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# Letter From the Editor

June 5, 2026

Welcome to Volume 2, Number 1 of the *Journal of Advances in Education*. It is my pleasure to present this issue, which continues the journal ‘s mission of promoting scholarship, innovation, and professional dialogue across the field of education. As education continues to evolve, researchers and practitioners are challenged to address complex issues while seeking meaningful solutions that positively impact students, educators, and educational systems.

This issue features a diverse collection of manuscripts addressing important topics in education, school counseling, educational leadership, technology, and school improvement. The authors provide valuable insights into contemporary challenges and offer practical implications for educators, administrators, counselors, and researchers. Collectively, these articles reflect our commitment to advancing knowledge and supporting evidence-based practices across educational settings.

I would also like to thank Dr. Franklin B. Thomas for his vision and leadership in establishing the journal and helping it grow into a platform that supports educational scholarship and professional engagement. As Interim Editor, I am honored to contribute to the journal’s continued development and future success.

We remain committed to providing a timely, rigorous, and supportive review process while expanding opportunities for scholars and practitioners to share their work with a broader audience.

Thank you for you interest in the *Journal of Advances in Education*. We hope you find this issue informative, engaging, and beneficial to your professional practice.

Happy Reading,
Dr. Jeffrey Herron, Interim Editor
*Journal of Advances in Education*

# "Whose Job is This?" Using the STEPS Model to Explore 504 Role Ambiguity

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## Abstract

The American School Counselor Association's position statement regarding school counselors' roles in Section 504 encourages school counselors to avoid serving as Section 504 coordinators. Still, school counselors are frequently asked to serve in this role, despite ASCA's position or their minimal training specific to Section 504. Yet, school counselors are also uniquely equipped to support student development, improved outcomes, and collaboration amongst school and family stakeholders. Through a synthesis of prior research along with current ethical codes and policies within the school counseling profession, this manuscript examines the ethical and practical tensions created by 504-role ambiguity. It offers examples and specific steps demonstrating how school counselors can navigate the dual assignment of Section 504 coordinator and school counselor using an ethical decision-making model. The authors provide recommendations for future practice and policy.

***Keywords***: Section 504; counselor responsibilities; counselor education; 504 coordinator; ethical decision making

## Introduction

School counselors are often tasked with responsibilities as Section 504 coordinators (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2023). We examine the ethical and professional dilemmas counselors face when these roles overlap, emphasizing the conflict between their training and the legal requirements of Section 504. This article explores the evolving role of school counselors in managing comprehensive school counseling programs. While the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2024) advises against school counselors serving as 504 coordinators, if counselors are asked to take on this responsibility, they can ethically assess how best to fulfill the role and prepare to execute it effectively in support of students. We highlight the guidance provided by professional organizations, such as ASCA, and propose strategies, including ethical decision-making models (Cottone & Claus, 2000), and proposed policy, to navigate these complexities. By analyzing these challenges, the paper advocates for enhanced professional training, clear role delineations, and policy development and implementation to improve systems enabling school counselors to effectively fulfill their duties while supporting students with disabilities. for the complexities of contemporary classrooms (Stewart & Jansky, 2022), while veteran teachers must adapt to new standards, accountability systems, and technologies. Within this context, professional learning is expected to serve both as a mechanism for teacher support and as a lever for systemic improvement. Yet, the evidence base remains mixed: while case studies and qualitative reports highlight examples of transformative teacher growth, large-scale quantitative studies often reveal weak or inconsistent relationships between PD and student achievement (Hill et al., 2013; Yoon et al., 2007; Kennedy, 2016; Ventista, 2023; Sims et al., 2025; Lynch et al., 2025).

School counselors are charged with implementing comprehensive school counseling programs for each and every student (ASCA, 2025, 2019). Several researchers have defined and advocated for comprehensive school counseling programs (Ault & Gibbons, 2024; Gysbers et al., 1999; Gysbers & Henderson, 2000; Gysbers & Lapan, 2001). While terms have shifted through the years, many key elements of comprehensive programs remain (Akos et al., 2022; ASCA, 2025). Such programs improve student outcomes through preventative interventions and developmental considerations (ASCA, 2025). Researchers consistently demonstrate the efficacy of comprehensive program implementation as linked to positive student outcomes (Borders & Drury, 1992; Wilkerson et al., 2013; Ziomek-Daigle et al., 2016) and improved job satisfaction (Pyne, 2011). School counselors can look to *The ASCA National Model ®*: *A Framework for School Counseling Programs* (ASCA; 2025) as a framework for implementing a comprehensive school counseling program. The ASCA National Model ® (2025) incorporates the *ASCA Ethical Standard*s (2022a), *ASCA School Counselor Professional Standards and Competencies* (2019), and the *ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success* (2021). By doing so, the model aligns with best practices by incorporating preventative and developmental applications while prioritizing improved student outcomes. The ASCA National Model ® (2025) is further built upon four fundamental tenets. These tenets describe a school counselor's role: (a) define, (b) manage, (c) deliver, and (d) assess.

