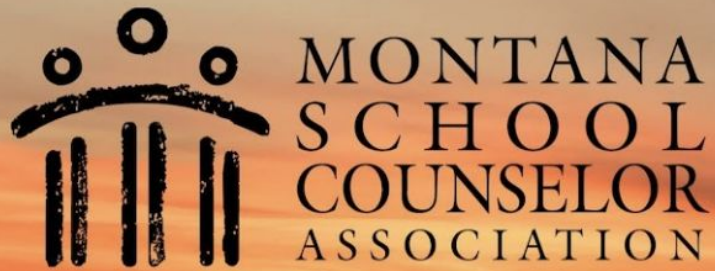


**Understanding School Counselor Crisis Needs
and Challenges: Insights from a Statewide
Survey**



The WHY.

Survey Question focus areas:

1. Who our school counselors are and what their roles look like across the state
2. Familiarity with the ASCA Model and how they use it
3. Crisis preparedness: both proactive and responsive needs
4. The challenges they face and the supports they need
5. What is their perception of how they are heard in your schools and communities

Interesting issues we had to overcome

1. BUGS . .
2. Inability to email/connect with school counselors due to fire walls/security
3. No accurate list of practicing school counselors- only a list of who is certified



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— Cross section of who took survey —

Exhibit 1: Number of Respondents by Individual, School, and District Count

Classification	Individual count	School Count	District count
AA	145	113	8
A	76	71	25
B	83	92	47
C	66	85	65
Other	46	19	29

Exhibit 2. Number and Percent of Respondents by Grade Span

Grade spans served	Number of respondents	Percent of respondents
High school	143	37.0
Elementary	121	31.3
Middle school	109	28.2
K-12	63	16.3
PreK-8/K-8/K-6	15	3.9
Other	10	2.6

Exhibit 3. Percentage of Class 6 Licensure by District Classification and Statewide

Classification	Class 6 licensure
AA	89.7%
A	88.2%
B	81.9%
C	72.7%
Other	26.1%
Statewide	78%



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Survey Findings

Three domains of a school counselor



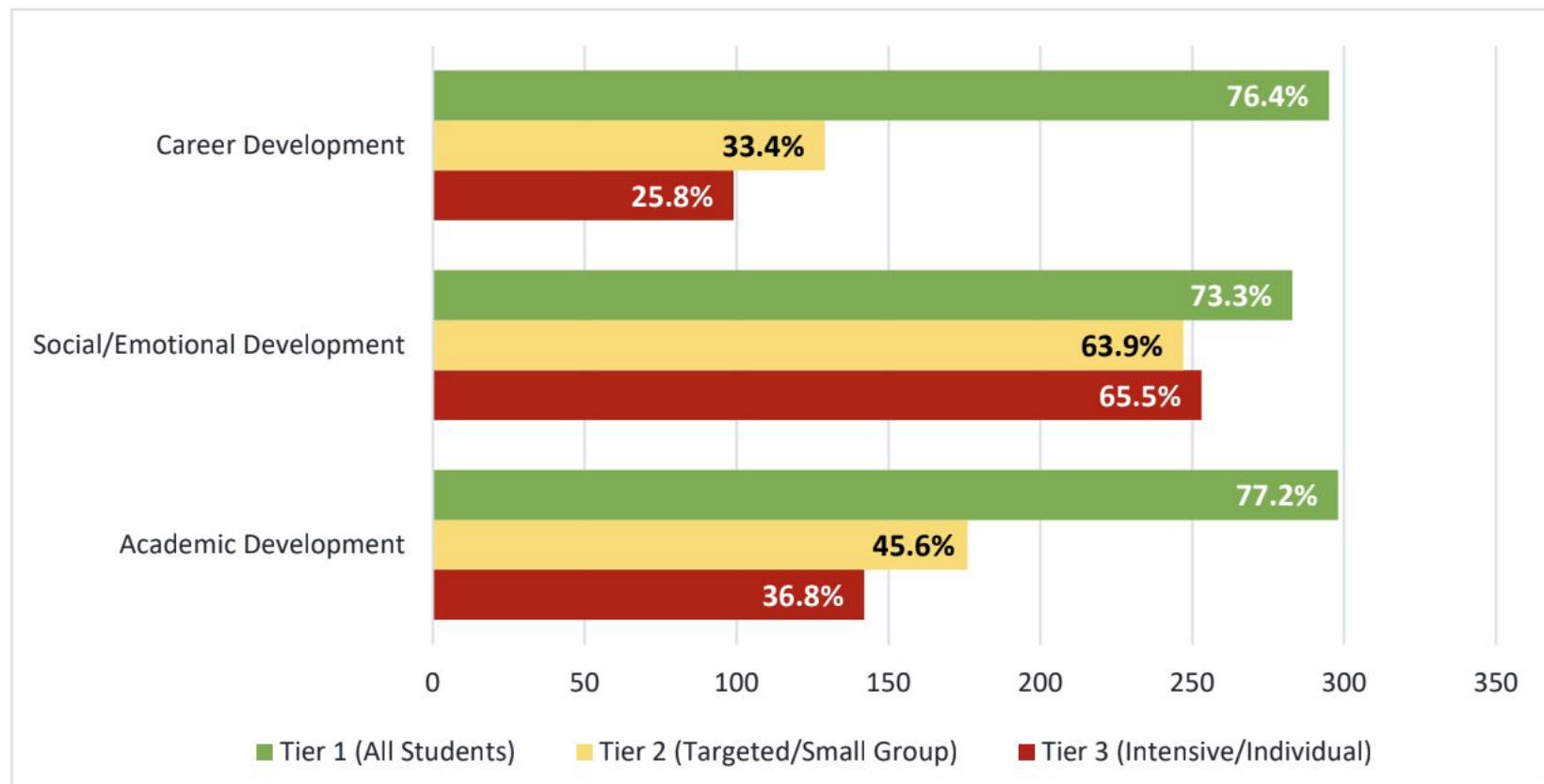
Exhibit 6. Percentage of Respondents Indicating How Much Time Is Spent Across ASCA Domains by District Classification

