

## SECONDARY SCHOOL COUNSELLOR QUALIFICATIONS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

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### Abstract

Through the use of a questionnaire to all school districts in British Columbia, data were gathered on various aspects of school counselling. Respondents covered areas such as counsellor qualification standards, selection criteria, up-grading, centralized decision making, uniformity in standards, and present counsellor qualifications. The findings indicate support for more centralized standards and greater support for up-grading, since less than half of the practicing counsellors meet the minimum qualification, and strong support to have various groups such as Universities, Ministry of Education, school districts and the B.C. School Counsellors' Association work together to bring about a large number of improvements. The study was a follow-up to the Ministry of Education's Task Force Report on Secondary School Counselling.

### Résumé

A l'aide d'un questionnaire administré dans tous les districts scolaires de la Colombie Britannique, on a recueilli des données sur divers aspects du counselling en milieu scolaire. Les questions inventoriées concernent les normes d'accréditation du conseiller, les critères de sélection, la promotion, la centralisation du processus décisionnel, l'uniformité des normes et les qualifications des conseillers. Les résultats indiquent que les répondants appuient une politique de plus grande centralisation des standards et d'encouragement accru de la promotion étant donné que moins de la moitié des conseillers en exercice répondent aux qualifications minimales. Ils dénotent aussi une opinion fortement favorable au fait que des groupes aussi divers que les universités, le ministère de l'Éducation, les districts scolaires et l'association des conseillers en milieu scolaire de la Colombie Britannique travaillent de concert à la réalisation d'un grand nombre d'améliorations. Cette étude est une relance du rapport du groupe de travail du ministère de l'Éducation sur le counselling à l'école secondaire.

Consistent themes found in the literature on secondary school counselling in British

Columbia are that the amount of specialized training of counsellors is low (Allan, 1975; Province of British Columbia, 1979), teachers without specialist training continue to be placed in counselling positions (Joshi, 1981), and the role of counsellors is constantly being redefined (Carr, 1978).

### *Counsellor Qualifications*

Throughout Canada the standards of qualifications for secondary school counsellors vary widely. Three major factors contribute to the wide diversity of standards. In many provinces local school authorities determine the standards (Bedal, 1979). There is a lack of clarity in defining the role of the counsellor (Andrews, 1978). There is no widely accepted model for counsellor education (Jevne & Peavy, 1981). The statement made by the Canadian School Trustees Association (1980) best summarizes the situation for counsellors in Canada:

“With no set standards to be met and no agreed upon role to fulfill, the appointment of a school guidance counsellor has been haphazard.” (p.5)

In British Columbia numerous concerns were expressed about school counselling services by the Goard Commission and the Faris Committee (Carter, 1977). In response to these concerns the Ministry of Education in 1978 requested that guidelines for counselling services in secondary schools be developed. Under the chairmanship of a senior Ministry of Education official, a Task Force on Counselling Services in the Secondary Schools in British Columbia was established. Part of its role was to define the objectives of secondary school counselling services, the role of the counsellor and the selection and qualifications of counsellors.

The completed report (Province of British Columbia, 1980) was presented to the Minister of Education in March, 1980, and subsequently distributed to school districts and others.

Among the suggestions made by the Task Force were that:

- 1) A director of counselling be appointed by the Ministry of Education, A permanent advisory council on counselling and guidance be considered. This body should be drawn from a broad spectrum of the B.C. community,
- 3) Criteria for selection of counsellors be emphasized by the Ministry of Education,
- 4) Minimum standards of qualification for counsellors be established by the Ministry of Education and by district officials,
- 5) Funding assistance from the Ministry of Education to encourage in-service work be provided.

The minimum qualifications in the Task Force Report were:

- 1) Preference be given to individuals:
  - a) with ability in forming positive relation-

ships with students, staff, parents, and other members of the community,  
 b) with job experience outside of teaching,  
 c) who have completed or are working towards a diploma or degree in counselling.

- 2) Counsellors should have:
  - a) a professional certificate in teaching,
  - b) at least two years of successful classroom teaching experience,
  - c) training based on minimum of four mandatory courses (equivalent for example to 12 U.B.C. units) in the areas of:

– educational and career counselling  
 – growth and development  
 – counselling theories  
 – communications, consultation and referral skills including observation and interview techniques and group process skills.

This article reports on a study, supervised and completed by the authors, that was designed to assess present standards of qualifications of secondary school counsellors in British Columbia and consider how some of the training issues of the Task Force Report could be implemented.

A questionnaire was sent to each Director of Counselling of the 75 school districts of British Columbia. In addition, opinions of various leaders in counselling and education were also surveyed by means of a questionnaire.

Respondents were asked to indicate:

- a) who defines the criteria for the hiring and placement of counsellors,
- b) what these standards are,
- c) the percentage of counsellors working in the districts who meet the standards of qualifications defined by the Task Force, and
- d) how the district is encouraging counsellors to up-grade.