Given the emphasis on supporting each and every student, comprehensive school counseling programs are designed to meet the needs of students with disabilities (Deck et al., 1999; Mitcham et al., 2009; Owens et al., 2011), including students receiving 504 services (Goodman-Scott & Boulden, 2019; Romano et al., 2009; Townsend & Yount, 2019). The role school counselors assume as it relates to Section 504 varies widely from state-to-state, district-to-district, and even building-to-building (Townsend & Yount, 2019). While school counselors are prepared to assume Section 504 related responsibilities, they often find themselves assigned to serve as Section 504 coordinators (ASCA, 2023), extending their professional duties beyond their typical training (Goodman-Scott & Boulden, 2019). However, researchers continue to document the prevalence of school counselors serving in this capacity (e.g., Goodman-Scott & Boulden, 2019; Kolodinsky et al., 2009; Madaus & Shaw, 2008; Romano et al., 2009), including researchers with ASCA. A recent research report surveying building-level and district-level school administrators (ASCA, 2023) found 63% of all administrators reported they understood a school counselor's role "to a great extent" (ASCA, 2023, p. 6), and nearly 75% indicated familiarity with the ASCA National Model. Results also indicated 55.9% of building-level administrators and 52.1% of district-level administrators identified coordinating 504 plans as part of a school counselor's role and responsibility. While professional organizations within school counseling often describe coordinating 504 plans as an inappropriate school counseling duty (ASCA, 2022b), the results of this report demonstrate school and district administrators are often placing school counselors in the role of 504 coordinators, believing it to be an appropriate duty.

School counselors are uniquely equipped to serve as facilitators and coordinators in their school settings (Esparza & Milsom, 2023). The *ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors* (2022a) describe the vital role school counselors play in collaborating with relevant stakeholders (A.3.b, A.4.a, A.6.a, A.6.f, A.10.d, B.1.a, B.2.q), remaining knowledgeable of educational policies (A.1.i, A.6.c, B.2.q, B.3.d), and facilitating productive teams to support students' growth and development (A.1.k). Similarly, CACREP (2024) describes school counselor preparation as orienting future counselors to their roles as advocates and change agents. Despite school counselors' training and expertise, researchers continue to describe a tension between school counselors' roles in supporting students with disabilities and facilitating plans for students with 504 accommodations (Goodman-Scott & Boulden, 2019; Greiner & Hatton, 2023). Acknowledging the leadership role of school counselors marks a significant shift in mindset within education; school counselors require space to reflect on their role within their unique context to develop guiding visions aligned with their practice (Watkinson, 2015).

## Section 504 and the 504 Coordinator's Role

Under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (29 U.S.C. 28 CFR 35.104), schools and other local education agencies receiving federal financial assistance ensure students with disabilities receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE). As a civil rights law, Section 504, Title 34, Subpart D protects disabled students from discrimination (29 U.S.C. 28 CFR 35.104). It requires schools and local education agencies (LEAs) receiving federal funding to provide

appropriate regular education and as needed, special education, including supplementary aids and services, to meet the individual educational needs of students with disabilities at the same level as students without disabilities (Office of Civil Rights, 2022). Section 504 requires schools and LEAs to utilize relevant and valid evaluation to identify and locate students with disabilities and to work with families in the development of individual programming that is appropriate, free of charge, and ensures the student is receiving support and services in, or as close to the general education environment as is appropriate (Martín, 2018). Schools and LEAs receiving federal funds who fail to adhere to Section 504 rules and regulations are in jeopardy of an investigation by the Office of Civil Rights (OCR). Findings of noncompliance may have financial, structural, systematic, and/or legal implications.

Section 504 Title 34, 104.7 requires appointing a Section 504 coordinator to oversee, guide, and support the law's implementation (29 U.S.C. 28 CFR 35.104). The *ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors* (2022) asserts school counselors "recognize the strengths of students with disabilities as well as their challenges and provide best practices and current research in supporting their academic, career and social/emotional needs" (p. 5). Given this ethical standard, school counselors are often assigned the role of 504 coordinators (Madaus & Shaw, 2006; Shaw & Madaus, 2008). However, this responsibility may be at odds with a school counselor's scope of practice, as their preparation programs may not have offered training and experience in Section 504 or disability law (ASCA, 2016). This leaves school counselors with the novel challenge of coordinating and implementing the required components of Section 504, including evaluations, meetings, and plans, without needed preparation or knowledge.

