education policy analysis archives

A peer-reviewed, independent,
open access, multilingual journal

epaa aape

Arizona State University

Volume 33 Number 44 August 5, 2025 ISSN 1068-2341

Boundary Spanning in State Education Agencies: How State Officials Support School Counseling

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Citation: Savitz-Romer, M., Rowan-Kenyon, H. T., Nicola, T. P., & Carroll, S. (2025). Boundary spanning in state education agencies: How state officials support school counseling. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 33*(44). https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.33.8758

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is twofold; first, we seek to understand the professional roles of officials from state education agencies (SEAs) charged with overseeing school counseling. Second, the study examined how SEA officials carry out their work supporting school counselors. We interviewed 34 counseling representatives from 30 distinct states, exploring the lived experiences of these state education professionals (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). We further analyzed how SEA school counseling officials understand their professional

Journal website: http://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/
Facebook: /EPAAA
Twitter: @epaa_aape

Manuscript received: 22/5/2024
Revisions received: 2/5/2025
Accepted: 9/5/2025

responsibilities and drew on boundary spanning theory to analyze how they perform their roles despite having limited positional authority. We found SEA school counseling officials acted as bridges between their state department of education and districts, schools, other state leaders, and external organizations, strengthening school counseling within their state in the process. Our analysis revealed that SEA counseling officials' primary responsibilities included information dissemination, professional development, advocacy, and policy implementation. However, due to unique tensions they face, they fulfilled these duties by embodying boundary spanning roles, such as reticulist, interpreter, coordinator, and entrepreneur. These roles afforded SEA officials the ability to enact their professional responsibilities despite multiple constraints.
Keywords: state education agencies; policy; school counseling; boundary spanning; student success

Superación de límites en las agencias estatales de educación: Cómo los funcionarios estatales apoyan la orientación escolar

Resumen: El propósito de este trabajo es doble: primero, comprender las funciones profesionales de los funcionarios de las agencias estatales de educación (AEE) encargados de supervisar la orientación escolar. Segundo, el estudio examinó cómo los funcionarios de las AEE desempeñan su labor de apoyo a los orientadores escolares. Entrevistamos a 34 representantes de orientación de 30 estados, explorando las experiencias vividas de estos profesionales de la educación estatal (Kvale y Brinkmann, 2008). Analizamos en profundidad cómo los funcionarios de orientación escolar de las AEE comprenden sus responsabilidades profesionales y nos basamos en la teoría de la superación de límites para analizar cómo desempeñan sus funciones a pesar de su limitada autoridad. Descubrimos que los funcionarios de orientación escolar de las AEE actúan como puentes entre su departamento de educación estatal y los distritos, las escuelas, otros líderes estatales y organizaciones externas, fortaleciendo así la orientación escolar dentro de su estado. Nuestro análisis reveló que las principales responsabilidades de los funcionarios de orientación escolar de las AEE incluyen la difusión de información, el desarrollo profesional, la promoción y la implementación de políticas. Sin embargo, debido a las tensiones particulares que enfrentan, cumplieron con estas funciones asumiendo roles que trascienden las fronteras, como reticularista, intérprete, coordinador y emprendedor. Estos roles permitieron a los funcionarios de la AEE ejercer sus responsabilidades profesionales a pesar de las múltiples limitaciones.
Palabras-clave: agencia estatal de educación; política, orientación escolar; superación de fronteras; éxito estudiantil

Superando limites nas agências estaduais de educação: Como os funcionários estaduais apoiam a orientação escolar

Resumo: O objetivo deste trabalho é duplo: primeiro, compreender as funções profissionais dos funcionários das agências estaduais de educação (AEE) encarregados de supervisionar a orientação escolar. Em segundo lugar, o estudo examinou como esses funcionários desempenham seu papel de apoio aos orientadores escolares. Entrevistamos 34 representantes da área de orientação de 30 estados, explorando as experiências vividas por esses profissionais da educação estadual (Kvale e Brinkmann, 2008). Analisamos em profundidade como os responsáveis pela orientação escolar nas AEEs compreendem suas responsabilidades profissionais e nos baseamos na teoria da superação de fronteiras para analisar como desempenham suas funções apesar da autoridade limitada. Descobrimos que os responsáveis

pela orientação escolar nas AEEs atuam como pontes entre seus departamentos de educação estaduais e os distritos, escolas, outros líderes estaduais e organizações externas, fortalecendo assim a orientação escolar em seus respectivos estados. Nossa análise revelou que as principais responsabilidades desses profissionais incluem a disseminação de informações, o desenvolvimento profissional, a defesa da orientação e a implementação de políticas. No entanto, devido às tensões específicas que enfrentam, eles cumprem essas funções assumindo papéis que extrapolam fronteiras, como tecelões de redes, intérpretes, coordenadores e empreendedores. Esses papéis permitiram aos funcionários das AEEs exercerem suas responsabilidades profissionais apesar das múltiplas limitações.
Palavras-chave: agência estadual de educação; política; orientação escolar; superação de fronteiras; sucesso estudantil

Boundary Spanning in State Education Agencies: How State Officials Support School Counseling

Public schools in the United States are increasingly challenged to address growing threats to mental health (Office of the Surgeon General, 2021) and fluctuations in college enrollment rates (Kim et al., 2024; NSCRC, 2025). Although all educators contribute to students' development in these areas, school counselors are often the professionals most centrally responsible for providing academic, social emotional, and postsecondary support (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2019). Through offering individual and group counseling, developmental classroom lessons, and schoolwide programming, school counselors are critical members of a school community (ASCA, 2019). However, the ability of these professionals to enact their roles is heavily dependent on the nested systems of influence—including the micro- and macro-levels—in which they carry out their work (Savitz-Romer & Nicola, 2022).

The policy landscape, particularly at the state level, is among those systems that shape counselor efficacy. Officials from state education agencies (SEAs)[1] are the actors that implement education policy—including statewide counseling policy.[1] Within the school counseling realm, SEA officials are responsible for overseeing school counselor licensure (Trevisan, 2000), counselor evaluation systems (Strear et al., 2019), and the development and implementation of comprehensive counseling program models (Martin et al., 2009). Despite the important intended role of state policy in promoting school counselors' practice, the literature on SEA officials who oversee state counseling policy is very limited. The narrow body of extant literature has, however, identified SEA counseling officials as important actors in the implementation of state policies but lacking authority to ensure districts and schools comply with them (e.g., Savitz-Romer et al., 2024; Martin & Carey, 2012). This is because many states defer to districts to administer and regulate education at the local level, leaving state actors with limited power.