Academic Development					
Class	Very little time	Some time	Moderate amount of time	A lot of time	Significant amount of time
Class AA	7.3%	18.9%	27.4%	28.7%	17.7%
Class A	7.2%	18.9%	30.6%	27.9%	15.3%
Class B	5.0%	9.0%	34.0%	39.0%	13.0%
Class C	4.2%	12.7%	35.2%	29.6%	18.3%

Social/Emotional Development					
Class	Very little time	Some time	Moderate amount of time	A lot of time	Significant amount of time
Class AA	23.8%	22.6%	28.0%	15.2%	10.4%
Class A	12.6%	19.8%	29.7%	24.3%	13.5%
Class B	9.0%	21.0%	25.0%	26.0%	19.0%
Class C	5.6%	14.1%	26.8%	32.4%	21.1%

Career Development					
Class	Very little time	Some time	Moderate amount of time	A lot of time	Significant amount of time
Class AA	23.8%	22.6%	28.0%	15.2%	10.4%
Class A	12.6%	19.8%	29.7%	24.3%	13.5%
Class B	9.0%	21.0%	25.0%	26.0%	19.0%
Class C	5.6%	14.1%	26.8%	32.4%	21.1%

Exhibit 8. Percent of Services Provided Through Tiered Supports Across the ASCA Domains



Understanding Crisis response

Crisis Response & Impact on Tier 1 Services

- **Examples of crises:**
 - Suicidal thoughts or attempts
 - Significant behavioral concerns
 - Student or community death
 - Traumatic events impacting students or staff
- **Crisis response requires immediate attention and often includes:**
 - Safety assessments and intervention
 - Student and family support
 - Collaboration with staff and community providers
 - Follow-up and ongoing monitoring
- **Impact on Tier 1 services:**
 - Crisis needs take priority over planned prevention programming.
 - Supporting one student in crisis can require **½ a school day or longer**, reducing time available for proactive services such as classroom lessons and school-wide initiatives.

