

GUIDING STUDENTS TO SUCCESS

In Ontario, the government has increasingly articulated policies that stress the relationship between school guidance programs and overall student success.¹

Creating Pathways to Success, a new policy introduced by the Ministry of Education in 2013, promotes comprehensive school guidance and outlines how schools should align career and life planning programs from kindergarten through grade 12.

The policy, which was to be fully implemented by the fall of



Provincial policy requires each elementary school to have a process to document student learning and career and life planning. This process is intended to include reviews with teachers, guidance counsellors and parents.⁸ However, we found that very few elementary schools have staffed guidance programs. Only 14% of Ontario's elementary schools have a guidance counsellor, and among that small minority, only 10% have counsellors that are full-time.

The lack of elementary guidance staff has been noted as a concern in Ontario over the past two decades,⁹ particularly since evidence indicates that the expertise of guidance counsellors in the areas of mental health and child development can be crucial to fostering student success in elementary school.¹⁰ Professionally trained guidance counsellors are able to employ evidence-informed strategies to teach students social-emotional skills, and studies suggest that the teaching of these skills is connected to academic performance and behavior.¹¹ Just over three quarters (76%) of elementary schools with guidance counsellors report that their counsellors hold additional qualifications in guidance and career education.

In grades 7 and 8, students make important decisions about high school and often face a range of issues related to adolescence. The course choices that they make may affect their options throughout secondary school *and* after they graduate.¹²

Because guidance counsellors in elementary schools can interact with students regularly, they may develop a nuanced understanding of a student over time. The development of these relationships can lead to informed one-on-one support, particularly when students are deliberating between applied and academic courses for high school. But only 20% of schools with grades 7 and 8 have guidance counsellors, and the vast majority are part-time.

Some schools increase grade 8 access to guidance expertise by organizing visits and activities with high school guidance counsellors. However, it is unclear how systematic these links are, and to what extent such efforts mitigate the effects of not having an elementary school guidance counsellor.

Elementary school, Simcoe-Muskoka Catholic DSB

The methods that schools use to communicate information on course selections appear to be, at least in part, connected to whether or not they have a guidance counsellor. In schools that have guidance counsellors, the main source of information regarding course choices and their implications is more likely to be information nights (62%) than for schools without guidance counsellors (52%). Conversely, schools without a guidance counsellor are more likely to use handouts (22%) to inform parents about high school course selections than schools with a guidance counsellor (12%).

Elementary school, Waterloo Catholic DSB

Secondary school, Grand Erie DSB

Across the province, guidance counsellors are much more likely to be found in urban schools, which tend to have larger student populations. This difference may be partly attributed to the provincial funding formula, which allocates the majority of funding to school boards based on the number of students enrolled.¹³ In our report, we investigated urban accessibility to guidance counsellors by contrasting the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and four other less densely populated regions of the province.

We found that GTA elementary schools were approximately 3 times more likely to have a guidance counsellor. For GTA schools with Grades 7 and 8, 53% had at least one part-time guidance counsellor, and 32% of all GTA elementary schools had at least one part-time guidance counsellor (see Figure 1 for regional comparisons).

Ministry of Education policy outlines the importance of comprehensive guidance programs including the coordination of guidance supports, student well-being, learning competencies, and career and life planning.¹⁴

We asked principals to indicate the two areas where they thought guidance counsellors spend most of their time. The majority of principals selected “supporting social-emotional health and well-being,” and “supporting student development and refinement of their Individual Pathway Plans.” Far fewer selected “collaborating with other teachers and social workers,” and “supporting and facilitating learning for students.”

Given these results, there may be the potential to advance the goals of comprehensive school guidance set forth by the Ministry by developing the areas of guidance counsellors’ work that currently receive less emphasis.

In contrast to elementary schools, secondary schools in the province are much more likely to have guidance counsellors. Over 99% of secondary schools report having at least one guidance counsellor, of which 88% have at least one full-time. Of the schools with guidance counsellors, 97% report that their counsellors hold additional qualifications in guidance and career education.



Across the province, the average student–guidance counsellor ratio per secondary school is 391 to 1, and guidance counsellors appear to be relatively evenly distributed throughout schools across the province. The exception is northern Ontario, where 46% of secondary schools report that they only have part-time guidance counsellors—a far higher percentage of part-time counsellors than any other region.

We asked principals to indicate the two areas where they thought guidance counsellors spend most of their time. The majority of principals selected “providing course enrolment advice and guidance” and “supporting student social-emotional health and well-being.” Far fewer selected “supporting student development and refinement of their Individual Pathway Plan” and “collaborating with teachers and social workers;” and very few selected “supporting and facilitating co-operative education and experiential learning for students.”

