

Key Policy Letters from the Education Secretary and Deputy Secretary

June 30, 2014

Dear Colleague:

As educators across the country work to empower all students to meet the academic and career preparation demands of the 21st century, the role of school counselors has never been more important. School counselors are often the vital link between students' aspirations for the future and tangible opportunities for postsecondary success. They are also particularly important for our neediest students, who require expert and accessible guidance as they navigate a challenging and complicated college admissions and career preparation landscape. As State and local educational agencies (SEAs and LEAs) prepare for the start of the 2014–2015 school year, I want to call attention to the urgent need for highly effective school counselors and discuss the importance of amplifying the impact of school counselors on students' academic success, social-emotional well-being, and college and career readiness.

If the nation is to meet President Obama's goal of having the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020, it is imperative that all students have consistent access to school counselors who possess the training and skills to help students reach their highest aspirations. School counselors are pivotal in helping students manage their academic programs as well as the inevitable life events that may threaten students' ability to succeed in school. Yet, as the Civil Rights Data Collection recently found, one in five American high schools operates without any school counselors on staff (<http://www.ed.gov/blog/2014/03/five-new-facts-from-the-civil-rights-data-collection/>). This is an untenable situation for millions of students who need the support of site-based school counselors, whose job it is to ensure their students' success.

Schools that do employ counselors may not use them to full advantage. Despite the critical role school counselors play in supporting students' college and career readiness, they often are asked to perform many "non-counseling" duties that can distract from their core work and ultimately leave students without the individualized attention they need to complete their academic course work, successfully navigate the college admissions and financial aid processes, and/or prepare for productive careers. Increasing the number of students who graduate from high school ready for college and careers requires that all students benefit from a holistic support system that ensures consistent access to effective school counselors.

Schools and LEAs should support their school counselors by providing them with the time, space, and resources they need to work effectively on behalf of students, while also holding them accountable for measurably improving the college and career readiness of the students they serve. Doing this well will require that SEAs and LEAs make wise investments in professional development for school counselors, create or provide data platforms that can enable school counselors to extend their impact and reach all students, and provide high-quality training for principals and teachers so they understand how to most appropriately utilize and build on the capacities of school counselors.

Additionally, schools and LEAs can further support student success by engaging school counselors in a leadership capacity to serve as trainers and providers of professional development designed to improve all educators' understanding of the college awareness, admissions, and financial aid processes. This strategy could help school counselors focus their energies on meeting students' academic, social-emotional, and college- and career-readiness needs, especially those of the many first-generation college-bound students who are now graduating from our high schools. A systemic and sustainable approach to supporting school counselors in meeting increased professional demands should include a

consideration of how federal funds and programs can help improve and expand the reach of school counselors. To that point, please find attached a list of federal initiatives and programs that may support the hiring, development, and retention of effective school counselors, including school counselor-led professional development activities.

Decades of professional experience confirm—and an emerging body of research indicates—that school counselors play a critical role in helping to ensure that our nation's students graduate from high school ready for college and careers. Without the support of school counselors, millions of students would neither graduate from high school nor fulfill the essential requirements of the college admissions and financial aid processes. I urge SEAs and LEAs to use the summer months to strategize and develop policies and programs that enable school counselors to become more effective at helping greater numbers of students—especially low-income students, minority students, students with disabilities, and English learners—successfully access postsecondary education or career opportunities.

I am grateful to you and our nation's school counselors, who strive to meet the varied and complex needs of students and their families.

Sincerely,

/s/

Arne Duncan

Enclosure