Exhibit 7. Barriers to Implementing the ASCA National Model

Barrier	Percent
Limited time due to competing responsibilities	48.2
I do not have barriers to using the ASCA model	27.5
Challenges with data collection or usage	26.2
Limited resources or materials	26.2
Lack of administrator support or understanding of the Model	21.5
Insufficient training or professional development	20.5
I'm on emergency licensure and not yet certified	6.5
The ASCA Model does not align with my professional philosophy	1.6

Exhibit 16. Percent of Respondents Identifying Social-Emotional and Mental Health Barriers Faced by Their Students



Exhibit 17. Percent of Respondents Identifying Behavior and Safety Barriers Faced by Their Students

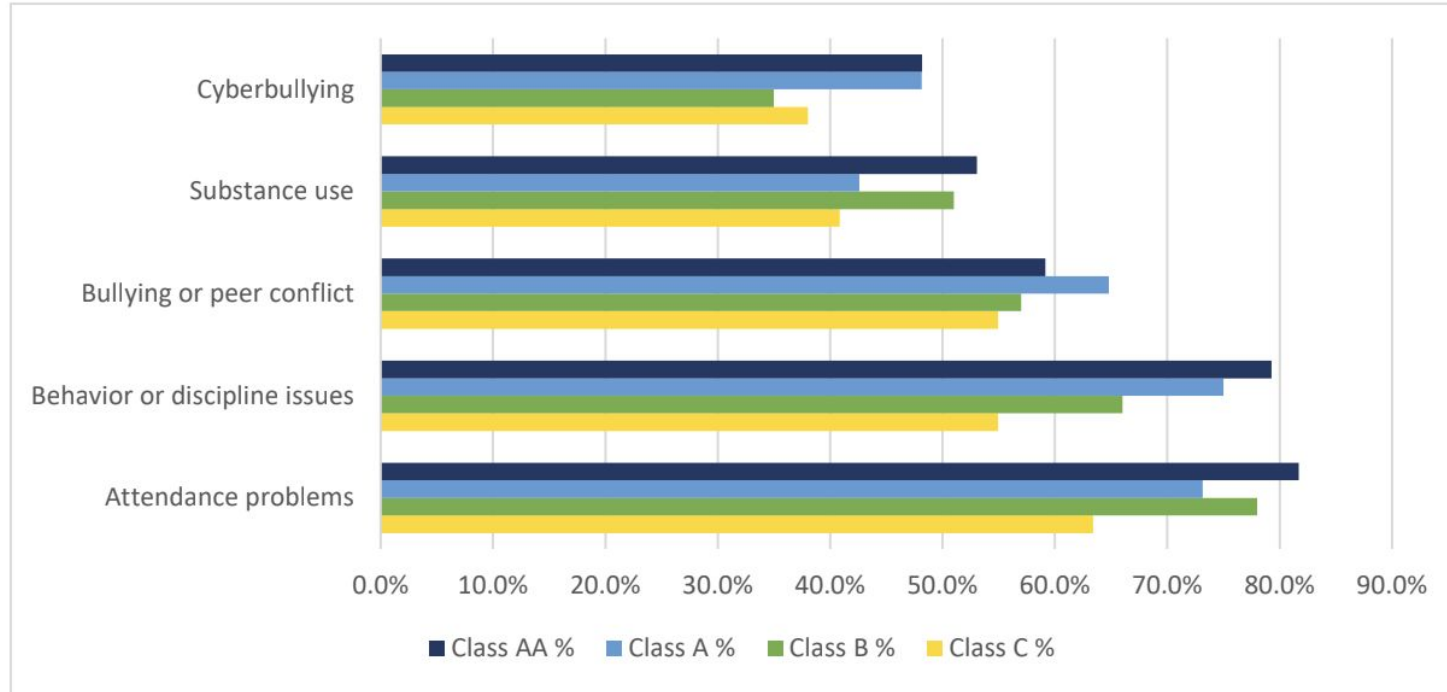
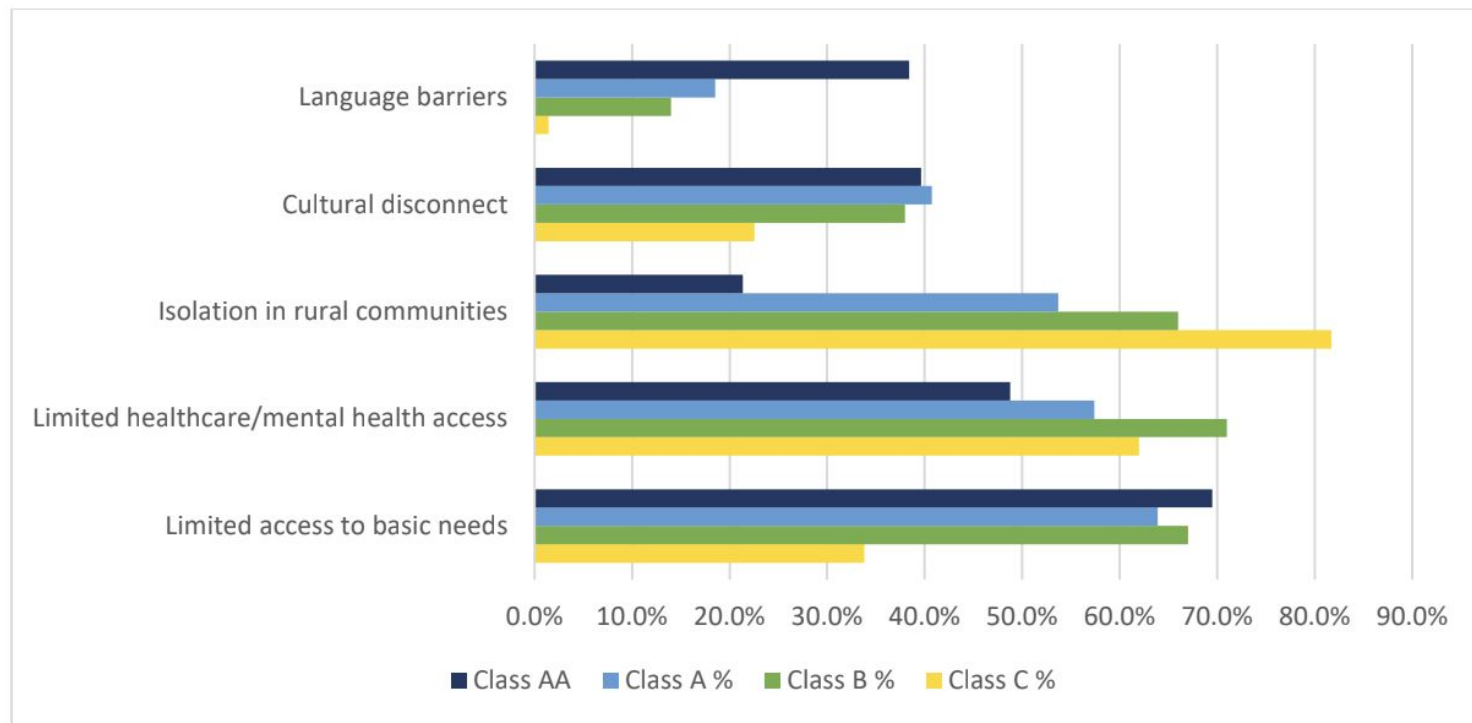
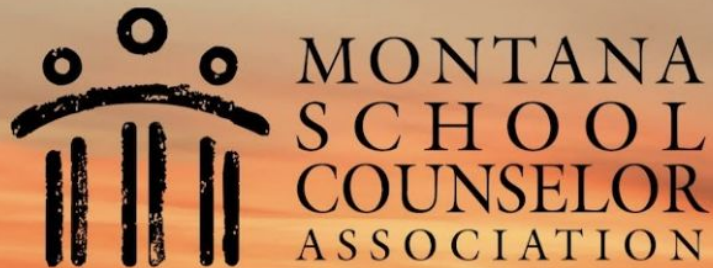


Exhibit 18. Percent of Respondents Identifying Equity and Access Barriers Faced by Their Students



time for absorption ..



