Virtual School Counseling During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Supporting Students and Trailblazing Future Trends

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Abstract

COVID-19 has transformed the K-12 education system. Many students, faculty, and staff have been required to transition from a traditional in-person school environment to a strictly virtual or hybrid setting, with little to no preparation or training. This drastic and sudden change has left students, families, faculty, and staff to navigate new or altered responsibilities related to virtual/hybrid learning. In turn, many students who are accustomed to learning in-person have experienced new stressors related to virtual/hybrid learning. Additionally, school counselors find themselves having to provide virtual/hybrid social, emotional, and academic support for their various student populations. Leading the *Journal of Human Services* special issue's third section, Youth and Schools in the Current Context, we discuss in this article how school counselors can support students during and after COVID-19 using the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework—employing virtual interventions that will be useful beyond the pandemic's duration.

Keywords: school counseling, COVID-19, virtual K-12, MTSS

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had far-reaching effects on the operation of K-12 schools, where face-to-face interaction has been the traditional modality. Due to the pandemic, schools across the United States (U.S.) were required to close their doors and provide virtual or hybrid services to students, which impacted multiple stakeholders, including students, parents/guardians, school counselors, teachers, and administrators (Varela & Fedynich, 2020). Many students have had to adjust to virtual or hybrid learning outside of the traditional school building, resulting in increased feelings of stress, anxiety, and depression (Seçer & Ulaş, 2020), all while facing barriers to mental health services and support (Boudreau, 2020; Savitz-Romer et al., 2020). School counselors are often first responders to students' social, emotional, and academic needs (Wake Forest University, n.d.), making their training and competency in providing virtual or hybrid support to students crucial during the COVID-19 pandemic. By understanding the root cause of student distress and using evidence-based resources provided by leading professional counseling organizations, school counselors can be better equipped to provide virtual or hybrid services. This article explores the challenges students are facing during the pandemic, proposes how the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework can provide a guide for school counselors to understand the needs of their diverse student clientele and intervene accordingly; the framework has potential utility during the COVID-19 pandemic, and generates ideas for future research pertaining to virtual and hybrid school counseling. For the

purposes of this article, the term *virtual* describes the online K-12 setting and *hybrid* describes a blend of virtual and in-person K-12 schooling.

K-12 Education System and COVID-19

Given that COVID-19 is a recent event that unexpectedly sent most K-12 schools virtual in March or April 2020 (Baron et al., 2020), there has been a flurry of activity aimed at producing, as quickly as possible, a stream of reliable new research specifically focused on the K-12 setting (Hall et al., 2020; Hamilton et al., 2020; Hartshorne et al., 2020; Kaden, 2020; Middleton, 2020; Varela & Fedynich, 2020). This recently published K-12 research has focused on disaggregating technical documentation, COVID-19 school closures and the K-12 teaching profession, district leadership, digital equity among schools and students, professional development, serving students with disabilities, and long-term learning impacts. Despite emerging research on the K-12 education system, researchers have yet to discuss the interventions school counselors can implement to assist students during and after the COVID-19 pandemic using an MTSS framework. Since school counselors are considered "educators" (American School Counseling Association [ASCA], n.d.), and the K-12 system involves multiple educators (teachers, support staff, school counselors, school psychologists, speech pathologists, administrators, and district leaders) with one common goal—to serve students—we decided to look at the current K-12 research as a whole to inform school counseling interventions. We begin with student needs cited in recent literature to highlight recommended educational supports.

In a study that surveyed stakeholders in the the K-12 setting, teachers and school leaders reported the following needs of family supports during COVID-19: academic instruction, social and emotional needs, physical activity, information on access to resources (food and health services), and instruction on how to talk to children about COVID-19 (Hamilton et al., 2020). Researchers also surveyed teachers and school leaders about the following school year, which they described as when the school "building reopens relative to what it was before your school building closed" (Hamilton et al., 2020, p. 21). Teachers and leaders indicated the following as priorities for returning to school: ensuring students' health and safety, creating a sense of community among students, implementing interventions related to student behavior, assessing students' achievement, supporting students' academic skills, supporting students' social and emotional wellbeing, promoting student engagement and motivation to learn, addressing achievement gaps, and planning for future school closures or other emergencies (Hamilton et al., 2020). These results indicate potential post-COVID-19 K-12 student needs, such as concerns surrounding health and safety, an increase in relationships and sense of belonging, academic supports, and modalities supporting and increasing motivation to learn and attend in-person classes.

