

Understanding the Recommended Student-To-Counselor Ratio's Persistence: An Institutional Theory Perspective

Journal of Education
2024, Vol. 204(3) 634–648
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DOI: 10.1177/00220574231182328
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Abstract

For decades the American School Counselor Association has recommended that schools employ one counselor for every 250 students, but there is limited evidence the policy promotes student success. This article investigates the origins of the 60-year-old recommendation, examining how and why it has persisted. Drawing on historical documents, it reconstructs how the 250 number was derived during the 1950s and then uses a framework of institutionalization within organizational fields to explain how the ratio became cemented within and beyond the counseling field. By highlighting how the 250-to-1 recommendation is an anachronism, this article raises questions about its continued relevance.

Keywords

school counseling, institutional theory, educational policy

“Recommended counselor ratio—250:1. My ratio—1029:1. CPS, Seriously?” were the words on the sign Erin Dubose was carrying through the streets of downtown Chicago (Perez et al., 2019). An elementary school counselor, she was one of the thousands of educators who joined the picket line for nearly 2 weeks in October of 2019 after Chicago Public Schools (CPS) failed to reach a contract agreement with the Chicago Teachers Union. Although benefits and compensation were two areas of contention, CPS educators also called for improved staffing levels. One demand concerned hiring more school counselors—specifically, ensuring there was one school counselor for every 250 students in the district (Perez et al., 2019).¹ Noting counselors’ training across the social emotional, academic, and postsecondary domains, the union argued these professionals were essential for promoting the success of CPS students.

This interest in bolstering student access to school counselors is not unique to Chicago. Facing an unprecedented number of students navigating mental health concerns as well as academic struggles and uncertainty about their futures, educators across the country have increasingly called for reductions in counselor caseloads (Prothero & Riser-Kositsky, 2022). Compelling evidence that caseload size is related to student outcomes supports the idea that low student-to-counselor ratios are important (e.g., Carey & Martin, 2017; Goodman-Scott et al., 2018; Kearney et al., 2021). However, manageable caseloads today are the exception rather than the norm: the average student-to-counselor ratio nationally is 415-to-1, with the typical caseload as high as

900 students in some states (American School Counselor Association).

Educators and policymakers alike overwhelmingly cite 250-to-1 as the ideal student-to-counselor ratio. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) is one of the biggest proponents of the 250-to-1 ratio, advocating for its widespread adoption (American School Counselor). Not only do other major education organizations such as Education Trust and Reach Higher lobby for this figure (Education Trust, Reach Higher, & American School Counselor Association, 2019), but also counselors, other educators, and even concerned citizens have taken it as gospel, vouching for the ratio to their district and state leaders (e.g., Perez et al., 2019). On account of these advocacy efforts, Maine has enshrined this ideal student-to-counselor ratio in legislation and other states including the District of Columbia, Indiana, North Carolina, and Oregon, have formally recommended it in state statutes (American School Counselor).

Despite the ubiquity of the ratio in the counseling policy discourse, however, there is little empirical evidence supporting it. In fact, no study has definitively concluded that a

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250 caseload improves student outcomes. Where then did this 250-caseload number come from and why has it persisted?

In this essay, I trace the origins of ASCA's nationally recommended student-to-counselor ratio. Drawing on primary and secondary source documents, I reconstruct how this ratio emerged from a 1959 study by education reformer James Bryant Conant. I then examine the rise and persistence of this ratio through the lens of institutional theory, applying Greenwood et al.'s (2002) framework on institutionalization to explain how this number became a rationalized myth within the counseling field. The essay concludes by reflecting on why the perpetuation of this myth can be deleterious for the counseling profession. Especially in the post-COVID-19 era when districts are allocating recovery funds to hire additional counselors, optimal caseload size is critical to consider. In raising questions about the relevance of the recommended ratio, the research thus has important implications for education leaders within and outside of the school counseling field.

Student-to-Counselor Ratios

The role of the school counselor is multi-faceted, encompassing everything from student assessment, college planning, and short-term counseling and crisis intervention work to implementing classroom lessons, promoting social justice initiatives, and conducting outreach with parents (Gysbers & Henderson, 2012). Research shows that the comprehensive, developmental counseling programs that counselors oversee support student success across a range of academic, social emotional, and postsecondary outcomes (Carey & Martin, 2017; McMahon et al., 2017; Whiston et al., 2011). Despite the importance of school counselors in the lives of their students, counselors' work is often stymied by structural challenges imposed by the school, district, and state systems within which they operate (Savitz-Romer & Nicola, 2021). Historically, these challenges have included role ambiguity (Blake, 2020), which leads principals to assign inappropriate responsibilities to counselors, burnout (McCarthy et al., 2010), and subpar training in areas like college and career readiness (Gilfillan, 2017).

One significant barrier is untenable student-to-counselor ratios. High caseloads restrict counselor efficacy by generating constraints on counselors' time. As a result, they limit counselors' ability to implement high-quality counseling programs (McCarthy et al., 2010). A growing body of observational evidence also suggests that high caseloads may contribute to burnout, which prevents counselors from effectively serving students. For example, Mullen et al.'s (2021) cross-sectional study found that caseload size was associated with counselor burnout, job stress, and job satisfaction.

Beyond just shaping the work of counselors, caseload size influences student outcomes (Carey & Martin, 2017). Although a few studies have found no association

(Engberg & Wolniak, 2010) or positive associations (Engberg & Gilbert, 2014; Lapan et al., 2012a) between caseload size and student outcomes, most research tends to find small to moderate negative effects. Observational studies have identified negative relationships between caseload size and academic achievement (Akos et al., 2018; Goodman-Scott et al., 2018; Lapan et al., 2012a; Parzych et al., 2019); attendance (Akos et al., 2018; Carey et al., 2012, 2012b); graduation rates (Goodman-Scott et al., 2018); the likelihood of applying to college and completing the FAFSA (Velez, 2016); and enrolling in postsecondary education (Woods & Domina, 2014). Studies have also found small to moderate negative impacts of caseload size on disciplinary incident rates (Carey et al., 2012; Lapan et al., 2012a, 2012b). Kearney et al.'s (2021) meta-analysis of 16 studies (the majority of which are observational) that examine caseloads arrived at a similar conclusion, finding a small but statistically significant negative effect of caseloads on student outcomes.

