

Zip Code Matters: A Comparison of Rural and Urban School Counseling Funding

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The literature on school funding, and specifically school counseling, suggests that student outcomes (e.g. academic, career, and social) are correlated to funding. This study examined school districts across Pennsylvania, comparing funding for school counseling services in rural districts to the funding in urban districts. Results indicated that urban schools are funded at a statistically significant greater rate than rural schools across 10 consecutive years. Implications of these results for professional school counselors were discussed.

Keywords: professional school counseling, school funding, rural and urban

Funding for public schools across the United States has historically been inequitable and inconsistent. Much of this inequality occurs as a result of the process by which public schools are funded, specifically through local property taxes (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). In 24 states the majority of funding for public education is developed through local taxes, and nationally 45 percent of public school funding is generated through local revenue (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). As a result, schools located in wealthier areas receive more funding through property taxes than schools that are located in impoverished neighborhoods, and as a local tax base fluctuates, so does local school funding. Biddle and Berliner (2002) explain that these differences in funding not only exist across states, but that disparities also exist across school districts within the same state.

These differences in funding have a significant impact on schools, students, and educators (Biddle & Berliner, 2002; Pouncey, Ennis, Wooley, & Connell, 2013). One important difference is found in student achievement, as measured by standardized testing. Students who attend schools with more funding indicate higher levels of academic achievement than students who attend schools with less funding (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). Furthermore, schools with higher funding levels are likely to employ more experienced educators, have smaller class sizes, spend more per student, and have more resources that are of higher quality, such as school programs and textbooks (Biddle & Berliner, 2002; Pouncey et al., 2013). Pouncey et al. (2013) explain, "The success or failure of schools is

strongly connected to the financial support made available to them through the levying of taxes and the allocation of revenues" (p. 2). Disparities in funding, specifically differences in per pupil spending, not only impacts a student's experience in the classroom, but also has the ability to impact that student's overall educational experience, including the ability to access quality counseling services within their school.

Per Pupil Spending

There are different ways that school districts measure the annual funding that they receive. The most commonly used measurement of funding is per pupil spending, which accounts for state and local funding for each school district across the United States (Baker, Sciarra, & Farrie, 2010). Data on per pupil spending is published by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; Baker et al., 2010). Reporting of per pupil spending is further delineated by the myriad of services that account for a student's overall educational experience. These individual aspects of Per Pupil Spending (PPS) include: instruction, student support services, instructional staff services, operation and maintenance, administration, transportation, and food services (NCES, n.d.). Funding for School Counseling Services (SCS), along with attendance, health, and speech pathology services is included in a subcategory of PPS called Student Support Services (NCES, n.d.). The NCES (n.d.) reported that in the 2011-2012 academic year, an average of \$613 was spent on

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Student Support Services per pupil across elementary and secondary public schools in the United States.

A 2010 report by Baker et al. (2010) highlights the differences that exist in PPS across the United States. A closer look at the data indicates that PPS not only differs across states, but can also differ significantly within a single state. This report further analyzes how schools are funded across the United States using four measurements of fairness that include: (a) Funding Level, defined as PPS ranked by state; (b) Funding Distribution, which compares funding per district across each state in comparison to the amount of poverty that exists; (c) Effort, which is based on each state's Gross Domestic Product for education; and (d) Coverage, or the amount of children attending public school and median household income compared to those attending private school and their median household income across the states (Baker et al., 2010). This report highlights the inequality that exists related to public school funding across the United States, as well as within each state. These inequalities can, in turn, impact each school's ability to provide students with the education and resources that they need to be successful.

Professional School Counselors provide a host of services to students in schools. School counselors assist students in their academic, career, and personal development, and work with students and families to help children meet their goals across all three of these domains (American School Counselors Association, 2014). In order to meet these lofty goals, professional school counselors must have appropriate training, available resources, opportunities for supervision and consultation, and a manageable caseload. These prerequisites may not be possible given the barriers that exist in school systems, specifically those related to funding and available resources (Holcomb-McCoy & Mitchell, 2005; Imig, 2014; Morgan, Greenwaldt, & Gosselin, 2014; Savitz-Romer, 2012; Sutton & Pearson, 2002; Worzbyt & Zook, 1992). Successfully working with available resources, even when they are lacking, is particularly salient for school counselors.

