

executive summary

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REDWOOD CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELING PROGRAM: YEAR 2 IMPLEMENTATION STUDY

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In the fall of 2021, Redwood City School District (RCSD) placed a full-time, district-employed mental health counselor in each of its twelve schools in order to bolster district capacity to support student mental health and wellbeing. Stanford's John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities (Gardner Center) conducted a [Year 1 Implementation Study](#) and followed up with a [Year 2 Implementation Study](#) to further document the evolution of the counseling program and its areas of impact. Focusing on data collected through interviews with faculty, staff, and administrators, the Year 2 study investigated three research questions:

1. What is the role of RCSD's school-based mental health counselors?
2. What are early signals or "lead indicators" of the value or impact of the counseling program?
3. What considerations might further improve the program as it moves into Year 3?

Data indicate that counselors are engaged in efforts to support mental health and wellbeing across three levels or domains:

Individual. Counselors provide tiered support for students and families. Tier 1 strategies introduce students and their families to the knowledge, language, strategies, and services they can use to recognize, express, and address their needs; Tier 2 supports provide more targeted and tailored interventions to address specific mental health challenges; and Tier 3 supports address the most chronic, complex, and/or acute mental health challenges.

Setting. Counselors invest in four areas of school-level capacity building that are known to support mental health and wellbeing: adult capacity; early identification and attention to root causes of students' mental health-related challenges; school culture and climate; and continuous learning and improvement.

System. Under the direction of and in collaboration with the lead district clinician, the counseling program contributes to district capacity in three key areas: leadership; data practices and systems; and crisis response.

Our data indicate that counselors' efforts across all three levels are contributing to a few early or "lead" indicators of impact. For example:

- School faculty, staff, and administrators observe that students are developing knowledge, skills, and language that facilitate and support their mental health and wellbeing.
- School faculty, staff, and administrators express a profound sense of relief knowing that someone with mental health expertise is on campus, accessible to students and families, and present as a thought partner. One site administrator noted:

I don't know what I need to say to make sure these positions don't go away... this is one of the most important positions on campus in terms of ... making sure that we have a proactive approach to mental health as opposed to what I would say we had before, which is a reactive approach to mental health. ... There's no amount of money that can be put on that. I know how much they cost, and they're well worth it.

- School faculty, staff, and administrators perceive that the counseling program is improving conditions for teaching and learning, specifically by contributing to a reduction in classroom disruptions and improvements in the quality of adult and student presence in the classroom conducive to teaching and learning.

Based on findings regarding the role of counselors and emerging domains of impact, the research brief concludes by offering three considerations that could inform district efforts to further advance the impact of the counseling program: expand implementation of Tier 1 strategies via mechanisms beyond the counseling program; expand district capacity to evaluate outcomes related to mental health and wellbeing; and deepen integration of counselors into each school community.

As this program enters its third year, there are opportunities for many who are invested, engaged, and impacted by the counseling program to ensure that the work is not only supported and sustained, but also continues to advance the capacity of individuals, settings, and the system itself to support mental health and wellbeing.

This research was conducted as part of the [Stanford Redwood City Sequoia School Mental Health Collaborative](#), a partnership of the Redwood City School District, Sequoia Union High School District, Stanford's Center for Youth Mental Health and Wellbeing, and Stanford's John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities to build district capacity to support mental health and wellbeing. This work is generously funded by Stanford's Office of the Provost through the Office of Community Engagement. For more information on RCSD's counseling program, please contact Ana Paula Garay at agaray@rcsdk8.net. For more information on the implementation study, please contact Dr. Kristin Geiser at kgeiser@stanford.edu.