The most compelling evidence regarding the deleterious effects of large caseload sizes is from a small body of quasi-experimental studies, which has largely concluded that higher caseloads lead to worse student outcomes. For example, Carrell and Carrell (2006) and Carrell and Hoekstra (2014) both exploited exogenous variation in ratios in Florida elementary schools and found that lower student-to-counselor ratios led to reductions in disciplinary incidents and improvements in academic achievement. Reback's (2010) regression discontinuity study of Alabama elementary students also concluded that lower caseloads led to reductions in disciplinary incidents, although no improvements in student achievement. Regarding college-related outcomes, Hurwitz and Howell's (2014) regression discontinuity analysis estimated that each additional counselor a school added would increase 4-year college-going rates by 10%. Mulhern's (2020) analysis also concluded that caseload size was negatively related to educational attainment and college-going outcomes for Massachusetts high school students. Taken together, these studies support calls for reduced caseload sizes.

Caseload Policy

Despite this connection between student-to-counselor ratios, counselor efficacy, and student outcomes, high counselor caseloads are the norm today. As shown in Figure 1, the average caseload nationally has steadily remained at about 500 students over the last two decades; even in small states like Vermont and New Hampshire that have the lowest student-to-counselor ratios nationally, average caseloads still exceed 200 students. One reason that caseloads are so high is that they are largely unregulated. Although states have the power to regulate caseloads, they have historically deferred to districts to oversee caseloads (Carey & Martin, 2017). Even among the 16 states that have enacted regulations setting a maximum student-to-counselor ratio, the regulations do not

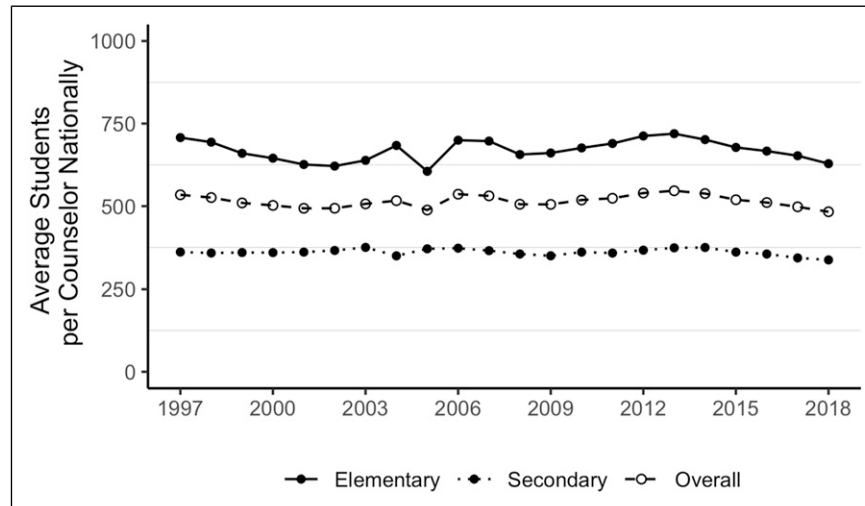


Figure 1. National average student-to-counselor ratio, 1997–2018.
Source. Common core of data, 1997–2018.

actually ensure counselors have reasonable caseloads; for example, while Missouri has a mandated maximum counselor caseload, under the state's regulations a single counselor can still be responsible for up to 500 students ([American School Counselor](#)).

Driven by calls to hire more student support staff, some state policymakers have begun enacting policies to reduce counselor caseloads. Notably, Colorado provided targeted funding to low-performing schools to hire additional counselors, thereby reducing counselor caseloads ([Arredondo et al., 2016](#)). In New York, legislation now requires that all students in grades K–12 have access to certified counselors—meaning that schools without counselors previously need to hire them ([Rider, 2018](#)).

Bolstering the number of school-based counselors has also become a priority in the era of COVID-19 as schools have struggled to absorb a mounting youth mental health crisis ([Office of the Surgeon General, 2021](#); [Savitz-Romer et al., 2021](#)). Notably, Washington recently allocated \$600 million for hiring counselors and other student support staff across the state ([Bazzaz, 2022](#)), and the [Oklahoma State Department of Education \(2021\)](#) used \$35 million of Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funds to create a School Counselor Corps of 300 new counselors and other mental health professionals.

The 250 Counselor Caseload

The literature underscores that caseload size is important, but what specific student-to-counselor ratio should schools strive to meet? Although there is little research investigating which student-to-counselor ratio or ratios are optimal, the most widely cited figure is 250-to-1. The school counseling profession strongly advocates there be one counselor for every 250 students in a school ([ASCA, 2019](#)). Through actively

lobbying policymakers to reduce caseloads to this level, ASCA and its affiliates have directly informed counseling policy at the state-level. Indeed, Colorado and Oklahoma policymakers explicitly noted that ASCA's 250-caseload recommendation motivated their recent investments in counseling ([Arredondo et al., 2016](#); [Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2021](#)) and guidance about the New York regulations also references the ASCA recommendation ([Rider, 2018](#)). With the support of ASCA, states have also introduced legislation to reduce caseloads to the recommended level, although most of these bills have not passed.²

Despite this emphasis on the 250 caseload, there is limited evidence that attending a school with a counselor caseload below 250 students has an effect on student outcomes that differs from attending a school with a caseload above that threshold. While descriptive and causal studies find a relationship between lower ratios and positive student academic, behavioral, and postsecondary outcomes, (e.g., [Carrell & Carrell, 2006](#); [Goodman-Scott et al., 2018](#); [Hurwitz & Howell, 2014](#)) there are only a few observational studies that have examined the 250-caseload number specifically and they suffer from methodological limitations.