Throughout the research, a recurring theme has been technological inequities among students (Hall et al., 2020; Hartshorne et al., 2020; Kaden, 2020; Varela & Fedynich, 2020). One study focused on the professional changes a teacher faced due to COVID-19 school closures (Kaden, 2020). In this single case study, Kaden (2020) conducted an in-depth evaluation of a secondary teacher's experience going virtual during COVID-19. This study exposed the need for equality among students regarding remote learning (i.e., meeting the needs of special education students virtually) and access to virtual communication modalities (i.e., computers, internet, etc.). In a study that looked at the perceptions of school district leaders going virtual during COVID-19, researchers found their overall level of preparedness appeared high; however, disparities among students made virtual learning challenging (Varela & Fedynich, 2020). School leaders also reported concern surrounding the lack of relationship

building between teachers and students due to the virtual setting. Additionally, student socioeconomic status was reported to impact student equity regarding access to internet and electronic devices. One participant commented, "I think it was difficult to serve those in most need and early childhood students" (Varela & Fedynich, 2020, p. 7), which indicates that lower socioeconomic status and early childhood students might be in need of additional support when returning to in-person instruction.

Another study also highlighted how COVID-19 posed challenges related to inequities among students (Hall et al., 2020). The researchers looked at preservice teachers' observations of digital inequalities among K-12 students, suggesting that there are multiple digital inequalities that affect K-12 students. For example, even when districts attempt to bridge the gap between technology and student equity, some still fall short of meeting students' needs. Students who receive district-issued devices might not have access to the internet at home. Similarly, Hartshorne et al. (2020) discussed equity issues among K-12 students during COVID-19. The researchers suggested students who do not have access to technology could be "left behind" in terms of academic success (Hartshorne et al., 2020, p. 144). They also suggested students going virtual who face issues related to equity could experience social or emotional isolation.

In a further study, researchers looked at the long-term impacts of COVID-19 on K-12 students. Middleton (2020) suggested that low-performing students who traditionally would enroll in summer school to gain additional support and bridge the gap between grade levels might not be enrolling due to COVID-19 and the virtual learning environment. This could potentially cause a larger achievement gap among students. Additionally, there has been less instructional time due to going virtual, which has negatively affected student learning. Lastly, in-person classroom instruction and testing is, to some degree, standardized. Due to schools going virtual, there was less "standardization" of "student performance" (Middleton, 2020, p. 42).

Unmet mental health concerns combined with adjusting to a vastly different learning modality virtual, could leave students feeling anxious about their perception of academic support during COVID-19 (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021; Kuhfeld et al., 2020; Middleton, 2020). Additionally, students might be consumed with worry surrounding changes in teaching methods, increased workload, ambiguous academic expectations, lower quality of teaching and education, difficulty with online learning and technological issues, inability to finish the school year, and a lack of support from teachers (Dorn et al., 2020; Middleton, 2020). With schools closing their doors, students might also experience needs related to adjusting to the virtual classroom and creating/maintaining routines (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021; Hermann et al., 2021; Iovino et al., 2020).