Our article builds upon a small but growing body of literature on school counseling policy through examining a key set of policy actors that are largely absent from extant research. Specifically,

[1] The term *state education agency* refers to the primary governmental organization within a state responsible for overseeing the public education system. Often this agency is called the Department of Education. However, some states use alternate names for such agencies (e.g., State Board of Education, Office of Public Instruction, Education Agency, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction). As a result, we use the broader term state education agency to encompass these organizations with similar functions but different names.

we delve into the work of SEA officials charged with overseeing school counseling, examining how SEA officials carry out this work despite having limited power to enact change at the local level. The specific research questions that guided this study were: What roles do SEA officials play in supporting school counseling in their state? How do these SEA officials enact their roles?

Drawing on data from interviews with 34 SEA officials, representing 30 states, who oversaw school counseling activities at the state-level, we found school counseling officials' roles primarily included: disseminating counseling-related information, serving as a resource for counselors in their states through providing professional development and/or technical assistance, engaging in counselor advocacy, and supporting state counseling policy implementation. Using the concept of boundary spanning from organizational theory as an analytical tool, we show how SEA officials leveraged their role as boundary spanners—serving as a bridge between the SEA and schools, districts, and other organizations—to strengthen school counseling in their state despite possessing limited regulatory authority. Our study reveals areas for improved practices within SEAs that can further support the efficacy of state policy officials and the school counselors and students they serve. We argue that if state policymakers facilitate the boundary spanning efforts of SEA officials, this could bring about a positive impact on professional school counselors. We conclude by offering recommendations on how to do so and highlight areas for future research.

Literature Review

Supporting students beyond the instructional core has increasingly become a focus of K–12 education. In addition to delivering academic instruction, schools are now expected to widen access to higher education (Jimenez, 2020), ameliorate a mounting youth mental health crisis (National Alliance on Mental Illness, n.d.), and ensure that all students have access to academic interventions that promote learning (Bohanon et al., 2021). Whereas many educators provide support to students beyond the classroom, school counselors have traditionally and uniquely played a key role in delivering these services (ASCA, 2019). As outlined in the American School Counselor Association's national counseling model, professional school counselors are trained to provide direct and indirect services across three primary domains: academic, social emotional and postsecondary (ASCA, 2019). Examples of direct services include administering classroom lessons focused on building social emotional or study skills, hosting one-on-one counseling sessions with students to their postsecondary trajectories, and administering interventions such as a depression or suicide screening (ASCA, 2019; Goodman-Scott et al., 2020). Indirect services include connecting students to social services, consulting with school administrators, staff, and parents about a child experiencing academic or personal challenges, and presenting data to school and district leaders to advocate for the needs of students (ASCA, 2019; Goodman-Scott et al., 2020).

School Counseling Policy

School counselors are licensed educators who promote student success through bolstering students' study skills, providing short-term counseling and referrals for long-term care, and advising about careers and applying to college. Evidence routinely links access to a school counselor and the comprehensive counseling programs they offer with improved academic, social emotional, and postsecondary outcomes, including those related to academic performance, absenteeism, and college attendance (Carey & Martin, 2017; Whiston et al., 2011; Whiston & Quinby, 2009). For example, Whiston et al.'s (2011) meta-analysis of school counseling interventions "found that school counseling interventions tend to be particularly efficacious in increasing students' problem-solving behaviors and reducing disciplinary referrals" (p. 46). However, school counselors' ability to effectively serve students is dependent on the nested systems of influence in which they carry out

their work (Savitz-Romer & Nicola, 2022). For example, school leaders' expectations, the quality of counselor pre-service training programs, and the macro forces that guide counselor programming and practices within schools are all factors that shape school counselors' work (Savitz-Romer & Nicola, 2022).

Education policies at the state and local levels are other factors mediating school counselors' impact on student outcomes. Because the U.S. education system is managed at the local rather than federal level (McDermott, 2009), state policymakers play a significant role in shaping the working conditions of practitioners. Historically, SEAs in particular have been responsible for supporting educational reform efforts and implementing legislative policy (Brown et al., 2011). In addition to creating guidelines and practices needed to successfully enact education policy, SEA officials articulate a vision and priorities for education in the state, administer state education funds and programs, and offer technical assistance (Aspen Institute, 2015).

The academic literature on specific SEA professionals in relation to education policy, however, is relatively limited. Several studies have examined the roles of state social studies (Swan et al., 2016), mathematics (Reys & Lappan, 2007), English language arts (Hodge et al., 2023), and science curricular coordinators (Haverly et al., 2022; Hopkins, 2016; Hopkins et al., 2018, 2019) related to standards implementation. There is also emerging work from Hopkins, Weddle, and colleagues examining how research-practice partnerships with SEAs promote shared responsibility by disrupting silos in the work towards multilingual learner equity (e.g., Hopkins et al., 2022; Weddle, 2025; Weddle et al., 2024). Weddle (2025) specifically found how boundary practices and boundary objects facilitated the work of SEAs and their research practice partnerships to advance multilingual learner equity. Collectively, these studies highlight how the curricular coordinators support educators at the local level by disseminating resources, providing technical assistance, advocating for the needs of educators, and offering professional development opportunities. They also serve as brokers, leveraging professional associations to forge connections and transmit research and ideas at both local and national levels (Hopkins et al., 2018, 2019). The studies also identify factors that constrain their efficacy, including local control and state politics, unclear direction, and limited staffing.

Only two studies, however, have focused on SEA counseling officials specifically. Martin and Carey's (2012) study narrowly focused on how SEA officials implemented counselor evaluation systems; and Savitz-Romer et al. (2024) documented how a deference to local control restricts SEA officials' efforts to regulate policies related to caseload sizes and implementation of comprehensive counseling models, among others.

Given growing interest among policymakers, educators, and the general public in holding schools and districts accountable for student outcomes, SEA officials are now assuming "a new and far more demanding role" in the education sector than ever before (Brown et al., 2011, p. 1). In fact, the Every Student Succeeds Act explicitly called on SEAs to exercise leadership over school practices (VanGronigen & Meyers, 2017). Yet, the scholarship on state education policy actors remains limited and our understanding of SEA counseling officials — and how their unique experiences both align and differ from the extent literature on SEA curriculum leaders—is unknown. This study addresses that gap in the literature, interrogating how SEA counseling officials describe their support for an essential group of school-based counseling professionals.

