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# Development of a Taxonomy of Policy Levers to Promote High Quality School-Based Counseling

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## Abstract

There is a lack of an established framework or taxonomy in the academic literature to systematically analyze school counseling policies. This study was conducted to fill in this gap. Specifically, the researchers propose an initial taxonomy developed based on review of relevant school counseling policy documents and research. The proposed taxonomy has 21 policy levers grouped under seven policy foci covering school counselors' initial competence, continuing competence, effective school counseling practices, planning and evaluation of school counseling, distinct school counselor roles, hiring of school counselors, and the continual improvement of school counseling system. The Taxonomy is still in a developmental stage with a focus on improving its comprehensiveness through studies that identify additional policy levers from different countries. The authors also invite other academics and practitioners to conduct case studies using the taxonomy that will provide important knowledge to further improve the taxonomy.

*Keywords:* school-based counseling, taxonomy, policy, policy levers

Policy research related to school-based counseling is a developing discipline (Aluede et al., 2017). School-based counseling exists in various forms in at least 90 different countries (Harris, 2013). The form that school-based counseling takes in each country is affected by a broad range of contextual factors including the government priorities, laws, and policies (Martin, et al., 2015). Governments provide support to shape counseling in public schools because counseling is perceived to contribute to the public good by addressing national needs. Government policies also influence the practice of counseling in schools through both direct and indirect routes. Some policies shape school-based counseling practice through a direct focus on counseling practice itself. For example, some governments certify school-based counselors in order to assure their competence to practice. Other policies influence the practice indirectly by altering the school environment within which counseling exists. For example, educational policies in New Zealand that have strengthened building-based management

by school principals have resulted in a lessened presence for counseling in schools (Crowe, 2017).

Policy research 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 (Carey et al., 2017). Even in countries like the United States, which has over a 100-year history of guidance personnel and counselors in schools, very little is known about the relationships between public policy, practice, and the quality of services to students and their families (Carey & Martin, 2017). Both policy research within national contexts and cross-national comparative research are needed (Aluede et al, 2017; Martin et al., 2017).

The purpose of the present study was to develop a working taxonomy for organizing and understanding the various policy levers that governments have used to directly influence the practice of school-based counseling. Policy levers are tools used by the government to attempt change and improvement (Bemelmans-Videc et al., 1998). Policy levers are deployed in an intended and gradual manner to attain intended educational outcomes (The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2015, p. 29). These levers also play a crucial role in determining policy success as well as adapting and revisiting the policies. By developing a taxonomy of policy levers related to school-based counseling, we expect to facilitate both national and comparative research that identifies important factors such as (a) the strengths and limitations of the various policy approaches to improving school-based counseling, (b) the necessary conditions for effective policy implementation, (c) the conditions under which the various levers are effective, and (d) situations in which policy implementation may produce unexpected harm. In the following section, we discuss the method of developing the taxonomy.

## Method

The initial draft of the *Taxonomy of Policy Levers Used to Promote High Quality School-Based Counseling* was developed by the two authors based on an analysis of the literature cataloging laws and government policies intended to promote quality school-based counseling. The authors

employed a qualitative content analysis method (Cohen et al., 2007). Broad categories of policy approaches describing the intent of the policy were first identified using inductive coding. Then a structured deductive coding procedure was used to identify different levers within each category (Mayring, 2000). Several strategies to ensure credibility were used throughout the content analysis process. The main formative credibility strategy involved two researchers reviewing the same text and creating codes. Discussions were based on agreement or disagreement of code creation or text categorization. We resolved disagreements before moving on to the next source material. In addition, as described in a follow-up article by Aluede and colleagues (2020), we asked three colleagues from very different countries to evaluate the utility and comprehensiveness of the resulting Taxonomy in providing a description of the policy context in their country. These evaluations were used to improve the Taxonomy.

The structure of the taxonomy was adapted from the OECD Policy Outlook (OECD, 2015). This document provides a useful framework to analyze and compare educational policies focused on enhancing student achievement across OECD countries. The OECD framework identifies policy levers for raising student outcomes by enhancing the institutional quality and system improvement through effective governance. It also provides definitions, policy options, and existing policies in OECD countries for each lever.