While adjusting to virtual learning is stressful, attending in-person or hybrid classes during the pandemic is fear-inducing in different ways. Students might be fearful of contracting COVID-19 or spreading it to their family members, resulting in potential emotional and behavioral consequences (e.g., anxiety, sleep disturbance, and social isolation; Seçer & Ulaş, 2020). Additionally, if students find themselves experiencing any related COVID-19 symptoms (e.g., sneezing, coughing, fever, etc.), psychological symptoms could worsen (Seçer & Ulaş, 2020). Researchers have documented problematic behaviors resulting from this fear, including obsessive hand washing and hoarding of supplies like masks, sanitizers, and medications. School counselors are challenged to use virtual measures to identify both pre-existing risk factors and pandemic factors to target students with impairments due to stress, anxiety, depression, PTSD, and suicidal ideations (Guo et al., 2020; Seçer & Ulaş, 2020).

Lastly, students are faced with multiple environmental stressors due to COVID-19, including housing instability, food insecurity, social isolation, and limited access to medical care (Shonkoff, 2020). These stressors could lead to an increased rate of family violence, substance abuse, and untreated mental health problems (Shonkoff, 2020). Given school counselors' limited access to students in the virtual/hybrid setting, students might be missing daily or weekly check-ins (Savitz-Romer et al., 2020). These check-ins often prompt interventions and inform school counselors of potential challenges students face (Savitz-Romer et al., 2020). For example, reports of child maltreatment decreased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic, compared to before the pandemic, indicating a correlation between a loss of in-person interaction with victims of child maltreatment and decreased mandated reports (Baron et al., 2020). Furthermore, students who require mental health referrals might not be receiving information about what is available and where to find help. School counselors are a common source of mental health resources and referrals, so conveying this information to students collectively on a virtual platform has become necessary.

School Counselors' Responses

School counselors might struggle to use virtual modalities to access and support students with social, emotional, and academic needs, specifically those counselors traditionally trained in delivering the comprehensive school counseling program in the building, including social-emotional learning, post-secondary planning, and career development (Boudreau, 2020). In a study that included 1,000 school counselors, 43% reported less time for individual counseling compared to pre-pandemic, despite the increased need in services due to intensified stress and trauma (Savitz-Romer et al., 2020). Savitz-Romer and colleagues (2020) also reported that school counselors have been overwhelmed with tracking virtual student attendance and providing technological information and assistance, instead of their customary school counseling duties. This is problematic considering school counselors are often the only professionals in the K-12 setting trained to provide social, emotional, and academic support to all students. Unfortunately, if school counselors are tasked with extraneous duties, such as tracking attendance and technological data, they will have limited time to carry out counseling-related tasks.

MTSS

Using the MTSS framework to organize interventions that school counselors can implement during COVID-19 harnesses the comprehensive and collaborative systems they already have in place. MTSS organizes school counseling intervention by intensity (tiers) to meet the academic, social/emotional, and behavioral needs of all students and to target the needs of students with specific risk (Office of Special Education Programs, 2021). The following section aligns suggested interventions with Tier 1 (school-wide preventative interventions for all students), Tier 2 (supplemental interventions for students identified as needing additional supports), and Tier 3 (interventions for students identified with specific risk and specialized needs).

MTSS Interventions

Although there is a dearth of literature on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic as a recent and persistent phenomenon, some researchers have documented the mental health

concerns students are experiencing, including students' worry surrounding academics (Middleton, 2020; Dorn et al., 2020); fears beyond schooling (e.g., medical concerns; Seçer & Ulaş, 2020); and access to resources like mental health and school counseling services (Boudreau, 2020; Savitz-Romer et al., 2020). Scholars and national organizations, such as the ASCA, have responded by distributing resources to school counselors and other helping professionals to address student concerns. Access to school counseling and outside mental health resources is the key to addressing ways in which students are affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and changes in the education process. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected students in various ways, requiring systemic school counseling interventions that support their academic, social, emotional, and career development at different levels. The MTSS framework, supported by ASCA, is a culturally responsive and evidence-based framework that provides data-driven, tiered instructions and interventions to support the academic, social, emotional, behavioral development of all students (ASCA, 2018; Sink, 2016). Viewing these resources and interventions through an MTSS lens allows school counselors to use a well-established system, with which they might already be familiar, to collaborate with school constituents to best serve students with appropriate and data-driven assistance.

