

Advancing Rural Student Mental Health Through a University-School Partnership: A Professional Development Schools Approach

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Rural youth face significant mental health disparities due to geographic isolation, provider shortages, and stigma. Schools often serve as the primary access point for care, yet rural districts struggle to recruit qualified school counselors. This article introduces the School Counseling Professional Partnership, a university–school collaboration grounded in the evidence-based Professional Development Schools (PDS) approach. Through a school-based practicum, graduate school counseling students deliver tiered mental health supports under live supervision, enhancing school-based mental health services while gaining rural-context expertise. Outcomes demonstrate increased student access, reduced counselor to student ratios, and strengthened counselor preparation. This replicable model addresses critical gaps in rural mental health care.

Keywords: Mental health, rural, Professional Development School, school counselor preparation

Youth mental health concerns are increasing (World Health Organization, 2023). Recent prevalence estimates show that over one in 10 youth aged five to twenty-four live with at least one mental health diagnosis, with anxiety most prevalent among children ages five to nine and depression among youth ages 15-24 (Kieling et al., 2024). These needs are exacerbated by persistent barriers to accessing mental health care, especially youth experiencing marginalization due to race, ethnicity, social economic status, and language (Sapiro & Ward, 2020). When left unaddressed, early mental health challenges can lead to long-term adverse outcomes across health, economic, and educational domains (McGorry et al., 2025).

These challenges are especially pronounced in rural communities, where geographic isolation, fewer resources, and stigma contribute to significant disparities in mental health access (Graves et al., 2024). Suicide rates among rural youth are 1.6-1.8 times higher than those of their urban peers (Hoffman et al. 2022). Despite the need for mental health prevention and intervention services, rural areas are frequently designated as mental health professional shortage areas (Health Resources and Services Administration, 2025). With counselor availability in rural areas at two-thirds that of urban settings (Andrilla et al., 2022), schools often serve as the sole source of mental health support for students (Duong et al., 2021). The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) notes that in rural schools, the school counselor may be the only provider of mental health support in these professional shortage areas (2025a), making the strengthening of school-based mental health capacity a critical strategy for improving access.

Unfortunately, rural schools often struggle to recruit and retain qualified school counselors, with some positions remaining vacant for years. To address urgent shortages, particularly in rural areas, some state education departments hire school counselors under emergency licenses, waiving the requirement for prior completion of a graduate training program (Harman & Ausloos, 2024). Although this can help alleviate vacancies, it also creates challenges in preparing emergency credentialed school counselors to meet complex K-12 student needs, particularly those involving mental health. For example, emergency credentialed school counselors report requiring training and support in conducting suicide risk assessments, developing and delivering classroom curriculum lessons, and accessing community resources (Harman & Ausloos, 2024).

To address this gap, it is essential to establish a school counselor pipeline of highly trained and qualified school counselors prepared to meet the mental health needs of students in rural schools (Harman & Ausloos, 2024; Kearney et al., 2025). University–school district partnerships offer a promising avenue for building this capacity (Boulden & Schimmel, 2022; Lawson & Owens, 2024). This manuscript introduces an innovative application of the Professional Development Schools (PDS) approach, the School Counseling Professional Partnership, designed to train school counseling graduate students in rural school settings. The approach aims to enhance mental health service delivery in rural schools while equipping future school counselors with the essential skills and contextual knowledge necessary for effective rural practice.

Literature Review

Professional Development Schools

The evidence-based PDS approach has existed for over four decades, originating in the 1980s with teacher preparation programs (National Association for Professional Development Schools [NAPDS], 2021). The PDS is a distinctive form of university-school partnership, intentionally structured around nine essential elements that define the approach including clinical practice preparation, on-going professional learning, and resource sharing (NAPDS, 2021). Unlike a one-time collaboration or single trainee placement, the PDS is a sustained, co-developed partnership between a university training program and a school,

designed to provide mutual benefit to both institutions. A hallmark of the PDS is the creation of an innovative “third space,” where the intersecting influences of school and university foster in-depth educational experiences (NAPDS, 2021, p. 10).

This partnership supports ongoing professional development for both school personnel and university faculty, while strengthening connections among school staff and trainees. The PDS offers university students insight into school environments and their broader contexts, preparing them to understand the complex factors shaping K-12 learners. Together, school partners and university faculty identify needs, maximize shared strengths, and coordinate resources to address challenges. The PDS extends beyond traditional institutional boundaries through cross-site engagement. Faculty work alongside trainees in school settings, providing live, in vivo supervision and instruction. School-based partners actively contribute to the evolution of the PDS, collaborating with faculty to adapt the approach to emerging needs and contextual changes (NAPDS, 2021).