Theoretical Framework

Theory is a critical element of qualitative research, providing not only focus and organization to a study but also direction for analysis (Garvey & Jones, 2021). Theory serves as a lens through which to interpret observed phenomena and understand a study's findings in relation to known

concepts and constructs (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). In this study, we utilized organizational theory to draw meaning from our qualitative data, identifying how SEA officials—a group of professionals with limited authority—enact their roles. In particular, the concept of boundary spanning guided this study.

Boundary spanning explains how networks among organizations are constructed and reflects the behavior of professionals "who operate at the periphery or boundary of an organization, performing organizationally relevant tasks, relating the organization with elements outside it" (Leifer & Delbecq, 1978, pp. 40–41). Any individual within an organization could potentially serve as a boundary spanner (Tushman & Scanlan, 1981), building bridges with other entities to achieve their organization's goals (Ancona, 1990; Ancona & Caldwell, 1992).

In education, boundary spanning has been used to understand the work of education leaders. For example, some scholars have used boundary spanning to explain how higher education and education nonprofit leaders respond to complex, systematic changes in their leadership environments (Prysor & Henley, 2018; Wegemer & Renick, 2021) and forge connections with schools and communities (Miller, 2007). Scholars have also used boundary spanning to bring to light the unique stressors and challenges that superintendents face working across various systems (e.g., schools, communities, districts; Richardson, 2002).

Components of Boundary Spanning

As summarized by Williams (2012), boundary spanners are defined by four key qualities: being a reticulist, interpreter, coordinator, and entrepreneur. A reticulist is an individual capable of building, maintaining, and leveraging intricate networks of people from various organizations. As reticulists, boundary spanners build trust and consensus to effectively carry out their work (Williams, 2012). They are often seen as gatekeepers, filtering information they receive and passing it through their networks (Castells, 2000; Goldsmith & Eggers, 2004). Successful boundary spanners are also expert interpreters. They seek a nuanced understanding of other people's needs and values to facilitate effective communication and to foster empathy and understanding among multiple groups (Williams, 2012). Van den Brink et al. (2022) note that their knowledge of different "languages" particularly facilitate their expertise in cross-boundary communication. In addition, boundary spanners are coordinators who manage the logistics of collaboration among multiple stakeholders. Drawing on their knowledge of what each party needs and can offer, effective coordinators build extensive networks and resources that foster partnerships (Williams, 2012). Finally, boundary spanners are entrepreneurs who create spaces for themselves and others to innovate and catalyze change. These entrepreneurs identify a need and devise a solution from scratch—a feat that requires creativity, flexibility, and an opportunistic mindset (Williams, 2012). Often, entrepreneurs are waiting for a policy window to open, and have strategies prepared to act quickly (Kingdon, 2003).

These boundary spanning skills have been identified as critically important in a variety of school settings. For example, Addi-Raccah (2015) found that successful school principals across various schools often embraced the reticulist and entrepreneurial roles as they regularly sought out individuals with essential resources to support school initiatives as well as strengthen their overall professional networks. As boundary spanners, principals also acted as interpreters and coordinators through building positive relations and communicating consistently with external agencies.

Others have used a similar concept of boundary crossing to understand the role of SEA officials in supporting multilingual learners (e.g., Hopkins et al., 2022). Based on previous research depicting SEA officials as limited in their authority (Savitz-Romer et al., 2024), we hypothesize that SEA officials also leverage these qualities associated with boundary spanning to perform their roles. In doing so, SEA officials act as bridges between their state department of education and districts,

schools, other state leaders, and external organizations, strengthening school counseling within their state in the process.

Methods

This research was part of a larger qualitative study documenting the school counseling policy landscape at the state-level with an emphasis on SEA school counseling officials' perspectives (Savitz-Romer et al., 2024). The broader project examined four specific state counseling policies—related to mandating that schools offer school counseling programs, maintain student-to-counselor ratios beneath a specified threshold, evaluate counselors on an annual basis, and have all counseling programs adhere to the premier comprehensive counseling model developed by ASCA—and the extent to which they are implemented and regulated. After conducting a literature review and analyzing policy documents from all 50 states and the District of Columbia, we then conducted interviews with 34 SEA counseling officials representing 30 states to gain a deeper understanding of those policies. While about half of the interview questions interrogated the specific counseling policies of interest, the others focused on the SEA officials themselves and their roles (see Appendix). This study presents findings from the latter subset of questions.

Interviews

In the summer of 2020, we conducted interviews with counseling officials from SEAs. Interviews enabled delving deep into the lived experiences of these state education professionals (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). Because each state's counseling policy context is unique, it was important for us to be able to probe participants' responses to clarify specific details. Interviews facilitated this (Denzin et al, 2006). Specifically, the interviews were semi-structured, allowing for the collection and comparison of themes across SEA officials, while still providing flexibility to probe individual participants to obtain richer responses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

We recruited study participants by identifying individuals on SEA websites responsible for overseeing school counseling at the state level and directly invited them via email to join the study. While we initially contacted officials from all 50 states plus the District of Columbia, SEA leaders from 30 states ultimately participated. From the 30 states, we interviewed at least one SEA official who oversees school counseling. In most instances, our interviews included one SEA leader; however, in four cases, two representatives participated in the interview. On average, participants worked in the school counseling policy realm for 5 years (the range being 0 to 10 years), and half of participants were formerly school counselors.

As shown in Table 1, almost half of participants were housed within an SEA department related to college and career readiness, while the remainder were spread across several different departments, including health and safety, learning, and student support services. Few SEA officials were situated within cross-disciplinary departments that encompass all domains—academic, social emotional, and postsecondary—that intersect with counselors' work. While our participants held different professional titles (see Table 2), they all oversaw school counseling policy within their respective SEA.

SEA officials represented a diverse group of states. As shown in Table 3, interview participants represented states from all regions of the United States and encompassed both the largest and smallest states in terms of population size. Republican-leaning states outnumbered their Democratic-leaning counterparts in our sample, which aligns with the current political composition of the US.

