

Recession-Proof School Counseling: Strategies During Uncertain Times

By: Lisa De Gregorio

With the onset of COVID-19, the world has never experienced a school shutdown on such a scale. Most predictions indicate we're in it for the long haul – anywhere from the next 12-18 months – until greater testing and a vaccine are available. As a former school counselor who now provides professional learning and consultation services nationally, I understand the legitimacy and identity issues that school counselors may face, especially in the midst of this crisis where so much focus has been on the role of teachers in a new virtual learning world. By recession-proofing school counseling programs now, school counselors can secure their job relevance later.

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), students are out of school nationwide in 177 countries, representing over 72% of the world's student population.¹ Edweek also reported that as of May 2, 2020, 45 states, four U.S. territories, and the District of Columbia, have ordered or recommended school building closures for the rest of the academic year. This impacts approximately 47.9 million public school students.²

The efforts of educators across the country to navigate and make rapid transformations in response to this global crisis have been nothing short of extraordinary. In addition to a total revamp of operations, schools have also been providing “grab and go” meals, electronic devices, and/or instructional packets to millions of students and families. With much persistence and grace – even as fellow staff, volunteers, and parents have contracted COVID-19 – educators have been shifting to online learning at most schools and working hard to adapt to this new normal.

For school counselors, this means delivering curriculum and other program activities in more creative ways. This is **an incredible opportunity for school counselors to not just adapt, but go even further by reimagining what their role is in a remote learning world and what it could become in the long term.**

The past few years have seen improved ratios and more earnest commitments from states and school districts to solidify the appropriate role of the school counselor. Yet with schools now bracing for a recession that will be exacerbated by a number of additional factors, school counselors could be facing uncertainty when painful decisions on budget and staffing need to be made.

John Fensterwald, editor at large of EdSource, where he recently published, “The coming storm: big budget cuts, rising costs for California schools,” stated, “Unlike the Great Recession, the pandemic has imposed unprecedented expenses, from food to computer purchases. A return to school could compound staffing needs and add to expenses. Addressing learning deficits and issues of trauma will demand more counseling, after school programs or perhaps an extended year, adding cost pressures for districts looking to cut costs.”³

In order for school counseling programs to continue to thrive during this crisis, school counselors have to predict, prepare, and innovate.

Our students deserve access to comprehensive school counseling programs that promote success and achievement for all through imperative social/emotional, academic development and post-secondary support. When implementing such programs, now is an especially important time to find opportunities for growth – both big and small – and make the most of them.

¹ <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>

² <https://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/map-coronavirus-and-school-closures.html>

³ <https://edsources.org/2020/the-coming-storm-big-budget-cut-rising-costs-for-california-schools/630938>

Although the world has never seen a crisis quite like this, the fallout from the “Great Recession” of 2008-2009 offers much insight regarding what might be expected in our school system. Matt Barnum, Chalkbeat’s national education policy and research reporter, provides key takeaways from research by the University of Washington and others in his outline of “12 Ways the Last Recession Changed America’s Schools — And What That Means for the Years Ahead.”⁴ These include:

- The Great Recession resulted in lasting damage to school budgets. Even years after the initial downturn, the three states with the largest cuts – Florida, Arizona, and North Carolina – were still spending 20% less than they had been before.
- Ultimately about 4% of the education workforce (approximately 300,000 school employees) lost their jobs. States that relied more heavily on state taxes to fund schools were hit harder than those which relied on local tax revenue to fund schools.
- The last recession sparked a major debate about how to determine which educators got laid off, though years of service was often a key factor since novice teachers are usually paid less.
- Greater stress and job uncertainty likely prompted a drop-in morale and a decline in job performance.
- Private school enrollment declined, resulting in the loss of tuition dollars and public schools bearing the cost of educating additional students while budgets were strained.
- States made drastic education policy changes and reforms in order to receive federal funding.
- Students’ academic performance declined, with home displacement and the amount of school funding being factors. Existing disparities in school districts serving more low-income students and students of color widened.

