



Rural Guidance Counsellor Program Pilot: A local application of the Ontario Rural and Northern Education Funding Grant

Initiated: December 2017

Updated: March 2018

**Director's Executive Council
Upper Canada District School Board**

Rural Guidance Counsellor Program Pilot

Issue: *Whether and how to enhance guidance counsellor services offered in rural schools, in the UCDSB, by augmenting guidance counsellor sections/allocations to each rural school, and providing targeted staff development for these personnel with an emphasis on enhancing skills in the three key areas of those holding qualifications in this teaching area: personal counselling, academic counselling, and career counselling.*

1.0 Specifications related to the scope and sequence of the pilot project.

1.1 That the Rural and Northern Education funding announced by the Ministry of Education on 28 June 2017, be the funding source for this pilot project since it aligns with the funding's intent to "...improve programs and support services in rural schools...". Funding will be directed to Human Resources (allocation of additional guidance staffing) and for staff development costs associated with this program pilot¹;

1.2 That the program pilot be extended to all 15 secondary schools in the UCDSB deemed to be eligible by the Ministry of Education as recipients for the Rural and Northern Education funding;

1.3 That the baseline for rural guidance counsellor support services, for the duration of this pilot project, be enhanced to an operational level a 1.0 FTE staff presence (minimum), is available within the Student Services Departments at each of the 15 secondary schools, until June 2019. These schools are: Almonte DHS, Athens DHS, Char-Lan DHS, Gananoque SS, Glengarry DHS, Perth DCI, Rideau DHS, Smiths Falls DCI, Seaway DHS, North Dundas DHS, North Grenville DHS, South Grenville DHS, Russell HS, Tagwi SS, and Vankleek Hill CI;

1.4 The Rural and Northern Education funding grant would serve as the "top-up" of section allocation beyond what each school's enrollment would ordinarily generate for guidance counsellor sections;

1.5 The key Human Resources commitment for this project is that each school has at least 1 full-time person (six sections of guidance per year), assigned exclusively to the Student Services Department, with an emphasis on Tier 1 intervention counselling of students, as well as counselling to support academic planning and career planning. This signals a priority for strengthening the key role that Guidance Counsellors in conjunction with our district's Student Well-Being Strategy where school staff provide Tier 1 support for students and;

¹ https://efis.fma.csc.gov.on.ca/faab/Memos/B2017/B09_EN.pdf

1.6 In order to support the latter emphasis on Tier 1, the pilot project will be investing in a collaborative staff development commitment with an expertise external to each school, to enhance and extend current skillsets and an orientation to current methodologies in academic counselling, personal counselling, and career counselling areas.

2.0 Background and Rationale:

2.1 It is understood that guidance counsellors perform a significant role in program delivery in our secondary schools. Initial documentation surrounding the scope and role in guidance counselling was initially offered by the Ministry of Education in 1999 through its publication of *Choices Into Action*. Within that publication, the Ministry highlighted the three basic functions of school guidance counsellors: personal counselling of students (peer relationships, self-care, etc.), academic counselling (supporting course selection and student timetabling), and career counselling (support and guidance of the completion of post-secondary applications, applications for apprenticeship, resume development and support for students when seeking part-time employment).

2.2 The Ministry's publication of *Creating Pathways to Success and Education and Career/Life Planning Program for Ontario Schools (2013)* supersedes the direction that *Choices Into Action* provides about guidance and career education for students. While this policy introduced new expectations, it was silent on the role of personal counselling which has traditionally been a key element in the guidance counsellor role. The publication of *Supporting Minds (2013)* provided, however, an update to all educators regarding to how to support and engage students in discussions about their mental health and well-being. The UCDSB relies upon other resources, specifically School Mental Health ASSIST, as a focus for positive mental health promotion and prevention and has adopted its 3 tiered-model of service and support.² The "Tier 1" service and support area – universal health promotion - has long been the mandate of schools and continues to be reflected in the school curriculum in Ontario.³

2.3 There is some evidence to suggest that the counselling role of guidance counsellors has been under-engaged over the past several years. A report from the People for Education (2016) suggests that expanded expectations for career and pathway planning introduced by Ministry of Education policies may have contributed to this outcome. As well, their latter report suggests that there is "a lack of clarity on the role of a guidance

² <https://smh-assist.ca/why-student-well-being/>

³ See, for example, the recent update to the Canadian and World Studies Curriculum: Grades 11 & 12 (2015), which makes specific reference to *Supporting Students' Wellbeing and Ability to Learn* as well as *The Role of Mental Health*. <http://edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/canworld.html>

counsellor”. Operational issues of this nature fall to school districts, who draw upon the detailed description of the skills and competencies that guidance counsellors bring to their work as detailed in the Additional Qualifications (AQ) published by the Ontario College of Teachers which provides clarity about the work of guidance counsellors.⁴

2.4 Since 2015, the Upper Canada District School Board has been taking steps to clarify and promote (at the school and system level) a tiered approach for student support and well-being, noted initially in the Ministry publication *Supporting Minds*.⁵ The Director’s Work Plan for 2017-2018 is investing specifically in building Tier 1 capacities among all secondary school staff to be aware and prepared to engage their role to support students who have expressed concerns about their mental health or well-being. This builds upon an earlier model of “the caring adult” promoted province-wide by the Ministry of Education and at the local level by Student Success initiatives in school districts - anchored by the research of Dr. Bruce Ferguson of the Hospital for Sick Children.⁶ Since 2016, a variety of staff have been involved in a renewed focus regarding “the caring adult” including a session held in the spring of 2017 around the design of the *Tell Them From Me Student Survey*. At this session, students were asked to identify traits of caring adults; the findings of which were shared with schools for further follow-up and discussion.

