JORDY BERNE, MALLIKA BHANDARKAR, ELIZABETH D. STEINER, MELISSA KAY DILIBERTI, JULIA H. KAUFMAN, CLAUDE MESSAN SETODJI

# RAND Survey for School Counselors

## 2026 Technical Documentation and Survey Results

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Research Report

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# About This Report

This technical report provides detailed information about the sample, survey instruments, and resultant data for the spring 2026 Survey for School Counselors (SSC) that was administered to a nonrepresentative sample of school counselors in public schools serving any grade 6 to 12. The survey investigates how school counselors support secondary school students in relation to math course taking and college and career plans.

The 2026 SSC was conducted under the umbrella of the American Mathematics Educator Study (AMES), which conducts nationally representative surveys of teachers and principals to study schools' approaches to K–12 math (e.g., course offerings, curriculum, professional learning, etc.). The 2026 SCC is a companion survey to the AMES 2026 principal survey, which was administered in spring 2026 to a nationally representative sample of public school principals—many of whom were members of the American School Leader Panel (ASLP). The SSC was designed to sample counselors whose principals had already completed the AMES survey, thus facilitating direct comparisons of counselors' and principals' perspectives within the same schools.

The results are intended to inform policy and education practice related to mathematics education. AMES is administered via RAND's American Educator Panels (AEP). If you are interested in using AEP data for your own analysis or reading other AEP-related publications, please visit www.rand.org/education-and-labor/projects/aep.html or email aep@rand.org.

This document contains recycled text from previous AEP technical documentation to describe AEP methods.

## RAND Education, Employment, and Infrastructure

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# Contents

About This Report ..... iii

RAND Survey for School Counselors: 2026 Technical Documentation and Survey Results ..... 1
The 2026 Survey for School Counselors ..... 1

Abbreviations ..... 8
References ..... 9

*Available at www.rand.org/t/RRA4736-1*
ANNEX
RAND Survey for School Counselors: Annex, Descriptive Results for Spring 2026 School Counselor Survey Items

# RAND Survey for School Counselors: 2026 Technical Documentation and Survey Results

This technical report provides detailed information about the sample, survey instruments, and resultant data for the spring 2026 Survey for School Counselors (SSC) that was administered to a nonrepresentative sample of school counselors in public schools serving any grade 6 to 12. The survey investigates how school counselors support secondary school students in relation to math course taking and college and career plans.

The 2026 SSC was conducted under the umbrella of the American Mathematics Educator Study (AMES), which conducts nationally representative surveys of teachers and principals to study schools' approaches to K–12 math (e.g., course offerings, curriculum, professional learning, etc.). The 2026 SCC is a companion survey to the AMES 2026 principal survey, which was administered in spring 2026 to a nationally representative sample of public school principals—many of whom were members of the American School Leader Panel (ASLP). The SSC was designed to sample counselors whose principals had already completed the AMES survey, thus facilitating direct comparisons of counselors' and principals' perspectives within the same schools.

The AMES teacher and principal surveys were administered for the first time in 2023 and will be administered each spring through 2027. AMES investigates students' access to high-quality mathematics learning opportunities from elementary school all the way through college and career pathways in high school and the obstacles that stand in the way of providing these opportunities to all students (and, particularly, Black, Hispanic, and lower-income students).

## The 2026 Survey for School Counselors

The courses students take in secondary school—particularly in mathematics—can have lasting effects on their postsecondary options. Students who complete more rigorous math coursework are more likely to earn a bachelor's degree (Adelman, 2006) and tend to earn more over their careers (Rose and Betts, 2001). A college degree, in turn, is associated with greater lifetime earnings, employment stability, and civic participation (Baum, Ma, and Payea, 2013; Card, 1999; Oreopoulos and Salvanes, 2011).

School counselors can play a key role in shaping these outcomes. Through course advising and college and career advising, counselors help determine which students access rigorous coursework and how they navigate the path from high school to life after graduation. In some settings, counseling has been shown to increase college application and enrollment rates, particularly among disadvantaged students (Bryan et al., 2011; Mulhern, 2023).

However, there is relatively little large-scale evidence about how secondary school counselors approach advising and the extent to which their practices vary across schools. These gaps are particularly consequential given persistent inequities in math course taking. Black, Hispanic, and lower-income students continue to face barriers to participation in advanced mathematics courses (Wolfe, Steiner, and Schweig, 2023; Walston and Carlivati McCarroll, 2010; Gamoran and Hannigan, 2000), and these inequities carry long-term consequences for postsecondary and career outcomes.