As we attempt to predict what a return to school might look like, we can turn to measures taken by other countries. The [Hatching Results Podcast](#)⁵ recently featured two episodes with San Diego, California native Rachel Pekin, an Upper School Counselor at the Hangzhou International School near Shanghai, China, who offered fascinating insight into what’s ahead. Rachel discussed the transition and protocols enacted as students returned to school in April:

- Documenting temperatures of students at checkpoints to assess safety when entering campus;
- Maintaining about three feet of distance between students in the classroom;
- Minimizing crowding;
- Providing no group bathroom breaks;
- Utilizing plastic dividers between students in the cafeteria; and
- Using window ventilation procedures to allow fresh air since heating and cooling systems are not used while students are present.

Within this context, Rachel said she focused on addressing behavioral concerns and supporting her students to meet graduation requirements. She stressed the importance of school counselors having flexibility, self-care to aid your own recovery, and giving yourself permission to have an “empathy hangover.”

Encouragingly, Rachael reported of her students, post-return: “They are doing OK. They are so happy to be back with their friends. They are very resilient.”

⁴ <https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.chalkbeat.org/2020/4/22/21230992/great-recession-schools-research-lessons-coronavirus&sa=D&ust=1588549340366000&usg=AFQjCNHJaGLZly4D7BuHD8dAYFupyQMEBq>

⁵ <https://www.hatchingresults.com/podcasts>

Similar planning guidelines for reopening schools are being considered by education leaders in the U.S. For instance, the San Diego County Office of Education identified the following as possibilities:⁶

- Modified operations where restrictions are lessened in phases, including measures where students and staff are proactively screened for symptoms, all are required to wear face masks, frequent disinfection measures of school property, hand-washing regulations, and physical distancing practices in all settings.
- Modified operations with a hybrid model to learning. Think distance learning as a complement to in-person schooling a couple days of the week, or a half-day model to limit the number of students in school and in classrooms at any given time.
- Decreased classroom size to allow for physical distancing.
- Increased need for mental health supports due to the strain on coping skills, unhealthy home environments, and possible exposure to (or death by) COVID-19 of family, staff, and friends.
- Altered school calendar with modified attendance policies.
- Altered school day with staggered start times, multiple recess and lunch periods to limit group size, modified bell schedules, and implementation of a block schedule to reduce student movement and cross contamination of classrooms.
- Established contingency plans for virtual school events and ceremonies.
- Decreased student and staff attendance rates due to parents' efforts to mitigate exposure as well as a result of fears and rumors.
- Content-area deficits as students begin the next academic year.

In his Forbes piece, "What Will It Take for Schools to Reopen?," Frederick Hess, director of education policy studies for the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) stated, "The challenges are daunting. Two shifts of students each day would place an unimaginable strain on school transport, and might well prove unworkable. There would be questions relating to contracts and job descriptions. Districts already struggling with ugly revenue projections and outlays related to virtual learning could face new costs. And, of course, schools would need to ensure that teachers and school staff feel safe ... we also need to be thinking hard about what comes next."⁷

Educators are already bracing for a vast range in students' remote learning experiences, social-emotional learning needs, and readiness to learn. While creating an individual learning plan to assess and address these issues can counter this, others like Superintendent Alberto Carvalho of Miami-Dade County Public Schools (the fourth largest district in the country) is rolling out "a massive effort that includes virtual tutors and mentors, an earlier school year start date for its most fragile students, and the continuation of its blended learning program."⁸

These are extraordinary times, but it doesn't mean that it's time to panic! School districts and county agencies are outlining precautions in preparation for recovery as state governors begin to unveil their roadmaps to revitalizing economies. In "A Blueprint for Back To School", AEI sketches out a path for addressing the challenges ahead and reopening schools in a manner that is safe and responsive to the needs of families and communities. It outlines six areas of work: school operations, whole child supports, school personnel, academics, distance learning, and other general considerations. Reassuringly, it calls for districts to assess the need to employ more school counselors and other student services personnel, especially in terms of whole child support.⁹

⁶ <https://covid-19.sdcoe.net/Portals/covid-19/Documents/Pandemic%20Plan%20Resources/Recovery-Plan-Assumptions-and-Recommendations.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/frederickhess/2020/04/01/what-will-it-take-for-schools-to-reopen/#a601b7a37ea1>

⁸ <https://www.edutopia.org/article/school-leaders-debate-solutions-uncertain-2020-21>

⁹ <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/A-Blueprint-for-Back-to-School.pdf>

This is a critical time for school counselors to assert themselves as essential members of the educational team. School counselors can work toward **recession-proofing** their programs by examining what is known about the consequences of past economic recessions and the plans that are being developed.