For example, [Lapan et al., 2012a](#) compared attendance and graduation rates between high-poverty middle and high schools in Missouri with average counselor caseloads above and below the 250 threshold. Utilizing *t*-tests, they found significantly higher attendance and graduation rates at schools adhering to the 250-caseload recommendation compared to other schools with larger caseloads. Similarly, [Parzych et al. \(2019\)](#) examined the relationship between student-to-counselor ratios and various student academic outcomes in Indiana high schools, finding that pupils in schools meeting the recommended ratio had, on average, higher attendance rates and SAT scores. Drawing on

nationally representative data from the High School Longitudinal Study of 2009, [Goodman-Scott et al. \(2018\)](#) also descriptively explored differences in academic outcomes between schools above and below the 250 threshold, concluding that students in schools with counselor caseloads below 250 students had higher GPAs and graduation rates, on average, although the effect sizes were small.

While promising, this research does not provide sufficient evidence that 250 is a meaningful caseload number. The studies are all observational, showing correlations and not causation. Furthermore, given the limited control variables included, these studies may suffer from omitted variables bias, which could potentially have led to overestimating the effect of the 250 caseload on student outcomes. For example, variables like school funding levels and school size were not considered across these analyses even though such factors are likely correlated with both caseload size and student outcomes. In addition, from a policy perspective, these studies did not show that investment in counseling staff to attain a 250-to-1 ratio yields more marginal benefits than maintaining other student-to-counselor ratios or spending those education dollars elsewhere altogether.

Given such limited evidence linking a 250 caseload with improved student outcomes, why is the ratio a prominent talking point within the school counseling policy landscape? In the following sections, I draw on primary and secondary source documents as well as institutional theory to explain how the counseling profession initially identified—and why it continues to promulgate—250 students as the ideal caseload.

Origins of the 250-to-1 Ratio

The 250-to-1 recommended ratio can be traced to the work of James Bryant Conant in the 1950s. Conant was a renowned chemist, education leader, and public servant. Shaped by his two decades as president of Harvard University, involvement in the National Education Association, and experience on the national stage fighting communism, Conant was an advocate for education reform ([Biebel, 1971](#)).

Conant had an especially strong interest in secondary education. During his lifetime, the public secondary education system was still underdeveloped; the idea that all American youth should have access to public high school education—rather than just the college-bound children of elites—was only beginning to gain traction. In the 1950s, an estimated half of American youth either did not attend high school or dropped out before graduation, and those students who did attend were not consistently obtaining high-quality instruction ([Educational Policies Commission, 1952](#)).

Conant championed the establishment of comprehensive high schools as a means of addressing inequities in educational opportunity. Like most secondary schools in the United States today, comprehensive schools in the 1950s served students with a range of academic abilities and interests and

offered broad curricula. One of their defining features was the guidance they provided to help students navigate the vast curricular offerings and to engage in vocational and post-secondary planning. [Conant \(1959\)](#) believed these guidance supports could drive comprehensive high schools to increase the number of students pursuing a college preparatory curriculum and ultimately higher education.

The American High School Today

Although Conant was a strong advocate of the comprehensive high school, he had limited firsthand knowledge about these institutions or the broader U.S. secondary education sector. For this reason, he undertook a study of American high schools. His primary research question was whether comprehensive high schools were successfully supporting students with a range of academic abilities and promoting their transition to postsecondary education. Notably, Conant did not conceptualize the project as a large-scale research study rooted in the scientific method but rather as a subjective analysis—a “personal appraisal” ([Teicher, 1977](#), p. 194). As [Conant \(1957\)](#) himself declared, this research was “not a study of the relation of variables but rather an attempt to discover and report on examples of the schools which I believe exist.”

With funding from the Carnegie Corporation and support from the Educational Testing Service (ETS), Conant and his staff set out in search of exemplary comprehensive high schools that could serve as models for others throughout the country. Conant identified such institutions through questionnaires mailed to 120 schools—the schools recommended by ETS and other stakeholders—requesting data on their enrollment, student-to-counselor ratios, curricula, and college-going rates ([Hollister, 1957](#)). Schools meeting Conant’s eligibility criteria were invited to participate in the study, which involved Conant and/or his staff visiting the school and conducting observations and interviews with teachers, students, counselors, and administrators. Between 1957 and 1958, Conant and his staff visited nearly 100 high schools in 18 states ([Teicher, 1977](#)).

Conant synthesized the findings from the school visits in his 1959 book called *The American High School Today*, also known as the Conant Report. In it he outlined 21 recommendations for improving public education. The first, and most influential, recommendation concerned the counseling supports offered at a school:

There should be one full-time counselor (or guidance officer) for every two hundred fifty to three hundred pupils in the high school. The counselors should have had experience as teachers but should be devoting virtually full time to the counseling work; they should be familiar with the use of tests and measurements of the aptitudes and achievement of pupils. ([Conant, 1959](#), pp. 44–45)

Conant made clear that his recommendation was not based on a rigorous quantitative investigation, as he lacked access to the type of data and statistical tools needed to undertake such an analysis: "I am now convinced that it is impossible to obtain information on which one could generalize about the success or failure of the American high school," he lamented (Conant, 1959, p. 17). "There are too many high schools of too many different types, and I doubt if any procedure can be worked out by which a meaningful sample can be drawn from the 21,000 public high schools," he stated (Conant, 1959, p. 17).

Conant's field notes revealed instead how the recommended counseling ratio emerged from a qualitative investigation of a highly curated sample of schools. Given one objective of his study was to evaluate the "quality and extent of guidance" schools offered, Conant and his team observed counselors' work at each of the schools they visited, and they considered how factors such as school size, the number of counselors employed, and the scope of the guidance program affected perceived counselor efficacy. One of Conant's main concerns was the amount of time these professionals devoted to actually counseling students, and he felt that counselors at the schools where caseloads were between 250 to 300 pupils were able to meet with their students. Also shaping Conant's (1959) recommendation were the unique parameters he used to identify eligible schools for his study, which included: having a "good reputation" (p. 118); enrolling at least 100 students in a graduating class (p. 14); and being located outside of major metropolitan areas (p. 14). Conant therefore did not study large high schools (typically found in urban areas) that would be more likely to have high student-to-counselor ratios.