Table 1

Primary Domain of Interview Participants' SEA Departments

Departmental Focus	*N*
College/Career	13
Health/Safety	2
Intervention/Prevention	2
Learning	4
Other	1
Student Opportunities	4
Student Support Services	4
Total	30

Table 2

Interview Participants' Job Titles

Title	*N*
School Counselor Specialist	5
School Counseling Program Director/Manager	10
School Counselor Coordinator	3
School Counselor Consultant	8
Career and Technical Education Liaison	5
Commissioner	1
Other	2
Total	34

Table 3

States Represented by Interview Participants

Characteristic	*N*
Region	
Northeast	6
Midwest	5
West	9
South	10
Political Leaning of State	
Democrat	10
Republican	18
Swing State	2
Population Size	
1st Quartile	5
2nd Quartile	9
3rd Quartile	8
4th Quartile	8

The interviews were conducted on Zoom and lasted on average between 30 and 45 minutes. Interview questions captured information about participants' SEA context and the political environments that shaped their work, the specific responsibilities associated with their roles, and their interactions with policymakers and practitioners. We piloted the interview protocol with two former SEA counseling officials, who provided feedback on question wording and order, before conducting the interviews. While the majority of the protocol stayed the same, we tweaked some questions related to the impact of the geography of the state on the policies in question, along with questions related to education policy in their particular state.

Analysis

In the larger project, the research team thematically analyzed the 30 transcripts, drawing on elements of grounded theory and the constant comparative method to identify prominent themes (Charmaz, 2006; Saldaña, 2013). The research team undertook analysis collaboratively, with at least two team members coding each interview transcript before the full research team discussed, debated, and refined codes. As we conducted this broader analysis, concepts related to boundary spanning emerged. For this manuscript, we conducted additional rounds of deductive coding

specifically for the four qualities of boundary-spanning according to Williams (2012): reticulist, interpreter, coordinator, and entrepreneur. These codes formed the basis of our findings presented here.

Our research team used three main strategies to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, the process of collaboratively coding and analyzing the data forced the research team to thoroughly explain our rationale for specific codes to arrive at consensus. Doing so yielded tighter, more informative codes that resonated across and within the interview transcripts. Second, we conducted member checks with interview participants in Fall 2021 to ensure our depiction of their roles and responsibilities aligned with their lived experiences. And third, team members engaged in reflexive memoing throughout the study to both elucidate emerging themes and to reflect on how our identities impacted how we approached this work.

The research team consisted of four members. One author is a former school counselor who is now a counselor educator and scholar, and three authors are higher education researchers who study issues related to college access. While we all have some connection to the school counseling field, we are largely "outsiders" to the realm of state policy. Memoing supported reflection of both the affordances and challenges of this outsider status and informed how we approached the analysis of the transcripts and our understanding of the study's limitations.

Findings

We found that the ways that SEA state officials described supporting school counseling in their state fell into four major categories of activities. In describing these activities, SEA officials also shared a number of factors that influenced or limited their abilities to support school counseling, which we share below as critical context for their role enactment. In particular, their positions within state government (office affiliation), staffing capacity, and limited regulatory authority required SEA officials to enact their roles as boundary spanners, leaning into their abilities to network, interpret, coordinate, and innovate in order to fulfill their responsibilities.

How SEAs Support School Counseling

Our participants shared that they supported school counseling in their states primarily through four types of activities: (1) disseminating counseling-related information and serving as a resource for counselors; (2) providing professional development and/or technical assistance; (3) engaging in counselor advocacy; and (4) supporting state counseling policy implementation. We briefly describe each of these foci as a basis for understanding how SEA officials understand and enact their roles.

Information Dissemination

First, SEA officials identified disseminating information and serving as a resource for counselors as key responsibilities. They noted sharing information with counselors through state counseling newsletters, listservs, and web-based resource repositories where counselors could access information and materials as well as post their own resources to share with others. One SEA official described how they "facilitate[d] weekly webinars…[and] took notes on a Google Doc as people talked and they all had access to it, to add their own notes and resources." Some state officials made themselves directly accessible to counselors by phone or email to provide resources and guidance, with one SEA sharing, "I am on my email all the time because I understand the need. You can't wait two weeks for an answer when you've got a parent breathing down your neck." Others preferred to share information on broader platforms like an email listserv as "our way of getting information out but also helping to provide a platform for a virtual collaboration between school counselors."

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic prompted some officials to increase their outreach and resource-sharing activities and to find new ways to connect with counselors virtually. One SEA official described setting up a state-wide conference call to address counselor concerns during the pandemic. "We had about 60 or 70 people on this call," this SEA leader shared, "and we even had our state superintendent… and we stayed on that call until every single question was answered."

Professional Development and Technical Assistance

Professional development events were also an avenue for state officials to support school counselors, although their oversight of professional learning activities varied. Whereas some organized large conferences, regional meetings, and online workshops where counselors could collaborate, others did not directly sponsor professional development activities. Rather, they participated in conferences and other events hosted by their state's professional school counselor association or by colleagues in other divisions of state government. For example, one SEA official from a small state shared, "I hold quarterly lead counselor meetings… and we do anything from rolling out new initiatives. We do training on the ASCA model, [and] I bring in guest speakers for resources in the community." Conversely, an SEA official in a large, predominantly rural state shared that they didn't provide any professional development directly: "Our state counseling association puts on an excellent conference every year that I participate in. I'm a presenter at it every year. But our department doesn't put [a conference] on." SEA officials also offered technical assistance, often in the form of supporting counselors' use of state level tools and platforms.

School Counselor Advocacy

With notable variation, SEA officials engaged in advocacy by supporting counselors to advocate for themselves, educating school leaders about appropriate counseling roles, and calling for more support for the school counseling profession at the state level. Some officials engaged in advocacy about specific policies, such as for school leaders to use a counselor-specific evaluation tool to assess counselor performance rather than a teacher evaluation form. Others discussed advocating on behalf of counselors at the state level for increased funding, support, and visibility of the counseling profession. One SEA official described how they advocated by consistently providing a voice for counselors in state-level meetings:

> When I'm in some of these meetings, sometimes when I get asked, "Well, what do you think of this," and I spin it from a counselor perspective, they're like, "Oh, yeah, okay. We never really thought of that before." So [school counselors] really haven't ever had a voice before.

However, officials commonly reported that local control at the school district level constrained their ability to advocate on counselors' behalf and felt that advocacy work was best left to the state's counseling association. "It's very much a local control state," one official shared, explaining why they could not help counselors advocate for more appropriate roles within their schools. "Any time the district feels like the state has overstepped its boundaries [by advocating], we hear about it really loud and clear."

