



©UNICEF/Cybermedia

SCHOOL COUNSELLORS

*UNICEF QUALITY INCLUSIVE EDUCATION MODEL'S
PERSPECTIVE ON SCHOOL COUNSELLORS
POSITION PAPER*

**UNICEF OFFICE IN ROMANIA
2021**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Intro	3
2. Who are the school counsellors?	4
3. Why the schools and the communities need school counsellors	6
4. Why are the school counsellors relevant for children/students in UNICEF Quality Inclusive Education Mode	9
5. Evidence of impact – Quality Inclusive Education Model External Summative Evaluation on the impact of school counsellors	10
6. Policy implications	12
7. Conclusions and recommendations	14

1. INTRO

In Romania the rate of early school leavers (ESL) was in 2019 of 15.3% while more than 370,000 children of compulsory school age are out of school, falling through the gaps between the different sectors in Romania (education, child protection, social assistance, health, etc.). Vulnerable children face significant challenges in terms of access and participation to education. And one key front to address all these challenges and generate positive impact is through school counselling.

School counsellors work with students of all ages and their families, from pre-kindergarten to grade 12, providing valuable individual or small group support, counselling and psychological assessment for students with specific needs. Their daily work activities may include counselling students, assessing students' learning and behavior, helping families make informed decisions about their child's education, identifying adjustments to support students' learning and liaising with external agencies regarding students' wellbeing.

School counselors represent an important pillar in preventing and reducing school dropout and early school leaving, in supporting transitions between educational cycles and even for increasing the student outcomes, especially for the most at risk children/students. They have an important role in parenting education and counselling, as well as in liaising with child protection, health or other services in monitoring and cross-sector management of educational risks.

However, research demonstrates that student-to-counsellor ratios, how the school counselling program is structured and organized and what counsellors need to do and choose to do matter¹. They all are accountable for the efficacy and efficiency of school counselling.

¹ "The impact of school counseling on student educational outcomes in high schools: What can we learn about effectiveness from statewide evaluations of school counseling practice in Nebraska and Utah?" Carey, J.C., & Harrington, K. M. (2010) CSCORE

This position paper provides education, child protection and health authorities and key decision makers from central, county and local level with an overview of the evidence supporting the scaling up of the Quality Inclusive Education (QIE) Model for all schools in Romania, a model in which the role of the school counsellor was designed to improve the efficacy and efficiency of school counselling interventions. Building a robust guidance and counselling system at national level, for all school units in pre-university education, is one of the crucial paths to achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 - ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all.

2. WHO ARE THE SCHOOL COUNSELLORS?

Guidance and counselling services in schools are covered by the Law of education (1/2011) and by the Order of the Ministry of Education No. 5555/2011.

The school guidance and counselling services are delivered through school counsellors and teachers, and had a rapid development area in the education system going from a few dozen practitioners at the end of the '90s, to currently almost 2200 counsellors. In pre-university education in Romania, the counselling and guidance activities are taking place either within school counselling offices or as a distinct school subject included in the National Curriculum. Counselling has been part of the curriculum, as a compulsory distinct discipline in lower secondary education, since 2004. While a reorganization of the entire curriculum on a competence-based approach took recently place, new school syllabi have been developed for counselling in various educational cycles².

While initially the Order of the Ministry of Education No. 5555/2011 established that one school counsellor had to support at least 800 students (or 400 preschoolers) recently, in 2020, the legal framework was amended³ (also due to QIE advocacy) and a new paragraph in the Law on education allows now a ratio of 500 students (or 300 preschoolers). However, there is another piece of legislation stating a school councilor should have a 600 students' (or 300 preschoolers) ratio. At the moment, the Ministry of Education is waiting for the Parliament to decide upon the ratio.

Becoming a school counsellor requires a BA level background in psychology, pedagogy or social studies. Several master's degree level study programs are available in several university centers. While they are not a prerequisite to becoming a guidance practitioner, they are very popular with practitioners and aspiring counsellors. With most counsellors having their initial training in psychology, many pursue further acquisition of competences in this area through continuous education. There are county and regional level centers for school counsellors and labor market counsellors which offer continuous training opportunities. School counsellors can also access the network of Teacher Training Centers.

School counselling is provided in the Romanian education system not only by the school counsellors but also by the guidance teachers (head-teachers – profesori diriginti). The activity of the guidance teachers is regulated in the Law on Education and the Regulation for the organization and functioning of the school units in the pre-university education system. The guidance teachers provide counselling and orientation as per the curricular area "Counselling and orientation" (covering grades 0-12). The school programs for the curricular area "Counselling and orientation" target the development of certain specific key-competences (as defined by the European Framework of Key-Competences for Lifelong Learning) such as learning to learn, interpersonal, intercultural and social competences, civic competence, etc⁴.