How? Consider these six key strategies as opportunities for growth:

- 1.) Build Your Knowledge Base and Skill Set.** There are always more skills to learn – new tools, new approaches, and new ways for delivering the school counseling program. The top three skills currently needed are **technical skills**, **data proficiency**, and supporting the **mental health and social-emotional learning** needs of others (as well as your own).

Technical Skills

With the shift to delivering counseling programs remotely, it's the perfect time to build your understanding of online cybersafety, digital etiquette, and [Web 2.0](#) applications, which offer creative ways to connect with your students digitally and will help modernize the delivery of school counseling lessons.

For example, create a free [YouTube](#) channel to upload videos of all curriculum lessons and get comments from students or set up a free [Google Classroom](#), a relatively simple web-based platform that seamlessly integrates with all G Suite services like Google Docs and Google Forms. Google has compiled a [Teach From Home Toolkit](#) as a step-by-step guide, complete with screenshot visuals to help educators teach virtually. For those most comfortable teaching with tools like a SMART board and chart paper, try [Educreations](#) or [Explain Everything](#), interactive digital whiteboards that make virtual collaboration and lesson delivery more engaging, especially in psychoeducational small counseling groups.

For individual counseling and small counseling groups focused on topics like managing anxiety, the school counselor can utilize [Padlet](#) to have each group member create his or her own wall to depict what it is like to cope with anxiety. Students build their wall with various multimedia images or sounds that capture their experiences, or the counselor can choose to have the group create a single wall together about their shared experiences of living with anxiety during these times.

[Flipgrid](#) can also be used to create a virtual representation of the small group or as an outlet for students to share their stories and interact with one another's videos (or not to allow for more privacy). The "grids" serve as an icebreaker or message board to facilitate video discussions on questions called "topics" that students respond to in a tiled grid display.

Look into downloadable apps like [MindShift CBT](#) and [Stop, Breathe, & Think](#) that can be utilized by students in your individual and group meetings for self-regulation and as 'homework' to report back on progress.

Discover more than 70 ways e-learning can be more fun and effective with [DitchThatTextbook](#). In addition, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) offers [helpful online resources for school counselors](#). Remote work is here to stay, so it's time to embrace it and recognize that the added benefit of these skills will undoubtedly broaden the geographic landscape of job searching in the future.

Data Proficiency

It is no longer optional for school counselors to know how to use data in multiple ways--**they must be data proficient**. This includes a) ensuring every student receives the required instruction; b) monitoring progress; c) signaling the need for an intervention; d) measuring the impact of instruction and interventions; e) sharing what was learned; and f) improving the school counseling program.

If training on accessing, collecting, and/or analyzing data in the school counseling program is needed, seek out training and answers to the most pressing questions you have now. *The Use of Data in School Counseling: Hatching Results for Students, Programs, and the Profession* (Hatch, T. 2013) text is a great reference point with practical examples of how a data-driven, comprehensive school counseling program operates. You can even connect with some colleagues to start a [book study group](#) that discusses each chapter together or take an [online course](#) as self-study.

Social-Emotional Learning Development

As a result of their world being turned upside down, the loss of their peer and teacher connections, and the loss of special school events like prom and graduation, millions of students are currently experiencing mass social regression in addition to an academic lapse. A priority for school counselors should be increasing their own knowledge and skills to ensure that students have the social-emotional skills and coping strategies required to face any trauma and manage their emotions. School counselors can take advantage of this time to read new books and participate in professional learning to expand their “toolbox” of activities related to growth-mindset, coping with grief and loss, building resiliency, emotional health, trauma-informed care, and mindfulness and meditation techniques. It’s important to be able to normalize student emotions and give them creative ways to have a voice, maintain relationships, and feel a sense of security.

