

Innovations in Elementary School Counseling During a Global Pandemic

Elizabeth Hooper, MA, MS

Armando Romero, MS, BHT

Please address correspondence concerning this article to Elizabeth Hooper, 10227 E. Vista del Cielo Circle, Hereford, AZ 85615. Contact: [eamhooper@gmail.com](mailto:eamhooper@gmail.com)

### Abstract

During the recent pandemic, counselors, like all educators, faced the challenge of engaging students working online and in safe-space or “hybrid” learning areas. This scenario often manifested failing grades, lack of motivation, and other mental health concerns such as depression, anxiety, and isolation. To increase academic participation and overall student wellness, counselors found new ways to build trust and rapport online instead of in person. Students shared motivational and how-to videos with classmates. Counselors conducted virtual family fun nights, incorporated music into counseling sessions, and integrated therapy dog school visits into the counseling program. Cooperation and perseverance amongst counseling colleagues and all school staff were crucial ingredients for student growth and success.

*Keywords:* pandemic, student success, student achievement, online learning, virtual learning, online counseling, hybrid learning, innovative counseling practices

School counselors are often the go-to professionals for resources that bring calm and balance to the ever-changing world of elementary education. Providing those resources was critical in ensuring students met academic goals this past year as the whole world battled a devastating, highly contagious virus. In most cases, the virus left schools across the globe vacant for up to a year. With little forewarning, administrators and staff dashed to implement technology and infrastructure so students still had the opportunity to experience a proper education. What was once a typical school day in a brick-and-mortar classroom soon became a novel, virtual, and hybrid experience from a computer. Even kindergarten students who had just started the learning process in preschool not only faced adapting to a new system of gathering information but also battled fears of contracting the virus. Every school witnessed first-hand the damaging and often fatal effects of the virus. A school-wide cooperative effort was undertaken to prepare students, as many began feeling a sense of sadness, anxiety, anger, confusion, and isolation that would, at a minimum, manifest failing grades.

The school counselor's role in today's society is to guide students in academic achievement strategies and to assist them in managing their emotions while applying interpersonal and life skills (American School Counselors Association, 2021). To this end, it is the goal of every school counselor to meet the social and emotional needs of the student, especially during an unprecedented time of uncertainty. This manuscript consists of innovative student services and counseling practices that demonstrate how to help students move forward in achieving self-enlightenment and mental wellness at the elementary school level. Creativity and perseverance was necessary to complete the task during a global pandemic.

## **Background**

In March 2020, a worldwide pandemic forced schools to close for the academic year. High school seniors graduated without a graduation ceremony. Teachers and staff had little choice but to work remotely. The sudden closures left everyone with more questions than answers. The schools that once provided food, companionship, safety, guidance, mentorship, and tutoring to students could not provide those essential ingredients for life. During a virtual conference, Dr. Jackson (2020) stated the pandemic would likely cause students who were already falling behind in any grade level three years to recover from the loss of in-person schooling.

Massive amounts of courage and collaboration from the 5 through 11-year-old students, their parents/local community, and incredible foresight from administrators was needed to ensure students continued learning, progressing, and thriving through the worst of the pandemic. It became a moment in time to teach resilience and success using technology and adaptation.

Many students already observed having a hard time with school and life, in general, did not register for the 2020-2021 school year although schools provided laptops and internet hotspots. The schools did everything they could to ensure students and staff had the technology they needed to succeed, but many experienced an unexpected learning curve. Some students and families had little experience with computers or tablets. Many of the students and staff had never learned or taught, respectively, from Google classroom. The school and the community also underestimated the amount of reliance the school would have on good internet service and adults at home, who would become tutors and instructional assistants. Even local cable companies donated extra resources to teachers and schools. The support was available, but the challenges would still be monumental.

Counselors began receiving referrals from parents who realized their children could not stay seated for long periods asking what they could do to help. They also aided students and parents through the grieving process when they had lost a loved one due to the virus. Teachers came to counselors for resources related to social and emotional learning blocks, and counselors provided individual support to students that began falling behind. Counselors provided treatment plans to keep those students engaged so they remained on task.

As schools and communities began overcoming the devastation and gaining ground on the virus, districts began hybrid models via “safe spaces,” which also had logistical intricacies. The safe spaces had limited seating that were essential in providing necessary resources to help students remain successful. Districts nationwide began developing safety protocols for offices that clearly explained what to do when a student came to school exhibiting signs and symptoms of fever, cough, or cold. The administration created separate rooms for those students, and staff were screened at the gates and front offices before signing in for the day. Counselors visited safe spaces daily as part of an attempt to help students struggling with academics before they fell too far behind.

