

One parent shares the story of her substance-abusing daughter – and how a school counselor saved her child’s life.

BY SUSAN BURROWES

A HEAVY BURDEN

In an age when college acceptance is held up as the pinnacle of achievement for a young person, it may be tempting for some parents and students to see the school counselor’s role simply as “those people you go see to get your schedule of classes.” School counselors, after all, will make sure our children have all of the prerequisites necessary to be considered for the college of their choice.

What some parents and students find out is that a school counselor is much more than a person who juggles your classes so you can fit varsity lacrosse into your life and chase that scholarship at your dream college.

School counseling has evolved to include not only support but also leadership roles. That’s particularly true with the drug-use epidemic currently sweeping our nation. As school counselors become the vanguard of student success, they have also become experts in the stumbling blocks our kids face along the way. School counselors need to be aware of the signs and symptoms of students using drugs, as well as students who are living in a home where drug use is prevalent. That’s a pretty tall order, especially as drug and alcohol abuse becomes ubiquitous. In 2014, the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) revealed that more than 70 percent of our students obtained drugs or alcohol from their friends or relatives.

My teen? She raided our medicine cabinet, shared and traded drugs with friends

and panhandled for money to buy what she couldn’t steal or barter.

Most school counselors have hundreds of students in their caseload. Yet somehow, they still are able to give focus and attention to each individual student who comes into their office. The best of them see, really see, our children. Have they lost weight, been absent a lot lately? Become disrespectful to their teachers? Found a new friend group while cutting off their old besties? Maybe they’re looking tired, or their hygiene is suddenly suffering.

By noticing changes in our children, school counselors save lives every single day. They saved my daughter’s life, when she spiraled out of control. It happened so fast, and it happened mostly between the walls of her school, where an eagle-eyed school counselor noticed the shocking changes in her demeanor and appearance and called me in to have a chat. “Perhaps it’s time to speak to an addiction expert,” the school counselor had said. It made me angry at the time. I shook my head no before she had finished her sentence, but now I know she was doing an important part of her job. She was referring me to a professional who sees kids like my daughter every day and visits and assesses the places that can help students when they can’t be helped at home or school. The school counselor was guiding me to a resource that could help my daughter lead a better, fuller and definitely longer life.



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School counselor intervention is a long-term gift. According to NIDA, helping a student avoid drug use during adolescence can help them be less likely to develop chemical dependency as an adult. Drug education programs are a tier-one intervention in schools led in part by school counselors, and they seem to be working. In U.S. high schools, drug use is down across many categories, including alcohol, cigarettes and opiates. Education and counseling have clearly had a positive impact. But don't celebrate yet; we've only just started. According to the Office of Adolescent Health, one in six high school seniors still reports binge drinking daily, and 20 percent of them don't consider heroin to be high risk.

Every day, 3,900 teens try drugs for the first time. Not all of them will become addicts of course, but ultimately 78,000 teens under age 18 will receive treatment for substance abuse every year.

We parents are failing our children in ways that we may not yet understand. While we figure out how to improve our parenting, school counselors remain the line in the sand. The watchers. The ones we rely on for education, prevention and counseling. Sometimes parents ask school counselors to provide recommendations and referrals to wilderness or therapeutic programs in far-flung, desolate places they have never seen and may know very little about. Places that can scar our teens for life in myriad ways. We rely more and more on school counselors to be the guardians of our teens' mental and physical health, without giving them the support to succeed in partnering with parents or the knowledge they need to do no harm.

More than half of 100 school counselors surveyed in a 2014 study by Bamgbose, Hu and Myers expressed their concern that their training in recognizing and addressing drug and alcohol use was either not adequate or very inadequate. How awful it must be to have such an important role in a child's life and not feel as though you've been prepared. How big your job is, earning the student's trust, rallying a family around the truth and helping to find a

solution, all while doing the same for countless others and fulfilling all the other critical roles that are part of your daily work. It's like telling firefighters to put out a raging fire with water guns. Our school counselors may be brave and tireless in their efforts, but better tools would go a long way toward noticing, understanding and referring our teens.

As my daughter, drug-addled and angry, was sent to an unknown place in the snowy plains of Utah, her school counselor's advice helped to make sure she was protected. It couldn't have been pleasant to face my anger and pain with compassion, referring us to a respected outside expert who could best guide us on our journey. My daughter never knew just how much support she had.

My child wasn't on her own, because our family had the advice and resources to find help. But not all families can afford to utilize the services of an outside professional. We must find better ways to make sure all of our children can find the path home again and find solutions to relieve the burden school counselors carry on our behalf.

- First and most obviously, smaller case-loads would allow more individualized attention for our students.
- School counselors should be supported in continuing education and training related to substance abuse in teens, including travel to or speakers from residential, therapeutic programs.
- Addictions professionals should be accessible and a part of staff in public schools or districts.

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- School districts should vet private addictions consultants prior to sending teens their way.
- Drug education in the schools should be a family affair, so that in the worst case, families are prepared to support and work together with the school counselor and school.
- Teachers should be included in the training. They see our children every day.
- If the school deems the problem as one that is growing, there should be a path to community involvement and support.
- If our school counselors are expected to add this to their long list of duties, they should be given the power and resources they need to start creating solutions.



I think about school counselors a lot. I think about how they saved my girl's life, our family life and our future by opening a door to treatment, pulling at it steadily and stubbornly until I finally let go of the handle and walked through. I think about how I thanked our school counselor later, after our crisis. She smiled and hugged me. "I was just doing my job."SM

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