School Counselor Suicide Response: A Final Rejoinder

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In this article, we provide a summary of responses to Gallo and Wachter Morris (2022). We provide additional considerations based upon contributing authors' perspectives and concluding thoughts on how to move forward on issues specific to school counselors' roles in suicide prevention, assessment, and intervention in K-12 schools, as well as recommended considerations for school counselor educators and practicing professional school counselors.

We are grateful to the editors and guest editor of *Teaching and Supervision in Counseling* for welcoming this important conversation into the pages of this journal. We are also thrilled to have talented scholars and authors help us further identify some key factors to consider in training future school counselors on the school counselor's role and professional identity. This is particularly important as school counselors are working to support K-12 students who are facing ongoing mental health concerns in schools, including an increasing prevalence of suicidal ideation and behaviors and school counselor educators are working to train school counselors for a K-12 system that is still adapting to the needs of students and educators in a post-COVID era. In this rejoinder, we will respond to each of the four responses to the initial article in this special section. Then, we will discuss what we see as key next steps for school counseling practitioners and school counselor educators to support the mental health and wellbeing of K-12 students in schools. Finally, we will summarize key takeaways to consider as the field moves forward.

School Counselor Professional Identity

In her article, Gibson (2022) highlighted a crucial, but under-discussed, piece of this ongoing debate regarding school counselors and suicide assessment—the professional identity development of school counselors. School counseling as a field has undergone several shifts during its history. With its roots based in vocational guidance, the field has grown and transitioned as the needs of the United States have changed. These shifts show the responsiveness of school counseling to the ever-changing needs of K-12 students and families in the United States, but it also necessitates an ongoing examination of how those in the profession and those being trained to join the profession are prepared for those changes, particularly when they are being guided by different professional associations that may not always agree on central aspects of school counselor identity (Akos & Duquette, 2022).

Gibson (2022) highlighted several places where there may be conflicting messages around vital aspects of the field, including, but not limited to, directions around the role to play in suicide prevention, assessment, and intervention. We agree. Our position is that school counselors are trained as counselors with expertise in K-12 school settings. With the ongoing and growing mental health crisis faced by children and adolescents, school counselors must coalesce as a field around the fact that both our training and our calling provide us with the knowledge and skills to support youth who are facing mental health crises, such as suicide. Although our format of responding to suicide will invariably differ from colleagues in private practice, clinical mental health organizations, or universities,

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that approach does not mean that school counselors are not trained to identify students at risk, use suicide risk assessments appropriately, communicate effectively and ethically with students and caregivers about suicide, and support students and families in navigating the possible next steps for crisis stabilization. That approach is the crux of the argument that we make in Gallo and Wachter Morris (2022). The field of school counseling broadly, including school counselor educators, professional school counselors, and members of the associations and organizations that provide support and guidance to the larger counseling field, can understand that school counselors are vital to providing support and intervention around youth suicide. If, as a profession, we send a message that school counselors are practicing outside of their scope of competence to assess for suicide, then we are doing a grave disservice to the K-12 students we serve and to their families. This is true even with legal cases decided against school counselors who did not follow proper protocol around notification of caregivers or who did not appropriately use suicide risk assessments. We might argue that this is even more of a rationale for ensuring that school counselors-in-training and practicing school counselors receive ongoing training around suicide prevention, assessment, and intervention.

We also want to touch briefly on the ongoing debate between whether school counselors are counselors first or educators first—a conversation that has been ongoing for decades. This constant debate certainly contributes to confusion in school counselor identity and the way that school counseling professionals may define themselves differently. We recommend DeKruyf and colleagues (2013), as well as manuscripts within the Professional School Counseling special issue anchored by Levy and Lemberger-Truelove (2021) as sources of guidance on how to help school counselors see themselves with a unified educator-counselor identity that helps integrate these occasionally conflicting roles. These resources can also help school counselor educators identify ways to help school counselors in training build a unified identity.