Teachers who were struggling with confidence in their new pedagogical reality and working with parents who were directly involved also came for support and guidance during the pandemic. Additionally, counselors worked to ensure 504 plans were current, IEP (Individualized Education Plan) students continued receiving services, and grappled with other everyday situations like bullying, cyberbullying, and oppositional defiance in safe spaces. Ground-level footwork, fortitude, and innovation was developed in an effort to turn a learning curve into a thriving community of people helping students and each other so that students could learn the material and grow despite the many challenges.

### **Building Relations During a Non-Typical School Year**

An initial step in addressing student needs during a pandemic is building and maintaining counselor-student relationships, which is especially difficult online and hybrid due to distractions and lack of proximity. However, this relationship was critical, as research shows that the best indicator of an individual's happiness is the quality of their close, personal relationships, whether they are romantic, family-related, or social (Boyd, 2013). General satisfaction is directly linked to healthy relationships and whether those relationships are fulfilling. In a classroom, relationship building assists youth in constructing social skills and understanding the concept of being self-determined and self-driven (Zelihic, 2015).

Similarly, school counselors had to find ways to interact with students that built sustainable relationships without having the ability to converse with them in a traditional face-to-face manner. This kind of relationship-building in an online setting required increased creativity, flexibility, and persistence by the counselor.

Face-to-face sessions were restricted in some cases and not possible in others; therefore, virtual sessions with students via online platforms such as Google Meets, Zoom, or Facetime became the home of relationship building. The key to using these platforms was to be on time for the appointment, fully present, and prepared to initiate the students' cooperation and involvement during the session. Trust-building exercises such as icebreakers like Freeze Dance and getting-to-know-you games like "Would You Rather?" (e.g., would you rather play basketball or ride your bike to relax?) were a priority during those first couple of sessions to allow students to feel comfortable and ready to participate in the virtual setting. Online scavenger hunts were not only particularly engaging but also helped assess whether or not the student was applying techniques introduced during sessions. For example, the counselor allowed two minutes for the

student to find an item in their home that inspired a sense of calm. Locating an item with ease was a good indicator that the student was practicing mindfulness in the home setting. On the other hand, when the student struggled to find an item, the counselor reviewed mindfulness and suggested a common household item, like a squishy ball or play dough, for that purpose.

Moreover, staying in frequent contact with students and their families became essential for maintaining rapport. Counselors invited families to view recordings of themselves delivering updates about the counseling program or reading a book with a social-emotional focus, further helping to promote connection with their stakeholders. Blog posts on online platforms like Class Dojo and the school website and newsletters sent via email on topics like managing anxiety also kept the school community engaged without meeting in person.

The counselors outreach efforts and focus on building relations helped some parents and students feel less isolated from the school. They received emails and phone calls from these groups despite little to no in-person interaction with them. Counselors also found that they became familiar and comfortable using technology that they had little experience with before the pandemic. Today, as our schools have begun reestablishing in-person instruction, counselors continue to use some of the novel practices employed during that time.

### **Motivational Videos**

When the pandemic first hit, students and staff needed time and assistance getting used to the infrastructural changes. Many needed help navigating the online classroom and ensuring their equipment was working correctly. Some students flourished in this new virtual world, while others, even straight-A students, struggled to keep up with the momentum. Teachers required motivational resources and the counselors stepped up to the plate.

The task was to develop a program that would praise students for their efforts, encourage other students to push themselves, and do it in a way that showed students the correct method of operation for success. Since the school was primarily virtual at the time, it delivered the message via the internet. The information had to be powerful enough to keep the students engaged long enough to learn how to be successful, but, at the same time, it was necessary not to overwhelm the students who were struggling. The counselors set out to create excitement for the new learning environment and a sense of hope that success was possible in this new realm. They also wanted to ensure that each student had someone to turn to if they needed help. Furthermore, the message would be more empowering and relatable if it came from the students themselves.