Many school counselors, particularly those working in rural settings, are facing financial and time constraints that make it difficult, if not impossible, to provide all students with effective counseling services (Holcomb-McCoy & Mitchell, 2005; Imig, 2014; Morgan et al., 2014; Savitz-Romer, 2012; Sutton & Pearson, 2002; Worzbyt & Zook, 1992). Jackson, Johnson, and Persico (2016) compared PPS and students' long-term academic achievement and success. The study included 15,353 participants across the United States, and their findings indicate that increases in PPS have a positive impact on academic achievement and long-term educational attainment, especially for students in low-income neighborhoods. Jackson et al.

(2016) describe that, "...among low-income children, increasing per pupil spending by 10% over the entire schooling career increases the likelihood of graduating from high school by between 5.6% and 19.3% (p. 193). The authors also describe the positive impact that increased spending on Student Support Services can have for students, especially students who are likely to be growing up in low-income homes. Additionally, increased funding can result in lower student to counselor ratios, which has also shown to be a critical element in students' success (Jackson et al., 2016). The authors describe that these results support existing research. Jackson et al. (2016) write, "These similarities suggest that money still matters, and so do school resources" (p. 212).

Research suggests that there are significant disparities regarding where school counseling resources are being directed and which students benefit most from these services. As per pupil expenditures decrease, school counselor caseloads typically increase. In general, schools that spend less money for each student are likely to have substantially higher ratios of students to school counselors (Lapan, 2012). In these schools, students are served by school counselors with large caseloads, making the provision of comprehensive counseling services difficult, if not impossible. Counselors in these underserved schools are attending to a host of responsibilities, from assisting students in their academic and personal development, to preparing them for life after graduation (Lapan, Whitcomb, & Aleman, 2012).

Rural School Counseling

Data point to the fact that rural schools have a shortage of overall resources combined with restrictions in funding streams (Breen & Drew, 2012; Gandara, Gutierrez, & O'Hara, 2001). Breen and Drew (2012) found that rural school counselors feel they lack the resources necessary to effectively perform their job duties and are disconnected from services that are important to the success of their students. Likewise, Monteiro-Leitner, Asner-Self, Milde, Leitner, and Skelton (2006) found that rural schools often lack the resources to implement effective school counseling programs.

In turn, these funding shortages may adversely impact the counselor's ability to perform the duties necessary to implement a successful comprehensive school counseling program. For example, rural school counselors feel overwhelmed as a result of multiple responsibilities and large caseloads (Sutton & Pearson, 2002). Often, the school counselor working in a rural setting might be the only counselor at the school or in the area. Being the only counselor leaves one person to

handle diverse responsibilities with limited resources, making it virtually impossible to administer and deliver a comprehensive school counseling program. Conversely, a school with greater resources and numerous counselors could assign specific duties to each of the counselors (Sutton & Pearson, 2002). Related to the issue of limited personnel, Toby, Neale-McFall, & Owens (2016) write, “These are the very factors that make it difficult, if not impossible, for school counselors to provide thorough, effective, and comprehensive counseling services in rural schools” (p. 4-5).

The above studies highlight the crucial role that the school counselor plays in the life of a student, but also illuminate how a rural school counselor’s positive impact can be limited due to a lack of funding and necessary resources. Worzbyt and Zook (1992) write, “Staggering workloads, low salaries, meager resources, shortage of staff development opportunities, a high rate of administrative turnover, and difficulties attracting needed personnel are just some of the factors that plague small rural schools” (p. 344).

Urban School Counseling

School counselors working in urban schools also face unique difficulties in regard to providing successful comprehensive counseling services (Toby et al., 2016). Like rural schools, urban schools are also likely to have limited resources, and are usually located in high-poverty areas where there school and community violence. Urban schools are also characterized by “...high rates of teacher and administrative turnover, absenteeism, diverse family concerns, and a lack of parental involvement” (Toby et al., 2016, p. 5). This leaves school counselors working in urban schools to face unique challenges when administering services to students.

Holcomb-McCoy and Mitchell’s (2005) study sought to discover the role of urban school counselors and the most prevalent issues that exist in their schools. One hundred and two urban school counselors participated in this study. The results of their surveys showed that the counselors most commonly spent their time (a) providing group and individual counseling; (b) consulting with teachers and parents; and (c) completing administrative work. The study further found that an urban school counselor on average had 362 students on their caseload, with as many as 1,800 students per counselor (Holcomb-McCoy & Mitchell, 2005).