To identify specific school-based counseling levers, the authors reviewed key documents on laws affecting school-counseling. They reviewed *A Guide to State Laws and Regulations on Professional School Counseling* (American Counseling Association, 2012) that provides an extensive description of the ways that state governments in the United States influence the practice of school-based counseling. Each state government initiative was included as a policy lever in the proposed taxonomy. For example, the guide identified that 29 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands had established legislative mandates to provide school counseling services in public elementary and/or secondary schools (American Counseling Association, 2012, p. 71). Seventeen states also specified the counselor-student ratio in their mandate (American Counseling Association, 2012, p. 71). The focus on these mandates was included in the Taxonomy through several specific policy levers. For example, a policy lever on mandating that some school-counseling related activities are delivered in schools was included under the focus of "Promoting a distinct counselor role in schools." Two additional levers mandating that schools have counselors and mandating student-counselor ration were included under the focus on "Promoting the hiring of counselors in schools." The two authors also reviewed the general coding document for "State law and educational policies" that was developed as part of a recent study of factors affecting the development school-based counseling in 25 countries (Martin et al., 2015). This document enumerated 16 discriminable ways

that law and government policy affected school-based counseling practice. Each of these 16 ways was incorporated into the Taxonomy. For example, the study identified ways such as the "Specification of a distinct job classification for Counselors in Schools," "Specification of roles and activities," and "Specification of role differentiation between teaching and counseling." The taxonomy included these ways under the focus of "Promoting a distinct counselor role in school."

Finally, the authors reviewed 16 chapters of the *International Handbook for Policy Research on School-Based Counseling* (Carey et al., 2017) that included summaries of laws and government policies affecting school-based counseling in 31 countries, including Argentina, Australia, Botswana, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Costa Rica, Bangladesh, Egypt, Guatemala, Honduras, Hong Kong, India, Iran, Israel, Japan, Kenya, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Nigeria, Panama, South Africa, South Korea, Tanzania, Turkey, Uganda, the United Kingdom, the United States, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe. Relevant laws and government policies were incorporated into the Taxonomy. For example, Köse (2017) noted that the Turkish Higher Education Council has mandated a uniform curriculum for all school counseling training programs across the country and developed a system for monitoring compliance. This program was an example of an attempt to "Assure the initial competence of school-based counselors" through the implementation of a system of accrediting/approving university-based counselor training programs based upon their demonstration of delivery of state-required courses. All the literature that were used as source documents are listed after the reference section.

### The Resulting Taxonomy

Table 1 contains the Taxonomy of Policy Levers. The first column indicates the focus of the Policy Lever. The second column lists the actual Levers. Each of these dimensions are described below, followed by applications for school-based counselors.

#### A. Assuring the Initial Competence of School-Based Counselors

Governments have three policy levers available to assure the initial competence of school-based counselors: (a) licensing/certifying school-based counselors, (b) accrediting counselor training programs, and (c) providing funding to improve the quality of school counselor training programs.

**Counselor licensure.** In order to be able to license or certify school-based counselors the state must institute a process to evaluate fitness of candidates. This process requires the development of standards for competence. These standards may be expressed in terms of as either courses that the licensure candidate has completed or competencies that they have developed during their training. Governments may choose to develop their own

**Table 1**  
**Taxonomy of Policy Levers Used to Promote High Quality School-Based Counseling**

Focus	Policy Lever
A. Assuring the initial competence of school-based counselors	A.1. Licensing/certifying school-based counselors A.2. Accrediting school counselor training programs A.3. Providing funding to improve the quality of school counselor training programs
B. Assuring the continuing competence of school counselors	B.1. Requiring professional development for relicensing B.2. Providing support for professional development education for school counselors B.3. Requiring periodic personnel evaluation of school counselors
C. Promoting the use of effective school counseling practices	C.1. Advocating for best practices C.2. Developing and disseminating resources to support effective practice
D. Ensuring that school counseling activities are planned organized and evaluated well in schools.	D.1. Developing or adopting a model for school counseling practice
E. Promoting a distinct school counselor role in schools.	E.1. Developing a distinct job classification and description for school-based counselors E.2. Developing or adopting a role statement for school-based counselors E.3. Mandating that some school counseling-related activities are delivered in schools
F. Promoting the hiring school counselors in schools	F.1. Suggesting that schools have counselors F.2. Mandating that schools have counselors F.3. Requiring that only qualified counselors be employed in schools F.4. Suggesting appropriate student to counselor staffing ratio F.5. Mandating appropriate student to counselor staffing ratio F.6. Funding school counseling positions in schools F.7. Hiring school counselors and placing them in schools
G. Ensuing that the country's school counseling system continuously improves	G.1. Leading periodic statewide evaluation of the school counseling system G.2. Promoting local evaluation of School counseling programs and activities

standards, adopt the standards of professional school-based counseling professional organizations, or collaborate with these organizations in the development of standards. In any case, it is important that the standards for practice align with the actual work of school-based counselors and reflect best practices.

A process to evaluate the fitness of candidates also requires that the government develops a process to review licensure/certification candidates to determine their competence. Depending on how the standards are expressed and available government resources, this process may involve a review of credentials, a review of actual examples of work, or completion of a written examination. Any evaluation process, like any “selection” tool, needs to be reliable and valid.