Focus Group findings



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Participants across all three focus groups identified the following:

- Tier 1 instruction across all three ASCA domains is valued but highly vulnerable to disruption.
 - Crisis response and non-counseling duties routinely pull counselors away from classroom lessons.
 - Missed Tier 1 instruction is rarely rescheduled, leading to uneven student access.
- Some counselors reported hesitation or limited buy-in by administrators or communities for prevention-focuses Social/Emotional instruction.
- Rural contexts amplify challenges, with constant triage limiting capacity for sustained Tier 1 systems.

Need for continued PD on crisis response

Exhibit 9. Average Confidence Rating of School Counselors to Respond to Situations

Classification	Mental health	Crisis	Grief	Help staff
AA	4.40	4.00	3.96	3.89
A	4.26	4.00	3.99	3.72
B	4.30	3.83	3.88	3.87
C	3.92	3.60	3.71	3.50
Other	3.94	3.50	3.69	3.28

During the focus groups, crisis preparedness and response emerged as the most urgent and emotionally demanding responsibility of the counseling role. Across all three focus groups, participants described regular experiences with suicidal ideation and self-harm, significant mental health needs, family instability, and school/community safety concerns. While many districts have written crisis protocols and some access to training or partners, participants emphasized that practice-level clarity and follow-through are inconsistent particularly when roles are unclear or local resources are limited. Across all three focus groups, participants shared the following:

- Suicide-related crises and broader mental health concerns are frequent and increasing in complexity.
- Counselors often carry the bulk of crisis response and follow-up responsibilities, even when protocols exist.

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

“This is also my second year in this position, and I felt so unprepared for our recent crisis. It has been about a month since, but it is ongoing in other ways, and I am feeling like I am building the plane while flying.”

—*Rural/No Counselor focus group participant*

“We have access through RBHI to telehealth therapists who can do an assessment pretty much immediately, or within an hour or so, and put together a safety plan and make recommendations is critical.”

—*Eastern focus group participant*

- Crisis response systems lean heavily toward reaction; prevention efforts are harder to sustain without time, training, and administrative buy-in.
- Referral pathways and follow-up supports after crises are inconsistent and often limited especially in rural settings.

There were some notable differences in focus groups by region. Participants from Eastern Montana described telehealth and regional partners (e.g., Rural Behavior Health Institute), when available, as critical supports for assessment and safety planning. In the Western Montana focus group, participants expressed concern about unclear or shifting response protocols and emphasized the need for consistent, state-supported templates and expectations. Participants from the focus group for rural areas or sites without a school counselor described limited next-step placement and service capacity and unique operational challenges (e.g., communications during power outages) that amplify risk during crises.

Exhibit 19. Percent of Respondents Indicating Interest in Professional Development Topics

Topics	Percent
Data collection and analysis in school counseling	51.2
Effective small group counseling strategies	47.1
Crisis response and intervention	45.9
Addressing student mental health and trauma	43.9
Legal and ethical issues in school counseling	43.7
Parent Engagement	39.0
Managing competing duties and responsibilities	37.3
Understanding and/or Implementing the ASCA National Model	35.4
Time management and organization for school counselors	31.5
Supporting students with diverse needs	30.7
Career and college readiness counseling	30.7
Supporting Native American Students	30.2
AI in your curriculum	27.6
Using technology in school counseling	22.7
Developing lessons	20.5
Building relationships with school staff and administration	16.1
Classroom management	14.9
Other (please specify)	0.0

