

News release

School counsellors can affect positive and significant change, NZ's first study shows

The first study of its kind in New Zealand asks how much more could be accomplished by school counsellors if a more favourable staffing ratio was employed.

It was one of several conclusions in the country's first analysis of the effectiveness of school guidance counsellors, co-funded by the New Zealand Association of Counsellors (NZAC) and the Ministry of Education.

Undertaken in 2019 and involving 30 counsellors in a nationwide sample of 16 schools, data was collected from 490 completed counselling cases.

Using an internationally recognised self-report measure – called the Outcome Rating Scale (ORS) – pre-, during, and post-counselling well-being scores were collected from students.

The gain score – the change in the ORS from 1st session to last – was used to calculate effectiveness.

Using other inferential statistics and clinical indicators of significance, counselling was found to be effective, the study found.

The study's researchers were surprised to find “virtually no studies evaluating the counselling effectiveness, even though counsellors have been a respected part of New Zealand secondary schools since their formal introduction in the 1960s”.

Key points:

- Taken as a whole, students who received counselling changed positively and significantly over time. The effect size (used to determine the clinically relevant size of the change in ORS scores) was .87, which is considered “large” and was similar to or greater than what has been found in most studies overseas.
- Although boys had significantly higher first session and last session ORS scores than girls, both groups had the same average gain score.
- On average, all ethnic groups (Pākeha, Māori, Pasifika, Indian, Asian) made significant gains in ORS scores after counselling.

“The positive findings from [the] study [were] even more notable given the high levels of stress reported by many of the counsellors and the very low staffing levels in schools compared with those overseas,” the study's authors noted.

“For example, in every participating school, the ratio of counsellors to students (1:668) far exceeds the American School Counsellor Association's recommended 1:250, and the NZAC's recommended 1:400.

“More staffing would enable counsellors to work more effectively, experience less job-stress and burnout, and, for students, the waiting time to see a counsellor would be reduced.”

NZAC president, Christine Macfarlane, says the study vindicates the Association's longstanding calls for a greater ratio of counsellors to students, cementing their importance in a young person's life.

“It is of even greater importance in today's COVID-19 environment, with students staying at home and away from their support network.

NZAC, Te Roopu Kaiwhiriwhiri o Aotearoa, is the leading professional Association of Counsellors in Aotearoa New Zealand



“Of course, pastoral staff have some skills to help students, but it is only the professional school guidance counsellor who is able to meet the diverse needs of today’s students and help manage their risks.

“Our school guidance counsellors – who are under-resourced and under-appreciated – need greater financial support to help our young students; not just in secondary schools, but primary schools too.”

For more information and to arrange an interview with Ms Macfarlane or a school guidance counsellor, please call Daniel Paul (021) 400-993.