Professional Development Schools and School Counselor Training

While traditional PDS approaches primarily cater to teacher education programs, and teachers in training, the skills gained from a PDS experience such as learning to navigate the complexity of the school environment, cross discipline collaboration, and functioning as leaders are also extremely relevant for school counselors in training. Prior to the early 2000s many counselor education programs lacked opportunities for school counseling students to gain and practice these skills before entering their internship experience, leaving them feeling underprepared to engage in a complex school environment (Coker & Schrader, 2004). In the early 2000s, to bridge the gap between knowledge and practice, school counseling scholars began exploring the application of a PDS approach to school counselor training for both practicum and internship placements in rural and urban settings. Practice-based examples within school counseling scholarship include school counseling program-specific implementations (Coker & Schrader, 2004; Foust & Goslee, 2014), impact of a PDS on counseling skill development (Cuccaro & Casey, 2007), and the role of a PDS in preparing trainees for systems-based and advocacy work (Cook et al., 2016). Quantitative research indicates that trainees prefer the PDS practicum approach over traditional placements, typically involving one trainee at a single school site (Cuccaro & Casey, 2007). Qualitative findings highlight opportunities for multi-perspective taking, critical self-reflection, and engagement in social justice advocacy during PDS-based practicums (Cook et al., 2016).

Historically, the PDS has been employed to respond to urgent professional needs arising from policy changes or contextual shifts (Coker & Schrader, 2004; Cook et al., 2016). For example, when the ASCA National Model was introduced to guide comprehensive school counseling programs, PDS partnerships facilitated implementation by supporting practicing school counselors and providing training sites for students (Coker & Schrader, 2004). PDS has been used to advance multicultural and social justice counseling competencies; under the on-site supervision of a counselor education faculty member, school counseling practicum students increased their counseling skills and commitment to systemic advocacy

(Cook et al., 2016). In today's context of escalating mental health needs, particularly in rural areas, the PDS offers a promising approach to meet this challenge.

Meeting Rural Student Mental Health Needs Through a PDS

Amidst rising youth mental health needs, students in rural areas face distinct challenges in accessing care (Kearney et al., 2025; Smith Ramey et al., 2023). A recent qualitative study in rural eastern Washington identified barriers such as stigma, limited mental health access, and a shortage of qualified mental health professionals (Graves et al., 2024). These gaps position schools as key access points for support; however, some concern exists that school counselors may lack the specialized training and capacity needed to address acute mental health issues (Graves et al., 2024). These concerns are especially pressing in elementary schools, where rural counselors often serve large caseloads and may be the only mental health professional in the building (Brown et al., 2022; Purgason & Gruman, 2024). For example, in the state in which the partnership takes place student-to-counselor ratios are well above the recommended ASCA 250:1 (U.S. Department of Education, 2024). Meeting the complex needs of younger students requires targeted training and support for school-based providers. Strengthening the pipeline of professionals equipped to work in rural schools, and fostering partnerships between universities and districts, can help train individuals from rural communities, maximizing their local knowledge and trust to improve access and outcomes.

School counselor preparation programs include training in mental health prevention and intervention within the framework of comprehensive school counseling programs. This includes instruction on mental health screening (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2023) and evidence-based counseling approaches appropriate for a school setting (ASCA, n.d.). A multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) guides service delivery, emphasizing data-informed decision making to identify and address student needs (Goodman-Scott et al., 2019; Zyromski et al., 2021). MTSS is structured into three tiers. Tier 1 supports provide universal interventions, such as classroom lessons on social emotional learning. A recent large meta-analysis suggested that students who participated in SEL interventions experienced improved outcomes across a variety of domains ranging from improved attitudes and relationships to an increase in sense of safety, and improved school climate (Cipriano et al., 2023). Tier 2 interventions offer targeted small-group counseling for students needing additional supports across a broad range of topics such as emotion regulation, confidence building, and social skills. Research suggest that group counseling can reduce negative emotions and increase a sense of belonging (ASCA, 2020). Tier 3 interventions include individualized counseling, crisis response, and referral for more intensive support (Kearney et al., 2025).

