prioritize or recognize the full scope of this role for counselors. That is why they often face systemic barriers that limit their ability to advocate effectively for students. Advocacy efforts are fundamental to addressing students' needs and guaranteeing social justice, but counselors may lack the time, training, or instructions to engage in this meaningful advocacy work.

Regarding advocacy for systemic change, school counselors should play an active role in advocating for rules, programs, and procedures that support student wellbeing, mental health, and anti-bullying. The main barrier here comes from the ability to collaborate with stakeholders at all levels, who are responsible for creating a more supportive school environment. Being "change agents", counselors can drive reforms that can ensure that all students get the support they need to succeed.

To advocate for their profession, school counselors need to take on leadership roles within their schools and communities, encouraging and promoting the value of the school counseling profession and counselor education programs, obtaining funding, and influencing education policy at the national and local levels.

Building a bridge while walking on it (Preparing for the job market)

In a progressively competitive and aggressive job market, counselors must help students navigate their career plans, higher education options, or professional paths and develop essential skills for the workforce. This concerns not only counselors who work with students in upper-secondary education who need to decide what to do after

completing school, but also those who work with lower-secondary education students who have to decide what type of school to attend to continue their upper-secondary education.

Guiding students through the complex college and career selection process is a critical role of high school counselors. Staying updated with the ever-changing landscape of higher education and diverse career options while addressing individual student aspirations is a daunting task (Bullock, 2023).

Here, a difficult moment occurs, namely, trying to prepare students for jobs that may not yet exist. Of course, this is a duty not only for school counselors. Teachers, career advisors, vocational consultants, and other school or out-of-school-based specialists, or college- and university-based information centers help students make important decisions. However, school counselors, being very close to students, cannot avoid this moment, and this requires staying informed about emerging industries, technological innovations, and workforce trends.

Gone are the days of school counselors sitting in their office simply handing out college applications, making schedule changes for students who want to drop a class, or waiting for a crisis to occur. Instead, today's school counselors are vital members of the education team. They help all students in the areas of academic achievement, career and social/emotional development, ensuring today's students become the productive, well-adjusted adults of tomorrow. (American School Counselor Association, in Roush, 2020, para 4)

School counselors should have adaptive and flexible consulting methods to meet the changing requirements of the job market. In today's economies, students need to acquire and develop a variety of soft skills, such as communication, adaptability, problem-solving, teamwork, creativity, leadership, critical thinking, time management, active listening, negotiation, integrity, confidence, dependability, open-mindedness, patience, empathy, flexibility, etc. Counselors can play an energetic role in helping students identify their motivation, strengths, interests, and life goals. By providing high-quality career guidance according to the newest trends in the job market, school counselors assist students to create plans and make informed decisions about their future.

Aurora challenges

(Aurora symbolizes the arrival of a new day, renewal, and the promise of new opportunities.)

Building bridges between circuits and synapses (Digital technology integration and the use of Artificial Intelligence)

Keeping up with rapidly evolving technology and effectively integrating it into counseling practices is a challenge. School counselors need to stay updated on various platforms and tools that can enhance communication, data management, and student engagement (Bullock, 2023).

On the one hand, technology brings many benefits to education, including the work of school counselors. On the other hand, it brings some negatives, like cyberbullying, online harassment, and hacker attacks. Counselors must stay informed about the digital landscape and its effects on students.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is an essential part of our lives, changing school practices, and school counseling is no exception. The use of AI in school counseling can have the following benefits (NexPath, n.d.-b):

- providing personalized support to students through AI algorithms analyzing vast amounts of data, including academic records, extracurricular activities, and personal interests;
- providing instant support to students through AI-powered chatbots answering common questions, giving information about study programs, and offering career advice;
- making predictive analytics by analyzing historical data, and identifying patterns that can help counselors predict student results;
- simulating real-life scenarios, allowing students to sightsee various ways or experiences before making decisions;
- scheduling appointments, managing student records, and generating reports.