**Program accreditation.** As an alternative to the licensure/certification of individual counselors, governments may opt to set up an accrediting system for the programs (typically university-based) that prepare school-based counselors. Accrediting school counselor training programs also require that governments have developed or adopted standards and criteria for high-quality training programs. In addition, governments need to implement a system to periodically review the training programs. This system may include a paper review and/or site visit.

**Funding training program improvement.** The third policy lever for assuring the competence of counselors is providing funding to improve the quality of school counselor training programs. Compared to previous policy levers mentioned earlier, the state or country has less direct involvement in counseling program design or assessment,

and rather it may coordinate the process for determining counseling needs and allocate supports accordingly.

### **B. Assuring the Continuing Competence of School-Based Counselors**

Governments have three policy levers available to ensure that the school-counselors continue to develop further: (a) requiring professional development for relicensing, (b) providing support for professional development education for school counselors, and (c) requiring periodic personnel evaluation of school counselors.

**Professional development for relicensing.** State or government entities may require that counselors must take professional development courses or programs for relicensing. State or government representatives may evaluate the documents or credentials testifying that counselors have completed required professional development.

**Providing support.** Instead of just reviewing the credentials, state or government administrators may decide to actively provide support for professional development. They have several options that they can employ as standalone initiative or choose more than one options. For example, states may identify the need for professional development through a need assessment or qualified professional development providers and contact or approve them to provide such service. States can also decide to evaluate the professional development programs to ensure quality delivery of the programs.

**Periodic personnel evaluation.** Under this policy lever, relevant state organizations may either coordinate the personnel evaluation system or they may monitor existing personnel evaluation systems of school-based counselors. They may also choose to do both.

### **C. Promoting the use of Effective School Counseling Practice**

Two possible levers can be used to promote the use of effective school counseling practices: (a) Advocating for best practices, and (b) Developing and disseminating resources to support effective practice. It is to be noted that the assumption underlying these levers is that effective or best practices are already known through research, practice, experience, or any other means and the role of these levers is to help promote these practices.

**Advocating for best practices.** If states or governments decide to enact this lever, they would most likely identify what the best practices are and encourage schools to adopt the practices.

**Developing and disseminating resources.** Besides identifying and encouraging best practices, states may identify the materials and resources needed for implementing the practice. They may also support schools to access or develop the required materials and resources.

### **D. Ensuring that School Counseling Activities are Planned, Organized and Evaluated Well in Schools**

States or governments can develop or adopt a model for school counseling practice as a potential policy lever to ensure planned, organized, and well-evaluated school counseling activities.

**Developing or adopting a model.** In addition to developing the model, states may take a range of actions to promote its implementation. They may encourage or require schools to implement the model. States may also provide materials and resources to support model implementation. To further promote its implementation, states may provide professional development training and even monitor the model implementation. States developing or adopting the model provide a common framework for practice and evaluation and thus ensure consistency of the counseling implementation. It also makes the counseling activities more comparable across different schools, increases the quality and willingness of implementing counseling services, and enhances feedback and accountability for further improvement.

### **E. Promoting a Distinct School Counselor Role in Schools**

There are three possible levers that the government can use to promote a distinct school counselor role schools: (a) developing a distinct job classification and description for school-based counselors, (b) developing or adopting a role statement for school-based counselors, and (c) mandating that school counseling-related activities are delivered in schools.

**Developing a distinct job classification and description.** Using this policy lever, states draw a clear line between teaching and counseling and creates a clear role description for counseling. The hypothetical strength of this lever is that it provides clarity of role, thus leaving no or little chance of confusion. It also helps establish a common framework for teaching and school counselor roles in schools throughout the state. School counselor role becomes easily comparable as well. On the other side, hiring a fully trained and competent counselor may require more monetary and human resources commitments. It also presupposes the existence of well-developed professional school counselor preparation program that many countries lack. If counselors have a different reporting authority other than schools, it should be clearly stated in order to prevent authority and reporting confusion between counselors and schools. It also requires a high level of coordination between the state and the school to ensure counselors can smoothly operate in school and deliver their services.

**Developing or adopting a role statement.** State representatives can also identify the duties and activities associated with the school counselor role. Like the previous lever, this approach provides some clarity and makes the counselor role more standardized. However, if there is no

state compliance system to monitor the implementation of the role statement, it may not actually be implemented in schools.

**Mandating delivery of some school counseling-related activities.** States may mandate that school counseling-related activities will be delivered in schools, and they may also monitor compliance. The potential strength of this lever is that it ensures that schools comply with the state mandate.