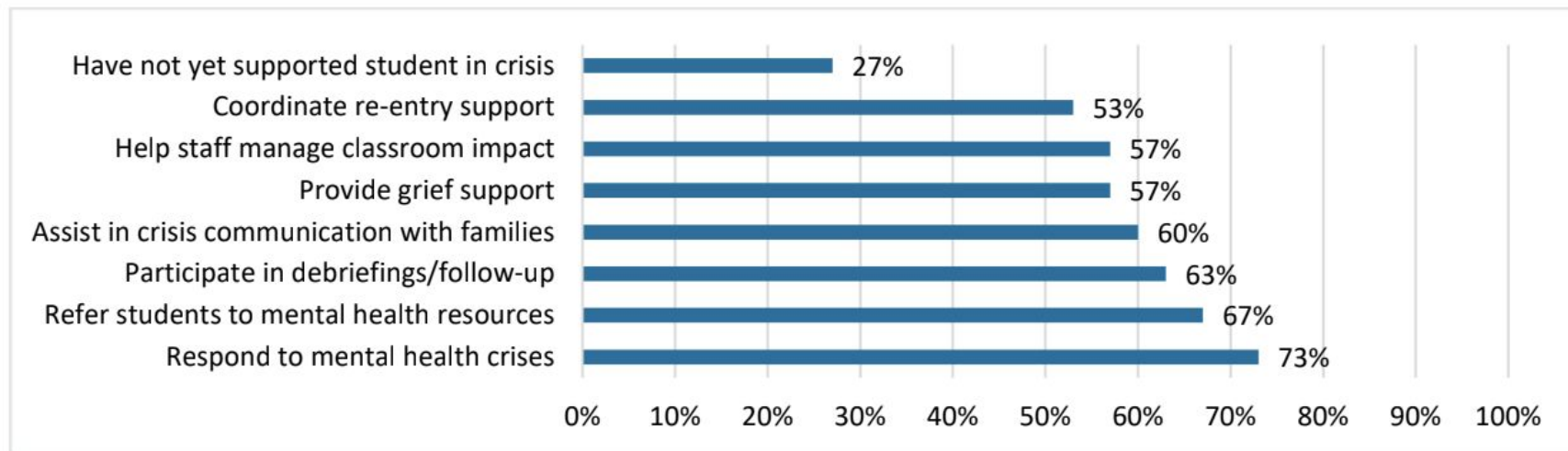
Note. Percentages exceed 100% as respondents could select multiple options.



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Schools w/o school counselors

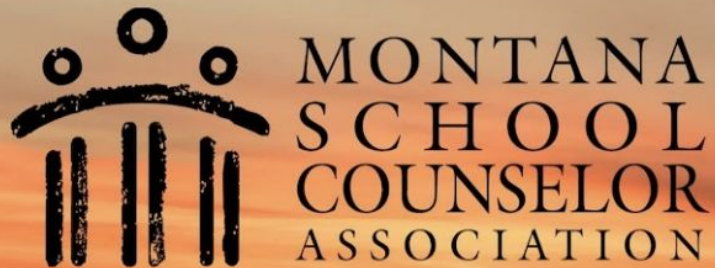
Exhibit 24 Percentage Breakdown of Crisis Response Activities



Schools w/o school counselors

Exhibit 25. Percentage Breakdown of Confidence Level in Supporting Students in Identified Areas

Area	1 Not Confident	2 Slightly Confident	3 Moderately Confident	4 Confident	5 Very Confident
Mental Health Concerns	0%	20%	43%	23%	13%
Crisis Response	0%	17%	55%	21%	7%
Grief Support	0%	25%	54%	21%	0%
Helping Staff After a Crisis	0%	10%	48%	41%	0%



Overall Findings

Exhibit 28. Summary of Key Findings and Implications for Next Steps

Key finding	Primary implication
Highly qualified counseling workforce	Focus on system capacity rather than retraining
Strong ASCA Model alignment	Emphasize implementation supports and role clarity
Tiered services widely implemented	Protect staffing and time for prevention
High crisis response capacity	Preserve counselor availability for safety
Significant amount of noncounseling duties placed on the workforce	Reduce role overload
Ratios exceed recommendations	Address staffing levels
Limited data capacity	Invest in data systems and training
Inconsistent role understanding	Provide administrator training
Widespread student barriers	Coordinate multisystem supports
Uneven career readiness access	Expand early career exploration



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MSCA Action plan

1. **Action Planning for Advocacy** - Use survey findings to strengthen advocacy and awareness. Translate survey data into accessible advocacy materials that elevate the counseling role, clarify barriers, and support alignment with ASCA standards at the school, district, and state levels.
2. **Action Planning for Professional Development** - Design and deliver professional development that reflects variation in district size and setting, aligns with counselors' identified interests and preferred formats, and includes a mix of in-person, virtual, and self-paced options - incorporating enhanced crisis response and staff-support training for smaller districts and advanced data-use training for larger systems.
3. **Action Planning for Building Connection & Providing Support** - Establish and strengthen regional and virtual communities of practice, including structured MSCA-facilitated peer support opportunities, to connect counselors across similar contexts, reduce isolation, and provide debriefing and consultation following significant crisis events - supporting counselors in addressing compassion fatigue and sustaining effective practice, especially for those serving as the sole counselor in a building or district.