Make sure to build transferable and soft skills, too. From communication to time management, identify areas to improve and put in an effort to build these skills. Examine productivity levels and [professional competencies](#) to identify areas for growth. Then take advantage of the abundance of podcasts, YouTube tutorials, free software for educators, webinars, and free or discounted online learning that are currently available. For instance, [#SCCHAT](#) held a special webinar on March 25, 2020, about virtual school counseling, which identified opportunities for professional growth like free online courses, guides, and more.

- 2.) **Be Resourceful.** In the face of challenges, how one works through problems, communicates with others, and determines creative solutions when resources aren’t readily available, will draw attention from the supervising administrator. During difficult times, it’s easy to get distracted by excuses and technological mishaps. Instead, think outside the box to make things happen. For instance, rather than allow yourself to be roadblocked by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and other confidentiality parameters, solve the problem by using our ASCA [Ethical Standards](#) while abiding by state/district guidelines so that students get the services they need.

School counselors feeling frustrated by silly misbehavior and ‘chatting’ of students in [Zoom](#) or another video conference platform can explore the settings to mute students upon entry, disable the name change feature, utilize the wait room feature more efficiently, allow only chatting with the counselor, or turn off the chat entirely. View this as a great opportunity to discuss digital etiquette, expectations, and the desired norms of these meetings with students. Seek technical assistance from someone on staff who is more experienced with the tool, or watch online software tutorials for tips in setting up the next one.

If a lot of effort goes into setting up a video conference meeting with students and only a handful attend, don't give up! Feel proud there was a connection made and that those five students benefited from seeing your smiling face. Also, consider collaborating with teachers to drop in to their classroom meetings and make announcements about the school counseling program. Opt to be the next "Mystery Reader" in their class and select a book or excerpt that would offer a good segway to highlighting school counseling support.

Even in a virtual setting, there are many engaging ways to offer schoolwide activities and support school climate and family engagement. Coordinating school wide events like "Mindfulness Mondays" and "Wellness Wednesdays" are inventive ways to remind students that their school counselor is still available. If a College/Career Day or Week had to be cancelled, investigate technology platform options or modify what is offered by posting challenges, activities, games, or simply scheduling "chats" with persons in different careers to be available at pre-set times.

Parent and family education workshop programs don't have to end either. Turn to family mental health professionals in the community to coordinate a series of virtual presentations and discussion groups to equip parents with strategies to identify their locus of control, manage their own fears, and keep themselves healthy so they can better care for their children. Be sure to offer a specific session for non-English speakers or offer a translated transcript.

If a major challenge is access to students and communication issues, consider the alternatives and use multiple methods to find students – email, phone calls, social media, newsletters, school or counseling program websites, surveys, virtual meetings, etc. If privacy is an issue, [Google Voice](#) provides a free U.S. telephone number (chosen from the available numbers in the selected area code) and then forwards calls and messages to a personal phone number. This way parents and students never need to know your real number. For more ideas, take advantage of twitter feeds and private Facebook groups for school counselors at all levels to be inspired and get answers to your top questions.

Evansville-Vanderburgh School Corporation (EVSC) in Indiana is a prime example of inventiveness in that they utilize resources available at local community agencies and communicate school counseling program activities where parents and students are active. EVSC has partnered with PBS to record a combination of K-12 quality lessons taught by teachers, school counselors, and SEL specialists, which are available on YouTube. For instance, school counselors Mr. Allen Woodruff and Ms. Stephanie Smith discussed [teamwork](#) and [growth mindset](#), respectively. Through teaming and collaboration, EVSC school counselors have a collective bank of shared lessons that students across the district can benefit from. The district and individual schools actively post upcoming programming with an ["On Air" schedule](#) to their Facebook pages, as both enrichment and to support the learning of students and families with limited access to the internet.