² <https://www.euroguidance.eu/guidance-system-in-romania>

³ LEGE nr. 185 din 20 august 2020 pentru modificarea și completarea Legii educației naționale nr. 1/2011, Art. 1, para 12.

⁴ School Counsellor Paper, Crai, E., UNICEF Romania, 2015, not published.

According to the Order of the Ministry of Education No. 5555/2011 or other normative acts regulating school counsellors' mandate, the role of school counsellors includes a variety of interventions such as:

Counsellor – counselling children/students on personal and educational decisions, counselling parents and teachers;

Connector - liaising with child protection, health or other agencies in monitoring and cross-sector management of educational risks;

Case manager – developing mid-term and long term counselling strategies and interventions.

School counsellors' first roles, according to the legal framework in effect, are "ensuring participation to and retention in the compulsory education system of all children / youth, regardless of their socio and psycho-individual particularities" and "providing additional support necessary for the provision of a quality education based on the bio-psycho-social potential of each child / youth".

3. WHY THE SCHOOLS/COMMUNITIES NEED SCHOOL COUNSELLORS?

From a historical perspective, school counselling was introduced with the aim to help the students left behind (lower academic performance, students with vulnerable socio-economic backgrounds or students belonging to minority/immigrant groups). However, recent research shows that the School Counsellors must play a role for all students, since it is traditionally within the mandate of the School Counsellor to support the development of non-cognitive skills that are demonstrated to play a key role in school attendance, school longer paths and better school outcomes ("data show these non-cognitive skills matter as much as or even more than cognitive or academic skills in predicting positive life outcomes"⁵).

As such, modern school counselling is more and more geared towards all students, taking into account that each student may face various barriers in his/her school life and has different academic and personal needs. Professional school counsellors serve a vital role in maximizing students' achievement. Incorporating leadership, advocacy and collaboration, professional school counsellors promote equity and access to opportunities and rigorous educational experiences for all students. Professional school counsellors support a safe learning environment. Collaborating with other stakeholders to promote student achievement, professional school counsellors address the needs of all students through prevention and intervention programs that are a part of a school counselling program.

In the Romanian education system, the school counsellors play key roles for the educational success of children/students. According to Article 5 of the Order of the Minister of Education 5555/2011 for the approval of the Regulation for the organization and functioning of the county centers / Bucharest Municipality center for resources and educational assistance, school counsellor must ensure:

- a. Participation to and retention in the compulsory education system of all children / youth, regardless of their socio and psycho-individual particularities;
- b. Providing additional support necessary for the provision of a quality education based on the bio-psycho-social potential of each child / youth;

⁵ "Ready to Be Counted: The Research Case for Education Policy Action on Non-Cognitive Skills", A Working Paper by Chris Gabrieli, Dana Ansel, PhD, and Sara Bartolino Krachman, December 2015

- c. Providing information and counselling for the teachers in order to optimize the didactic-educational activity;
- d. Cooperation with educational stakeholders involved in the development of the personality of students / youth for their optimal integration into the school, social and professional life;
- e. Involvement of parents in specific activities for an efficient school-family-community relationship, as the foundation for the school adaptation and social integration of the children / youth;
- f. Organization of the development of studies on school dropout, juvenile deviant behavior, negative entourage, extracurricular activities / leisure;
- g. Organization of antiviolence programs and projects in the school environment.

That is why schools and communities rely heavily on the work of school counsellors for boosting access and participation to education, enhanced rates of compulsory school completion, improved school outcomes, improved student resilience and socio-emotional skills, reducing school dropout and absenteeism and for contributing to a quality inclusive education approach and a safe learning environment.