Recommendations For State-Level Leaders, Districts and School leaders

- 1. Support professional growth and retention. Provide access to peer support, structured debriefing, and wellness-oriented professional development, release time, mentoring, and professional development, particularly for early career counselors and those serving in small or under resourced districts.**
- 2. Integrate counselors into leadership and school safety structures. Ensure counselors are active members of school safety teams, crisis response planning, MTSS leadership, and school improvement efforts to strengthen collaboration and role clarity and shared accountability.**
- 3. Develop clear, district-level processes to support school counselors following significant crisis events, including scheduled debriefing time, access to peer or supervisory consultation, and temporary workload adjustments when appropriate.**
- 4. Invest in resources to build crisis and mental health capacity in rural and isolated districts. Support targeted funding for crisis response, mental health, and staff-support training in smaller and geographically isolated districts where counselor confidence in these areas is lowest.**

Goal 1: Strengthen Prevention Through Comprehensive School Counseling

Objective: Increase Tier 1 prevention efforts that reduce behavioral health concerns before they become crises.

Action Steps

- Promote implementation of the ASCA National Model across Montana schools.
- Expand universal social-emotional learning, belonging, and career readiness programming.
- Develop resources demonstrating how comprehensive school counseling improves school safety.
- Advocate for protected time for counselors to provide preventive services.

Measures

- Increase schools implementing comprehensive counseling programs.
- Increase counselor time spent in Tier 1 services.
- Increase student participation in prevention programming.

Goal 2: Increase Crisis Preparedness and Response Capacity

Objective: Ensure every school has trained personnel and clear protocols for behavioral health and safety crises.

Action Steps

- Expand PREPaRE and crisis response training opportunities.
- Develop regional crisis response support networks.
- Create school counselor crisis toolkits and response guides.
- Collaborate with school psychologists, administrators, law enforcement, and community mental health providers.

Measures

- Increase number of trained crisis responders.
- Increase schools with updated crisis protocols.
- **Improve counselor confidence in crisis response.**

Goal 3: Clarify the Role of School Counselors in School Safety

Objective: Ensure stakeholders understand how school counselors contribute to safe schools.

Action Steps

- Share statewide survey findings with policymakers and educational leaders.
- Develop advocacy materials outlining counselor roles before, during, and after crises.
- Provide presentations to administrators and school boards.
- Advocate for appropriate staffing ratios.

Measures

- Increased stakeholder understanding.
- Increased districts adopting role-aligned practices.
- Reduction in inappropriate non-counseling duties.

Goal 4: Expand Support for Rural and Underserved Schools

Objective: Reduce disparities in school safety supports across Montana.

Action Steps

- Establish Peer Learning Communities.
- Provide virtual coaching and consultation.
- Connect schools without counselors to regional supports.
- Increase partnerships with postsecondary institutions and community agencies.

Measures

- Participation in PLCs.
- Increased access to consultation.
- Increased implementation of evidence-based practices.

Goal 5: Strengthen Family and Community Partnerships

Objective: Engage families earlier to support student well-being and school safety.

Action Steps

- Develop family education resources.
- Increase communication following behavioral health concerns.
- Partner with community mental health agencies.
- Promote early intervention and referral pathways.

Measures

- Family participation.
- Increased referrals to appropriate services.
- Stakeholder satisfaction.

Goal 6: Use Data to Drive Continuous Improvement

Objective: Use statewide data to inform school safety decisions.

Action Steps

- Continue annual or biannual statewide surveys.
- Monitor behavioral health trends.
- Share findings with stakeholders.
- Use data to guide professional development and advocacy priorities.

Measures

- Annual reports produced.
- Increased stakeholder engagement.
- Data-informed policy recommendations.



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Thank you for your interest in this data.
Please reach out to MSCA's ED Tina Boone at
executivedirector@mtschoolcounselor.org
if you have any questions or would like continued collaboration.