A number of important themes emerged in Savitz-Romer’s (2012) qualitative study of 11 female urban school counselors who worked in schools where the majority of students were eligible for free and reduced

lunch. Examples of these themes included: a lack of motivation among students, low student expectations, and issues of homelessness (Savitz-Romer, 2012). The counselors in this study further describe the specific challenge of students experiencing a lack of familial support, which led the counselors to play a very significant role in the students’ lives, particularly in regard to their post-secondary plans. Although having a positive impact on students’ lives is paramount to being a successful school counselor, the participants reported that they feel that their assistance may in turn prevent their students from becoming independent (Savitz-Romer, 2012).

Both rural and urban school counselors face challenges that may prevent them from providing comprehensive counseling services to all students, particularly surrounding funding and a lack of resources. The review of the literature indicated a need to investigate the differences that may exist between funding for rural and urban school counseling programs. The present study sought to discover whether a significant difference exists by comparing funding for school counseling programs in rural and urban school districts across the state of Pennsylvania.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to better understand the funding available to professional school counselors across Pennsylvania and to compare the resources available to school counselors in rural districts with their urban counterparts. As previously described, the literature indicates that financial resources play a significant role in student outcomes. These outcomes range from academic success to planning for college and careers after graduation. In developing this study, the authors examined school counseling funding at the district level across one state, Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania was chosen, in part, due to the diversity found in the state, specific to relative equality in the number of districts that are categorized as rural and urban.

The specific research question this study aimed to answer was, *Do significant differences exist in per pupil spending on School Counseling Services (SCS) between rural and urban districts across Pennsylvania?* In order to perform statistical analyses, this question was posed in the null hypothesis form, that is, the null hypothesis for this study was, *No significant differences exist in per pupil spending on School Counseling Services (SCS) between rural and urban school districts across Pennsylvania.* The purpose of this study, then, was to determine if this null hypothesis was true or false. If proven false, and significant differences were found between rural and urban districts in PPS on SCS, then

the existing literature comparing funding and student outcomes could be applied to any disparities discovered in this study. In the end, the authors hoped to determine if one subset of students (i.e. those in rural or urban districts) were receiving less funding, and therefore, fewer services than their counterparts in the other subset.

Method

The authors reviewed extant data from 2003-2013 specific to district expenditures on School Counseling Services (SCS), as well as the amount spent per student. This provided an analysis of publicly available data across the past 10 years. Analysis of secondary data began with an evaluation of Per Pupil Spending (PPS) on SCS across Pennsylvania. These data were collected from publicly available websites of the Pennsylvania Department of Education. Specifically, data were obtained for annual district spending on SCS (notated by the Pennsylvania Department of Education as *Guidance Services*), as well as Average Daily Membership (ADM) for the years 2003-2013. ADM is defined by the Pennsylvania Department of Education as “the term used for all resident pupils of the school district for whom the school district is financially responsible. It is calculated by dividing the aggregate days membership for all children on active rolls by the number of days the school district is in session” (PA Department of Education, 2016, para. 5). PPS on guidance services was computed for each district by dividing the total amount spent on Guidance Services by the ADM for the district. Each district was then coded as either rural or urban, based on data provided by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania (2014). The Center of Rural Pennsylvania defines rural and urban school districts as follows: “A county or school district is rural when the number of persons per square mile within the county or school district is less than 284. Counties and school districts that have 284 persons or more per square mile are considered urban” (Center for Rural Pennsylvania, 2014, para. 3).

In Pennsylvania, schools are delineated by local school districts, rather than by county as found in some states. There are 500 public school districts in Pennsylvania, 497 of which were used in the analysis of historical data. Of these 497 districts, 234 were classified as rural using the definition previously described; 263 districts were identified as urban (Center for Rural Pennsylvania, 2014). Three districts were removed from this analysis: two were removed because they do not have their own school buildings, but use neighboring school district resources. The other was removed because of contradictory data reported to the state Department of Education.

Aggregate mean spending and standard deviations were then calculated for the two categories of school districts (i.e. rural and urban), and the differences in mean spending per pupil were compared using independent samples t-tests. Variance was first calculated using Levine’s test to determine if equal variances should be assumed or not assumed, and the appropriate test result was then analyzed. Values were not adjusted for inflation due to the fact that means were only compared for urban versus rural for each year and not across years.