In response to these challenges, RAND researchers have administered AMES surveys annually since 2023 to samples of teachers and school principals within the RAND's American Educator Panels (AEP). In spring 2026, the Gates Foundation asked RAND to extend this work by conducting a survey of school counselors to better understand how counselors shape secondary school students' math course taking and college and career plans. The 2026 SSC investigates counselors' advising practices, perspectives on mathematics course placement, and college and career preparation activities. For information about the AMES surveys, including RAND reports and associated technical documentation, see the AMES webpage (RAND Corporation, undated).

The Gates Foundation was specifically interested in understanding the complementary and contrasting perspectives of secondary school principals and counselors in the same schools. To facilitate that goal, instead of conducting a national random sample of school counselors, we designed the 2026 SSC as a companion survey to the spring 2026 AMES principal survey—which received responses from 3,422 public school principals and included several survey questions about course advising and postsecondary planning. Our intention was that a school would only be eligible for the counselor survey if a principal in that school participated in the AMES principal survey. (For detailed information on the 2026 AMES principal survey, see Schweig et al., 2026.)

The advantage of the 2026 SSC's sample design is that it allowed us to (i) compare and contrast the perspectives of principals and counselors in the same schools and (ii) use principal survey responses to better understand the context of counselors' responses and the relationship between school policies and counselor practices. The tradeoff is that the design does not lead to estimates that are nationally representative of secondary schools or school counselors. Specifically, sampling among AMES schools means that the SSC inherits non-response bias from the AMES principal survey and an overrepresentation of five states (CA, FL, NY, TX, and WA) that the ASLP intentionally oversamples. Data users should bear these limitations in mind when interpreting SSC results (see the "Survey Limitations" section).

Nevertheless, the 2026 SSC offers several valuable insights about secondary school counseling. It is one of the largest surveys of secondary school counselors in the United States

and includes several items that counselors have not previously answered.[1] Therefore, to inform the field, we share the full SSC descriptive results at www.rand.org/t/RRA4736-1.

### *Survey Development and Content*

We developed the SSC in consultation with funders (see the "About This Report" section) and a variety of experts on school counselors. Experts and funders provided feedback on question wording, format, and sequencing, with RAND maintaining final editorial control of the survey items. We designed the survey to generate data on secondary school counselor perspectives on math course taking and postsecondary pathways. RAND developed many of the survey items, but the survey also adapted an item from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2009). Our annex to this report notes this item. In addition, we intentionally borrowed items from the 2026 AMES principal survey to facilitate comparisons between principals' and counselors' responses (Schweig et al., 2026).

Table 1 presents a summary of the survey's content areas.

**Table 1. Content Areas in the 2026 Survey for School Counselors**

| Content Area | Number of Items |
|---|---|
| Job title and duties | 5 |
| Math course offerings | 3 |
| Course eligibility criteria | 5 |
| Perceptions about courses | 4 |
| Course placement policies and practices | 4 |
| High school course advising | 3 |
| 8th grade course placement | 3 |
| School advising activities | 2 |
| Counselor demographics | 3 |

### *Survey Administration*

The 2026 SSC had an approximate administration time of 10 minutes. We administered the survey online and in English, like other AEP surveys. Individuals who completed the survey received a $10 e-gift card upon completion. The survey instrument was in the field from April 2, 2026, to May 22, 2026.

RAND mailed invitations to complete the survey in two waves. We sent the first wave of invitations to 831 sampled counselors on April 2, 2026. This wave included counselors in

[1] The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) and the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) also conduct large-scale surveys of school counselors in the U.S.

schools whose principals had already completed the spring 2026 AMES principal survey at the time of the first mailing.

The second wave, sent on April 23, 2026, was intended to include counselors in schools whose principals completed the 2026 AMES principal survey after the initial mailing. However, an error was made in sampling for wave two such that counselors in *all* AMES schools were flagged as eligible for inclusion rather than only counselors in schools with a principal who had completed the AMES principal survey (who were not already included in wave one). This resulted in invitations being sent to 699 counselors in wave two—roughly 2.5 times the number that would have been sent had the correct restriction been made. Consequently, all counselors sampled in wave one are in schools whose principal had completed the AMES survey, whereas the wave two sample has a mix of counselors in schools with AMES completers and noncompleters.