## **F. Promoting the Hiring of School Counselors in Schools**

There are several policy levers to promote hiring of school counselors in schools: (a) suggesting that schools have counselors, (b) mandating that schools have counselors, (c) requiring that only qualified counselors be employed in schools, (d) suggesting appropriate student to counselor staffing ratio, (e) mandating appropriate student to counselor staffing ratio, (f) funding school counseling positions in schools, and (g) hiring school counselors and placing them in schools.

**Suggesting that schools have counselors.** States can suggest that schools should have counselors. States can also monitor whether schools are complying with the suggestion. Monitoring compliance with the suggestion will require the states to invest some resources necessary for monitoring. However, if schools have to pay for the counselors, a mere suggestion may not necessarily lead to the hiring of school counselors.

**Mandating that schools have counselors.** States can mandate that schools must have counselors and monitor compliance. A mandate would ensure schools have counselors, but unless coupled with other levers, it may not ensure that the counselors are competent.

**Requiring employment of only qualified school counselors.** Another related policy lever at the government's disposal is requiring the schools to employ only qualified school counselors. States may define and set criteria for qualified counselors and monitor whether schools are employing counselors according to the criteria. This lever would make it easier to develop a distinct professional role for school counselors. A standard would further mean the qualifications are comparable across the.

**Suggesting student to counselor ratio.** States can suggest a ratio for student to counselor and monitor compliance. This lever would help ensure that counselors are able to enact their roles. However, given the voluntary nature of the lever, it is likely that the schools that need counselors most may be less able to comply with the state's suggestions.

**Mandating student to counselor ratio.** States can set a clear guideline on student to counselor ratios and strictly monitor whether schools are complying with this. A mandate would ensure schools have sufficient counselors according to state's expectation and set criteria. If this mandate is not funded by the state, schools will also need to find ways to pay counselors.

**Funding school counseling positions.** Another policy lever at states' disposal is funding school counseling positions. Schools are still able to control the hiring process themselves while the funds to pay for and support the counselors come directly from the state.

**Hiring counselors and placing them in schools.** The final option for states is to hire the school counselors centrally and place them in schools. This lever requires a very direct, centralized, and authoritative engagement of the state. This lever ensures that all schools have counselors, however, it may create problems due to confused reporting lines and accountability.

## **G. Ensuring That the Country's School Counseling System Continuously Improves**

In order to ensure the country's counseling system continuously improve, states can lead a centralized periodic statewide evaluation of the school counseling system and/or build the local capacity of school counselors to evaluate their own work and share the results of their evaluations.

**Leading statewide periodic evaluation.** States may conduct periodic statewide evaluations of their school counseling system to understand the status of counseling and initiate systemic improvement. The state education agency itself may conduct the evaluation or may contract with professional evaluators. Based on the evaluation, states may disseminate the results and provide feedback to stakeholders on the needed improvements. This lever ensures regular evaluation, feedback, and a learning mechanism needed for continuous systemic improvement. On the other side, it may give more power to the hand of the state depending on how the state uses the evaluation data and what implications they might have on the schools.

**Building local evaluation capacity.** As an alternative, states may choose to help build the capacity of counselors to evaluate their work. States can provide evaluation training that will enable counselors to either perform their own evaluations or contract or coordinate with professional evaluations. This lever has the advantage of ensuring that useful, actionable evaluation results are available at the local level. However, it requires an investment in professional development for counselors in evaluation.

## **Discussion**

*The Taxonomy of Policy Levers Used to Promote High Quality School-Based Counseling* developed through a content analysis is an important first step in comparative policy research. It provides a description of the foci of policy levers and a list of levers that have been implemented in different national contexts. In addition, we have included some preliminary speculation on the potential strengths and limitations of each lever.

Research is needed to determine whether the Taxonomy is comprehensive and to identify the strengths and limitations of the various policy approaches to improving

school-based counseling. Further research may also help to identify the necessary conditions for effective implementation of the policy levers and the potential unintended negative consequences associated with the implementation of each lever across contexts. Once validated, the Taxonomy will be a useful guide for both comparative policy research and policy advocacy based on this research.

At present, policy advocacy and development are hampered by a lack of research that identifies effective approaches and by a lack of evaluation information that identifies effective strategies for implementing approaches. In addition, the generalizability of knowledge about effective policy is hindered by a lack of research and evaluation of the adaptation of policies across contexts. A common vocabulary describing policy levers is needed to enable these types of investigations, so that policy developers in government and policy advocates in professional associations and nongovernment agencies will be able to base their work on sound and effective information.

At present, the Taxonomy is still in a developmental stage with a focus on improving its comprehensiveness through studies that identify additional policy levers from countries and contexts. Having a Taxonomy that facilitates policy development, policy advocacy, and comparative policy research will be a major step forward for the field of school-based counseling policy studies.

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