ASCA's Recommended Counselor Caseload

Not long after the Conant Report was published, the counseling field adopted the report's 250-to-1 recommendation as a best practice. In 1963, ASCA sponsored a study to establish profession-wide standards about the responsibilities of secondary school counselors. Statements about important dimensions of the school counseling role were collected from local counseling groups that collectively reached 9000 counselors from 40 states (Loughary & Fitzgerald, 1963). Two documents summarizing the findings of the study, *The Statement of Policy for Secondary School Counselors* and *Guidelines for Implementation*, were adopted in 1965 as official ASCA policy statements. Notably, one section within the latter document on counseling caseloads incorporated Conant's recommendation, stating, "To give reasonably prompt attention to all pupils, the assigned pupil load should approximate 250 pupils to one full-time school counselor" (Loughary et al., 1965, p. 104).

While the policy statement did not explicitly reference Conant when noting the 250 caseload (the statement did not include any citations), it is clear that Conant's work influenced this recommendation. First, subsequent references to

ASCA's 250-to-1 ratio in the counseling policy discourse explicitly cite Conant (e.g., Mortenson & Schmuller, 1959; Quinn, 1969; Shertzer & Greenberg, 1962). Second, in the early-1960s, Conant was the only individual who had advocated for a 250-to-1 ratio (see Stemnock, 1972). Third, articles written by practitioners and counseling researchers for ASCA's flagship journal, *The School Counselor* (e.g., Caravello, 1964; Equi & Donnan, 1972; Finley & Shertzer, 1967; Quinn, 1969) consistently cited Conant's 250-to-1 recommended ratio as the gold standard. And fourth, counseling leaders overseeing the study were not only aware of Conant's work but supported it. For example, Willis Dugan, the executive director in the 1960s of the American Personnel and Guidance Association (APGA), the parent organization of ASCA, and co-chairmen of the National Planning Committee for the ASCA role study, contributed to a volume in which he extolled Conant's work (Volsky & Dugan, 1960).

Since embracing the 250-to-1 ratio in the 1965 policy statement, the association has not altered this best practice. The caseload recommendation can be found in ASCA policy statements, reports, and press releases from the 1970s to the present day (e.g., ASCA, 2019; Daley, 1972). Despite there being a tenuous link between a 250-caseload size and improved student outcomes, today the ratio remains a cornerstone of ASCA's comprehensive counseling model and advocating for the reduction of caseloads to this level is a key priority of the organization.

Conant's Enduring Influence Through the Lens of Institutional Theory

Although the school counseling field has evolved significantly since the 1950s, Conant's recommended ratio has surprisingly endured for the last 60 years. The institutional theory literature, particularly Greenwood et al.'s (2002) framework of how structures become institutionalized within organizational fields, offers insight into why this is the case.

Institutional theory broadly examines "the processes and mechanisms by which structures, schemas, rules, and routines become established as authoritative guidelines for social behavior" (Scott, 2005, p. 408). It focuses on understanding organizations and their interplay with institutions; whereas institutions can be thought of as the formal and informal "rules of the game" that structure human interactions, organizations are the "players," or "groups of individuals bound by a common purpose to achieve objectives" within the bounds of those rules (North, 1990, pp. 3–4). Examples of institutions include laws, customs, and professions, while organizations encompass schools, political parties, and businesses (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). A fundamental tenet of contemporary institutional theory is that institutions exert regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pressures on

organizations that lead them to seek legitimacy (Scott, 2014); it is these social pressures, rather than rationale economic factors like efficiency, that drive organizations to adopt and retain particular structures (Suddaby, 2013).

School counseling is comprised of multiple organizations, all of which reside within the same organizational field. Organizational fields are “sets of organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute an area of institutional life; key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organizations that produce similar services or products” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, pp. 148–149). Through sustained interactions, these organizations establish shared systems of meaning that facilitate the diffusion of norms, policies, and practices (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Within the school counseling field, organizations include federal and state government, special interest groups, professional associations, counseling accreditation bodies, schools and districts, and parent-teacher associations, among others. These organizations can be thought of as interdependent actors within a larger competitive arena who vie for power to shape discourse, norms, and structures pertaining to counseling (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011). By conceptualizing structures within the school counseling field as acquiring, in response to institutional and field pressures, shared meaning and significance extending beyond their technical purposes, institutional theory offers a powerful framework for understanding how structures become formalized within and among organizations (Suddaby, 2013).

Institutional theory is thus useful for conceptualizing *how* the 250-caseload recommendation became so deeply embedded within the school counseling field and *why* the field continues to promote it given the limited research base supporting it. Education scholars have used institutional theory to explain how many other policies and practices have become institutionalized in K–12 settings (e.g., Hallett, 2010; Sherer & Spillane, 2011). For example, there is a large body of work dissecting why these structures have remained immune to change, often despite considerable efforts to reform them (e.g., Cohen, 1988; Cuban, 1990; Mehta, 2015). The literature has identified various micro-, meso-, and macro-level dynamics that influence the persistence of these structures in educational organizations (e.g., Coburn, 2004; Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006; Sherer & Spillane, 2011), including specific modes of reproduction that facilitate their institutionalization (Anderson & Colyvas, 2021). Through identifying forces that promote persistence and change, institutional theory provides rich insight into the structures underlying both the broader educational landscape and school counseling field today.

The continued acceptance of the 250-to-1 ratio is an especially perfect example of how one theory of institutionalization—Greenwood et al.’s (2002) model of institutionalization in organizational fields—works in action. In the following sections, I first describe the Greenwood et al. (2002) framework and then use the model to chart the

continued persistence of the caseload recommendation. I show that the institutionalization of this ratio is inextricably tied with the birth of school counseling as a profession, and, more specifically, with the growth of its main professional body, ASCA.

Institutionalization within Organizational Fields

Building on the work of Tolbert & Zucker, 1996 and Meyer and Rowan (1977), Greenwood et al. (2002) propose a six-stage model of how structures become institutionalized in organizational fields. Stage 1 consists of “precipitating jolts,” or macro-level forces that lead stakeholders within a field to question extant practices, followed in Stage 2 by the deinstitutionalization, or dismantling of these practices from organizational routines, by new or existing actors. Next, organizations in Stage 3 locally innovate new practices and subsequently engage in theorization about those practices in Stage 4, often with the help of prominent “champions.” As noted by Tolbert & Zucker (1996), advocates theorize a practice by defining and drawing public attention to an organizational failing and then, with the support of evidence, position a new practice as a solution. Such theorization imbues the new practice with pragmatic as well as moral legitimacy.