In considering how standards can be further developed, opinions were sought regarding the establishment of uniform standards throughout the province, who should determine these standards, and how counsellors should be encouraged to meet them.

### *Results and Discussion*

Fifty-seven of 75 school districts returned the questionnaire. This indicates a 76% return. The majority of respondents were from school districts located in southern British Columbia.

Data from the ten items collected by the questionnaire will now be reviewed.

#### *District Criteria for Hiring and Placement of Secondary School Counsellors*

Of the 57 respondents, 44 (77<sup>0</sup>/o) indicate their districts do not have defined criteria for hiring and placement of secondary school counsellors. Taking this data and projecting it on the counsellor population we find that 281 (44<sup>0</sup>/o) work in districts with such criteria.

Five (45<sup>0</sup>/o) of the 11 districts that have criteria are in the Lower Fraser Valley region. Some respondents noted that district criteria became more necessary as the size of the district increases.

#### *School Principals Determine the Criteria for Hiring and Placement of Counsellors*

The principals have most control over who counsels in secondary schools. In 35 (78<sup>0</sup>/o) of the 45 districts that do not have criteria, the principals determine them. In four (9<sup>0</sup>/o) of the districts without criteria the principals determine qualification standards, with some district input.

Determination of criteria by principals is most common where there is a small number of counsellors working in the district. However six (17<sup>0</sup>/o) of the districts where principals have control over standards of qualifications have more than 10 counsellors.

#### *Comparison of District Criteria to Those Recommended by the Task Force*

There is general agreement on many of the qualifications recommended by the Task Force. Of the 11 districts with standards of qualifications, 10 stated a preference for individuals who have an ability to form positive relationships with students, staff, parents, and other members of the community and who have a diploma or degree in counselling. All the districts require a professional certificate in teaching, eight want counsellors to have taught successfully for two years and seven prefer individuals with job experience outside of teaching.

There is less agreement on the mandatory courses recommended by the Task Force. In some districts counsellors are given a wide choice of courses they may take, though they are told the total number of units they must have in counselling courses. The type of courses listed by the respondents suggests a variation in the district's definitions of the role of the counsellor.

Additional criteria used in hiring and placement were noted by four districts. The criteria included the needs and preferences of the schools as outlined by the principal; attitude, commitment and involvement of the individual; and the individual working on a Master's Degree in counselling.

The purpose of the Task Force report was "to serve as a base from which to advance" (p. 13). Because there seems to be general support for many of the qualifications outlined in the Report, these recommendations could become a framework for standards for the province.

#### *Percentage of Counsellors that Meet Task Force Standards*

Table 1 indicates that 30 (61<sup>0</sup>/o) of the 49 districts that responded to this question have a majority of counsellors who do not meet Task Force standards of qualifications. Only one of these districts has criteria for hiring and placement of counsellors. Most of these districts have 10 or fewer counsellors and are not located in the Lower Fraser Valley region. It might be noted that two of the universities offering counsellor training are located in this region.

Table 1  
Percentage of Counsellors Who Meet Standards of  
Qualifications Defined by the Task Force

Number of Districts	Percentage of Counsellors
7	0 - 10%
5	11 - 20%
6	21 - 30%
5	31 - 40%
7	41 - 50%
3	51 - 60%
2	61 - 70%
8	71 - 80%
2	81 - 90%
4	91 - 100%

Of the 14 districts reporting over 70<sup>0</sup>/o of counsellors meeting Task Force qualifications standards, six (43<sup>0</sup>/o) are located in the Lower Fraser Valley and six (43<sup>0</sup>/o) have district criteria for hiring and placement of counsellors. Only 10 (20<sup>0</sup>/o) of the 49 districts that answered this question have defined criteria.

## Counsellor Qualifications

Slightly under half of the counsellors in the 48 districts where a percentage was indicated and the number of counsellors was known, do not meet the standards of qualifications defined by the Task Force. By taking the mean of the percentage range indicated by the district and multiplying by the number of counsellors, it was found that of the 548 counsellors in the 48 districts, 279 (51<sup>0</sup>/o) were reported as meeting Task Force recommended standards of qualifications. 179 (68<sup>0</sup>/o) of these counsellors are working where there are district criteria for hiring and placement of counsellors. It must be indicated that this is an approximation, as an absolute percentage was not given by the respondents.

### *District Upgrading Practices for Counsellors*

There is a positive climate in most school districts for upgrading of counsellors, as 46 (81<sup>0</sup>/o) of the respondents stated that their district encourages their counsellors to do so. Three methods of encouragement commonly used are districts approving in-service programs during school hours, providing funding for in-service, and granting educational leave for teachers attending university courses in counselling.