Rural School Setting Considerations for Implementation

Implementing MTSS in rural schools requires school counselor attention to both context-specific challenges and community strengths (Henry & Fears; 2025; Kearney et al., 2025). Rural schools are situated in interconnected school, family, and community contexts (Henry & Fears, 2025). The Rural Cultural Wealth framework identifies four types of assets in rural communities: rural ingenuity, rural resourcefulness, rural familism, and rural community unity (Crumb et al., 2023). These forms of rural wealth encompass the ways that rural residents collectively share resources, solve problems, and support one another and the larger community (Crumb et al., 2023). A PDS approach can actualize these assets by strengthening a school's capacity to deliver supports and activating the knowledge and relational capital that school partners contribute to PDS development, while honoring the mutual benefits of the partnership (Biddle, 2025; Crumb et al., 2023). Through a PDS approach, school counselor trainees can be introduced to mental health interventions early in their training, while developing awareness of the unique ecological factors influencing service delivery in rural settings.

School Counseling Professional Partnership

The School Counseling Professional Partnership presented in this program description is a 12-year collaboration between one rural, high need elementary school and a nationally accredited graduate school counseling program at an urban university in the Pacific Northwest. This partnership mirrors a traditional PDS approach where a group of six school counseling graduate students complete a 22-week field practicum placement at the same school site across two, 11-week academic terms. Throughout the 22 weeks, practicum students implement various components of a comprehensive school counseling program under the supervision of a licensed school counselor and an on-site faculty supervisor one day per week. The training and preparation of the practicum students and a detailed description of the partnership are provided below.

Partnership Elementary District

The School Counseling Professional Partnership school district is in a growing rural community in the Pacific Northwest. This area meets both the state's definition of rurality (State Office of Rural Health, 2024) and the federal classification of "rural fringe" (National Center for Education Statistics, 2025). The local school district enrolls nearly 7,000 students across 13 schools (State Department of Education, 2024). Student demographics reflect the region's agricultural heritage and recent population growth: 70% identify as White, 22% as Hispanic or Latino, 5% as multiracial, with smaller percentages identifying as American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, Black/African American, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander populations (State Department of Education, 2024). The district also serves a diverse student population, including 13% identified as Multilingual Learners (speaking 26 languages), 14% as students with disabilities, and 32% experiencing poverty (State Department of Education, 2024).

The region surrounding the partnership community has been identified as an area with below-average mental health provider capacity compared to state benchmarks. There are approximately 0.65 mental health providers per 1,000 residents compared to the state average of 1.25 providers per 1,000 residents, revealing a significant gap in accessible mental health care within this community (State Office of Rural Health, 2021). For many students and families, school represents the primary, and sometimes only, point of contact with mental health services. At the same time, a shortage of school counselors exists in rural schools across the region, requiring intentional effort to build a pipeline of well-trained, culturally competent school counseling professionals.

Partnership Elementary School

The partner elementary school serves approximately 480 students in kindergarten through fifth grade (State Department of Education, 2024). The student population is predominantly White (75%), with 16% identifying as Hispanic or Latino, 8% as multiracial, and smaller percentages identifying as American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, Black/African American, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander populations (State Department of Education, 2024). Although only about 5% of students are classified as Multilingual learners, three languages are represented within the school community (State Department of Education, 2024). Additionally, 16% of students have identified disabilities, and 33% of students are experiencing poverty (State Department of Education, 2024). The school maintains an average class size of 26 students and employs 27 teachers, 11 educational assistants, and one school counselor (State Department of Education, 2024).

Selection of the partner school site was guided by several key factors: the strength of the current school counseling program, the expertise of the school counselor, and administrative support. The school counselor brings over a decade of experience and a deep commitment to comprehensive school counseling, culminating in earning distinction as a Recognized ASCA Model Program (ASCA, 2025b). Her experience in rural education and ability to mentor trainees across all components of a comprehensive school counseling program created an ideal training environment. Additionally, both school and district leaders demonstrated strong buy-in, recognizing the partnership's mutual benefits: expanded counseling services for students and a high-quality, rural-context training for future school counselors. The collaboration immediately enhanced student support while fostering essential competencies for trainees working in rural settings.