If a practice is successfully theorized, it then reaches Stage 5 where it diffuses throughout an organizational field, becoming increasingly objectified as organizational actors reach consensus about its practical value (Greenwood et al., 2002). Finally, Stage 6, or full institutionalization, is achieved when a practice is widely adopted and embraced to such an extent that it has attained cognitive legitimacy, or become “taken-for-granted.” These institutionalized practices are effectively rationalized myths (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Greenwood et al. (2002) especially emphasize the role of professional associations in Stages 4 through 6 of the institutionalization process. Professional associations are communities where organizations delineate the boundaries of a profession, developing shared understandings of practices, norms, and conditions of membership (Greenwood et al., 2002). Greenwood et al. (2002) note that professional associations are influential theorizers; by deeming a practice as the “right” thing to do, these actors imbue the innovation with moral legitimacy. Furthermore, by incorporating the new practice into certification, training, and hiring routines, professional associations promulgate its diffusion and sedimentation (Greenwood et al., 2002).

Institutionalization of the 250-Caseload

As shown in Figure 2, this six-stage model of institutionalization can be used to understand the rise and sustenance of the caseload recommendation. The following sections connect each stage of the model to notable stakeholders and events that led to the institutionalization of the

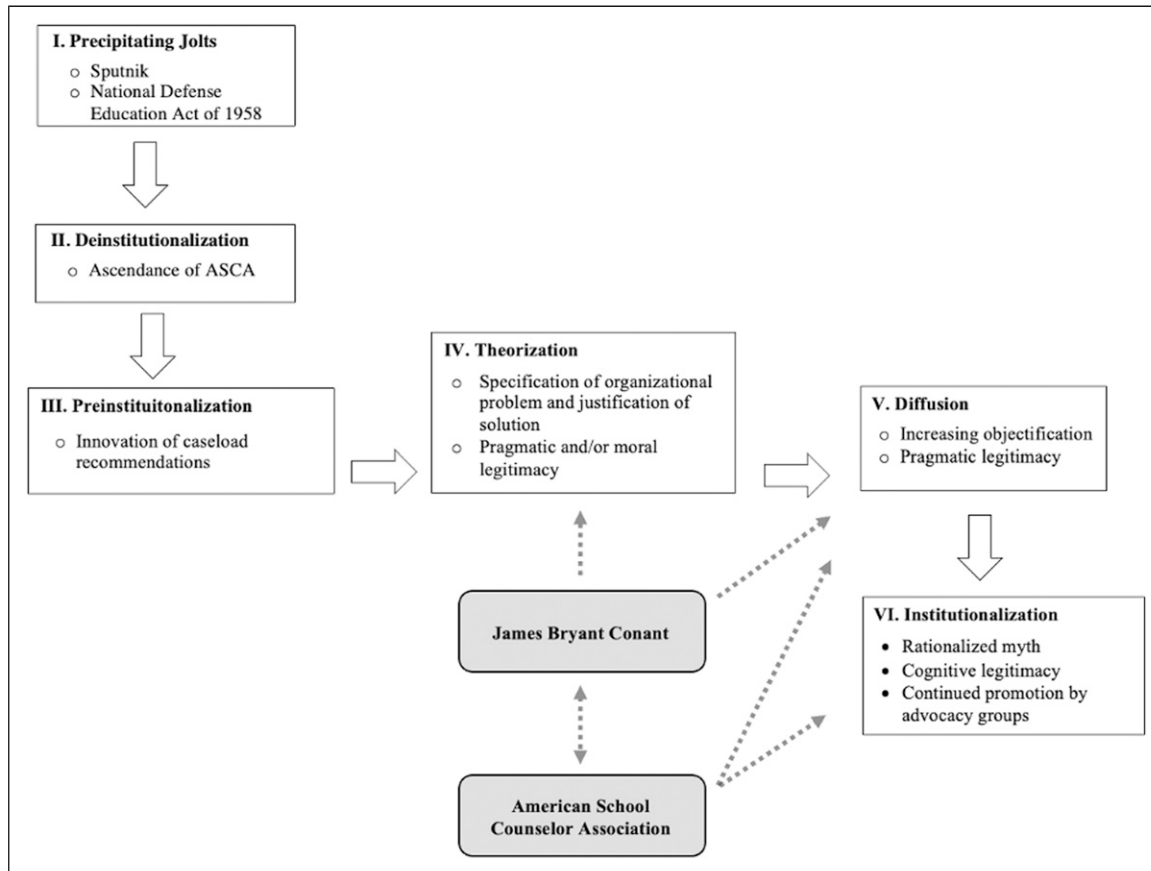


Figure 2. Institutionalization process of 250-to-1 ratio.
 Note. Adapted from Greenwood et al. (2002).

250-to-1 ratio in the school counseling field. These stakeholders and events have been prominently discussed in historical accounts about the development of the school counseling profession and the formalization of the field's policies and practices (e.g., Gysbers, 2010; Gysbers & Henderson, 2012) as well as mentioned directly by James Bryant Conant (1959) and other major school counseling actors (e.g., Volsky & Dugan, 1960) as influencing their work. This section thus draws upon extant historical literature to connect the Greenwood et al. (2002) model to the 250-to-1 ratio specifically.

Stage 1: Precipitating Jolt. In the early-20th century, guidance counseling was an ancillary position held by teachers and was narrowly focused on vocational guidance. The counselor role lacked standardization, which meant individual schools determined the duties of their teacher-counselors (Gysbers & Henderson, 2012). As the counselor role broadened between 1920 and 1950 to encompass personal-needs counseling and academic advising, this counseling delivery model was ineffective; teachers did not have the time or support to undertake such work in conjunction with their teaching duties (Gysbers & Henderson, 2012).