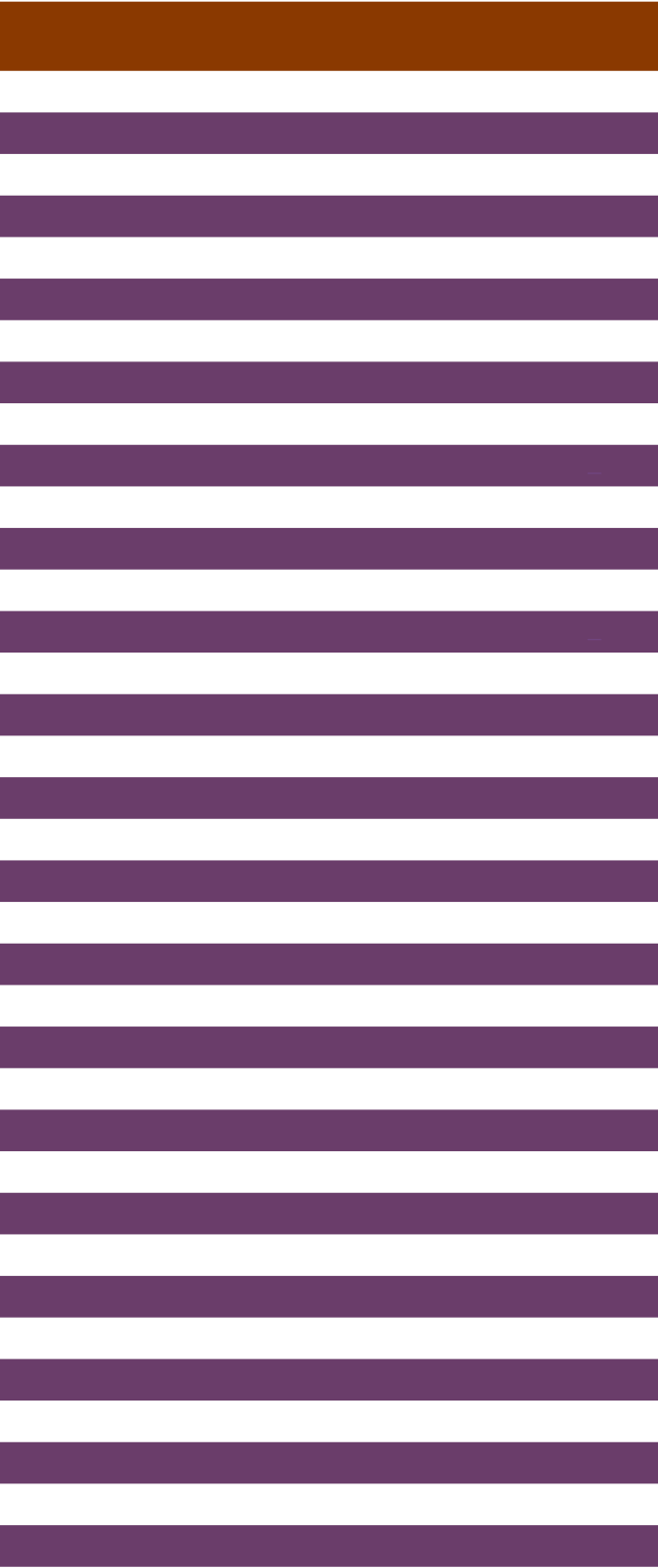
Similar to elementary school findings, there appears to be a gap between the areas of emphasis that schools indicated and the integrated, comprehensive, and collaborative approach to guidance that the Ministry has outlined.

Using our survey data, we also sought to develop a clearer understanding of secondary school guidance and applied and academic course recommendations. Eighty-nine percent of participating secondary schools indicate that they have initiatives to ensure that students select academic and applied courses appropriately. However, once students have selected courses, there appears to be less support for student transfers from one program of study to another. Nearly half of schools (43%)

Several key implications emerged from our investigation into school guidance.

1. Although provincial policy aspires to more comprehensive guidance programs beginning in kindergarten, very few elementary schools have full- or part-time guidance counsellors. This absence of guidance staff may suggest a gap between provincial policy expectations and resources provided at the school level.
2. Regional disparities in guidance resources, such as access to school-level guidance counsellors and social workers, were evident throughout our report. Investigating feasible strategies for more even distributions of guidance staff and related resources throughout the province may be an area of future policy consideration.
3. The government has asserted the need to integrate guidance activities and other youth development supports. When we asked principals where they felt guidance counsellors spent the most time, only a few chose collaboration with teachers and social workers. Even though access to social workers has improved at both the elementary and secondary levels in recent years, a large number of schools throughout Ontario more evenly provide school guidance.

