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### Commentary: On School-Based Counseling Policy and Evaluation

Christopher A. Sink  
*Old Dominion University*, [csink@odu.edu](mailto:csink@odu.edu)

Jay C. Carey  
*University of Massachusetts–Amherst*, [jcarey@educ.umass.edu](mailto:jcarey@educ.umass.edu)

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## Commentary—On School-Based Counseling Policy and Evaluation

Christopher A. Sink  
Old Dominion University

Jay C. Carey  
University of Massachusetts, Amherst

### Abstract

The writers of this commentary advocate for increased attention to school-based policy development, effective policy implementation, and high quality policy research across the world. A new organization (International Society for Policy Research and Evaluation in School-Based Counseling) focused on these topics is introduced. In closing, the article contents comprising the first issue of Society's scholarly journal are overviewed.

### Introduction

School-based counseling exists in various forms in at least 90 different countries (Harris, 2013). The delivery of preventive and remedial counseling services for students and families in schools is being used to address a diverse set of societal issues including, for instance, poverty, threats to public health, violence, educational inequity, mental health, workforce development, inclusion, and economic development. Diverse services are organized by several different implicit or explicit models and are delivered by individuals from diverse disciplinary backgrounds including: teaching, psychology, social work, and professional counseling. In most schools in North America and internationally, these school-based counselors are helping professionals with similar roles but also function in ways that are appropriate to their context.

In some countries, there are attempts to delineate the role and activities of school-based counselors and thereby to distinguish between "appropriate" and "inappropriate activities." Ultimately the debates over role and activities are debates about public policy. The ultimate issue to be resolved for the international school-based counseling community is to delineate the optimal role for counselors in schools within each given context. Clarifying this issue will inform decisions at national, state/province, and local levels about how to promote high quality counseling in schools.

Furthermore, "school-based counseling" is an inclusive term that refers to the intentional incorporation of the foundational principles, approaches, and techniques of counseling in schools to improve the lives of students. The International Society for Policy

Research on School-Based Counseling (ISPRES) assumes that there is no one orientation to school-based counseling that is most appropriate across all contexts. Rather, we accept that different approaches to school-based counseling will be more or less effective depending upon the degree to which they are properly attuned to the situation in which they are being implemented. We believe that research is needed to help determine which approaches are best attuned to a given context and what public policies will best promote effective practice within that context.

ISPRES maintains that such debates are very healthy if they are informed by research and if they are bound by context. Without research such potentially healthy debates can degenerate into political posturing for self-interest. Failing to understand that an appropriate role can only be defined with respect to a particular context can result in the imposition of particular approach to school-based counseling practice in contexts where a different approach would be more appropriate and effective. Because the term "school counseling" carries connotations related to the appropriateness and inappropriateness of certain counseling activities, ISPRES uses the term "school-based counseling" to describe the main focus of its concern.

### Policy Research

Policy research related to school-based counseling is a nascent discipline (Aluede, Carey, Harris, & Lee, 2017). This notion relates to research that seeks to understand the relationships between public policy and practice in order to ensure that policies are based on the highest quality information. To date, very little policy research has been conducted related to school-based counseling. Policy research produces systematic and objective information that the policy community can use to make informed decisions related to the creation and implementation of programs intended to improve people's lives, and society. If policy makers are grounded in the findings of rigorous research, programs will be effectively designed and implemented; effective programs will be continued, and ineffective programs will be redesigned or discontinued—thereby improving the lives of the recipients of the programs' services and benefits. Moreover, rigorous research will identify the unintended negative effects of policies and programs so

that these problems can be remedied (Rallis & Carey, 2017).

### **International Society for Policy Research on School-Based Counseling (ISPRESOC)**

As alluded to above, ISPRESOC is a global organization that is heavily invested in the issues related to school-based counseling policy development, implementation, and evaluation. Here, the Society's goals, foci, and history are summarized. For those who are interested in collaboration or would like to join, we encourage a visit to the Society's website: <https://qshimunoz.wixsite.com/ispresoc>.

#### **Goals and Foci**

The ISPRESOC is a scholarly society of university-based researchers, graduate students, educational policy-makers and educational policy advocates. The overall goal of the organization is to promote the development, well-being and rights of children and youth to a high quality education, worldwide, through the assurance of their access to outstanding school-based counseling services. To achieve this goal, ISPRESOC works to:

- promote the use of high quality research and evaluation methods in policy studies related to school-based counseling so that the quality of the information generated is valid and useful;
- enable international collaborations on critical policy research and evaluation projects in school-based counseling;
- facilitate cross-national research and evaluation projects related to school-based counseling to generate new knowledge and understanding;
- disseminate the findings of important policy research and evaluation projects;
- facilitate communication among policy researchers/evaluators, policy makers and policy advocates to help identify research and evaluation needs related to school-based counseling and to enable the generation of useful information and the effective use of findings; and
- encourage and enable graduate students to focus their developing research programs on policy research and evaluation.