### *Survey Completion Results*

The 2026 SSC yielded 1,058 complete or partial responses. Among those, we either removed from the data file or did not give a survey weight to 250 cases because the survey instrument screened them out (46 cases), the respondent was affiliated with an ineligible school (17 cases), or the respondent reported an ineligible job title (187 cases).[2] Ultimately, the data file contains 808 weighted records.[3] Of these records, 499 (or 62 percent) are in schools whose principal completed the AMES principal survey.

Table 2 provides weighted descriptive statistics for the 808 SSC respondents. The weights, which we describe below, ensure that sample members' school characteristics match the national population of schools serving any grade 6 through 12 with at least one school counselor. However, because of the sample design, we caution that this does not imply that weighted estimates are nationally representative of secondary schools or secondary school counselors.

[2] Two of our pre-specified job title response options (school counselor; career counselor or career coach) were eligible for inclusion. Another two (school social worker, psychologist, or behavioral specialist; instructional coach) were ineligible for inclusion. Among respondents who selected the "other" job title response option, we preserved records with the following manually entered responses: academic counselor; academic and career counselor; director of counseling; guidance counselor; PTECH coordinator; and college counselor.

[3] Weighting procedures are described in detail in the "Calibrated Weighting" section below.

**Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Spring 2026 Counselor Respondents**

| Variable | Unweighted [CI] | Weighted [CI] | Population |
|---|---|---|---|
| School level | | | |
| Elementary | 16.2 [13.7, 18.8] | 28.6 [25.5, 31.7] | 29.3 |
| Middle | 37.4 [34.0, 40.7] | 31.2 [28.0, 34.4] | 30.9 |
| High | 46.4 [43.0, 49.9] | 40.2 [36.8, 43.6] | 39.8 |
| School neighborhood poverty | | | |
| Low poverty (IPR 401 to 999) | 26.0 [23.0, 29.0] | 21.4 [18.6, 24.3] | 21.2 |
| Middle poverty (IPR 201 to 400) | 61.8 [58.4, 65.1] | 59.5 [56.2, 62.9] | 59.0 |
| High poverty (IPR 0 to 200) | 12.3 [10.0, 14.5] | 19.0 [16.3, 21.7] | 19.8 |
| School student race/ethnicity | | | |
| Majority white | 57.4 [54.0, 60.8] | 52.0 [48.6, 55.5] | 51.5 |
| Majority students of color | 42.6 [39.2, 46.0] | 48.0 [44.5, 51.4] | 48.5 |
| School size | | | |
| Small (449 students or fewer) | 34.5 [31.2, 37.8] | 45.5 [42.0, 48.9] | 46.0 |
| Large (450 students or more) | 65.5 [62.2, 68.8] | 54.6 [51.1, 58.0] | 54.0 |
| School locale | | | |
| Urban | 21.5 [18.7, 24.4] | 26.1 [23.1, 29.2] | 26.4 |
| Suburban | 33.9 [30.6, 37.2] | 28.1 [25.0, 31.2] | 27.9 |
| Town/Rural | 44.6 [41.1, 48.0] | 45.8 [42.4, 49.3] | 45.7 |

NOTE: Population totals are from NCES's CCD (2024–25). School neighborhood poverty data are from EDGE School Neighborhood Poverty Estimates (2021–22). Any slight differences between characteristics calculated from the survey microdata and this table are a result of imputation of missing values of the calibration variables during sampling and when creating weights. CI = 95% confidence interval; IPR=income-to-poverty ratio. *N* = 808.

### *Calibrated Weighting*

The 2026 SSC data file includes weights to align the observable characteristics of respondents' schools with those of all U.S. schools serving any grade 6 through 12 that have at least one school counselor. Our aim is for the weights to make our estimates *closer* to nationally representative; however, given the nature of the SSC's sample design, we do not consider weighted estimates to be fully representative (see the "Survey Limitations" section).

We produced the weights using iterative proportional fitting (also known as raking), calibrated to five school-level variables: school level, school neighborhood poverty, school student race/ethnicity, school size (i.e. student enrollment), and school locale. The population benchmarks are from the 2024–2025 Common Core of Data (CCD) and the 2021–2022 School Neighborhood Poverty Estimates. We used school-level variables only because there are no population-level data on school counselors available for calibration. Thus, the weights are designed to adjust for observed differences in school characteristics but not necessarily in the

personal characteristics of the school counselors themselves. Table 2 presents the unweighted and weighted distributions of the five calibration variables alongside the population benchmarks.