School counselors' adaptation to AI differs by country and world region, but there is no doubt that school counselors need to equip themselves with skills and knowledge to effectively use AI.

This usually comprises: technological literacy, including understanding AI concepts; data analysis and interpretation; ethical and legal considerations, including understanding privacy laws, and use of student data; and responsive practices, including equitable and culturally responsive counseling services that address the needs of diverse student populations (Teachflow, 2023).

Co-planting a garden of minds (Improving collaboration with teachers to boost personalized education)

With the evolution of personalized education, school counselors play a key role in supporting students' progress. The main reason is that, unlike teachers who deliver curriculum to a large group of students, counselors have the possibility and expertise to work closely with individual students, and with parents and teachers, as well.

[...] school counselors are indispensable in personalized education. Their ability to provide individualized support, address social and emotional needs, foster positive relationships, and guide students in planning for their future is crucial in helping students navigate the challenges and seize the opportunities that personalized education offers. (NexPath, n.d.-c, para 7)

How collaboration between school counselors and teachers can be done depends on the level of centralization or decentralization of school systems' governance in different countries, and the levels of control and autonomy of school counselors' work. Commonly viewed, the approaches to such a collaboration can be: regular information sharing; joint planning; mutually identifying possible students' problems, risks, and needs; conjoint team building, and others, depending on the given country.

A wildfire of connection (Extensive interaction)

A good counseling style always requires extensive interaction with other school specialists, out-of-school specialists, and various organizations.

School counselors need to interact with a large circle of persons and organizations, such as: students, parents, teachers, principals, other school based or out-of-school based specialists (social workers, psychologists, speech therapists, doctors, etc.), municipal and state institutions, non-governmental youth and children organizations, centers for professional information, police and court authorities. (Popov & Spasenović, 2020, p. 38)

The format, intensity, and communication methods depend on the specific national regulations in the given country. In centralized school systems, counselors have some limitations or need more approval for their official out-of-school contacts. In decentralized school systems, counselors have higher autonomy in interacting with out-of-school experts and other organizations. However, despite the country, in today's entirely interactive societies, school counselors' intensive interaction is a must. This trend can be seen not as a problem but as an opportunity for school counselors to enlarge their circle of collaboration with other professionals (mostly special education teachers, therapists, and psychologists) to develop individualized plans that meet specific student needs and promote student wellbeing.

And this has another important aspect: pre-service and in-service school counselor training programs should emphasize interdisciplinary collaboration and teamwork to prepare counselors for using interconnected approaches.

Setting the compass for the journey (Clarifying the role)

The statute, role, functions, responsibilities, and procedures are more or less defined by nationally adopted documents (laws, regulations, instructions, ordinances, guidelines, etc.). In documents, the school counselor's role seems clear in both countries with centralized or decentralized school systems. However, in practice, the role of school counselors is often misinterpreted because directors, teachers, students, and parents frequently have different and even conflicting expectations of what school counselors should do. For school directors, school counselors are key figures in achieving school goals, reducing disciplinary incidents, and preventing dropouts. For teachers, school counselors are partners in students' behavioral and emotional problem-solving. For parents, school counselors are experts who must provide personalized care to their children. For students, it is too difficult to meet all the expectations they can have of school counselors – from providers of information and guidance to advocates, listeners, mentors, navigators, and emotional supporters.

School counselors can clarify their role by informing directors, teachers, students, and parents about their particular functions and professional responsibilities, and establishing clear borderlines and good collaboration as well. All participants in school counselors' activities will benefit from a clear understanding of the school counselor's role.

From a whisper to a thunderclap (From quietness to resonance)

Some common, heartfelt descriptions portray school counselors as “the quiet heroes in the journey of every student”, “the unsung heroes of education”, and “the silent warriors fighting for every student”. School counselors are listeners, discreet mentors, softly shaping students' futures. These noiseless experts can move from quietness to

resonance using online technologies and social media that allow school counselors to effectively organize group consulting with students, teachers, other school specialists, and even parents. In today's extremely connected and exposed communication, a school counselor can be a well-liked motivator, conductor, enthusiast, initiator, and leader, and at the same time discreetly silent about students' private data obtained from personal consultations.

