

The Effects of Massachusetts' High School Counselors on Educational Attainment

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I estimate the impact of individual high school counselors on student achievement and behavior in high school as well as high school graduation and college enrollment. My estimates are based on the 131 Massachusetts high schools which assigned students to counselors based on the students' last names and which posted their assignment policy on their website for at least two years between 2008 and 2017. I control for differences in the types of students with names in different regions of the alphabet and only focus on differences in counselor effectiveness within individual high schools. This amounts to comparing outcomes for students who are in the same school but assigned to a different counselor because of their last name.

My estimates are based on approximately 142,000 students and 500 counselors in Massachusetts. Students from urban school districts are slightly under-represented, mostly because there are few Boston schools in my sample. My sample is slightly higher achieving and less diverse than the state as a whole. It does, however, cover students from all regions of the state as well as students from traditional, charter and vocational schools.

I find that counselors can have large effects on educational attainment as well as student behavior and course-taking in high school. Counselors vary significantly in their effects on AP course-taking, SAT taking, high school graduation and college enrollment. Counselors also influence suspensions and high school dropout rates. Counselors' effects on high school graduation and college enrollment are similar in magnitude to teachers' effects. Counselors also have much larger effects on low-achieving and low-income students than their peers.

Counselors also influence the type of college a student attends, students' majors as well as persistence in college. Some counselors increase attendance at selective colleges and many counselors appear to direct students to colleges similar to where they earned their Bachelor's degree. Counselors who earned a Bachelor's degree in Massachusetts also appear to be the most effective. This may be because they know more about the local high school graduation requirements and college options. I do not find any evidence that counselor effectiveness improves with experience.

Students benefit from assignment to a counselor of the same race. Counselors also vary in the outcomes they are best at improving. Good counselors tend to improve all measures of educational attainment but some specialize in improving high school behavior while others specialize in increasing selective college attendance. This may be because improving student behavior or achievement requires a different skill set than improving college choices.

Improving access to effective counselors may be a better policy option than reducing counselor caseloads if there is a simple way to improve effectiveness. My largest estimates suggest that hiring an additional counselor in each Massachusetts high school will lead to increases in educational attainment which are smaller than those expected from increasing the effectiveness of each student's counselor by one standard deviation. These estimates are based on within school variation in the number of students. Estimates instead based on within school variation in the number of counselors (due to hiring or losing counselors) suggest potentially smaller or nonexistent benefits to hiring an additional counselor in each high school. The negative correlation between caseloads and high school graduation (or college enrollment) across all schools in the state is largely due to schools with more high achieving students having lower caseloads.

Broadly, this research indicates that counselors can be an important resource for students during high school and as they make postsecondary choices. Counselors, however, vary significantly in their effects on students. Improving counselor effectiveness may help to increase students' experiences in high school and their educational attainment. Counselors' large effects on low-income and minority students also indicate that improving access to effective counseling may help to close socioeconomic gaps in education.