State Policy Implementation

Whereas participants reported not having the authority to regulate state policies or monitor their adoption, they did note that supporting policy implementation was an important part of their role. Examples of this included assisting with the implementation of comprehensive counseling programs, monitoring state-mandated initiatives that involved counselors, and collaborating with other leaders at the state level on counseling initiatives and policy. For instance, one state official

supported the creation of a statewide career and technical education plan, while another official oversaw a state reporting system for graduation requirements because counselors were responsible for collecting and reporting college and career data. Another SEA official shared that they closely monitored school compliance with the career and technical education standards necessary to access federal Perkins Grant funding, and they supported school counselors in schools that were out of compliance. "What happens then is that we go back in and we write a plan with [the school counselors], and they have to really come into compliance within one year or they could lose their funding," this official shared. "It really holds them accountable." In other words, although their role did not include setting counseling-related policy, SEA officials were often tasked with supporting existing policies in various ways.

Factors that Influenced SEA Officials' Work

As SEA officials detailed their roles and how they enacted them, they routinely referenced working conditions that directed, limited, or otherwise influenced their work. Four prominent themes emerged in this regard: (1) professional background, (2) office affiliation, (3) staffing, and (4) limited regulatory influence. Nearly all participants mentioned at least one of these factors as directly shaping the scope of their job as well as their ability to effectively fulfill their role. We briefly describe each of these factors.

Role Enactment Shaped by Professional Background

Our participants came from a variety of professional backgrounds, with at least 18 of them having worked as a school counselor at some point in their careers. Regardless of their level of experience with the counseling profession, the vast majority of our participants described how previous work experiences shaped the ways they understood and carried out their current roles. One counselor shared, "because I was a counselor, I can understand from the administrative perspective how counselors can best serve our students holistically… [so we] educate them on the expectations in our state based on our [needs]." Another official, whose background was in career and technical education, believed that a major aspect of his role was developing state career counseling standards. A background in school counseling was useful to another SEA official as she reshaped an ambiguous job description into a comprehensive, well-integrated one. As she explained:

> The school counseling stuff used to be under CTE. And then there used to be a school mental health position on the school health and safety team. And they created the position that they moved me into, and kind of collapsed those together but collapsed it under school health and safety. Because I am a school counselor, I've kind of morphed that position to what it is now.

Thus, the previous professional experiences of SEA officials shaped the scope of their school counseling roles.

Role Focus Defined by SEA Organizational Structure

Our participants shared that the placement of their office within the organizational structure of the SEA influenced the type of work that they performed. As highlighted in Table 1, the offices in which SEA school counseling officials worked varied widely and were typically determined by factors outside of the SEA officials' control. For example, just over a third of participants were housed in a state education office related to college and career support, which led them to focus on college readiness and career and technical education efforts rather than the academic or social emotional domains of counseling. Conversely, several participants shared that they did not support the college

and career readiness domain of counseling at all as they were based in an office outside of their state's CTE branch. Some of our participants shared that their office affiliation was directly related to the funding for their role, either through state legislation or grant money that was directed towards a particular domain. As one state leader described, "The money was in CTE, so… when they brought back the [state counseling] position, that's where it landed." Office affiliation was also dependent on the plans and priorities of state leaders, either within the department of education or beyond. As a result, SEA officials shared that changes in leadership could lead to shifts in how they were positioned in the department of education, pivoting them to a different domain of focus or placing them under supervisors who were less familiar with counseling work. One participant shared:

> We had a change in leadership, so we had a new Commissioner come in who restructured everything, as happens often at the state level. And so, they've moved school counseling into whole child support. I know the person that's over in "whole child," but she's not a school counselor, she doesn't know school counseling.

Participants' affiliation with a specific office sometimes shaped their focus on specific professional domains associated with school counseling. For instance, if their office is structurally located under the college and career department, they do not always feel well positioned to support counselors' work on mental health. While about a third of our participants reported that their colleagues stepped in to support school counselors in domains not covered by the counseling officials, this was not true for most of our participants. Consequently, participants who were unable to cover all three domains regretted that they were unable to do more for the counselors in their state. As a result, they expressed the desire to expand their domain support to school counselors beyond their office's immediate focus. One state leader shared that a change in leadership created such an opportunity:

> So, when I first started, it was all career. So, career, career, career, and keep in mind that was about 5 years ago. I got a new director and things kind of shifted in a better way... now, with me being able to talk to this new director about how school counselors want more mental health professional development, not just career, I'm getting more leeway to be able to support more in the mental health area.

As a result of the constraints of their office affiliation, SEA officials often found that it was necessary to strategically collaborate with their colleagues in counseling-adjacent offices or to find creative ways around bureaucratic divisions in order to better support counselors.

Role Capacity Determined by Staffing

Staffing consistently proved to be a huge limiting factor to SEA officials' efficacy and was often the impetus for building strong networks with stakeholders. Whereas two participants described having two or three full-time staff dedicated to overseeing counseling, the remaining participants noted working in "an office of one." In one state, the state official we interviewed was expected to devote only one day a week to counseling-related work.

Many of the SEA officials remarked that this limited staffing reduced the scope of what they could do. In one case, a state official described a state law that required schools to submit a comprehensive counseling plan to the SEA, but explained that there were not enough SEA staff to review the plans and ensure they were conforming with state counseling guidelines:

> [Schools] do not submit them [the plans] to us. I think they have to post them on their website, which is our usual method of you know, it has to be publicly posted so that your school community has access to it... in a perfect world, I would have a staff

> person assigned to going through the websites… but we haven't had an ability to do that.

Without the capacity to monitor or enforce counseling policy, this SEA official admitted that there was little regulation coming from the state office.

Some participants overcame the gaps in expertise created from limited staffing by leaning heavily on colleagues from other offices or external organizations, such as ASCA state affiliates, for support. In a few cases, the SEA official was situated in a general office of student support, which was most conducive to sharing their workload, even when they themselves were the only liaison for school counseling.