Tier 1

Tier 1 supports are designed and implemented to serve the entire student population (Office of Special Education Programs, 2021). Harlacher and colleagues (2014) recommended that school counselors develop and implement interventions benefiting at least 80% of the student population. Because most school counselors are trained to provide traditional school counseling programs, they should seek professional development opportunities to serve all students virtually. For example, they are encouraged to attend ASCA webinars to gain knowledge, skills, and tools, such as the ethics of tele-school counseling, methods of connecting students and families, and means of supporting college applications, to provide all students with school counseling support (ASCA, 2020).

One intervention school counselors can use to address the effects of COVID-19 on the entire student body is to provide all families and students with access to resources to assist with mental health and academic concerns (ASCA, 2016). These resources could aid students in addressing any social isolation concerns related to COVID-19 and the virtual setting that are evident in several studies (Seçer & Ulaş, 2020; Shonkoff, 2020). ASCA and the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) recommend organizing virtual events—such as back-to-school social events and virtual tours/classroom visits—as well as school-wide programs, like peer buddy mentorship, homeroom/morning meeting, and advisory periods with school counselors (Savitz-Romer et al., 2020). School counselors can also encourage students to take part in extracurricular activities that bring them joy and a sense of self-worth, which could benefit students' mental health and lower the risk of burnout (Boudreau, 2020). Additionally, academic support can be provided to students adjusting to the virtual learning environment. Professional organizations provide recommendations for addressing academic concerns. School counselors can use the online platforms provided by ASCA to support students' distance learning (e.g., portfolio creation, home-learning tips, and language translation). ASCA also offers school counselors tools and lessons to promote students' online learning success, such as time management, completing schoolwork during quarantine, and building study schedules. Finally, the Nebraska School Counselor Association (n.d.) produced a list of study tips and techniques for online learning that school counselors can introduce to students.

School counselors are also encouraged to collaborate with parents/guardians to support students' mental health and academic success. For example, school counselors can provide the educational workshop created by ASCA (2021) for parents/guardians on promoting appropriate student online behaviors. NSAC (n.d.) created a list of tips for parents on supporting their child's mental well-being. La Greca and Sevin (2020) provided tips and strategies (e.g., reducing media exposure, creating routines, connecting with friends) to help students and parents/guardians cope with the challenges in the COVID-19 pandemic. It is also imperative that school counselors provide students and families with outside mental health resources and referrals. These resources can include 24-hour hotlines and lists of clinical mental health counselors' contact information (Bowen, 2020). As a virtual or hybrid intervention, school counselors can produce a resource list or map accessible to all students and parents via email or on the school website.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, academics and mental health challenges are not the only concerns students have faced. Another pressing concern for students is racial stigma, particularly related to being Asian American, Black, and/or African American. In terms of a Tier 1 support, school counselors have the responsibility of advocating for the end of racism throughout the entire school (NASP, 2020). School counselors can inform stakeholders of misinformation and stereotypes surrounding racial and cultural stigma. They can also address discriminatory language and behavior by advocating for changes in policies, which will cultivate an inclusive and safe school environment for all students. School counselors can model anti-racist and anti-discriminatory behavior by counteracting microaggressions with micro-affirmations and celebrating cultural and racial differences in schools and communities. Lastly, school counselors act as leaders by initiating projects that address the needs of marginalized students and populations, along with organizing "virtual town halls, webinars, and meetings to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on communities of color" (Liu & Modir, 2020, p. 440).