Results

Prior to comparing the mean values of SCS between rural and urban districts, mean statewide expenditures on SCS were calculated, as well as the percent of the total budget and PPS on counseling services. Mean statewide expenditures on guidance spending per pupil indicate that during the 10 year period analyzed (see Table 1), the mean PPS on SCS across Pennsylvania ranged from \$197.01 per student to \$268.47 per student. The mean percent of total budgetary expenditures during this period ranged from 1.79 percent in the 2008-09 academic year to 1.90 percent in the 2003-04 academic year. The average percent of total budgetary expenditures during the 2003-2013 period was 1.83 percent.

Using the methods described above, mean values of PPS were calculated for both rural and urban districts for the 10 academic years analyzed in this study. Those mean values were then compared using unpaired t-tests. The results from this analysis determined that PPS on guidance services was statistically significantly greater in urban districts for every year examined. Differences between rural and urban locations ranged from \$15.92 in 2005-06, $t(495) = -4.20, p < .001$, to \$22.86 in 2009-10 $t(495) = -3.57, p < .001$. The average difference in spending being \$20.76 per student over the course of the 10 years.

Discussion and Implications for Professional School Counselors

Given the disparities in these data, there are clear and significant differences between the funding allocated for school counseling services in rural and urban districts across Pennsylvania. The statistical differences were not only significant, but in many cases, startling. Given these differences in spending between rural and urban districts, it stands to reason that these spending disparities can have a significant impact on the ability for professional school counselors to provide the highest quality services to their students, especially in rural districts.

Table 1*Comparison of Per Pupil Spending on Guidance Services 2003-2013*

Academic Year	Average Pupil Spending						95% CI <i>UL, LL</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
	Rural			Urban					
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>			
2003-2004	\$186.35	54.41	233	\$206.50	61.25	262	-30.20, -10.09	-3.94***	493
2004-2005	\$194.14	51.78	235	\$216.23	63.95	262	-32.42, -11.76	-4.20***	495
2005-2006	\$203.58	56.26	235	\$219.50	66.21	262	-26.81, -5.03	-2.87**	495
2006-2007	\$209.04	59.17	235	\$230.41	70.18	262	-32.88, -9.86	-3.65***	495
2007-2008	\$221.80	71.6	235	\$242.29	72.14	262	-33.17, -7.79	-3.17**	495
2008-2009	\$225.71	66.06	235	\$247.76	73.59	262	-34.43, -9.67	-3.50***	495
2009-2010	\$233.43	65.09	235	\$256.29	76.57	263	-35.44, -10.27	-3.57***	496
2010-2011	\$242.54	67.85	235	\$265.33	77.68	263	-35.71, -9.88	-3.47**	496
2011-2012	\$245.71	74.64	235	\$266.59	81.17	263	-34.66, -7.10	-2.98**	496
2012-2013	\$258.65	80.17	235	\$277.25	85.95	263	-33.28, -3.91	-2.49*	496

Note. CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

As described previously, the literature is clear regarding the influence of spending on counselor resources. As spending decreases, counselor caseloads increase. There is a reason that the American School Counselors Association recommends a ratio of 250 students to each professional school counselor (American School Counselors Association, 2012), which is to maintain equity across schools and districts, as well as to keep workloads manageable so that professional school counselors can work with all of the students in a school, not just those that present with the greatest need.

Other findings from the literature that were previously discussed are of importance given the results of this study. Rural school counselors in this study report a lack of financial support and insufficient time to provide the services necessary to their students. They wear many hats, have high caseloads, and lack peer support for service provision, consultation, and supervision. The significant spending differences found in this study suggest that professional school counselors in rural areas of Pennsylvania struggle with these very issues.

Finally, previous research has found direct correlations between inequity in spending and inequity in the quality and quantity of resources provided to students. These financial inequities also correlate directly with a lack of student achievement. Given the findings in this study (i.e. that rural school counseling programs are funded at significantly lower rates than urban programs), the question certainly must be raised regarding the quality and quantity of the services and resources provided in rural districts, and ultimately, the level of achievement of students attending rural schools as compared to their urban counterparts across Pennsylvania.

What this means for professional school counselors, especially those who are underfunded, is a need for advocacy for students, for their comprehensive school counseling programs, and for equity in resource allocation. This advocacy may best be conceptualized by using the ACA Advocacy Domains (Lewis, Arnold, House, & Toporek, 2002). Lewis et al. (2002) suggested that advocacy can occur on a variety of different levels, both with clients and on behalf of clients, and at the student level, the school level, and the public domain.