Role Impact Shaped by Limited Regulatory Influence

Nearly all of our participants described ways in which governance processes limited their authority to enact changes at the state level on behalf of school counselors. In states without a clear counseling mandate or without dedicated funding streams for counseling, SEA officials felt they lacked the power to implement counseling best practices. Even in states with mandated counseling programs, state leads often cited bureaucratic inefficiencies, policy exceptions, and lack of an enforcement mechanism as barriers to successful implementation of state mandates. In particular, many SEA officials described local control, or the delegation of policy authority to local governing bodies, as a major limiting factor to their ability to implement counseling policy. As one SEA official explained, "we're a local control state. So I can't call their principal and say they're not allowed to do this. And I think sometimes that's what they want. They don't understand that I don't have that type of authority." While numerous SEA officials shared this feeling that counselors wanted more regulation of counseling policy and practice at the state level, many of them also shared the feeling that there was little they could do to support counselors at the local level beyond helping them to advocate for themselves. One SEA shared, "Our state is very much a local rule state. So, you know, our requirements are few, our guidance is a lot. So, I guess the way to look at it is where there are regulations, that's the absolute floor and our guidance is aspirational." As a result, SEA officials had to find alternative ways to support counselors by engaging their boundary-spanning skills.

How SEA Officials Enact their Roles as Boundary Spanners

To fulfill their responsibilities despite these unique factors that complicated their efforts, SEA officials relied on certain tools and skills. We hypothesized that the SEA officials enacted their roles by wielding skills and competencies that mapped directly onto the four qualities of a boundary spanner described by Williams (2012): a reticulist, an interpreter, a coordinator, and an entrepreneur. In the following section we illustrate how, as boundary spanners, SEA officials carry out their roles through activation of these skills.

Reticulist

SEA officials embodied a reticulist approach, which is when an individual maximizes intricate networks of people from a variety of spaces to build consensus to increase effectiveness in their role. SEA officials created, maintained, and leveraged social networks to achieve their goals. To support the counseling field, these professionals underscored the importance of creating strong networks of counselors within their state. Given that many schools, particularly in rural areas, employ a single counselor, professional isolation is a reality of the job. State officials emphasized their efforts to mitigate this isolation. For example, one SEA official shared how she developed regional meetings for counselors to meet and share best practices:

> We developed school counselor collaboratives within each of our eight regions. So, it gave counselors a way to come together. Even though we've got a lot of counselors in, you know, four or five pretty dense urban populations, the majority of our schools are rural, so they didn't have any support at all.

Participants also personified the reticulist spirit by building rich, diverse networks of education stakeholders to influence and support school counseling policy, including school district leaders, school counseling associations, state policymakers, and nonprofits. The curation of this expanded network was intentional to elevate the focus on school counseling within the state. As shared by one state official:

> I do whatever I possibly can to get a school counselor on every committee, every table everywhere. So [name of state official] just had to redo the CTE [career and technical education] state plan. So, I had a school counselor on that committee as well as myself.

State officials leveraged these varied connections to advance school counselors' priorities and interests in the state. For instance, a state official provided an example of the robust network they utilized to build stronger linkages between the K–12 and higher education sectors:

> I work with postsecondary, with the dual credit, with the Commission for Higher Education, and then I also work with the CTE team, a lot with my Governor's workforce cabinet. So, I feel like I'm kind of all over the place.

The official noted that because she had connections with higher education officials in the state, these officials were no longer hesitant to leverage her expertise on issues that affect counselors. "And so, everything they do, they consult with me on school counselor stuff," she noted. Many of the participants in our study shared that they had worked in their state for a long time, either in state government, in schools, or both, which facilitated these relationships.

Interpreter

SEA officials also acted as interpreters between the practical world of school counselors and the political world of policymakers. On the one hand, SEA officials clarified complex policies for counselors, provided technical assistance (e.g., assisting with state-mandated paperwork), and offered advice about state certification and continuing education requirements which fell under the purview of the SEA. On the other hand, they helped policymakers at the state and local levels understand the role of school counselors, the domains that govern their work, and the types of responsibilities that counselors should and should not oversee. For example, one SEA official explained how she "correct[ed] her commissioner all the time" when the commissioner used the outdated term "guidance counselor" rather than "school counselor," while another participant shared how she educated superintendents about the differences between social workers and school counselors. The latter state official explained that after a new regulation was passed requiring schools to hire counselors, superintendents were confused why their schools' social workers could not undertake the duties outlined for the counselors. "Are you saying that school social workers can't do that [work]? What specific things do school counselors do?" she recalled them asking. The SEA official explained that she helped correct misinformation about the differences between these two types of student support professionals.

In their role as interpreters, SEA counseling officials also served as conflict mediators between school counselors and the principals who assigned them inappropriate duties. Although

SEA officials described their lack of influence over school leaders' choices to assign (or not assign) certain duties to counselors, SEA officials supported counselors by providing them with a sounding board and offering guidance about effective ways to successfully navigate less than ideal conditions. In fact, one official from a state that mandated counseling in grades K–12 shared that because "there's not a lot of local knowledge about what school counselors should be doing," she educated school leaders during professional development days about counselors' roles; she also talked one-on-one with counselors about effectively advocating for their needs, including having conversations about "how you can talk to your administrator, respectfully, about [what] duties are fair" for counselors to oversee. The fact that counselors sought advice from SEA officials on navigating these tensions with administrators demonstrates how the SEA school counseling officials were trusted by their network to foster empathy between parties, even when stakeholder interests collided.

Coordinator

The role of a coordinator within boundary spanning is to manage complex logistics among all stakeholders. The vast majority of SEA officials described finding ways to partner with other colleagues (i.e., officials within SEA, other state agencies, and professional organizations) in order to provide more robust support to counselors in their states. These partnerships primarily allowed them to tap into additional resources and delegate tasks, which was especially important given most states had only one or two SEA officials dedicated to supporting school counseling. Engaging and collaborating with their colleagues in the state department of education and at other state agencies was an important way for SEA officials to expand their influence. Participants referenced the importance of collaborating with colleagues who supervised school counselors' role partners, such as college or career advisors, dropout coaches, and school mental health professionals. One state official detailed how collaborating across agency departments was necessary to effectively address the multiplicity of issues that fell under the realm of school counseling:

> We also have colleagues at [SEA], in another division of the agency, who are specifically supervising social emotional learning, behavioral and mental health… So, we have to do a lot of coordination and collaboration with our colleagues in our agency to support the whole realm of school counseling, because there's a lot of us that share parts of that work.

Other important examples of cross-functional collaboration included SEA officials coordinating with their state's student social emotional wellness team, commissions for higher education, and a governor's workforce cabinet. As noted by one participant, collaboration enabled her to cover the multiple facets of school counseling since "the school counselor has a lot of hats." Moreover, participants noted that these relationships also enabled them to increase the visibility of school counseling issues and created the opportunity for them to act as a resource to their colleagues whose responsibilities included domains of the counseling profession.