Other ways that districts encourage counsellors to upgrade were listed by 18 districts. These included provision of in-service programs; encouragement to attend university classes, including summer school courses; support to counsellors to participate in regular in-service and professional development; and provision of credit and non-credit dollar support from in-service funds.

Two groups which encourage counsellors to upgrade their qualifications that were most frequently listed were the British Columbia School Counsellors' Association and district counsellors' associations.

### *Those Who Should Determine the Qualifications of Secondary School Counsellors*

Table 2 indicates that 35 (61<sup>0</sup>/o) of the respondents thought that the Ministry of Education should determine the qualifications for counsellors. The same number indicated that each district should determine the qualifications. Although this might seem contradictory, it can be explained by the fact that 41 (71<sup>0</sup>/o) of the respondents made more than one positive choice to this question. This suggests that no one group should be determining the standards of counsellor qualification. In fact suggestions were made that the

Table 2  
Frequencies and Percentages of Subjects Responding to the Question:  
"Who Should Determine the Qualifications of  
Secondary School Counsellors?"

Determiners	Yes		No		No Response		Undecided	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Principals	29	51	11	19	17	30	0	0
Each school district	35	61	5	9	17	30	0	0
British Columbia School Counsellors Association	26	46	11	19	17	30	3	5
Ministry of Education	35	61	8	14	13	23	1	2
Departments of Counselling Psychology of the three B.C. Universities	16	28	22	39	19	33	0	0

different groups should work together in establishing such standards.

Table 3  
Frequencies and Percentages of Subjects Responding to the Statement:  
"There Should be Uniform Standards of Qualifications  
Throughout the Province"

Opinion	Number of Respondents	% Respondents
Strongly disagree	2	4.1
Disagree	4	7
Undecided	6	11.5
Agree	24	42.1
Strongly agree	20	35.1
No response	1	1.8

### *Uniform Standards of Qualifications of Secondary School Counsellors Throughout the Province*

As indicated in Table 3, 44 (77.2<sup>0</sup>/o) of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the concept of uniform standards of qualifications. Of the six respondents who disagreed or strongly disagreed only one district has more than eight counsellors and one district has criteria for hiring and placement of counsellors.

Of the 44 districts that agreed or strongly agreed with the concept of uniform standards, 30 (70<sup>0</sup>/o) indicated that the Ministry of Education determine standards and 27 (61<sup>0</sup>/o) indicated each school district, 22 (50<sup>0</sup>/o) indicated principals and the B.C. School Counsellors' Association, while 12 (27<sup>0</sup>/o) indicated the Departments of Counselling Psychology should determine standards. A majority of respondents who supported the idea of uniform standards chose more than one of these groups. Some respondents suggested that this task be done cooperatively.

As noted earlier, in most districts the principals determine the necessary qualifications of counsellors. However, most respondents strongly support the concept of uniform standards. If this was to happen there would be a change of emphasis from decentralized determination of standards of qualifications to a province-wide approach. Leadership from the Ministry of Education would be necessary for this to occur. As the majority of those who support the idea of uniform standards indicated that they be determined by more than one group, a committee of people representing the various groups listed in Table 2 could define the criteria.

*Means of Encouraging Counsellors to Meet Standards of Qualifications*

It is clear from the responses stated in Table 4 that the respondents want the districts to retain control over who they place in counselling positions. Although most respondents agree with the idea of uniform standards of qualifications and look to the Ministry of Education to provide leadership in determining the standards, some noted that they want district staff to be able to interpret these standards depending on the local situation and still decide who from among the qualified counsellors they hire.

Table 4

Frequencies and Percentages of Subjects Responding to the Statement:

"Counsellors Should be Encouraged to Meet Standards of Qualifications by:"

Means of encouragement	No Response		Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Undecided		Agree		Strongly Agree	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Principals place only those who meet defined standards into counselling jobs	9	14	3	4.6	10	15.6	4	6	15	23	16	25
School districts hire only counsellors who meet defined standards	4	6	3	4.6	7	11	2	3	22	34	19	29.6
School districts set deadlines for upgrading	7	11	2	3	4	6	6	9	21	33	17	26.5
Counselling specialist certification by the British Columbia School Counsellors' Association	10	15.6	10	15.6	13	20	9	14	12	18.7	3	4.6
Counselling specialist certification by the Ministry of Education	9	14	7	11	9	14	7	11	19	29.6	6	9
Other Means:	7 responses (11%)											

## *Counsellor Qualifications*

There is a difference in response to this question between those who support the concept of uniform standards and those who do not. The respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with uniform standards gave stronger support to all methods listed in Table 4. In contrast, the most popular method of encouragement amongst those who do not agree with uniform standards was that principals should place only qualified people in counselling positions. Thirty-two (50%) made this positive response.