In constructing the weights, we imputed missing demographic data using Multivariate Imputation by Chained Equations (MICE). However, we preserved missing values in the final data file. We also applied a trimming process at the 99$^{th}$ percentile to account for extreme weight values, followed by recalibration to ensure that the sum of the weights matches the size of the target population.

### *Survey Limitations*

We note a number of limitations about the 2026 Survey for School Counselors. Data users should bear these limitations in mind when interpreting SSC findings.

First, the 2026 SSC does not produce estimates that are nationally representative of schools or school counselors, even when weighted. Sampling among AMES principal survey completers—rather than conducting a national random sample—introduces some known forms of bias. For one, the SSC inherits any nonresponse bias from the AMES principal survey. Counselors in schools whose principals responded to the AMES survey might be systematically different from those in schools whose principals did not respond to the AMES survey (or were not sampled for it), and the SSC weights might not fully correct these differences. In addition, the ASLP intentionally oversamples principals in five states (CA, FL, NY, TX, and WA), and this geographic imbalance carries through to the SSC sample.[4] We did not directly account for this by using state as a calibration variable.[5] However, to the extent that the calibration variables are correlated with state, the weights might mitigate bias from the imbalance. These limitations—including nonresponse bias and the inability to weight based on every observable characteristic—are present in all survey research. However, they are more severe in the SSC than in surveys with more straightforward sampling designs. Thus, we do not make claims of national representativeness.

Second, SSC weights also do not account for item-level non-response (i.e., respondents not responding to specific items or sections of items within the survey). This could cause further departures from national representativeness if, for example, select groups of respondents did not respond to specific items due to increased sensitivity around particular topics.

Third, the sampling frame might not have captured all AMES principal survey secondary schools with a school counselor in 2025–2026, nor all counselors within those schools. To

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[4] The five oversampled states contain 41.2 percent of schools in the SSC sample without weighting or 41.5 percent of schools with weighting. According to CCD data, the five states contained 32.1 percent of all public schools serving any grade 6 to 12 in the 2024–25 school year. Thus, the SSC overrepresents schools in these states by around 9.1 percentage points without weighting or 9.4 percentage points with weighting.

[5] We did not use state as a calibration variable because doing so would have complicated the construction of the weights and because other unavoidable sources of bias would still have prevented the sample from being fully nationally representative.

construct the frame, we purchased from a third-party vendor a national directory of school staff members whom the vendor had labeled as school counselors. However, the vendor's labeling process likely contains some measurement error given that some schools and districts use different job titles for school counselors. Also, the vendor might not have assigned the counselor label to some school counselors who serve in multiple roles in their schools. If we incorrectly and systematically *excluded* some counselors or schools with counselors from the sampling frame, our estimates would not reflect those types of counselors or schools. To account for staff members and schools that we incorrectly *included* in the frame, the survey includes an item asking respondents to report their job title, allowing for open-ended responses. As discussed in the "Survey Completion Results" section, we screened out some respondents whose self-reported job titles indicated they were not the type of counselor we intended to sample (e.g., school social workers, school psychologists). However, our screening might have been imperfect.

Fourth, the survey data rely on the self-reports of counselors who voluntarily participated. We have no independent means of verifying the accuracy of their responses. These survey responses reflect counselors' opinions and perceptions at a certain point in time and, like all survey data, are subject to various forms of response bias including social desirability bias, recall bias, and acquiescence bias (Choi & Pak, 2004).

Fifth, as previously noted, an error was made in sampling the second wave of the 2026 SSC. The second wave sampled counselors in all AMES schools rather than only counselors in schools with a principal who had completed the AMES principal survey. This error limits the sample for analyses that require linked data from counselors and principals. However, it does not affect the results in the accompanying data annex because those results use counselor data only.

Sixth, most of the items included in the 2026 SSC are intended to be analyzed as individual items, with only a small number explicitly combined into multi-item indicators. We acknowledge that the limited number of survey items available on several topics covered in the SSC—such as time use, advising practices, or perceptions of math courses—may incompletely capture the complexity of those topics.

# Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| AEP | American Educator Panels |
| AMES | American Mathematics Educator Study |
| ASLP | American School Leader Panel |
| CCD | Common Core of Data |
| NCES | National Center for Education Statistics |
| SSC | Survey for School Counselors |

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