- 3.) **Stand Out as a Leader.** School counselors should reflect on the degree to which they have been involved in the decision-making process at this time and how they can become more involved. In ["Planning for Virtual/Distance School Counseling During an Emergency Shutdown,"](#) ASCA calls us to actively participate in a multi-disciplinary team to create virtual learning plans, which outline how the school counseling services can continue and identify equity and access issues of students. Be sure to include clear processes for staff to follow when a student or family needs crisis counseling or follow-up support and offer contact information. Advocate for ways you can best assist the school and district in preparation for potential operational and programmatic changes once reopened. Refer to the ASCA

[Virtual Elementary School Counseling](#), [Virtual Middle School Counseling](#), or [Virtual High School Counseling](#) toolkits for ideas in developing the various components of the plan.

Likewise, if your teachers' union has issued an addendum to the contract – either as an interim agreement or Remote Teaching Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) – that outlines the working conditions of union members during school closures, be sure that it accounts for the work expectations and specific roles of school counselors as well. If not, push for school counselors to be included.

Moreover, look for opportunities to advocate for school counseling and the futures of millions of young people across the country on an even broader scale. We need to make our voices heard by writing and contacting state representatives and the U.S. Department of Education, so that the nation's schools receive the funding necessary to offer summer acceleration programs, expand the school day offerings, implement independent study programs, retain staff, stabilize our most vulnerable students, and narrow the digital divide.

- 4.) **Be A Partner.** There is no one-size-fits-all for remote learning. While some parents and kids are annoyed by daily Zoom classroom meetings, others depend on them. Children who once were active participants in the classroom may now find themselves disengaged. Students must understand how to learn in an entirely new way so ask what can be done to support them in being independent learners responsible for managing their time, checking off their assignments, and even raising their hand on a computer or typing into a chat box if they need a question answered. This means finding a way to accommodate *all* students during this *global crisis*, including those with special needs or a 504 Plan in place or who are English language learners. In accordance with state and district regulations, consider how to be a partner to parents and teachers in these circumstances. Offer assistance in scheduling review meetings with parents or reach out to ask if they have questions or need ideas for how to apply modifications at home. [Talking Points](#) is a multilingual website platform (free for individual users and currently free for high-need schools and districts) that sends text messages to parents with language translation without using a personal phone or WiFi.

The level of parental involvement in their children's learning is unprecedented right now. With little notice, parents and students were expected to learn and navigate online portals and multiple platforms with no real frame of reference. Consider whether there are ways they can be supported in their use of technology, from collaborating with a technical staff colleague to record how-to webinars to preparing a Q&A document or one-page of helpful troubleshooting resources. Parents who are illiterate or do not have access to the internet may need to be mailed weekly assignments with contact numbers for the teacher or someone who can verbally walk them through how to complete those assignments, along with a prepaid envelope to return them or instructions for sending photos of the work via a mobile phone.

To a greater extent than ever before, school counselors are dependent on teachers and parents for access to students, especially at the elementary school level, where connection often relies on a parent handing over the phone to their child – and confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. Elementary students in particular are more challenged with remembering meeting times and may not even have an email address. Without a private office for an in-person meeting, school counselors need to consider that at any point someone could walk in on a session or a family member may be sitting nearby listening to the conversation, either of which can impact a student's comfort in opening up.

To help combat this, be an ally to teachers and others on the school team to keep a pulse on how students are doing. Collaborate with the administrator to develop a plan of action for how to deliver and communicate the available school counseling services. Since students are most likely in contact with their teachers, partner with teachers to collect data; join classroom meetings and talk about ways that students and families can reach out; include a school counseling activity in their weekly assignments; and identify who needs additional outreach. Depending on the classroom platform teachers are using, ask if you can be added as a co-teacher to communicate frequently and send lessons and resources.

Also, think about the ways collaboration and assistance is needed from others. What can others on the team do to step in to add support? After all, ***we're all in this together.***

- 5.) Brand and Promote the Program.** When marketing the counseling program, it's important to communicate its purpose and the desired outcomes, and evidence that shows the goals are being met and a positive difference is being made for students. Examining and sharing student outcome data and results is at the core of a data-driven, comprehensive school counseling program. Data can help to create a sense of urgency for change, serve as a catalyst for focused attention, challenge existing policies, engage others in accountable conversations, and focus resources where they are needed most. Now more than ever, track use of time and be intentional in capturing data on the impact of the school counseling program.