ASCA advises school counselors to support students with disabilities in their academic and social/emotional well-being yet adds complication and confusion by advising against school counselors coordinating Section 504 efforts (ASCA, 2024; ASCA, 2022a). Consequently, while common practice, assuming the role of Section 504 coordinator often generates ethical dilemmas for school counselors, particularly involving competence issues and scope of practice. To mitigate potential ambiguity around Section 504, school counselors are called to employ an ethical decision-making model (ASCA, 2014; ASCA, 2016; Brown & Armstrong, 2022). These models address confusion derived from seemingly contradictory guidelines and expectations while supporting school counselors' decision-making process in considering professional best practices.

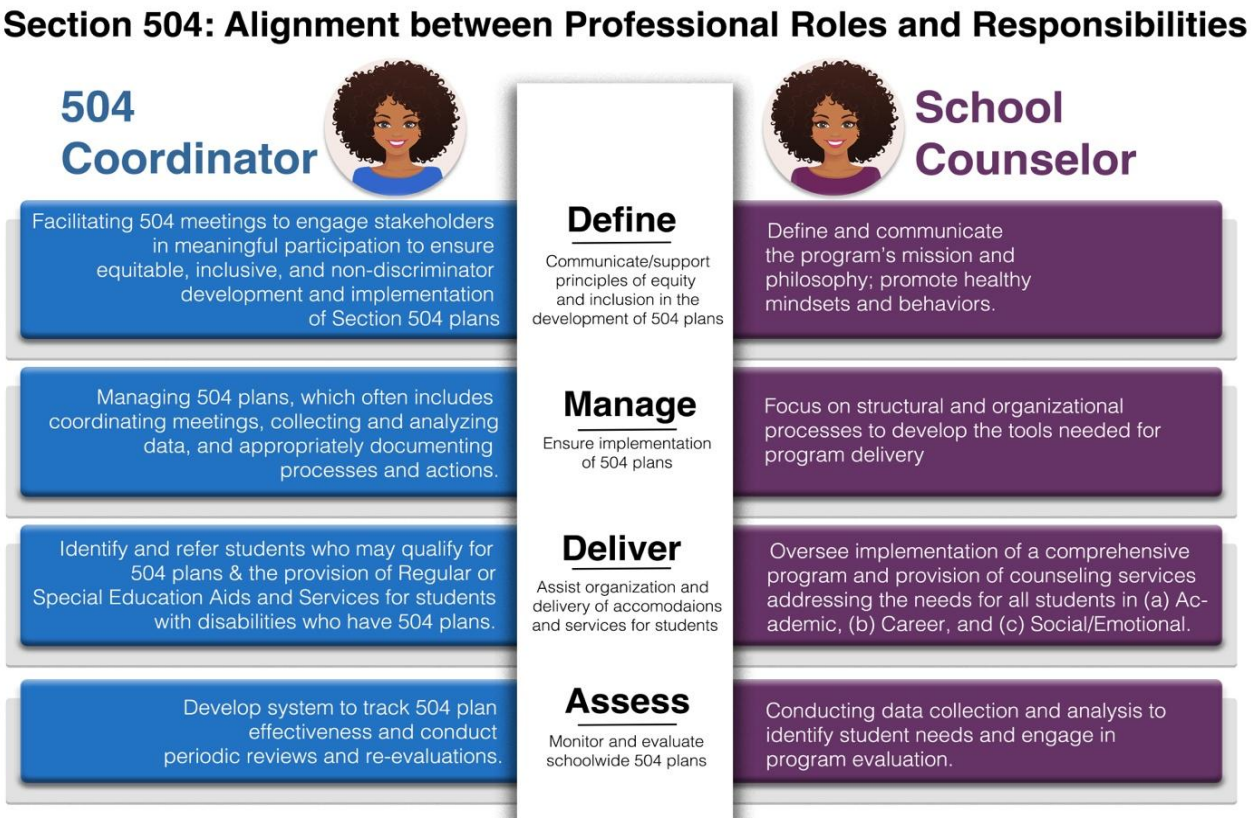
## Alignment Between Comprehensive School Counseling Programs and 504

While the components of the ASCA National Model ® (2025) (i.e., define, manage, deliver, and assess) and the role of 504 coordinators have differing areas of focus, the alignment between the two is evident in priorities to determine and deliver appropriate services, collect data, evaluate outcomes, and promote inclusive, ethical practice. The common goal of supporting students for success demonstrates the interrelatedness of the work of 504 coordinators and school counselors implementing comprehensive school counseling programs. Figure 1 illustrates the alignment between the roles of school counselors and Section 504 coordinators.