Tier 2

Tier 2 interventions are designed to provide additional support to about 10–15% of the student population (Harlacher et al., 2014). School counselors can refer to the Confident Counselor website (Speckled Moose Counseling, 2018) for examples of Tier 2 interventions used to support COVID-19-related student stressors. The website also provides resources to help address specific concerns and issues, such as behavioral intervention; crisis intervention; serving Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Other (LGBTQ+) populations; online safety; grief; self-care; and self-harm, suicide, and trauma and abuse intervention. School counselors should collect and analyze data to create and implement interventions to address academic, personal, social, emotional, and career concerns for specific groups of students. School counselors could designate a virtual safe space for students to process their experiences and gather their thoughts (Boudreau, 2020). For example, counselors might conduct weekly virtual check-ins with students or allow them to eat lunch virtually in a small group setting. If there is a situation where students are anxious about a certain topic or experience, it is crucial that counselors are able to virtually teach coping skills (Boudreau, 2020). In the virtual setting, school counselors could collaborate with faculty advisors of student organizations (e.g., gender and sexuality alliance, math club) to identify which organizations are meeting virtually. School counselors can meet with members of the organizations to attend to their needs.

Additionally, certain groups of students might face more academic challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students lacking access to technology (e.g., computer, internet)

might be left behind academically (Hartshorne et al., 2020). It is also predicted that Black/African American students, Latinx students, and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds will fall behind academically, which could have a lifelong impact (Dorn et al., 2020). Therefore, school counselors should address those academic inequities in engagement with virtual learning. As school counselors create specific support groups to meet students' needs, they can consult with teachers about the possibility of creating study groups to support those students or extending coach hours. Outside information (e.g., Khan Academy) can also be gathered and provided to students lacking online resources. School counselors can attend ASCA webinars to learn about virtual interventions to support student college and career readiness (ASCA, 2021b). For students experiencing stress related to college and career readiness, school counselors organize support groups; provide space for students to express their emotions and feelings; normalize their experiences; and provide strategies to cope with stress, alternative postsecondary options, and a gap year option between high school and college (ASCA, 2021b). From a systemic perspective, school counselors can advocate with and for these students in front of school administrators and policymakers to "prioritize access to home computers and broadband internet" (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021). School counselors can also advocate for creating different ongoing summer programs that can support these students' academic learning (Dorn et al., 2020).

Furthermore, as incidents of racial discrimination against the Asian, Black/African American, and Latinx community has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic (Pew Research Center, 2021), school counselors can provide support to this specific group of students while advocating for school climate change. School counselors can organize virtual support groups for Asian, Black/African American, or Latinx students that provide a safe space to talk about their concerns, experiences, and feelings; teach coping skills to address distress, anxiety, and fear related to racial discrimination; and coach students to build resilience and confidence in the face of potential racial discrimination.

Tier 3

Tier 3 interventions are developed and implemented to meet the needs of individual students (Harlacher et al., 2014). It is estimated that 5% of the entire student population require Tier 3 interventions (Harlacher et al., 2014). Some general examples of Tier 3 school counseling interventions include individual counseling and meeting with parents/guardians (Harlacher et al., 2014; Ziomek-Daigle et al., 2016). In terms of COVID-19-specific Tier 3 interventions, Savitz-Romer and colleagues (2020) and Bowen (2020) recommend having screening tools for depression, anxiety, and stress on-hand to identify students in need and making direct contact with these students via phone or other technology in a timely manner. By screening students who appear to be struggling when they return to in-person schooling, school counselors can develop individualized success plans to help students transition back to the traditional classroom environment.

Chafouleas and Marcy (2020) also suggested that schools use trauma-specific assessments to screen students' trauma exposure and their social, emotional, and behavioral functioning, as the basis for the design and implementation of multi-tiered trauma-informed practices. As child maltreatment and abuse might be more difficult to report due to the school closure during the pandemic, school counselors should have the knowledge and skills to identify signs of child abuse, ensure students' safety, and collaborate with different stakeholders to support the students and families (Baron et al., 2020). With specific training to support students' personal and social wellness, school counselors can collaborate with

teachers, staff, administration, district, and parents for trauma intervention in the post-COVID-19 era.