Having an "elevator speech" prepared is a good way to identify the critical role of school counselors that no one else on the educational team can do and to articulate relevance. When asked a simple question like, "What do you do?" it is easy to fumble when put on the spot. An elevator speech can help clarify program goals and services provided, demonstrate how school counseling supports the mission and goals of the school, get people excited by what is happening in the program, and communicate the results. How it's said is just as important as what is said so remember that practice makes perfect until it feels natural. Then, share it with the counseling team, feature it on the counseling website or page, include it in the mail signature line, post it on social media, or include it in the next newsletter.

Besides an elevator speech, prepare a brief visual slide presentation or one-pager that provides an overview of the program activities and results for this past academic year, including a "thank you" message to staff, parents, and students for their support. There are many amazing free and user-friendly communication tools available like, [Smore](#), [Canva](#) or [Adobe Spark](#) (currently offering free individual plan trials for two months) that can provide impressive visual templates to market more professionally.

- 6.) Be Indispensable.** Now more than ever, make sure that the school community and stakeholders see the unique contributions of school counselors and how much we are needed. This can mean completing work early, volunteering for tasks, proactively suggesting solutions, or simply being the go-to-person who will make something happen. Yet school counselors need to go beyond this and remain relevant by providing wraparound support to students, families, and staff. Find out what would help most right now by getting their vital feedback. Develop a wellbeing "check in" form or needs assessment and see what bright ideas come out of it. Creating downloadable, easy-to-use resources for parents, like reward and behavior charts for home, a visual schedule for primary aged students, or a sample daily routine or e-learning checklist to keep students engaged in online learning, may all be very appreciated.

If there are concerns for at-risk students whose families already struggle day-to-day with paying bills or keeping a roof over their heads, then prepare and post resource pages that include financial assistance

sites, domestic violence helplines, suicide prevention hotlines, food banks, free face mask distribution sites, etc. [American University](#) has compiled a list of resources during COVID-19, much of which could be useful to share with stakeholders in this regard. [My Undocumented Life](#) provides current information and resources that can help mixed-family and undocumented immigrants and families whereas the [Human Rights Campaign](#) offers suggestions and resources for meeting the needs of LGBTQ students, including a specific tipsheet for school counselors that covers recommendations for actionable steps to take and builds awareness of the challenges they face while social distancing.

Likewise, there is an incredible need to focus on the social-emotional welfare of students right now, so ask yourself how you can provide mental health support. “Developmental experts agree that disruption from the pandemic constitutes an ‘adverse childhood experience’ for every American child,” wrote Anya Kamenetz for [NPR](#).¹⁰

If morale is low, think about what might help everyone feel more connected to school, such as a Virtual School Spirit Week. If check-in survey data shows there is a need for an outlet to assist students, families, and staff in managing emotions and coping with stress, replicate something like the [Virtual Calming Room](#), a website developed by Independent School District 196 Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan in Minnesota, which contains resources for meditation, drawing, visual relaxation, and other stress management techniques.

When schools reopen and students return, **have a plan to help them heal and bring back a sense of security**. The repercussions of this virus will span health, grief and loss, and employment. Many students may face displacement as a result of the economic impact or other changes in their family situations. As school counselors, we need to be ready to assist with this recovery, even as everyone is feeling the impact. Give some thought to the experience of students and families when schools reopen and how to best help them feel less anxious and better prepared for the new precautions and changes to the school day. Perhaps you can participate in a “Welcome Back to School” video normalizing the new expectations and protocols in place while highlighting school counseling program services.

There is no denying that the COVID-19 global pandemic is leaving a permanent impression on the hearts and minds of multiple generations of children and adults and that the financial realities ahead are daunting. The aftermath is too vast to comprehend at this moment, yet the need to innovate and rise above the crisis is undeniable. So *take a deep breath*. Grant extra patience and time for circumspection and self-care. Apply what is known about past economic downturns and current recommendations being made for future school reopening, so that you as a school counselor are able to be there for your students and communities later.

With these simple strategies, ***the time to start recession-proofing school counseling is now.***



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¹⁰ <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/24/842528906/what-it-might-look-like-to-safely-reopen-schools>