In considering how to best advocate for the equitable allocation of resources, professional school counselors may want to examine the advocacy domains described by Lewis et al. (2002) as School/Community advocacy as well as Public Arena advocacy. For example, in the area of School/Community advocacy, professional school counselors can work with their local school boards to promote re-allocation of existing resources to the professional school counselors, especially if existing resources are being allocated to sources less directly connected to student success.

More likely, school counselors will be working in the area of Public Arena advocacy in order to attempt to close the opportunity gaps inherent in such inequity. Professional school counselors may want to use data such as those found in this study to collaborate with their state-wide professional organizations to lobby for equality in funding from state legislatures. School counselors may also want to partner with local officials, parent groups, community organizations, local chambers of commerce, and other stakeholders with a vested interest in the success of the students in their communities. As the number of voices grows, those voices are often heard more readily.

Limitations and Future Research

There are limitations to this study that are related to the scope of the research project, availability of data, and operational definitions. Specific to the scope of the research project, this study examined only one state's PPS data on counseling services. Pennsylvania may provide a good representation of many states as the number of rural and urban districts are almost equal (46.8 percent of districts are defined as rural while 47.2 percent of districts are defined as urban). Given the almost equal number of districts in each category, Pennsylvania provides a good example for comparison. However, equality does not necessarily imply generalizability, and the disbursement of population among each state will certainly be unique. Additionally, each state has its own school funding formula that will differ from that used in Pennsylvania. For these reasons, generalizability of these results to other states may be difficult, and each state may need to be considered independent of one another.

Regarding the availability of data, this study examined PPS on school counseling services over a 10 year span ending in the 2012-13 academic year, as those were the last publicly available data when the study was conducted. As Table 1 indicates, the last academic year examined (2012-13) had statistically significant results ($p=.013$), but those results were less significant than every previous year examined, where the significance values were less than .01 and .001 in many cases. This result may indicate that the 2012-13 academic year was an outlier and that the difference in spending would continue to be more significant. However, 2012-13 may mark the beginning of a shift toward more equitable spending on per pupil services. Future research should examine those trends, as more data are made available.

Additionally, cost of living is a statistical consideration that was beyond the scope of this study. While developing a statistical formula to adjust for variance in cost of living across the 500 school districts in Pennsylvania would provide more validity to this study, developing such a formula was extremely difficult given inconsistent measures of cost of living and challenges in accounting for how different costs of living would be reflected in both spending, but also revenues for the varying districts. It is the authors' contention that cost of living was accounted for in this study as the majority of school revenue is derived from property taxes, which are based on property values, which in turn reflect the cost of living in a particular district.

Finally, this study used two operational definitions to classify school districts and compare results: rural and urban. What is not included in this analysis is a

discussion of suburban school districts. The reasons for this were varied. First, the literature does not discuss suburban schools; it is almost exclusively constrained to rural and urban definitions for school districts. Second, in the review of the literature, specific definitions were provided for the difference between urban and rural districts in Pennsylvania; however, no definition could be found for suburban districts. For those who study or work in public education, intuition suggests that there would be differences between rural, suburban, and urban districts, if those distinctions can somehow be made and operationally defined. Future research may seek to develop those definitions and compare across all three categories.

Finally, this study used differences in PPS on school counseling services to draw conclusions about resources, counselor ratios, quality and quantity of services, and so forth, based on previous literature that examined the correlations between these constructs and spending. Future research may seek to correlate the data specific to this study to actual resource quality and quantity, counselor ratios, and other school counseling services in Pennsylvania.

Conclusion

The literature is sparse regarding the comparison of rural and urban school counseling. While some studies have been conducted, there is much to learn. The purpose of this study was to draw on previous findings related to the quality and quantity of school counseling interventions, as those constructs relate to financial resources for comprehensive school counseling programs. The literature suggests that there is a direct correlation between finances and resources; as financial support decreases, caseloads increase, quality decreases, time with students decreases, and student achievement suffers. The findings in this study suggest that in at least one state, there are significant and continuous differences between the amount spent per student on counseling services when rural and urban districts are compared. While we can lament these findings, as a profession we advocate for equality. We are often successful at advocating for student equality, but perhaps more needs to be done to advocate for our profession, so that we can provide quality school counseling services for all students, regardless of their zip codes.

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