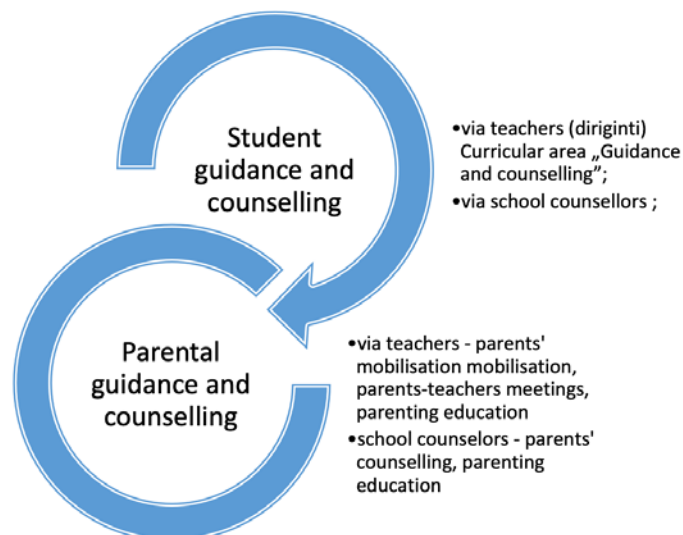
However, the questions that arise are: are school counsellors in every school? Are there sufficient school counsellors to match the school needs? Is the norm of the school counsellors adequate for implementing properly the extensive mandate of the school counsellors? Is the school counsellor-student ratio adequate for attending the needs of all children? Are school counsellors adequately trained and empowered to play the various roles in counselling students, parents and teachers and in liaising cross-sectorally with their counterparts in the child protection, social assistance, and health or county/local government sectors? Do they work in a school and management environment which is conducive for their work? Is there at county or local level a cross-sector cooperation culture and procedure?

QIE Model tackled all these issues in the model's implementation, advocacy and evidence generating. "The Model targeted in the same time, the development of quality education, and the school participation for all children, especially of those who are vulnerable. Those interventions insisted on preventing non-schooling, school absenteeism, dropout and early school leaving, as well as on increasing learning outcomes and the competences acquired by the children. A first objective was that every child would be able to enroll in school early, to learn at its maximal potential and be properly prepared to succeed in the labor market and to participate in an active citizenship. A second objective was to accelerate the efforts to realizing the right to education of all children, especially those vulnerable, by improving the quality of teaching and school administration, and to mobilize schools, families and communities to support the school attendance and development of each child"⁶.

As such, building the capacities of the schools involved in QIE Model was planned from the very design stage of the Model and in thorough consultations with the implementing partners of QIE. Including school counselling in QIE Model was planned also for ensuring a convergent approach with other national or EU strategies that also include measure for an enhanced school counselling in Romanian schools (such as the Early Education Strategy, The Strategy for the Reduction of ESL, the Child Rights Strategy, The National Strategy for Roma Inclusion, etc.).

6 QIE Model External Summative Evaluation, UNICEF, 2021, not published

Fig. 1 School counselling in QIE Model



QIE included the following key interventions for school counsellors and teachers:

- Setting standards for school counsellors and school mediators;
- Training of school counsellors, teachers and school managers on the new curricular area `guidance and counselling`;
- Training school counsellors and teachers on parenting counselling and parenting education;
- Training teachers on parents' mobilization and outreach;
- Encouraged the school involved to recruit and hire additional school counsellors (partially with funding provided temporarily from QIE Model budget);
- Advocating for a reduced student-school counsellor ratio and a better defined norm for the school counsellors;

Empowering school counsellors to deliver effectively their services;

- Providing technical assistance to MoE for the development of a national parenting strategy;
- Development of an Early Warning System for educational risks at school level and including it in the school Institutional Development Plan, providing thus a framework of cooperation and intervention of all school professional categories in support of the most vulnerable children/students (school counsellors included);
- QIE Model was developed in parallel with and complementary to the Minimum Package of Services (MPS) Model within the "Social inclusion through the provision of integrated social services at community level" Project in Bacau County. MPS is an umbrella concept for the provision of integrated services in health, education and social/child protection at community level; the package is organized around a set of seven services (identification; information; counselling; support; referral; monitoring; evaluation) provided in an integrated manner by a local team composed of a social worker, a community nurse and a school counsellor. In vulnerable communities, the team can be extended, in order to include also a school mediator and/or a Roma health mediator.

4. WHY ARE THE SCHOOL COUNSELLORS RELEVANT FOR CHILDREN / STUDENTS?

Romania is home to almost 4 million children. The country has made remarkable progress in the past 30 years, yet poverty, an unfinished reform of the education system, chronic underfunding of the education sector and a lack of cross-sector cooperation culture and frameworks at all levels (central, county and local) still affect too many of them. As data reveal:

- In Romania the rate of early school leavers (ESL) was in 2019 of 15.3%.
- The ESL rate for Roma minority in Romania is 77% (FRA 2016). Early school leaving is predominantly a Roma and a rural challenge. In 2018, ESL rate reached 25% in rural areas and 15% in urban and suburban areas and 4.2% in cities.
- In 2018 a number of 135,701 children of primary education age (6-10 years), 73,622 children of lower secondary education age (11-14) and 161,538 children of upper secondary education age (15-18) were not in schools.
- In Romania, socio-economically advantaged students outperformed disadvantaged students in reading by 109 score points in PISA 2018. Student resilience is low: "some 4% of advantaged students in Romania, but 0% of disadvantaged students, were top performers in reading in PISA 2018".
- PISA 2012 singled out Romania with the motivation of students ranked almost out of the chart as the least motivated among the OECD participating students.
- Parenting skills and practices of a large share of Romanian parents are insufficiently developed to allow parents to provide the support their children need on their educational path.