After administrator approval, the counselors asked teaching staff from each grade level to nominate two outstanding online students to show other students how they adapted to this new classroom environment. With parent permission, the counselors recorded the successful students on Google Meets explaining their study and work habits, time management skills, and general daily routines that helped keep them on track academically. For example, “What helps you stay focused during class?” Responses included: “I focus by keeping everything organized and ready to go,” and “I pay attention when the teacher says something,” and “My room is quiet.” Successful students shared a manageable sleep schedule and a productive morning routine that included a healthy breakfast. Responses from the different students came together by using iMovie to make one seamless, cohesive video recording. The peer-to-peer testimonials helped others take ownership of the learning process by understanding what was in their locus of control. Teachers shared these videos with students via Google Classroom, which inspired group discussions about successful virtual learning.

Through informal interviews, video participants shared that they felt as if they were on the right track. Participants also became domain experts and started helping other students. This occurrence reinforced the students' confidence. Some were intrinsically rewarded by seeing classmates become successful. The students who watched the videos reported feeling less stressed and more prepared, as they now had success templates. Viewers now had a mental image of a clean and clutter-free work environment that they could mimic at home. To date, the video has been viewed 442 times.

### **Virtual Family Fun Nights**

Next, the counselors ensured that stakeholders felt connected to a community and could still interact within a school social network. According to Hodges (2004), forming an online learning community is one motivational technique that has been proven successful in e-learning settings. Further research has shown that parental involvement is crucial in student success, school engagement, and academic performance (Bailey, 2017). A barrier to parental involvement was the parents' availability, as many parents are employed and not available during typical school hours. Having family-friendly events or activities during the day would work in some instances but may not be well attended by parents and other family members. Therefore, having a family fun event in the evening would likely benefit and draw the attention of more members of the family.

Due to the pandemic and social-distancing protocols, it was not feasible nor permissible to physically hold such an event on school grounds. The counselors imaginatively had the family fun night virtually and still created a memorable experience. All students and their family members received an invitation to participate in the event held by the school, which included different dates for those who could not attend on a particular evening. Most families participated

from the comfort of their homes. The counselors planned for the event for two months and it came together quickly and seamlessly. Each night offered twenty-minute academic-related, engaging sessions presented by community members willing to volunteer their time and expertise. Sessions included a firefighter demonstration, music appreciation time, a brief history lesson of the surrounding area, storytime with a public librarian, educational-based games and activities facilitated by teachers, and much more. To join the event, students only needed to click on a link to the virtual session to view the presentations and ask questions. Questions were encouraged to be asked either verbally or through the chat function of the online platform. Principals greeted participants in an opening session and thanked families for their attendance in an end-of-event session.

The family fun night events were successful because each session had active participants and few technical difficulties. Online attendance sheets collected through Google Meets show that seven adult stakeholders and sixteen students attended the first night. Four adult stakeholders and nineteen students participated in the event on the second night. Word-of-mouth feedback was also positive. However, counselors will seek to advertise the event even more within the school community in future undertakings. Counselors will also collect data from participants regarding the event's effectiveness—whether the experience was educational and enjoyable—and use the information for planning purposes.

### **Music Integration**

Thompson (2007) and his team stated client engagement is an essential yet challenging ingredient of effective therapy. Engaged clients are more likely to bond with therapists and endorse treatment goals. Further, involved clients participate to a greater degree, remain in treatment longer, and report higher satisfaction levels. Once counselors established rapport with

the elementary school students, they worked together towards the same goal just like two teammates running toward the end zone or hoop during a sporting event. Counselors in this new environment trying to build rapport had to develop different ways to engage students. Students started to welcome their counselors into their lives as caring, helpful adults who embraced the individual likes and dislikes and provided mentorship. Student preferences were wide-ranging from fire fighting to racing, from rock collecting to the military. While some students preferred music over playing outside, others wanted to be professional “Youtubers” and video gamers. The counselors had a lot to work with and quickly coordinated activities to help students open up while harmoniously making progress.

For students who chose music as a preference, the counselors played instruments through Google Meets without distracting other online classrooms. For those students who did not have musical instruments at home, soundboards were made available. Students practiced at home or in the hybrid environment with this setup even when the counselor was not with them. The students had hundreds of different sounds to choose from, and organizing those sounds on their board was as easy as drag and drop. What was observed was that most students needed little to no help learning and using the technology. Once they knew where and how to navigate and locate sounds, students would push play while the software kept a certain tempo and the students were making music. The software helped even the least experienced musicians sound like experts. Sounding good coupled with praise from people that happened to be listening at home or the counselor on the other side of the computer seemed to bring out a smile in almost every student that attempted the feat.