Viewed through the perspective of the ASCA National Model ® (2025), similarities in the roles of the school counselor and the expectations of a 504 coordinator are evident.

**Figure 1:**

*Alignment Between Professional Roles and Responsibilities for Section 504 Coordinators*




*A comparison chart showing the alignment of roles and responsibilities between 504 Coordinators and School Counselors in implementing Section 504 plans.*

## Define

The *define* component of the ASCA National Model ® (2025), or foundation, involves school counselors defining and communicating the program's mission and philosophy in promoting specifically identified healthy mindsets and behaviors. In like fashion, 504 coordinators also work to communicate and support principles of equity, inclusion, and non-discrimination in the development and implementation of 504 plans (Washington OSPI, 2014).

## Manage

Concerning management, school counselors focus on structural and organizational processes to develop the tools needed for program delivery. Likewise, 504 coordinators are tasked with managing 504 plans, which often include coordinating meetings, developing and overseeing appropriate processes, and documenting team decisions and actions (Washington OSPI, 2014).

## Deliver

For the delivery system, school counselors address the overall implementation of the comprehensive school counseling program, including its organization and evaluation. Similarly, 504 coordinators are also called upon to assist in organizing and delivering services and accommodations for students (Washington OSPI, 2014).

## Assess

The ASCA National Model ® (2025) component, *assess*, involves accountability, which includes school counselors collecting data, analyzing student needs, and engaging in program evaluation. Similarly, 504 coordinators collect data to monitor student progress and evaluate 504 plan effectiveness (Washington OSPI, 2014).

## Section 504 Coordination: Addressing the Ethical Dilemma

School counselors are often required to serve as Section 504 coordinators (ASCA, 2023), even as ASCA defines the role as inappropriate (ASCA, n.d.). Moreover, school leaders often perceive this coordination as positioned within a school counselor's explicit role (ASCA, 2023). Despite the overlap in role expectations between school counselors and Section 504 coordinators, school counselors may lack contextual knowledge of Section 504 regulations. Consequently, serving as Section 504 coordinator may move school counselors beyond their professional training to lead in identifying, evaluating, and programming students with disabilities and ensure compliance with the law. Upon reviewing the *ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors* (2022), many may find themselves grappling with the question of whether they should or should not be responsible for Section 504 coordination. The use of ethical decision-making models can help to address such ethical ambiguity. Consequently, to support school counselors contending with the appropriateness of their role within the Section 504 process, below we outline an ethical decision-making process school counselors may employ to evaluate their unique circumstances as they relate to Section 504.

## Ethical Decision-Making Using the STEPS Model

With the complexities of increasingly diverse student populations, school counselors regularly face ethical dilemmas; ethical decision-making models can guide their work resolving dilemmas when they arise (Brown & Armstrong, 2022; Luke et al., 2016). One specific model is the *Solutions to Ethical Problems in Schools* (STEPS; Stone, 2017). STEPS is a nine-step process integrating developmental issues and parental rights (Brown & Armstrong, 2022). ASCA also incorporates the STEPS model (Stone, 2017) into the *ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors* (ASCA, 2022). As such, ASCA recommends utilizing STEPS as a model for school counselors to consult when remedying ambiguous and complex ethical dilemmas. Professionals may turn to the STEPS model to clarify conflicting professional guidelines and contradictory practices specific to Section 504. As illustrated in Figure 2 and subsequently detailed, we explore how school counselors can rise to meet the needs of students with disabilities by thoughtfully navigating Section 504 responsibilities using the STEPS model.