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

Goodman-Scott and colleagues (2022) highlighted an important vehicle for suicide prevention and intervention in the schools in their response regarding multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS). We concur that MTSS is an excellent way to conceptualize how school counselors can reach students regarding any number of issues, including suicide prevention and intervention. Other scholars have highlighted how MTSS can be used for prevention, identification, and intervention in different forms of self-directed violence, including non-suicidal self-injury (Wester et al., 2018) and suicide (Granello and Zyromski, 2019; Pianta, 2021). Goodman-Scott and colleagues also discuss the importance of incorporating "culturally sustaining, antiracist practices; data; prevention; and screening" (p. 2) throughout MTSS activities related to suicide prevention and intervention.

Another important aspect of incorporating suicide prevention efforts in school-wide programming includes readiness planning with your school community. Erbacher and colleagues (2015) recommended four steps to prepare adequately when working within school systems. The first step is with engaging school administrators, including school board members and other key stakeholders. Procuring support is important to reducing barriers later in the process. Step two involves bringing people together to start the planning process. School-wide prevention planning involves school staff and community partners and will require buy-in from both groups to be successful. This also requires knowledge of school resources, including personnel skill sets so trainings can be planned accordingly. The third step is to provide key players with basic information about youth suicide and suicide prevention. This is an opportunity to educate others, especially parents and teachers about warning signs and risks of suicide, the increasing rates of youth suicide, and dispelling myths of suicide that are salient for individuals who are not as well-versed in the literature. Lastly, the final step is to develop an overall strategy. This includes evaluating what policies and procedures the school already has in place. Data could also be analyzed regarding the existing programs, how well the

programming in place meets the needs of the school, or in the absence of updated programs, could also be performed around the overall needs of the student body (see Wachter Morris et al., 2021). This could include a needs assessment to examine how ready the school is for prevention programming and what capacity they have to incorporate prevention programming. Considerations for different groups of students should also be incorporated and tailored specifically to the needs of the student body and the community the school serves. One thing to note is that these four steps require the use of both the educator and counselor skillsets simultaneously, underscoring the value of adopting a unified educator-counselor identity.

Lastly, Goodman-Scott and colleagues call attention to the importance of evidence-based programming. Incorporating evidence-based practices and programming into school counseling has been a focus of the profession for many years, and this is especially true when it comes to suicide prevention. We encourage school counselors and counselor educators to use programs that have been supported by research. When used in schools, these programs should be carried out with fidelity. The Suicide Prevention Resource Center (https://sprc.org/resources-programs) provides a database of searchable programs users can access to find programs that are evidence-based.

A Wrap-Around Approach to Suicide Prevention

In Dari and Gay's (2022) response, the authors focus on the importance of wrap-around services in connection with suicide assessment and intervention. The inclusion of the family, community, and school members involvement for a student's treatment and recovery are important considerations (Henry & Bryan, 2012). In addition, the emphasis on the cultural component within the treatment services is another valuable layer worth exploring. Mental health challenges create a heavy burden not only for the individual, but also for the families trying to cope with the stressors of suicide. Even families that have strong support systems may find themselves in need of additional resources

outside their knowledge base. School counselors who have created partnerships with outside agencies, including counseling agencies, treatment centers, hospitals, mobile crisis clinics, and even faith-based institutions and cultural brokers, may have an easier time accessing wrap-around services for their students and may be able to leverage community assets as a crucial factor in suicide prevention.

We appreciate Dari and Gay's inclusion of cultural considerations and the explicit mention of the Multicultural and Social Justice Framework (MSJCC; Ratts et al., 2016). We would include the additional reference to Ratts and Greenleaf's (2018) connection of the MSJCC as a framework for school counselors. The counselor who recognizes the need for multicultural and social justice leadership in all areas, but especially in the areas of suicide prevention, can have a large, positive impact in their community. The counselor who demonstrates cultural sensitivity through how they assess a client, the types of resources they offer, and their collaborative stance is more likely to effect positive outcomes (Meza & Bath, 2021).