Half of the Romanian children are at risk of poverty and social exclusion and nearly 1 in 4 suffer from severe material deprivation⁷.

- At the global level, UNICEF estimates 1 out of 10 children has a form of disability. In Romania, only 72,000 are registered.
- Vulnerable children in education (Roma children, children with disabilities, children from rural areas, children from families affected by poverty and LGBTQ+ adolescents) face particular and widespread barriers for school participation.

5. EVIDENCE OF IMPACT – QIE MODEL EVALUATION ON THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL COUNSELLORS

- QIE Model is based on a philosophy that promotes the right to education for all children and adolescents through early interventions, in a preventive and integrated way, with a focus on equity and quality of education. The Model targeted both enhancing the school participation for all children, especially of those who are vulnerable, and the development of the quality of education. Its components were design so that to prevent non-schooling, school absenteeism, and dropout, as well as on increasing learning outcomes and the competences acquired by the children.
- QIE is a tested and validated model consisting of a package of interventions including: improving the capacity of school management and teachers to support each child according to her/his needs; improving teaching methods and tools; creating partnerships with families and students and developing parental skills;

⁷ Eurostat 2020: EU children at risk of poverty or social exclusion

mobilizing communities, in a cross-sector cooperation framework, in support of education; improving socio-emotional skills and the motivation of children; encouraging diversity among students, regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion, abilities and socio-economic status.

- The relevance of QIE in relation to strategic directions of Education 2030 is achieved through its specific objectives and interventions, aiming to ensure the participation of all children and adolescents to quality education, starting early and enhancing life-long learning, in kindergartens and schools where management, teachers and school counsellors are prepared to provide quality support to each child/student, according to their needs and taking into account their complete environment (family and community). (QIE External Evaluation, 2020, pg. 43).
- QIE Model had a documented impact in the schools involved in the Model on:
 - School dropout
 - School absenteeism
 - Student learning outcomes
- All stakeholders largely agree that in QIE Model the activities and outcomes have the necessary quality to achieve the proposed objectives, and the integrated approach and human resources such as school counsellors and principals make a difference when it comes to the goals of inclusion and quality in education. It is also agreed that interventions for quality inclusive education should target the school as a whole within the community context and not to be teacher-centered. In this manner, teachers, parents, (school counsellors) and managers are seen as equally responsible key agents in education (QIE External Evaluation, 2020, pg. 40)
- From the perspective of school needs, according to teachers' perception, parenting counselling and parenting education were considered among the most useful interventions (QIE External Evaluation, 2020, pg. 33). The development of parenting counselling services at the school level was also listed among the measures for which principals and teachers offered the strongest appreciation (measures related to process management and the development of school ethos and climate)(QIE External Evaluation, 2020, pg. 33).
- At national level, relevant actors consider taking over into legislation and in the rules guiding the education system the objectives and practices validated under QIE Model. For example, MoE is interested in finding solutions for increasing the number of school counsellors, reducing the school counsellor's norm, developing a master's program in teaching, developing a curriculum on inclusive education/ non-discrimination (pg 48).
- However, QIE Model replication can be successful if connected to a human resource policy and development program for the pre-university education, including measures to motivate and incentivize teachers and school counsellors to work in disadvantaged, vulnerable and remote communities (QIE External Evaluation, 2020, pg. 87).
- In 2014, UNICEF joined efforts with 45 communities in the county of Bacău, where together with national, county and local authorities and partners launched „Community-based Services for Children“; a program that provides integrated access to healthcare, social protection and education with a specialized support of a social worker, a community nurse and a school counselor. In Bacău County over 28,000 vulnerable children and pregnant women and mothers benefited from health services and education;

6. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The evidence generated so far by various impact studies on school counselling should inform the policies on and around school counselling. Research⁸ highlights four key aspects relevant for policy development in this area:

(1) Prioritize school counselling as it contributes to important educational student outcomes.

School counselling was shown to be related to a range of important student outcomes including increased math proficiency levels, increased reading proficiency levels, lower suspension rates, lower disciplinary rates, increased attendance rates, higher graduation rates, and greater percentages of students taking the national tests. These results showed clearly that after schools have been equated for differences in student outcomes due to demographic factors, school counselling added value to the education of students and enhanced their engagement and performance. However, in recent years, basically globally, the condition of school counselling and school guidance is not an issue of importance on any major policy agenda, and is consistently absent from national-level discussions on education reform and chronically underfunded (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2011; McDonough, 2005).