The Cold War was a significant “precipitating jolt” within the counseling field, casting a national spotlight on the need for schools to hire full-time counselors. The space race, particularly the launch of the Soviet Union’s *Sputnik I* satellite, fueled concern about Soviet educational superiority in science, engineering, and math and its implications for national security (Gysbers, 2010). Consequently, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) in 1958 to identify talented students, provide them with robust academic supports, and strengthen their preparation for careers in strategic fields. Given research identifying counselors as important academic advisers, Title V of the NDEA funded two counseling initiatives: it provided \$15 million to schools for hiring full-time counselors and strengthening counseling programs and also funneled \$7 million to universities for establishing counselor training institutes (Gysbers, 2010). As a result of Title V, school counseling services expanded across the country. Between 1959 and 1963, the years immediately following passage of the NDEA, the ratio of students to counselors declined by nearly 45%; the number of full-time counselors increased 126%; and local school district expenditures for guidance ballooned from \$5.6 million to

\$127 million (Miller, 1968). It was this national investment in counseling that laid the groundwork for the development of formal policies structuring the role of the new counselor workforce.

Stage 2: Deinstitutionalization. The American School Counselor Association was at the forefront of conversations about the growing role of school counselors. ASCA emerged in 1953 as a division of the APGA, known today as the American Counseling Association. It formed during a time when there were calls to professionalize school counseling and create a cohesive counselor identity centered around clear standards and responsibilities (Gysbers, 2010). Especially after passage of the NDEA, there was growing concern that school leaders and administrators were failing to leverage their new counselors. Many schools situated counselors within a pupil personnel services framework, which brought together counselors, psychologists, social workers, nurses, and attendance officers under the umbrella of a single student support team (Gysbers & Henderson, 2012). This classification of guidance within a larger set of school-based services generated confusion about what the counselor role entailed, and how it differed from the work of other mental health providers like social workers. Such ambiguity often led school leaders to assign counselors many duties falling outside their counseling, consultation, and coordination responsibilities (Gysbers, 2010).

The American School Counselor Association spearheaded efforts to redefine the scope of the counselor role through conducting and disseminating research via its flagship journal, crafting position statements, and working with other professional associations to develop standards to guide the training of counselors. By the mid-1960s, ASCA emerged on the national scene as the voice of the school counseling profession (Gysbers, 2010).

Stage 3: Preinstitutionalization. As part of its efforts to professionalize school counseling, ASCA and its community of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners proposed best practices to guide the field. One such practice concerned student-to-counselor ratios. As the number of counseling programs across the country increased post-NDEA, staffing levels became a concern. The average caseload for a full-time secondary school counselor was over 500 students and that number was even higher at the elementary level (Gysbers, 2010). Just as they do today, such high caseloads hindered the efficacy of counseling programs, making it difficult for counselors to offer the type of one-on-one advising that their roles demanded.

Starting in the mid-1950s, a number of prominent counselor educators and researchers began circulating recommended student-to-counselor ratios. As shown in Table 1, these recommendations varied tremendously. They were rarely rooted in rigorous empirical evidence, and instead reflected what the counseling leaders thought was

Table 1. Examples of Recommended Counselor-to-Student Ratios.

Recommended Counselor-to-Student Ratio	Grade Level	Author
$\frac{1}{3} - 1 : 101 - 300$ pupils 1 - 3 : 301 - 800 3 - 6 : 801 - 1500 6 - 10 : 1501 - 3000	Secondary	Douglass, 1954
1 : 400	Secondary	Hoyt, 1955
$\frac{1}{3} - \frac{2}{3} : 101 - 300$ pupils $\frac{2}{3} - 1 : 301 - 600$ 1 - 2 : 601 - 1000 2 - 4 : 1001 - 2000	Secondary	Gruhn & Douglass, 1956
1 : 500	Elementary	Johnson et al., 1961
1 : 600	Elementary	US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Office of Education, 1961
1 : 300	Secondary	Wrenn, 1962

Note. Adapted from Stemnock (1972).

appropriate based on their knowledge of the field. For example, Gruhn and Douglass (1956) supplied a range of student-to-counselor ratios for junior high schools based on enrollment size. They stated that their recommendation did “not represent either prevailing practice or the ideal situation” but rather was a “suggested pattern that should be attainable in a modern, well-supported junior high school” (p. 360). A recommended caseload that was more closely rooted in data was Hoyt’s (1955) 400-to-1 ratio, which he derived using calculations about the number of minutes in a day a counselor should devote to advising each of their students. This innovation of caseload recommendations among key counseling stakeholders set the scene for Conant’s research.

Stage 4: Theorization Conant as Theorizer. The 250-to-1 recommendation garnered more attention than these competing ratios because Conant successfully theorized it. Conant’s book is the product of his personal theorization efforts. In *The American High School Today*, Conant identified problems facing comprehensive schools across the country and then advanced specific recommendations to ameliorate those issues—this act of specifying a problem and then justifying a potential solution is at the heart of the theorization process (Tolbert & Zucker, 1996). That Conant’s theorization efforts were successful is undeniable. His report received high accolades from the general public who extolled the work as “‘must reading’ for all Americans interested in improving their schools,” (Barbe, 1959) and “as influential as the effect of John Dewey” (Battey, 1959). The report also gained traction among educators, who were generally in agreement with its findings (Teicher, 1977). In fact, some school leaders

were so enthralled by the report that they circulated detailed checklists reporting the extent to which their schools adhered to Conant's 21 recommendations, including the 250-to-1 ratio (Teicher, 1977).

School counseling practitioners, scholars, and educators also found Conant's recommendations compelling. The counseling community generally thought his suggested ratio was "realistic" (Volsky & Dugan, 1960, p. 45) and a "good rule of thumb" (Shertzer & Greenberg, 1962, p. 43). Critics of his work typically took fault with the arguments Conant articulated, such as about what the role of counselors should be, rather than the exact numbers he derived (e.g., DeShane, 1959). As a result, few in the counseling realm actually challenged how Conant arrived at the 250-to-1 ratio.

ASCA as Theorizer. In addition to Conant, ASCA also played an important role theorizing the caseload. Just as *The American High School Today* was a physical representation of Conant's theorization efforts, ASCA's *Statement of Policy* and *Guidelines for Implementation* were the products of ASCA's theorization process. These documents reflected the voices of over 9000 counseling stakeholders that ASCA had tasked with identifying problems facing the profession and then outlining best practices that schools and their counselors should adopt. The organization's endorsement of the 250 caseload in their official policy statements imbued Conant's recommended ratio with pragmatic legitimacy, signaling to the counseling community that it should be accepted as standard practice.