Conversely, a failure to collaborate across agency boundaries was specifically cited by several state leaders as a limitation to their ability to support counselors across domains. For example, two state officials mentioned that college and career readiness was covered by a different branch of the state agency from their own and thus was outside the purview of their role. One shared:

> Most of the college and career readiness is the work that's coming out of our Office of Curriculum and not through my office. There's probably a lot more we could do, but we haven't. Although we collaborate on some things, we have not collaborated on that [college and career readiness].

SEA officials spoke highly of their collaborations with state professional counseling associations. One third of our interview sample held non-voting positions on state ASCA affiliate boards and as such worked closely with the boards on issues of concern at the state level. An additional seven participants who did not hold board positions described less formal yet still valuable engagement with ASCA affiliates. With limited budgets, SEA officials often relied on their state ASCA affiliate for support with hosting professional development opportunities, disseminating information to counselors, and engaging in advocacy practices. According to one SEA official, this relationship enabled them to carry out work that they otherwise could not:

> The state school counseling association is a critical partner for us…We are aligned in almost everything we do…Of course, [state counseling leader] can't have, doesn't serve in an advocacy role. So, our school counseling association is able to do that.

By connecting and coordinating with stakeholders across their states, SEA officials were able to expand the scope of what they were able to achieve.

Entrepreneur

SEA officials also described practices that reflected entrepreneurial approaches to their work, including designing creative interventions to address challenges that their state's counselors experienced. For example, one SEA official held virtual "office hours" for practicing counselors to connect and ask questions about state policies in real time. Another SEA official developed guidelines for a fourth counseling domain around global citizenship to better support counseling work. Several SEA counseling officials demonstrated innovation in the ways they defined the scope of their roles as the priorities of state leaders and SEAs changed over time.

SEA officials also demonstrated creativity in the ways they identified counselors' needs and in their outreach to counselors, especially across large states. They described finding multiple ways to connect with counselors to learn what support counselors wanted from their state government. One state official developed a counselor needs survey and worked with the state ASCA affiliate to address those needs:

> Something I've been doing every fall to help get data to show school counselor needs is just having a survey that goes out on our listserv to see what their professional development needs are and where they feel most supported… and so I always pass that on to our school counselor association as well, to show that we're teaming up and really focusing on their needs.

Additionally, SEA officials acted as entrepreneurs and innovators by challenging the status quo. Although most SEA officials lacked the power to make systemic changes at the state and local levels, some compensated for their lack of power with their determination to increase the visibility of counseling issues and to create a strong counseling presence within their SEA. For example, one official kept close track of any meetings within their state department of education that could impact school counseling and made sure to attend these meetings, despite not always being invited. State officials such as this one demonstrated a fierce commitment to being present in the room to challenge their colleagues to consider counselors' perspective and to put forth new ideas.

Discussion and Implications for Research and Practice

In this study, we examined the professional roles of SEA officials in charge of school counseling at the state level. As states aim to support schools and districts in their recovery from the

insidious impact of COVID-19, especially on matters related to mental health and postsecondary enrollment, role clarity among the professionals charged with supporting school counselors is critical. We found that the primary role of these officials was to help school counselors effectively carry out their jobs by focusing their time disseminating information to and providing technical assistance and professional development for their states' counselors. The SEA officials also emphasized their role as advocates for counselors within their sphere of influence and as experts on counseling issues within their SEA, oftentimes supporting policy implementation. Although our study did not set out to inquire about organizational factors impacting SEA officials' efficacy, themes such as limited staffing, office affiliation, and professional background all emerged as directly influencing professional efficacy.

Consistent with previous studies (Carey & Martin, 2017; Savitz-Romer et al., 2024), our research found that SEA counseling officials possess little authority and limited organizational capacity, which they believed further constrained their impact. However, these state officials recognized that there are significant unmet needs for support among the professionals they aim to serve, and therefore leveraged their influence, partnerships, and a unique set of skills to try to meet the needs of school counselors. Our work is also consistent with other studies (Hodge et al., 2023; Hopkins et al., 2022) on SEA officials more generally. Hopkins et al. (2022) highlighted the varying dynamics that need to be navigated in order to enable SEAs' work, while Hodge et al. (2023), found that logic shaped their perception of their position and the actions they could take to support local stakeholders.

Examining our findings through the lens of boundary spanning principles, we found evidence that SEA officials employ a set of boundary spanning skills to compensate for complicated working conditions (as illustrated in Figure 1). Specifically, the SEA officials utilized their boundary spanning qualities to various degrees to maximize their ability to fulfill their professional responsibilities despite organizational constraints, which in turn benefit school counselors, principals and leaders, and school districts more broadly. These professional responsibilities are often facilitated through relationships with partners, both internally and externally, to provide the greatest gain for the intended beneficiaries. Many of these partnerships were cultivated through the prior roles of the state official, from their own time as a school counselor and/or involvement in their ASCA state affiliate.

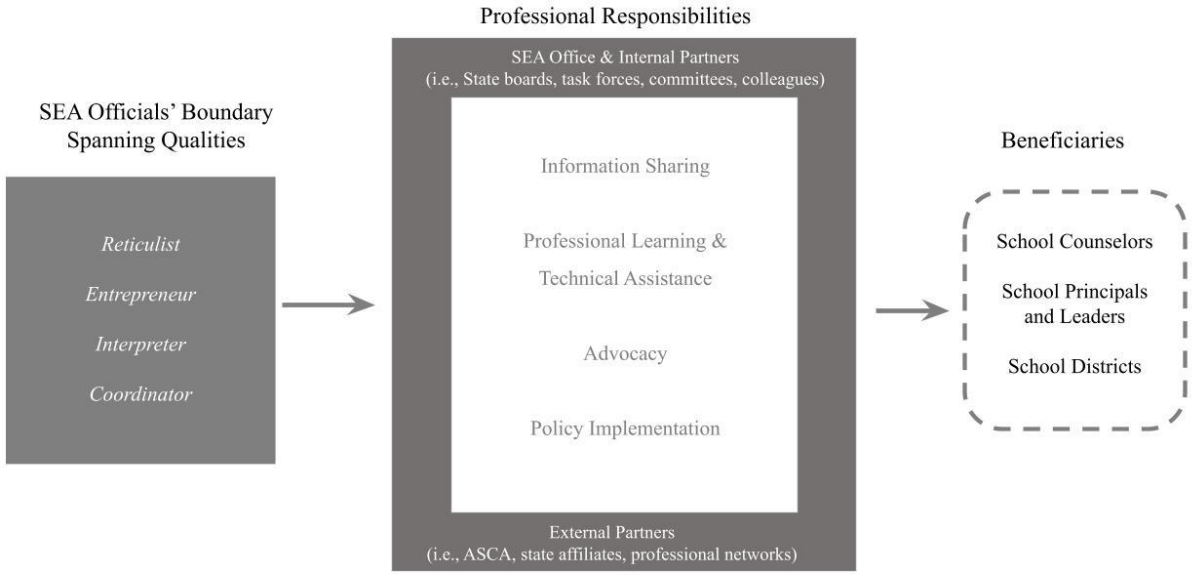
In terms of the specific qualities of boundary spanners, SEA officials acted as reticulists by cultivating robust professional networks and served as interpreters for school and district leaders, educating them about the school counseling role. They also worked as coordinators by establishing and maintaining partnerships with various internal and external stakeholders and embodied an entrepreneurial approach by designing creative interventions for addressing school counselors' challenges.