### *Ministry of Education Providing Funds for Upgrading of Counsellors*

If the Ministry of Education acts on the recommendation of the Task Force that it provides funds for in-service programs for counsellors, many respondents would like the money to go to the school districts rather than to the B.C. School Counsellors' Association or local counsellors' associations.

### *Results and Discussion of Questionnaires Completed by Others*

People considered to have varying degrees of control over the determination and enforcement of standards of qualifications of secondary school counsellors were asked their opinions regarding various issues discussed here. There was a 100% return from the seven people surveyed.

In answering the question regarding who should determine the standards of qualifications, (see Table 2 for list of choices), the greatest support amongst the respondents is for the B.C. School Counsellors' Association and the least for the principals to determine the standards. Six of the seven respondents combined the choices, indicating that the determination of standards should be a joint venture. Response to this question by these people is very different from that by district staff who do not recognize the B.C. School Counsellors' Association as a major force in determining the standards of qualifications.

There was strong support for uniform standards, as six respondents either agreed or strongly agreed, and one did not respond. The respondents place the onus on the school districts to enforce standards that are set at a provincial level. Amongst the respondents there was general agreement that counsellors should be encouraged to meet standards by principals placing only those who met standards in counselling jobs, school districts hiring only qualified counsellors and school districts setting deadlines for upgrading. Certification by the B.C. School Counsellors' Association

was not supported whereas four respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with certification by the Ministry.

The respondents strongly supported the idea of the Ministry providing funds for upgrading of counsellors to the school districts but many did not favour the local counsellors' associations receiving funds.

### *Summary and Recommendations*

The lack of qualification standards for secondary school counsellors in British Columbia is a major factor contributing to the fact that many counsellors do not have minimal training. This is supported by the high percentage of counsellors meeting the standards recommended by the Task Force on Secondary School Counselling who are working in districts who have criteria for hiring and placement of counsellors.

Amongst the leaders in counselling and education surveyed, there is strong support for uniform standards throughout the province and for the Ministry of Education to have input into the determination of standards. However there is not enough support for counsellor certification.

Implementation of the Task Force suggestions is a priority of many involved in counselling in B.C. As the results of the study indicate, provincial leadership is an important factor in this process. At this time either school districts are "reinventing the wheel" in developing their own criteria, or principals are setting the standards according to the immediate needs. The Task Force was a beginning in changing this trend. However, further steps must be taken to improve the professional status of counsellors in secondary schools. It is recommended:

- 1) That the provincial standards of qualifications as suggested by the Task Force become the minimum level of training for all secondary school counsellors.
- 2) That a Provincial Director of Counselling be appointed, even if for only a limited time, to direct and coordinate the many changes necessary to realize the goals of the Task Force Report.
- 3) That a Counselling Advisory Council composed of representation from school districts, Ministry of Education, School Counsellors' Association, Universities, business and industry, be established to assist the various jurisdictions with the task of improving counselling services.

- 4) That the Counselling Advisory Council review the recommendations on the qualifications required of secondary school counsellors with the view to clarify and possibly increase the requirements.
- 5) That deadlines be established by the Ministry of Education and School Districts for presently employed school counsellors by which time they would be required to have attained the minimum standards of qualification.
- 6) That the Ministry of Education, school districts, the B.C. School Counsellors' Association and others address the need to upgrade the present school counsellors who have taken their training some years ago and might need some help in changing their roles and services in light of the Task Force Report, even though they have the minimum academic qualifications and training.
- 7) That financial assistance, including assistance for part-time studies, from the Ministry of Education become available for practicing counsellors to return to University to attain a diploma or degree in counselling.
- 8) That an increased number of regionally based university courses be offered to part-time students in some of the larger population centres outside of the Lower Fraser Valley and Southern Vancouver Island areas.
- 9) That the Universities place as their top priority for the next few years the training of presently employed school counsellors.
- 10) That a major in-service program be contracted by the Ministry of Education to inform other educators about the role and function and necessary qualification of school counsellors as defined by the Task Force Report and help build better working relationships among teachers, administrators, counsellors and parents to help all students.

During these times of financial restraint, greater unemployment, and rising divorce rate, students will need more help to manage better. This is the time to increase and improve the counselling services for all students. British Columbia with its Task Force Report has the focus and interest to bring about these changes.

As the issue of counsellor qualifications is relevant in many parts of Canada, the above recommendations might be of considerable interest and value to those in other provinces. Data collected by the authors from provincial Directors of Counselling Services and provincial Directors of the Canadian Guidance and Counselling Association indicated that there is a wide

diversity of standards of qualifications, and in many cases the local authorities continue to maintain control over defining and enforcing the standards.

Some direction regarding qualifications has recently been provided by the C.G.C.A. guidelines. However strong leadership at the provincial level is needed to further develop standards of qualifications for secondary school counsellors within each jurisdiction.

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