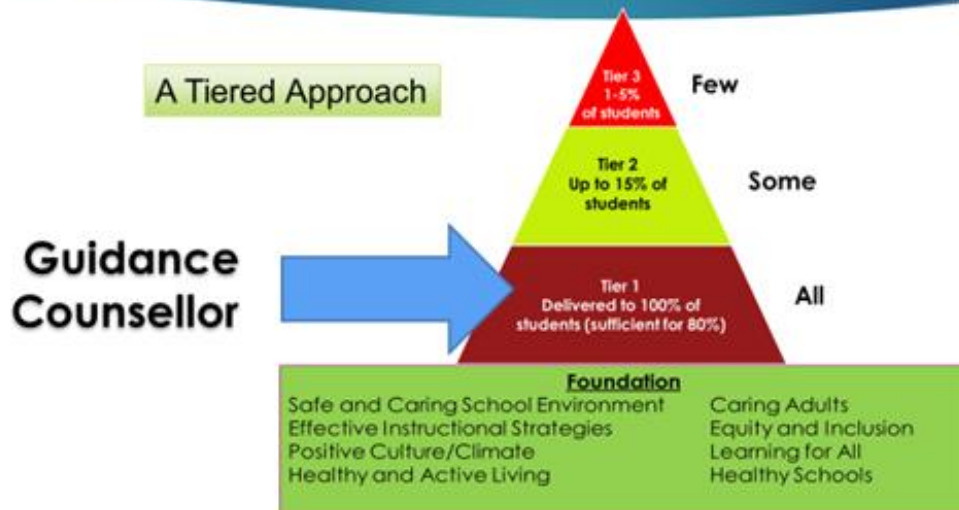
2.5 Refreshing the focus of “guidance counsellors as key resource people for supporting student well-being at the Tier 1 level” would not be possible without specific and targeted training. This training would extend and enhance current skillsets that participants in this pilot project currently bring to their work. Formalizing this staff development commitment signals to our schools and communities that we see guidance counsellors as having lead roles in supporting Tier 1 work with our students, within our schools.

⁴ Ontario College of Teachers. (2014). *Additional Qualification Course Guideline: Guidance and Career Education, Part I*
https://www.oct.ca//media/PDF/Additional%20Qualifications/EN/Schedule%20D/Part%20I/i_guidance_and_career_education_e.pdf

⁵ Ontario Ministry of Education. (2013). *Supporting Minds*, 144; Upper Canada District School Board Mental Health Overview and Update to Board, 13 December 2017.
<http://www.boarddocs.com/can/ucdsb/Board.nsf/goto?open&id=ATWPD642537>

⁶ Ferguson, B., K. Tilleczek, K. Boydell, A. Rummens, & D. Roth Edney. (2005). *Early School Leavers: Understanding the Lived Reality of Disengagement From Secondary School*. Toronto, Hospital for Sick Children, report for the Ontario Ministry of Education.

District's Model of Support



2.6 Attending to factors such as the allocation of guidance staff in schools and renewing a commitment to training of personnel assigned to a guidance counsellor role is emerging as a priority among guidance counsellors, as evidenced by dialogue emerging from the Ontario Guidance Leadership Association (OGLA).⁷

2.7 The October 2017 meeting of the Upper Canada District School Board's Student Senate provided specific feedback to the group of Trustees and Senior Staff who were in attendance, highlighting the need to enhance service levels related to the availability of Student Services/Guidance Centres within our secondary schools. A review of guidance counsellor allocations in UCDSB secondary schools confirmed that 9 secondary school sites had less than a full-time counsellor staffed at the school, though these schools had access to other support personnel provided by the school board. These findings are not uncommon in Ontario schools, as evidenced by findings in a report published in 2016 by the People for Education and, more recently, by the *Toronto Star*.⁸ This is particularly challenging for secondary schools with smaller student enrolments, which generates

⁷ Ontario Guidance Leadership Association, *OGLA Minutes*, 07 February 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.osca.ca/ogla-minutes.html>

⁸ People for Education. (2016). *Ontario's Guidance Counsellors: Spread Thinly in an Environment of Growing Expectations*, 5; School guidance counsellors 'stretched' amid rising mental health needs, *Toronto Star*, 23 January 2018. Retrieved from: <https://www.thestar.com/yourtoronto/education/2018/01/23/school-guidance-counsellors-stretched-amid-rising-mental-health-needs.html>

less staffing at the school level -including the staffing resources generated to support school guidance programs.

2.8 Concurrent to this pilot program is a move within our school district to initiate well-being goals for students as part of a school's annual program plan. There will be an emerging need for guidance counsellors to support this dialogue at the planning level as it relates to Tier 1 priorities at each of the secondary school operated by the Board.

3.0 Preliminary Project Timelines:

- January 2018 – advise secondary schools regarding the general scope and focus of the Rural Guidance Counsellor Program Pilot; initiate discussion with external service provider related to the program pilot and staff development needs.
- February 2018 – confirm which personnel, at each of the participating schools are designated as the full-time guidance counsellor aligned with this project and funding; initiate meeting of personnel to further inform and promote the pilot project's goals and expectations.
- March 2018 – initiate meeting with external service provider regarding an orientation session with program pilot participants.
- April 2018 – on-going training sessions with pilot program participants
- May 2018 – on-going training sessions with program pilot participants; Needs assessment with key stakeholders.
- June 2018 – on-going training session with program pilot participants; Needs assessment with pilot participants to inform the District focus for 2018-2019.

4.0 For Further Inquiries

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