Among these four qualities, the reticulist approach was leveraged most considering limited staffing and budgeting, which constrained what SEA counseling officials could do individually. Relationship-building within their state office enabled SEA officials to advocate for counselor representation and consideration in state-level initiatives. Moreover, they utilized their professional backgrounds, experience, and influence to build trusting relationships with colleagues to expand the professional support they could offer to counselors. This ability to build collaborative relationships and foster collaboration at both the local and state levels has been found to be a critical component of the work of SEA officials in other domains as well, helping state officials to promote a sense of shared responsibility for their work (Hopkins et al., 2022). Our findings suggest that this is also critical for the success of counseling SEA officials, who often needed to invest colleagues in their work in order to address all three counseling domains, especially in states where academic, social

emotional, and college and career supports were divided among different departments at the state level.

Figure 1

SEA Officials Employ Boundary Spanning Qualities to Compensate for Complicated Working Conditions



We found less consistency in state officials' use of entrepreneurial approaches. For example, some participants embraced a willingness to challenge the status quo, advocate fiercely at the state level and actively design creative interventions to support counselor challenges. However, among other participants, this quality was less evident as they noted their own limited positional power. This feeling of limited autonomy as state agency officials navigate the tension between state and local decision-making authorities has been found among other state-level officials in similar bureaucratic roles (Hodge et al., 2023). We question whether this finding is attributable to personality, organizational culture, state leadership, or some combination of all three of these factors. Nonetheless, those who embraced an entrepreneurial spirit believed it was essential to getting their jobs done and were less likely to cite their limited regulatory authority as a barrier to their success. Given this finding, our research suggests that an SEA counseling official's success in their role is intrinsically connected to their ability to enact each quality of boundary spanning.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This article is among a small number that speak to school counseling policy and the role of SEA officials, but there are limitations to this work. First, because we do not know the school counseling policy context in these states beyond the information gathered from our interviews and background research we conducted as part of the larger study, our findings are not necessarily generalizable at a national level. In addition, our study took place at a unique time during the summer of 2020 when SEAs were gearing up to prepare schools for hybrid and in-person learning. This likely not only explained why certain state officials may have chosen not to participate but also influenced the priorities of the SEA officials and the details about their role that our participants

shared. Also, by limiting our sample to only participants classified as the primary individuals overseeing school counseling within an SEA, the study lacked perspectives from other SEA officials who may also influence counseling policy at the state level.

There are many potential avenues for future research to build upon and extend this work. Further research might explore the experiences of other SEA professionals whose roles intersect with the domains of counselors' work to construct a more comprehensive picture of state support for a given domain. For instance, almost half of our participants were situated in CTE offices and thus, were not involved in supporting counselors' mental health efforts. Given a mounting youth mental health crisis (Office of the Surgeon General, 2021), future studies might examine how and where counselors receive role clarity, professional learning, and support addressing this domain.

In addition, our study is focused only on SEA officials' perceptions of their roles, but this may not align with how school counselors' experience SEA support. Future research should explore how school counselors experience the self-reported support provided by SEA officials and what more is needed from their state leaders to deepen the field's conceptual understanding of the interactive nature of boundary spanning.

Additional research is needed to explore the power dynamics that SEA professionals contend with in their roles. Although we did not have enough data to explore this topic, references to limitations of power that otherwise constrain SEA officials' efforts were frequent in our interviews. Such a constraint is consistent with existing research on boundary spanners and the potential for disempowerment. While the aforementioned skills drive boundary spanning efforts, one must also account for the power that is held by this person. Scholars (Collien, 2021; Ibarra, 1993) note how a position of power or expert knowledge is often needed to facilitate meaningful change.

Implications

In this article, we illustrate how boundary spanning supports SEA officials in fulfilling their roles. Our paper reinforces the relevance of boundary spanning theory in policy and education-related studies to examine professionals in these roles. Our paper also expands boundary spanning theory by illustrating (Figure 1) how boundary spanning qualities are enacted through their roles and influenced by internal and external partners in order to reach potential beneficiaries of their work.

If the status quo of having one (or in rare cases two) professional(s) at the state level responsible for school counseling remains, SEA officials will need to enact boundary spanning efforts to most effectively leverage their role and acknowledge its unique properties. This will be especially necessary given that counselors' work spans three professional domains (academic, social emotional, and postsecondary) and thus will require interacting with multiple departments within state education agencies, and potentially multiple state offices. Currently, officials responsible for school counseling navigate multiple offices and divisions that support students' academic, college and career, or personal/emotional development. To enhance boundary spanning capabilities, state policymakers may want to consider intentionally creating cross-functional teams, establishing formal partnerships with professional organizations, and appointing SEA officials to state-level cabinets that oversee each of the domain areas in which counselors focus their work. For example, establishing cross-functional teams could help ensure school counseling is represented and considered when developing state initiatives and policies that indirectly or directly impact counselors' practices.

Whereas in some cases there is value to enhancing boundary spanning efforts, it is likewise important to examine where SEA officials could be given greater authority, at least in the case of funded mandates. Previous studies have shown that there is little oversight of school counseling at

the school level, which suggests that more oversight could be beneficial, and SEA counseling officials are well-positioned to provide monitoring and support activities if given the resources and authority to do so (Savitz-Romer et al., 2024).

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Rena Kashari for her assistance on this project.

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Volume 33 Number 44 August 5, 2025 ISSN 1068-2341