School counselors work with a multitude of students from different minoritized groups who may encounter additional stressors due to racism, oppression, or discrimination that can lead to increased risk for depression and suicide (APA, 2016). Chu and colleagues (2019) researched how cultural factors can play a key role in predicting suicidal behaviors as well as how they can be protective factors. Specifically, the authors examined how cultural sanctions, idioms of stress, minority stress, and social discord impact an individual's well-being. From their research, Chu et al. (2019) were able to identify ways to better capture the person's experience, feelings, expressions, and symptoms related to their feelings of suicide. Meza and Bath (2021, p. 210-211) also made the following recommendations for suicide interventions to be more equitable: (1) identify cultural risk and protective factors; (2) expand screening to consider racism, discrimination, and acculturation; (3) invest in cultural adaptations of existing evidence-based protocols; (4) identify structural barriers to delivery of care; (5) ensure

inclusivity of diverse samples and analysis of race/ethnicity as key: and (6) provide workforce training in cultural competency and antiracist clinical care. As noted by Dari and Gay, today's school counselor needs to embrace their role as a social justice advocate and understand how cultural stressors can impact a student's life. Our role as school counselors is to not only acknowledge our students' cultures and belief systems, but also to integrate and value them.

The Vital Role of School Counselors

Stone's (2022) response provides some clarification on a few points from her previous article regarding the role of school counselors in suicide prevention work. One focus of her response with which we agree and would like to particularly emphasize for readers is the role of the school counselor as an "information gatherer" when working with students who are experiencing suicidal ideation. We appreciate the clarification that school counselors are indeed trained to carry out a risk assessment and will often be the individual within the school setting most qualified to provide this service for the school community.

As noted by Stone, it is difficult to find reliable and valid measures for quantifying suicide risk; however, we do believe there is utility for those who are trained and who follow ethical guidelines. We believe these tools can fill a need and fit within the role of information gathering. If the school counselor uses the information collected from the tool (i.e., plan, preparatory behavior, previous attempt), then this is also information that can be communicated to the family. As stated by Pisani et al. (2016), the suicide risk assessment aims to identify points of prevention rather than as a tool of prediction. There has been a growing effort within the field to consider how mental health providers reconceptualize suicide risk formulation (Pisani et al., 2016). Jonathan Singer, past-president of the American Association of Suicidology, stated, "Some of the most dangerous advice given to school mental health professionals [is] that we should refer out suspected suicidal risk [in] the same way we approach suspected abuse and neglect. If all school counselors, social workers, and

psychologists agreed that their jobs included screening and assessment, schools would be a safer and healthier place for kids" (personal communication, August 21, 2022).

We understand Stone's use of previous legal cases as precedent for informing the profession. However, the school counselors' clinical decision-making in each of these four cases seems to be the central issue and their failure to contact a parent (in three of the four cases). We agree that relying on a student's self-report as the sole source of information is potentially dangerous, as the student may not be honest when faced with fear about admitting suicidal ideation to an adult. Therefore, a school counselor will need to rely on additional methods of connection to help students become more comfortable as the school counselor may be the only adult they are comfortable telling in that moment. Ultimately, the school counselor must, as with all ethical dilemmas, rely on sound ethical decision making.

Moving the Field Forward

When considering where we, as a field, go from here, and what we need to take from this conversation regarding the role of school counselors in suicide prevention, assessment, and intervention, there are several important components to consider. There are implications for the training of future school counselors and the consideration of pressing needs for professional school counselors in the field. Each of these components has multiple needs and facets to consider.

School Counselor Education

School counselor educators and university training programs have a definite role to play in preparing school counselors who are equipped with the skill and self-efficacy to prevent, assess, and intervene with children and adolescents who are experiencing suicidal ideation (Binkley & Elliott, 2021). Further, we concur that many of the points addressed by other responders are key components of ensuring that new entrants to the profession are skilled in areas that will support effective assessment and intervention, including addressing school counselor professional identity,

conceptualizing interventions from an MTSS perspective, and considering wrap-around services. The combination of these efforts and services magnify the implications of how to incorporate these different concepts in a way that supports social justice and antiracist practices.