Figure 3



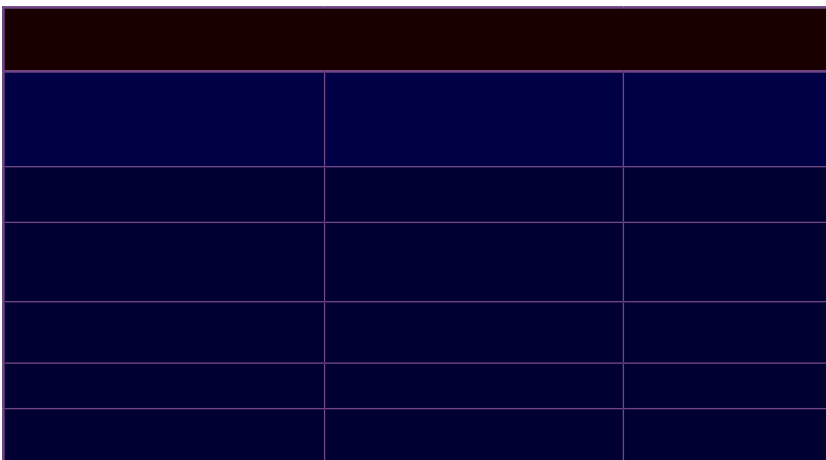
RESEARCH METHODS

Unless cited from other sources, the statistics and quoted material in this report originate from People for Education's 18th annual survey (2014–2015) on school resources in Ontario's elementary schools, and 15th annual survey of school resources in Ontario's secondary schools.

These surveys were mailed to principals in every publicly funded school in Ontario during the fall of 2014 (translated surveys were sent to French-language schools). Surveys were also available for completion online in English and French. All survey responses and data are confidential and stored in conjunction with Tri-Council recommendations for the safeguarding of data.¹⁷ The 2014–2015 survey generated 1,175 responses from elementary and secondary school principals. This figure equals 28% of the province's schools. Of the province's 72 school boards, 71 participated in the survey. Given these figures, the responses largely provide a representative sample of publicly funded schools in Ontario (see Figure 4).

The analyses in this report are based on both descriptive and inferential statistics. The descriptive statistical analyses were conducted in order to summarize and present numerical information in a manner that is comprehensible and illuminating. In instances where inferential statistical analyses are used, we examined associations between variables, using logistic regression analysis. All data were analyzed using SPSS statistical software. For regional comparisons, schools were sorted by region using postal codes. The GTA region comprises all of the schools in Toronto together with schools located in the municipalities of Durham, Peel, Halton, and York.

Calculations have been rounded to the nearest whole number and may not amount to 100%. The average student–guidance counsellor ratio was calculated for schools that reported both the total number of students and the full-time equivalents for staff positions.



NOTES

- 1 Levi, Marion, & Ziegler, Suzanne. (1991). *Making Connections: Guidance and Career Education in the Middle Years*. Retrieved from Ontario Ministry of Education website: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/reports/ere91016.pdf>; Government of Ontario. (2011). *Open minds, healthy minds: Ontario's comprehensive mental health strategy*. Retrieved from http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/common/ministry/publications/reports/mental_health2011/mentalhealth.aspx; Ontario Ministry of Education. (2013). *Pathways to success: An education and career/life planning program for Ontario schools*. Retrieved from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/policy/cps/creatingpathwaysuccess.pdf>.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Government of Ontario. (2012). *Stepping Stones: A resource on youth development*. Toronto: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/documents/topics/youthopportunities/steppingstones/SteppingStones.pdf>.
- 4 *Pathways to success*, see note 1.
- 5 Carrell, S. E., & Hoekstra, M. (2014). Are school counselors an effective education input? *Economics Letters*, 125(1), 66-69; Lapan, R. T., Gysbers, N. C., & Petroski, G. F. (2001). Helping seventh graders be safe and successful: A statewide study of the impact of comprehensive guidance and counseling programs. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 79, 320-330.
- 6 Ontario School Counsellors' Association (n.d). The role of the guidance-teacher counsellor. Retrieved from <https://www.osca.ca/en.html>.
- 7 *Pathways to success*, see note 1.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 *Making Connections*, see note 1.
- 10 Carrell, S. E., & Hoekstra, M. (2014). Are school counselors an effective education input? *Economics Letters*, 125(1), 66-69.
- 11 Reback, Randall. (2010a). Non-instructional spending improves non-cognitive outcomes: Discontinuity evidence from a unique school counselor financing system. *Educational Finance & Policy*, 5(2), 105-137; Reback, Randall. (2010b). Schools' mental health services and young children's emotions. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 29(4), 698-725.
- 12 King, Alan, et al. (2010). *Who doesn't go to post-secondary education?* Toronto: Colleges Ontario.
- 13 Ministry of Education. (2014) Education funding: Technical paper 2014-15. Retrieved from http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/funding/1415/Technical14_15.pdf.
- 14 *Pathways to success*, see note 1.
- 15 Johnson, S., & Johnson, C. (2003). Results based guidance: A systems approach to student support programs. *Professional School Counseling*, 6(3), 180-4.
- 16 Government of Ontario. (2012). *Stepping Stones: A resource on youth development*. Toronto: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/documents/topics/youthopportunities/steppingstones/SteppingStones.pdf>.
- 17 Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans, December 2010.

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