Counseling sessions that involved student interests like music became an event to look forward to for them. Integrating music and other student likes made their concerns less

problematic and provided the students an area of interest that would be useful in building skill and self-confidence. Students who were typically very shy were becoming more outgoing as they improved at playing an instrument. Teachers noticed a difference in those students as they and principals annotated fewer outbursts reported through the referral system. When an outburst did occur, it was much easier for the counselor to engage each student, help them process, and move past the event to continue schooling because of the relationship they had built.

### **Therapy Dogs**

In their study of psychosocial and psychophysiological effects of human-animal interactions, Beetz, Uvnas-Moberg, Julius, and Kotrschal (2012) found that therapy dogs help lower stress and anxiety, promote social interaction, and enhance overall human health. Further, children who work with therapy dogs likely experience increased school attendance, gains in confidence, a decrease in anxiety, positive changes toward learning, a newfound ability to express their feelings, and enhanced relationships with peers and teachers (Lloyd and Soren, 2015). Given this evidence, schools in Florida in 2018 and other American states utilized therapy dogs to provide comfort and support to anxious students returning to the school environment after a crisis (Grove & Henderson, 2018). Under the guidance of their handlers, the therapy dog's role was not to be a "service dog" but rather to interact with others to produce a positive social and emotional learning experience. The recipients of such services were encouraged to pet or talk to the canine, which also helped teach sensitive touch and induce calmness due to the release of oxytocin (Petersson et al., 2017).

There are two ways that therapy dogs played a part in students' lives during an atypical school year. First, handlers brought dogs into the hybrid setting where few students are physically in attendance. This allowed for a more 1:1 ratio with the dogs, facilitating a calming,

conscious experience for the student and a less overwhelming experience for the dog. Second, many national dog therapy programs currently provide an online experience to hospitals, nursing homes, and schools in crisis. Handlers streamed themselves with their animals to deliver a fun and engaging online presentation to the students. For example, the therapy dog “spoke” to the children with howls and barks and performed simple tricks while the handler explained the animal’s job as a “working dog” and answered questions about the dog. Nationally recognized programs like Go Team Therapy Dogs (2021) were primed and available to offer this kind of support.

In the academic setting, therapy dogs rekindled joy and laughter for the students coping with the emotions associated with an atypical school year. These working dogs were adept at treating the students, both younger and older, with love and affection, allowing the children to pat their heads, scratch behind their ears, and give them belly rubs. Principals and teachers alike attested firsthand to the anxieties, stresses, and fears that melted away in their students through the human-canine bond (Whetten, 2021). The handlers also agreed that their dogs helped remove the pandemic’s stress in children and adults alike.

After the therapy dogs visited with students, counselors noticed an improvement in student attitude and general excitement towards their daily activities. Students often asked about how the dogs were doing as well as when the dogs would be able to go back to their school for another visit. Administrators were also impressed with the dog's ability to involve even those students who were generally shy and introverted. The counselors and staff now had a common ground experience that helped gain rapport with students who were previously non-conversive. Overall, the therapy dogs uplifted the general mood in a situation that was new, unknown, and even scary to some students and staff.

### **Conclusion**

This past year, it became apparent that people in a crisis often dig deep to “pull out all the stops,” perform, and do what it takes to thrive. The community, the administration, the staff, and the students did all they could to make things work. Attending school in-person was no longer a reality, but resulted in creating community-wide cooperation that dropped barriers to success almost instantaneously. Quick thinking from staff was essential to get the logistics correct the first time. Jobs were now done online and recorded in real-time. But, the goal never changed.

The goal was to provide sound education and counseling services to students and families in a time of need. This year was about taking full advantage of new technologies and performing tasks with precision and accuracy during a state of emergency. It was about building relationships online or with safe-space “hybrid” students and finding ways to keep highly distracted students on task without being in the same room. Counselors brought their level of support online and empowered participants by disseminating videos of students' peers performing at grade level and those students explaining how they were accomplishing their goals. Virtual family fun nights connected the community despite not being able to leave their homes. Counselors focused their attention on individual student abilities while working with those most in need, thus building rapport and student self-confidence. Further, counselors enlisted therapy dogs to spark joy and seemingly cross all confinements that some students present daily. As many families made sacrifices and took on a new role as “educators,” counselors were there helping to ensure their students’ academic success during the pandemic.

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