One primary challenge for school counseling programs is to ensure that faculty who train school counselors not only train them with the skills and knowledge needed to be a school counselor, but also actively work to dissuade them from feeling that they are somehow less capable of performing suicide assessment and intervention because they are school counselors rather than clinical mental health counselors. If anything, the fact that they are the de facto mental health providers in K-12 schools is all the more reason that they should be trained in ways that provide them adequate knowledge and skill development to be able to competently intervene with students and to communicate clearly and appropriately with parents/guardians. Underscoring and building concepts tied to professional identity; ethical responsibilities, particularly communication with guardians); and the balance of potentially competing roles and professional responsibilities are all key pieces of training relevant to the next generation of school counselors.

Professional School Counselors

The school counselor has responsibilities to the student, the school, and the community in suicide prevention. At each of these levels, the school counselor operates from a lens of cultural sensitivity and from an ethical perspective. When in doubt about decisions, the school counselor consults with others who have knowledge and expertise. At the individual level, the school counselor seeks professional development in the area of suicide assessment to increase their skill development and to ensure they are using best practices. Consulting is a vital skill for school counselors (Cholewa et al., 2020), and can be one way of garnering additional expertise from colleagues and experts in suicide prevention, assessment, and intervention. As available, school counselors can avail themselves of clinical (Becnel et al., 2021) or peer supervision

(Wachter et al., 2008) in cases involving student suicide risk. It would also be important for school counselors to understand how to document activities related to safeguarding the health and well-being of students expressing suicidal thoughts or actions. This would include, but is not limited to, activities related to supervision and/or consultation, actions taken regarding safety planning for the student, and steps taken to contact guardians, or, in the case of risk related to disclosing to guardians, child protective services. As new research is being published, it is also important that the school counselor is actively seeking out new and evidence-based practices to inform their work with students and families.

The school counselor will also recognize the needs of the school in suicide prevention. First, school counselors will assess the needs of their school around suicide prevention and build a program around these needs. The school counselor will seek ways that are developmentally appropriate to address suicide in the building. They will work with teachers, administrators, and other school personnel in the school setting to create a help-seeking culture. A culture that teaches students how to reach out to adults and teaches adults how to approach and respond to students can be crucial to seeking the necessary help in light of suicide. The school counselor will work with administrators and other staff to ensure plans and protocols have been implemented to keep students safe and give guidance to adults when students experience suicidality. If the school does not have a plan that addresses suicide response that follow best practice, it is the school counselor's responsibility to advocate for updating or crafting appropriate, evidence-based protocols. The school counselor can also collaborate with the families of their students, given that families may serve as a protective factor. They can provide parent education nights where they have an opportunity to dispel myths, teach warning signs, and help parents learn how to listen in non-judgmental ways.

Lastly, the school counselor can collaborate with the community in suicide prevention efforts. Every community is different in how they view suicide, so it is important for the school counselor to gain an

understanding of the needs of the community and then get buy-in from its members. Suicide prevention efforts are more likely to be successful with community partnerships and support. Having community support could also assist in reducing much of the shame and stigma that is attached to suicide and which creates a barrier for many people who are struggling with suicide and who do not seek treatment.

Concluding Thoughts

In conclusion, we want to reiterate how crucial school counselors are to students—and particularly to students who are contemplating suicide. Zirkel (2019) examined all of the recent cases related to liability for student suicide and came to this conclusion:

> The bottom line is that, contrary to the previous literature and the prevailing perception, legal liability in the wake of student suicide is not a primary concern. The outcome odds for plaintiffs are low against school districts and – based on the deeper pockets of the district and the lesser legal bases applicable to individual defendants – negligible for school psychologists or other district employees. Rather the compelling reasons for serious and systematic proactive steps to recognize and reduce the risk factors and warning signs of students suicide are (a) the basic mission of public schools to provide emotionally, physically, and cognitively effective education, and (b) the corollary essential ethics of education professions, led by school psychology and school counseling, to safeguard the safety of students… Instead of the fear of liability, which can have negative effects on the stability and fulfillment of these professions, the focus should be on ascertaining and adopting the evidence-based best practices relating to student suicide that are hallmarks of successful schools (p. 30-31).

We wholeheartedly agree. A focus on liability is detracting from the true purpose and research on suicide prevention—to save children's lives. Let us put our energy into a focus on best practices, training, and skill-building instead of faulting a tool that was never made to take the place of a person or to predict the future.

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