Sailing the ocean of international parallels (Comparing internationally)

To improve their professional knowledge, school counselors may compare what and how they do with what and how their colleagues in other countries do. Such international comparisons will help them understand the common features, similarities, and differences in school counselors' statutes, roles, and functions across countries. The more school counselors know about others, the more they can understand and assess their positions, advances, and problems. Such comparisons, cooperation, and mutual understanding can be done through participation in international school counseling associations, joint research projects, international conferences, and other events or initiatives.

In today's digital world, comparing internationally does not require face-to-face meetings and on-site contacts. Comparative studies of what the others do, conference attendance, seminars, etc., can be organized virtually with minimal or no costs. Mental, social, and academic problems, students have are almost the same in countries with similar economic, social, and educational development. School counselors can only benefit from knowing more from a comparative perspective.

Sisyphus vs. Aurora challenges

The challenges faced by school counselors, as outlined in this paper, are broadly categorized into two groups: Sisyphus challenges, which represent persistent and often burdensome problems, and Aurora challenges, which symbolize opportunities for growth and innovation. The table below presents a comparison between these two categories.

Table 1. Comparison between Sisyphus challenges and Aurora challenges faced by school counselors

<i>Arena</i>	<i>Sisyphus challenges</i>	<i>Aurora challenges</i>
Nature of challenges	These are recurring, systemic issues that often feel insurmountable, such as heavy workloads, lack of resources, and barriers to advocacy. Like Sisyphus pushing a boulder uphill, counselors repeatedly tackle these problems with limited progress.	These are forward-looking opportunities that embrace change, such as integrating AI, improving collaboration, and leveraging technology. Like the dawn of a new day, they offer renewal and the promise of transformative potential.
Impact on counselors	These challenges can lead to burnout, frustration, and a sense of stagnation, as counselors struggle	These challenges inspire creativity, professional growth, and adaptability, empowering

	with limited support and high demands.	counselors to redefine their roles and expand their impact.
Approach to solutions	Addressing these issues often requires systemic changes, such as policy reforms, increased funding, and reduced student-to-counselor ratios—solutions that are slow to materialize.	Solutions here are proactive and innovative, such as adopting digital tools, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, and engaging in international comparisons—actions that counselors can often initiate themselves.
Outcomes for students	When unresolved, these challenges can hinder students' access to personalized support, mental health resources, and career guidance, perpetuating inequities.	When embraced, these challenges enhance students' experiences through personalized education, timely interventions, and preparation for a rapidly evolving world.
Long-term perspective	These reflect the enduring struggles of the profession, demanding resilience and advocacy to overcome.	These represent the future of school counseling, where adaptability and innovation can transform challenges into strengths.
Overview	While Sisyphus challenges highlight the ongoing struggles that school counselors face, Aurora challenges illuminate the path forward. By addressing both, the profession can not only mitigate its burdens but also seize opportunities to redefine its role as a cornerstone of student success in the 21 st century.	

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Conclusion

This paper theoretically outlined some current challenges to school counseling, divided into two groups – Sisyphus and Aurora challenges. This grouping of challenges into problems and opportunities is, of course, flexible, relative, and to some extent speculative. All the above-listed challenges are connected and, in some cases, mutually dependent. However, despite the speculative character of this paper, addressing and discussing the challenges can help school-based counseling come forward and be more effective.

The potential of school counseling is in its capability to adapt to the changing factors outside school systems, the needs of students, and societal fluctuations, ensuring that students have the opportunity to succeed. School counselors are not only listeners, advocates, advisors, mentors, and motivators, i.e., experts in supporting the academic, emotional, and social development of students, school counselors are also life shapers.

School systems—and school counselors as their most versatile professionals—stand at a crossroads, with an opportunity to redefine counseling as a keystone of student inclusion, wellbeing, and long-term success in the coming decades.

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