University Practicum Student Preparation

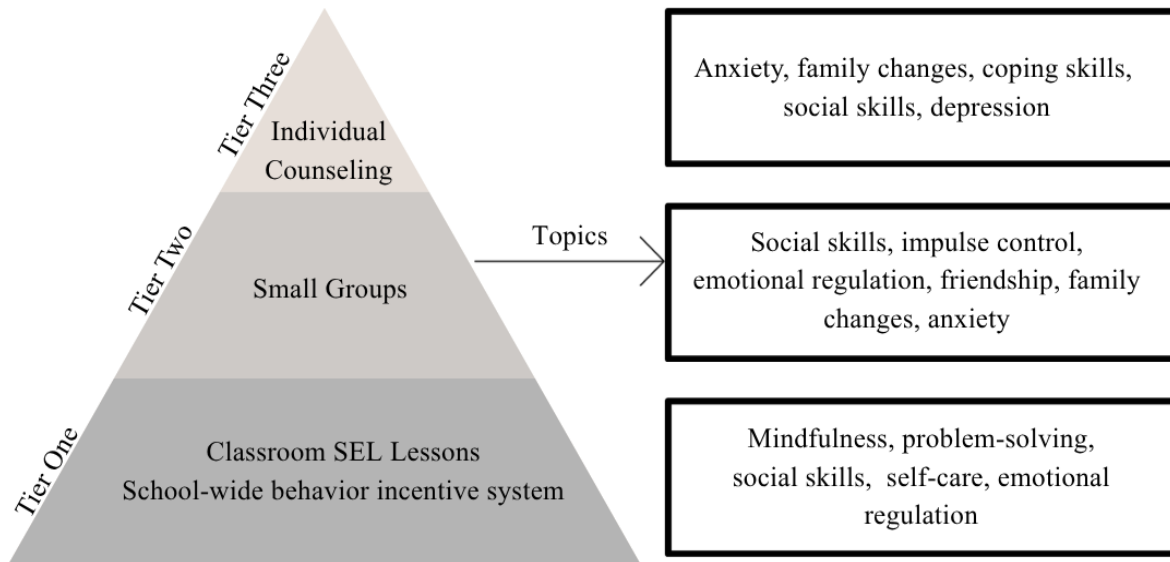
Counselor training programs may rarely address the unique needs of rural communities and thus, counselors are often underprepared to provide relevant and responsive mental health services to rural clients and students (Fifield & Oliver, 2016). Considering the significant mental health needs and lack of resources in rural areas, it is essential that counselor training programs prepare students to work in rural settings. The graduate school counseling students who participate in the professional partnership complete

a two- or three-year 90-credit program leading to a master's in counseling degree and a preliminary state school counseling license. Before beginning practicum, students complete several rigorous content courses that prepare them to deliver culturally responsive programming to meet the mental health needs of K-5 students in rural settings.

For example, during their first term in the graduate program, students complete an intensive summer session that includes an ethics course, a leadership in school counseling course, and social cultural perspectives course, all of which integrate material on the rural context. In the school counseling leadership course, students analyze data sets to identify and prioritize needs utilizing a multitiered system of supports. The ethics course features practicing school counselors from surrounding rural districts as guest lecturers, offering valuable insights drawn from their work within rural communities. Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) is introduced in the social cultural perspectives course with an emphasis on Rural Cultural Wealth (Crumb et al., 2023). During fall term students complete several skills-based courses where they learn and practice culturally responsive, trauma informed counseling skills. Before beginning their practicum experience, the students spend 12 hours observing in classrooms at the partnership school practicum site. During these observations students meet teachers, connect with the school counselor, and develop an understanding of the community and cultural norms of the school. Students also complete the Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training and an in-depth counseling theories course exploring various modalities and approaches to support individuals with mental health challenges.

School Counseling Professional Partnership Description

Practicum students participating in the School Counseling Professional Partnership deliver direct services across MTSS under the supervision of faculty with extensive experience working in rural areas. Practicum students receive applied culturally responsive training while increasing mental health supports for rural students within the partnership school.

Figure 1*Practicum Student Directed Services***Tiered Delivery Approach**

At the Tier 1 level, practicum students deliver classroom social-emotional learning (SEL) lessons assigned by the on-site school counselor. The lesson topics and Tier 1 programming are informed by school-wide data including school report cards, student survey data, and referrals. The identified topics include mindfulness, problem-solving, social skills, and emotional regulation. The evidence-based SEL curricula implemented are approved by the district and align with ASCA Student Standards (2025c). The delivery of SEL lessons at the Tier 1 level is an upstream preventive approach that proactively addresses common student challenges before they escalate to the point of requiring Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions. By intervening early, schools can reduce the intensity and frequency of higher-level mental health needs.