Embracing Conant's caseload was a strategic move for ASCA to garner support for its policy recommendations. It is clear from the writings of many counseling stakeholders during the 1960s that they were in awe of Conant; his star power and impeccable academic credentials bolstered the credibility of his claims, generating an "aura of prestige" around the Conant Report (Abramowitz, 1963). This aura largely insulated Conant's counseling recommendations from deep critique; as one counseling professor noted, Conant's "great and deserved reputation and prestige" caused his work to get "almost no critical analysis" (Watson, 1959). Indeed, "any writer who dared to challenge him would look like a lap dog yapping at a mastiff," another scholar remarked (Griffith, 1960, p. 59). Promoting a widely-agreed-upon recommendation thus aligned with the association's efforts to devise professional standards rooted in best practices and supported by its members.

Adopting Conant's recommendation also served to legitimate ASCA itself and raise the profile of the nascent counseling profession. In the 1960s ASCA was trying to position itself within the larger counseling field, carving out a niche distinct from the larger and more developed associations that were part of the APGA (Gysbers, 2010). Given building relationships with influential stakeholders is a proven strategy for bolstering an emerging organization's legitimacy (Scott, 2014), aligning with Conant

provided an opportunity for ASCA to improve its national presence. As one counseling scholar remarked, the field would be remiss not to: "Here is a former president of Harvard University, famous scientist and highly respected statesman, telling us about the need for a high-level guidance program!" (Burnett, 1961, p. 305). ASCA's alignment with Conant can thus be seen a strategic move to strengthen the emerging organization and the counseling profession.

Stage 5: Diffusion. Both Conant and ASCA subsequently promoted diffusion of the caseload recommendation. With respect to the former, Conant's fame led to *The American High School Today* receiving enormous media coverage, with front-page headlines and editorials about its findings appearing in national outlets like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* as well as small-town newspapers (Teicher, 1977). Over 170,000 copies were purchased in a span of 18 months, with the book becoming a *New York Times* bestseller within 2 weeks of its publication (Teicher, 1977). In addition, as a result of a robust marketing campaign, an additional 80,000 free copies were distributed to school boards, districts, and principals, which further circulated Conant's ideas (Teicher, 1977). This publicity thus helped spread the caseload recommendation among both the general public and educators.

The American School Counselor Association continued the diffusion of the caseload through publishing articles that referenced Conant and his counseling recommendation in its flagship journal (e.g., Caravello, 1964; Quinn, 1969). After the *Statement of Policy* and *Guidelines for Implementation* were adopted in 1965, ASCA also launched a national campaign to publicize the new policies governing the counseling profession—one of which being the 250-to-1 ratio—to counselors, parents, and others at the local level (Loughary et al., 1965). ASCA's efforts thus assisted in further expanding knowledge of the recommended caseload among the counseling community.

Stage 6: Institutionalization. The American School Counselor Association's incorporation of the 250 caseload into its policy documents ultimately fueled its institutionalization within the counseling profession. The *Statement of Policy* and *Guidelines for Implementation* governed the profession for nearly two decades before being subsumed into other policy documents and then formalized in the early-2000s into the ASCA National Model (Gysbers, 2010). Widely adopted today, the model outlines best practices for structuring the work of school counselors, with one practice being adherence to the 250-to-1 ratio (ASCA, 2019). This ideal student-to-counselor ratio remains taken-for-granted not only because the ASCA National Model is so well known within the counseling community, but also because it is embedded within curricula for school counseling training programs and the professional development offered by ASCA and its partners (ASCA,

2019). As part of their induction into the profession, new counselors are taught about the importance of this ratio, which enables its persistence.

In summary, the institutionalization of the counseling ratio is linked with the growth of the school counseling sector and the emergence of ASCA. After the NDEA led to a rapid increase in the size of the counselor workforce, ASCA spearheaded efforts to professionalize school counseling by encouraging the development of formal policies and practices to guide the nascent profession. One such policy concerned counselor caseloads. Although a number of prominent actors in the counseling community articulated caseload suggestions, James Bryant Conant's recommended ratio gained the most traction on account of his fame and authority. Conant's recommendation diffused widely throughout the education sector, and, with the help of ASCA, among the counseling community. ASCA's incorporation of the 250 caseload into its policy statements in 1965, and subsequently into its training materials and advocacy efforts, cemented Conant's recommendation within the very fabric of the organization and has promoted its persistence to the present day.

Reconsidering the Recommended Student-to-Counselor Ratio

Nearly 60 years after the publication of *The American High School Today*, the school counseling profession continues to draw on Conant's recommended student-to-counselor ratio. Is 250-to-1 actually the ideal ratio? Given the limited empirical evidence available, 250 is likely not the magical threshold that yields measurable benefits to students and schools if crossed. Nevertheless, one could argue that the counseling field's continued emphasis on this number is harmless and even beneficial—after all, given research that lower student-to-counselor ratios promote positive student outcomes (Carey & Martin, 2017), shouldn't advocating for a caseload size lower than the national average be worthwhile? However, I argue the focus on this singular statistic in the national discourse on counseling can be deleterious for two reasons.

First, while caseloads are important, strongly advocating for a blanket 250 caseload draws attention and money away from efforts to improve the working conditions that also need to be in place for counselors to do their jobs effectively. Regardless of their caseload size, counselors cannot maximize student success if they are in schools where principals do not understand their role, administrative duties abound, and time to meet with students is scarce (Savitz-Romer, 2019). Emphasizing caseloads without also attending to the counseling context that affects counselors and thus their students puts the cart before the horse. Indeed, this is partly why counseling initiatives like Colorado's, which combined hiring of school counselors with counselor professional development, training for principals and administrators about

the counselor role, and funding for purchasing the resources that counselors need, have been so successful (Arredondo et al., 2016). Adding more counselors into a school system that does not understand their role simply compounds existing problems.