(2) Student-to-counsellor ratios in high schools matter.

Evidence shows that the ratio of students-to-counsellors in a school was strongly related to its student outcomes. More favorable ratios were associated with improved attendance rates, increased completion rates and decreased discipline incident rates. These associations are robust. In one research⁹, for example, the student-to-counsellor ratio accounted for an additional 12% of the variability in the attendance rate after controlling for demographic differences among schools. In order for a school counselling program to be effective there must be a sufficient number of counsellors to address student needs.

(3) A comprehensive mandate and how the school counselling program is organized matters.

A comprehensive mandate (similar to the mandate of the school counsellor in Romania) for school counselling and a strongly organized program is better able to produce positive outcomes for students. Evidence¹⁰ showed that a comprehensive and well-organized school counselling programs accounted for 11% of the variability in average national test scores after controlling for demographic differences among schools.

4) What counsellors do matters.

Research has revealed that over the past several decades, and as the administrative responsibilities of school have expanded, counsellors have been assigned to more job duties that are unrelated to their training and intended purpose (American School Counsellor Association 2005)¹¹. "School counsellors and school mediators exist /are sufficient as number of staff and are able to carry out their work, not hampered by bureaucracy and unnecessarily complex rules" is also a recommendation of QIE Model external evaluation of 2020 (pg. 115).

Also in terms of content of counsellors' interventions, evidence indicate that career development-focused interventions seem to be particularly important in producing positive academic outcomes with students. Items that reflect a strong career development component of the school counselling program (e.g., career goals are used to construct

8 "The impact of school counseling on student educational outcomes in high schools: What can we learn about effectiveness from statewide evaluations of school counseling practice in Nebraska and Utah?" Carey, J.C., & Harrington, K. M. (2010) CSCO-RE.

9 Idem

10 Idem

11 Creating College Opportunity: School Counselors and Their Influence on Postsecondary Enrollment, Andrew S. Belasco, Springer Science & Business Media New York, 2013

student schedules) were positively related to a wide range of beneficial student outcomes including improved attendance, lower disciplinary rates, higher completion rates, and increased scores on state achievement tests.

In conclusion, policies on school counselling should factor in that if a school wants to improve its educational outcomes, school leaders should hire enough counsellors to satisfy the needs of students and parents, support the counsellors as they establish a well-organized program that serves all students, and focus on implementing more effective interventions and discontinuing ineffective ones and cater accordingly to the professional development needs of the school counsellors.

7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

School counsellors create a school culture of success for all, they work to maximize student success, promoting access and equity for all students. They are integral part of the school team.

QIE Model's approach to school counselling is aligned with other strategies in education or child protection that also rely for their successful implementation on school counselling, such as the National Strategy for the Reduction of Early School Leaving (extension and customization of school counselling services).

Although in 2020, the student to counsellor ratio was reduced from 800 students (or 400 preschoolers) to a ratio of 500 students (or 300 preschoolers), this is not yet sufficient for an effective school counselling. Evidence indicates that an ideal ratio is that of 250 students per one school counsellor in early and primary education, while the best counsellor to student ratio is 1:100 at secondary school level with the counsellors solely involved in the counselling programs and excluding other non-counselling duties¹². In Europe, Finland has a 1:245 counsellor to student ratio¹³.

Recommendations:

- Prioritize and invest in school-based school counselling services;
- Expand gradually the network of school counsellors to reach a counsellor to student ratio of 1:250 in early and primary education and 1:100 in secondary education;
- Regulate the school counsellor norm so that it has at least 65% of time allocated for counselling services (reducing the counsellor to student ratio will reduce as well the monitoring and reporting or other non-counselling workloads of school counsellors);
- Include school counsellors in the policies and strategies for human resources development in education and support them with management tools for a strong organization of the counselling services at school level (including monitoring and evaluation);
- Develop the cross-sector cooperation framework between education, health, child protection and social assistance sectors, so that school counsellors work in cross-sector teams in support of all children/students;
- Replicate at national level the QIE Model, as it has a solid and tested approach on school counselling services for children and parents.

¹² School Counsellor Paper, Crai, E., UNICEF Romania, 2015, not published, pg. 15.

¹³ Guidance and Counselling Practices In Finland, Liisa Metsola, 2010

UNICEF în România
Bd. Primăverii 48A,
Sector 1, București
Tel.: +40 21 201 78 72
Fax: +40 21 317 52 55
E-mail: bucharest@unicef.ro
<https://www.unicef.org/romania/>

unicef 

for every child