At the Tier 2 level, practicum students facilitate eight-week psychoeducation groups for students who need additional supports beyond what is provided in classroom lessons. Group topics include anxiety, social skills, emotion regulation, and family changes. Practicum students utilize evidence-based curricula that align with the ASCA Student Standards related to the identified need. These small groups are organized by grade level, and practicum students are intentionally assigned to both younger and older grades to further develop group facilitation skills across a range of developmental levels. The practicum students evaluate the appropriate level of support for each group member at the conclusion of the term through pre- and post-survey data and examine outcomes through achievement, attendance, and behavior data. These small groups provide targeted mental health services for multiple students while simultaneously reducing stigma by embedding support within peer interactions.

At the Tier 3 level, each practicum student provides individual brief counseling for two elementary students weekly. These students are identified through referrals given to the on-site school counselor. The practicum student, in conjunction with the on-site school counselor, makes phone contact with parents and/or guardians to obtain informed consent, build rapport, and get a better sense of student needs. This is especially important in the rural context as it presents an opportunity to further educate families on the services provided and create a stronger partnership. At the end of each 11-week term, practicum students reassess individual student needs to determine next steps: continuing counseling, adding or transitioning to a Tier 2 counseling group, or referring to community resources. Within this structure, practicum students learn to collaborate closely with the on-site school counselor and teachers to ensure continuity of care, thereby preventing gaps in treatment and strengthening the overall support network for students within the rural school setting.

Practicum Student Faculty Supervision

Culturally responsive supervision is an integral part of the Professional School Counseling Partnership. Faculty supervisors with experience working in rural schools who are familiar with the specific mental health needs and community resources are intentionally selected to provide on-site supervision. Connecting practicum students with regional and district resources, as well as other mental health professionals, helps them establish networks and gain a deeper understanding of how to effectively serve rural school communities. Student practicum placement at a shared site enables peer supervision, context specific consultation, and collective problem solving. Practicum students can provide one another relevant feedback, as they each understand the school context. This structure also offers essential professional support, as school counselors in rural settings, particularly at the elementary level, often experience professional isolation.

School Counseling Professional Partnership Outcomes

Through the School Counseling Professional Partnership both practicum students and the elementary school community experience tangible benefits that extend beyond traditional field placement outcomes. The partnership helps fill critical service gaps and ensures that students' social, emotional, and mental health needs are timely and equitably met. Partnership outcomes are collected through a variety of sources including narrative feedback from partnership participants (i.e., school staff and practicum school counseling students), practicum course evaluations, number of tiered mental health counseling interventions delivered, number of K-5 elementary students served, and hiring and job placement trends of school counseling graduates. For descriptive purposes, selected representative outcome data is included below.

Narrative Feedback

Partnership school staff and practicum school counseling students both indicate that the School Counseling Professional Partnership has brought benefits to the entire school, including professional development to school staff and positive impacts on student well-being. For example, one school staff member shared:

As a teacher, I've seen firsthand how the practicum partnership has benefited our students and school community. Having counseling [practicum students] available has made it easier for students to access support, manage emotions, and build stronger relationships. The [practicum students] bring a calm, caring presence that positively impacts the classroom environment. It's also inspiring to see them gaining real-world experience that prepares them to make a difference in rural schools like ours.

The school principal noted the knowledge that school counseling practicum students contributed to school staff in understanding student mental health. She shared, "the [partnership] allows counseling [practicum students] to form genuine connections with our students. Through their time on site, they deepen our understanding of students' social and emotional needs—strengthening our collective ability to provide the care and support every child deserves."

Practicum student feedback indicates that participation in the School Counseling Professional Partnership provides unique learning experiences that equip them with counseling skills to support their effectiveness in interning and/or working in a rural school in the future. One student noted the benefits of having peers and a faculty member on site to provide in-vivo processing of experiences and to deepen reflective learning. They shared:

What made practicum so meaningful for me was having my cohort and supervisor to debrief these experiences with. Whether I was troubleshooting a challenging classroom lesson, receiving feedback about how I might refine my group facilitation techniques, or sharing ideas about strategies to use when working one-on-one with students' individual needs, the collaborative reflection process helped me improve.

Another practicum student expressed the impact this had on their professional identity. She noted:

As someone who grew up in a rural community and attended a rural school without access to school counselors at the elementary level, it was deeply meaningful to contribute to a comprehensive school counseling program that prioritizes social-emotional learning (SEL) at every level.... I believe this experience helped shape me into a stronger advocate for students, connecting my personal experience as a student in rural education with my emerging professional identity as a school counselor.