And second, emphasizing the 250-to-1 ratio as a gold standard is also problematic as it neglects the nuances of counselors' local contexts. There is tremendous variation within the counselor role today. For example, counselor duties differ based on the grade levels they serve, with high school counselors primarily overseeing college and academic advising while their elementary counterparts focus on students' social emotional development (ASCA, 2019). Beyond just grade level, research has identified a plethora of other factors that shape counselors' duties—and their efficacy in performing them—including: the needs of the student populations they serve, school leaders' understanding of what the counselor role can and should entail, school and district resources, the training counselors received, and the existence of district- and state-wide counseling initiatives (Savitz-Romer, 2019). With so many factors shaping the work of counselors, there is likely no one-size-fits-all ratio. The optimal ratio for a counselor in a high-resourced school with a robust student support team is likely not the same as a counselor in a lower-resourced school serving a marginalized population with great needs. Advocating for a blanket caseload policy disregards these critical local contexts, potentially leading to the adoption of one-size-fits-all solutions that may not actually improve outcomes for all students.

Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

Caseloads may be just one factor that impacts counselors' efficacy, but they are an important one to consider. As such, more research is needed on counselor caseloads, especially optimal caseload sizes. Indeed, rather than accepting a single caseload number, the counseling field should push to identify optimal caseloads in specific school settings. While it would be ideal for all schools to have lower student-to-counselor caseloads, there are many factors that prevent this from becoming a reality; constrained school budgets as well as shortages in the counselor pipeline which limit schools' ability to hire qualified professionals are two of the biggest obstacles to reducing counselor caseloads across all schools (Jacobson, 2019; Meyer & Bell, 2023; Prothero & Riser-Kositsky, 2022). It is therefore essential that resources are directed toward bolstering those schools that would benefit most from reductions in caseloads. Since research has shown counselor ratios and school counseling programs most strongly affect outcomes for low-income and students of color (e.g., Carrell & Carrell, 2006; Mulhern, 2020), examining caseload sizes in schools serving these students is particularly important. If optimal caseload sizes are identified for such schools, counseling stakeholders could focus on advocating for caseload reductions as part of broader

counseling reform in those high-needs institutions. This is an ask that state legislatures may find more reasonable than one targeting a counseling investment in all schools across a state.

In addition to identifying optimal caseload sizes, there is also a need for research on the conditions that must be in place to maximize the benefits of these optimal student-to-counselor ratios. There is a growing body of literature about organizational conditions that shape the efficacy of school counselors and thus student success (Savitz-Romer & Nicola, 2021). For example, studies have highlighted how ambiguity about the counselor role (e.g., Benigno, 2017; Blake, 2020), particularly among school leaders (Lewis et al., 2020), as well as limited access to robust pre-service training and in-service professional development opportunities (e.g., Bridgeland & Bruce, 2011; Bruce & Bridgeland, 2012) affect the ability of counselors to fulfill their responsibilities. There remains, however, a gap in the literature about the intersection between these conditions and caseload sizes. Research that examines counselor efficacy across schools with similar optimal caseload sizes but different organizational conditions would provide evidence about factors that mediate the impact of caseload size on counselor and student outcomes; such work would offer critical insights into ways that school, district, and state leaders can better support counselors.

To facilitate this future research on optimal caseload sizes as well as their relationship with organizational conditions, changes need to be enacted regarding how caseload figures are calculated. It is essential that state education agencies commit to establishing systems for accurately counting the number of counselors employed in schools. Currently, there is much variation in how the total number of counselors in a school or district is determined. For example, some states will include in the ratio calculation any individual who performs some type of counseling within a school, even if they are not a school counselor; as a result, the ratios overcount the number of actual counselors employed (Savitz-Romer & Nicola, 2021). Not only are there differences in who is considered a counselor for reporting purposes but also how they are represented. For instance, some states track school counselors in terms of their full-time equivalent status while others simply report the total number of counseling professionals employed, not denoting if some work part-time (Donohue et al., 2021). These inconsistencies in reporting make research into optimal caseload sizes more difficult—it is impossible to rigorously investigate what student-to-counselor ratios should be without a baseline understanding of them.

Conclusion

As a preface to the 21 recommendations in *The American High School Today*, Conant (1959) wrote, “10 or even 5 years from now some of my recommendations may need serious revision” (p. 43–44). It is clear that a re-examination of Conant’s suggested

student-to-counselor ratio is long overdue. This essay argued that Conant’s study of American high schools was largely a personal crusade to confirm his beliefs about the effective tenets of secondary education in the 1950s—one such tenet being the necessity of high-quality guidance services. His findings gained traction because the emerging profession of school counseling was eager to lean on Conant’s prestige and authority to promote the field. On account of ASCA, the 250-to-1 recommended ratio became institutionalized within the school counseling policy discourse.

On a more fundamental level, Conant’s recommendation should be re-examined given all of the changes within the education sector and as well as society at large since the 1950s that have impacted students and the work of school counselors. Major historical events such as the desegregation movement in the 1960s and the passage of special education laws and Title IX in the 1970s, as well as the rise of the standards-based reforms in the 1980s and the school accountability movement in the early-2000s have dramatically reshaped the public education sector; by expanding the population of students that counselors must support as well as shifting the scope of the counselor role, these events have undoubtedly redefined the school counseling profession (Gysbers, 2010). Even recent events such as the rise COVID-19 have impacted the needs of students and thus altered the boundaries of the counselor role (Savitz-Romer et al., 2021). The rise of these powerful forces over the past half-century only further underscore a need to critically examine the 250-to-1 ratio.

In summary, for the last 60 years, the school counseling profession has remained an ardent advocate for a policy rooted in limited empirical evidence. It is time for the education field to finally take up James Bryant Conant’s invitation to explore his policy recommendation and the notion of optimal student-to-counselor ratios more generally.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. School counselors are licensed, school-based educators who implement comprehensive school counseling programs as defined by the American School Counselor Association. They primarily work in public schools and undertake a range of

responsibilities, including academic, social emotional, and postsecondary counseling.

2. States recently considering such bills include Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Virginia. See the [National Conference of State Legislatures \(2021\)](#) for more information.

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