Additionally, if a parent/guardian reaches out to a school counselor about Tier 1 resources, counselors can collaborate one-on-one with parents in supporting students' physical and emotional wellness and address concerns and crises. Together, they can establish a student success plan unique to that student's needs. It should be noted that the modality of instruction (e.g., in-person learning, remote learning, hybrid) could change in the near future, as the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2021) suggests schools can follow strict prevention strategies to safely reopen for in-person instruction. School counselors need to prepare to support students regarding their academic success, career development, and social and emotional wellbeing while they are adjusting to the school environment. School counselors should follow the ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success applicable to issues of school reentry to provide both direct and indirect services (ASCA, 2021b). As schools prepare to reopen, school counselors can follow common service delivery frameworks, such as MTSS, to respond to diverse students' needs (Chafouleas & Marcy, 2020). Within the MTSS, school counselors can create and implement multi-tier social-emotional learning curricula and mindfulness-based interventions to improve students self-regulation, coping skills, and resilience in the face of challenges (Minkos & Gelbar, 2021). Following the same framework, school counselors can also address academic skills based on students' needs (Minkos & Gelbar, 2021). Given the local, national, and global impact of COVID-19, school counselors should prepare to address the trauma experienced by students and families when schools reopen.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic and the school counselor's role to provide virtual and hybrid services could inform current and future school counseling practices and supports, student needs, and school counselor education programs. School counselors continue to face challenges related to navigating assigned duties outside of the role of the school counselor (Anderson, 2019; Boudreau, 2020) while providing social, emotional, and academic support to all students (ASCA, 2019). Since before COVID-19 school counselors were often perceived to carry out tasks unrelated to their role, such as administering tests, managing student records, and handling records and registration (Reiner et al., 2009), it can be assumed that they are also tasked with virtual duties outside of their role, such as tracking attendance and technology-related data (Savitz-Romer et al., 2020). This is problematic considering school counselors are often the only professionals in the building formally trained to provide mental health services to all students (ASCA, 2020). By further understanding the tasks school counselors are assigned and carrying out in the virtual or hybrid setting, the profession can identify areas of advocacy regarding how their time is used, the virtual or hybrid support being offered to students and families, and the virtual/hybrid services lacking.

More research should be conducted to understand how school counselors' motivation is affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, there could be lower rates of motivation to provide services to students and families due to lack of support and training offered to school counselors, who are navigating the often new role of a virtual/hybrid school counselor. Additionally, school counselors could be faced with new stressors related to the virtual or hybrid setting, which might result in increased risk for burnout or lower levels of self-care. Understanding the unique stressors of virtual or hybrid school counseling during COVID-19 will better inform district leaders on how to support school counselors.

Additionally, school counselor educators will be better equipped to prepare future school counselors to manage virtual or hybrid stressors related to burnout.

Researchers can further aim to understand how students' mental health in the K-12 setting has been affected by COVID-19. By exploring the unique mental health concerns students experience related to the COVID-19 pandemic, school counselors will be better informed of the support students will need when they return to the traditional in-person K-12 setting. After attending school virtually for an extended period of time, the return to in-person schooling might present distinctive and new stressors for students. Additionally, some students might find themselves opting to remain virtual even after schools reopen. Understanding the projected number of students remaining virtual will inform the field of how many school counselor positions are projected to remain virtual. This will also inform school counselor education programs on the gaps in curriculum related to the role of the virtual school counselor.

Additionally, by examining the unique role of the virtual or hybrid school counselor, educators will be better equipped to prepare future school counselors to provide social, emotional, and academic support in the virtual/hybrid setting. Although interventions might look similar to the in-person setting, such as running small groups, providing individual counseling, and consulting with stakeholders (ASCA, n.d.), the act of performing these interventions most likely differs given the nature of in-person, virtual, and hybrid settings. Lastly, the ethical considerations that are salient to providing virtual school counseling services differ from those that characterize the in-person context, such as recognizing that students might not have access to a confidential setting, navigating potential technology errors, and ensuring awareness of emergency services near a student's location (American Counselor Association, 2014; ASCA, 2016). These added ethical considerations related to the school counselor's role must be explored to inform future school counselor education programs of the often new and unique tasks of the virtual/hybrid school counselor.

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