The learning benefits to the practicum school counseling students were also noted by a partnership faculty supervisor. This supervisor, a decades long rural school counselor, and part-time faculty member of the counseling program, highlighted the unique school counselor preparation the School Counseling Professional Partnership offers:

This establishes early in the career of a school counselor the importance of collaboration, networking, and feedback that will allow them to develop the professional partnerships needed, when at so many times, the school counseling profession can be a “lone ranger” role in the schools especially in less populous areas. These students see first-hand how the entire school community works together in this rural setting to support the development of solid mental health and wellness tools for the students they serve.

Mental Health Intervention Data

This School Counseling Professional Partnership helps address the ongoing shortage of mental health providers in the region by expanding access to preventive and responsive care within the school setting. For example, counseling waitlists can be months long, or when counselors are available, transportation barriers prevent families from accessing services. Over the course of the 22-week practicum during the 2024-2025 academic year, the six practicum students collectively served 485 students through Tier 1 classroom lessons, led 24 Tier 2 small groups serving 120 students, and met with 20 students for Tier 3 individual counseling. By having practicum students contribute to school counseling services, the partnership school lowered their student-to-counselor ratio, creating capacity for deeper student relationships, increased responsive interventions, and proactive support to a larger number of students.

The six practicum students collaborated with all teachers, the parents and guardians of their Tier 3 students, the on-site school counselor, and select administrative staff and educational assistants. These interactions provided practicum students with insight into rural school systems while fostering support and connection with school personnel. Through these relationships, practicum students practiced consultation and collaboration skills, core components of the ASCA National Model.

With the intent to create a rural school counselor pipeline, graduation placement data from the last cohort of students completing the School Counseling Professional Partnership indicates that approximately 67% took a post-graduate employment position as a school counselor in a rural school. This speaks to the model's intentionality in investing in supervision and coursework aligned with serving rural populations. Although not all graduates from the graduate school counseling program ultimately work in rural schools, the skills and perspectives developed through the school counseling professional partnership model remain highly applicable. Many urban primary schools in the region serve students and families from rural communities, and having school counselors with an understanding of rural contexts enhances their ability to provide equitable, community-informed support in any educational environment.

Discussion

While this practicum model demonstrates clear benefits, it also presents challenges inherent to implementing comprehensive mental health support in rural settings. These challenges provide valuable insight for refining the practicum experience and sustaining future partnerships. The university is in an urban setting, thus accessing the partner elementary school may be a barrier for some graduate students who live closer to the university or are coming from other surrounding rural areas. Travel to the partner school requires graduate students to have reliable transportation, whereas other models may allow graduate students to complete their practicum in a school that is more geographically accessible. To ensure quality and sustainability several important considerations should be noted. Partnering directly with the school district or the regional education service district to secure funding dedicated to travel stipends for practicum students would increase equity and remove potential barriers to participation. The university might also consider delivering course content directly at the practicum school site to further reduce the travel demand on students. Offering coursework directly at the practicum site could also serve as an opportunity to invite school staff to participate in learning opportunities, offering their expertise while also learning more about school counseling.

Financial and logistical barriers can also pose challenges for some graduate students. Graduate training is inherently costly, and the practicum experience is unpaid, which may limit accessibility for students with financial constraints and those who need to work full time. Because the practicum model requires attendance at the partnership school on a designated day each week, students may face difficulties balancing their practicum responsibilities with employment, childcare, or other personal obligations. More traditional models may allow graduate students to select a location and day of the week that works best for them and their schedule and outside responsibilities. These factors can create additional stressors that influence graduate students' overall experience and capacity to fully engage in the practicum experience. The School Counseling Professional Partnership is situated within an in-person counseling program. Counselor education programs interested in adopting this approach that are geographically further from rural areas and/or offered online may consider ways they could adapt to fit the unique contextual needs of their programs. Future research is needed to move beyond descriptive outcomes to assess the program's impact on school counselor training and student mental health support.

Conclusion

The School Counseling Professional Partnership is a promising approach to address several important challenges and barriers faced by rural school communities. This approach prepares future school counselors to better serve students and families in rural schools by providing contextual learning opportunities in the rural setting. This replicable model creates a pipeline of qualified school counselors who are prepared to deliver culturally responsive mental health supports where shortages likely exist.

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