#### **History of ISPRESOC and Operational Strategies**

ISPRESOC was founded in 2017 by the chapter coauthors of the *International Handbook for Policy Research in School-Based Counseling* (Carey, Harris, Lee, & Aluede, 2017). The creation of this Handbook provided the first opportunity for international dialog about the state of the art of school-based policy research and potential ways to improve the quality of the information that is available to the policy community

through research and evaluation. This discussion prompted the formation of an international society to promote rigorous policy research that has the following operational principles. ISPRESOC:

- functions as a scholarly society not professional organization. Thus, the society is concerned with promoting the conduct of meaningful policy research and access to the information that results from this research;
- respects the value of students' access to quality school-based counseling;
- affirms that a variety of different models and approaches can be effective for delivering services;
- respects the need for and operation of professional counseling associations that do engage in policy advocacy;
- seeks to collaborate with these counseling associations by facilitating the conduct of rigorous policy research that is a necessary foundation for professional advocacy;
- respects the role that government-based policy has in creating public policy to ensure access to high quality school-based counseling services; and
- seeks to facilitate the policy research that policy makers need to develop and implement sound public school-based counseling strategies.

#### **National Policy Research and International Policy Research Agendas**

While the need for high quality policy research related to school-based counseling is widely recognized around the world, the discipline of policy research in school-based counseling is still in its infancy. Furthermore, the developing field is hampered by the fact that few attempts have been made so far to look at policy issues and research from an international perspective because policy research has been referenced to specific national (or even subnational) contexts. Both policy research within national contexts and cross-national comparative research are needed (Aluede et al., 2017; Martin, Morshed, & Carey, 2017). We certainly advocate for increased collaboration among scholars, students, and practitioners to establish an international network for this endeavor. The journal launched with this issue is an important step to create a meaningful forum for such collaboration.

#### **Introducing Journal of School-Based Counseling Policy and Evaluation (JSCPE)**

ISPRESOC is pleased to release volume 1, issue 1 of JSCPE. The goal of the journal outlined earlier is to promote a serious international conversation among policy makers, policy advocates, and policy researchers about the need for innovative and wide-ranging school-

based counseling policymaking that is founded on scientific evidence and rigorous evaluations. Articles in this issue represent three primary areas of interest: reviews of school-based counseling in the US and China, mental health issues, and career development in support of college and career readiness. Lauterbach and her colleagues have set the stage for extended policy discussions around standards-based comprehensive school counseling in the United States. This literature review is particularly germane as counseling scholars and practitioners across the globe are looking to adapt aspects of the ASCA (2012) National Model as a framework for their school counseling programs. The review shows that research on school counselors' beliefs, knowledge, and practice can assist policy makers and school-based counseling professionals, practitioners and educators to better implement standards-based comprehensive school counseling. Shi's overview of school-based counseling in mainland China is a useful follow-up article. It demonstrates the need for further policy development, implementation, and research to enhance evidence-based practice across this vast nation. The question for Chinese counselor educators is whether they want to emulate programs and practices from the West or establish their own contextually relevant strategies and frameworks. Perhaps a hybrid approach will emerge.

The remaining three articles explore important areas for policy discussion and research. Two papers examine mental health issues in American schools. Christian and Brown address the roles and responsibilities of school-based mental health counselors and how they can collaborate with more traditional school counselors. As a pertinent follow-up article, Peabody and her colleagues overview an effective program called the Primary Project that targets the psychological well-being of young children. It appears that with some revisions, this program could be replicated internationally. Finally, Falco and Steen add their well-researched literature review to this journal issue addressing the use of school-based career development to support college and career readiness. Major implications for school counseling research, evaluation, and policy are included. It is our hope that these articles will lead to fruitful international debate among school-based counselor educators, students, and practitioners. We welcome feedback and differing viewpoints.

#### Author Note

Christopher Sink is Batten chair and professor of Counseling and Human Services at Old Dominion University. He is also the editor of the Journal of School-based Counseling Policy and Evaluation (JSCPE).

Jay Carey is a professor in the Department of Student Development and Pupil Personnel Services and Associate Director at the Ronald H. Frederickson Center for School Counseling Outcome Research and

Evaluation (University of Massachusetts, Amherst). He is also the chair of the Executive Committee of International Society for Policy Research and Evaluation in School-Based Counseling (ISPRESOC).

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Christopher Sink, Department of Counseling and Human Services, Darden College of Education, Old Dominion University, 4301 Hampton Boulevard Norfolk, VA 23529. E-mail: csink@odu.edu

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