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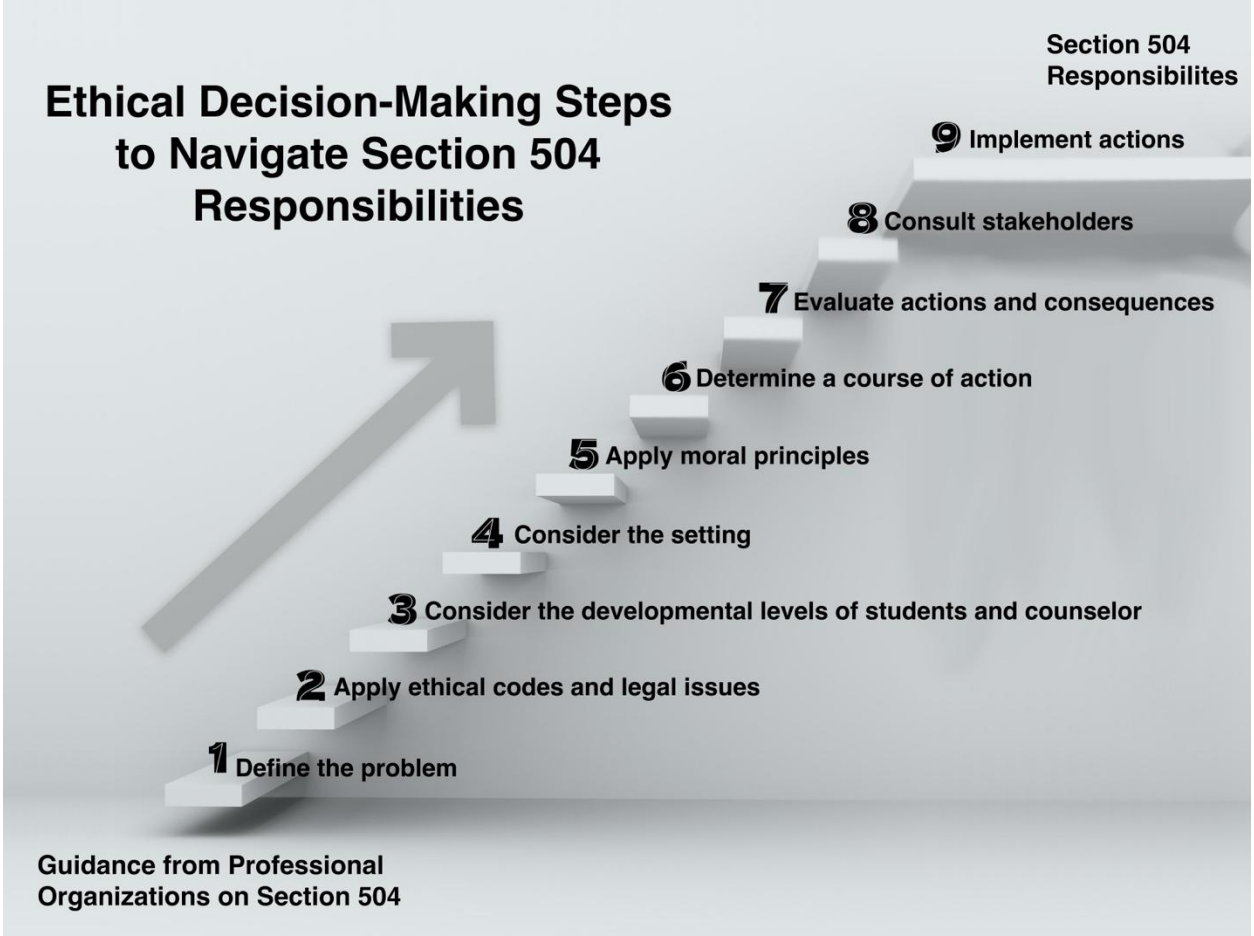
**Figure 2:**

*Ethical Decision Making Steps to Navigate Section 504 Responsibilities*




*A staircase graphic illustrating nine ethical decision-making steps for navigating Section 504 responsibilities, from defining the problem to implementing action.*

**STEP 1: Defining the Problem Emotionally and Intellectually.** The first step in the model is defining the problem within the context of one's own emotional and intellectual perspective. When tasked with serving as a 504 coordinator, school counselors may feel apprehension, fear, and frustration (Goodman-Scott & Boulden, 2019; Romano et al., 2009). These feelings may be related to internal conflict between the requirements being placed upon them by the administration, the position statements published by ASCA concerning the roles of school counselors, and their interpretation of relevant ethical codes and legal statutes.

**STEP 2: Applying Ethical Codes and Legal Issues.** Seeking guidance from leading organizations may help define the problem and assist school counselors as they apply relevant ethical codes and legal issues. School counselors are called upon to serve and address the needs of each and every student (ASCA, 2022a). The role of school counselors in serving each and every student is inclusive, working to identify and meet the needs of every student regardless of ability. According to the ASCA (2022a) position statement concerning the school counselor and students with disabilities:

> School counselors provide direct and indirect services to students with disabilities through the implementation of a school counseling program (Goodman-Scott & Boulden, 2019). School counselors recognize the strengths of students with disabilities as well as their challenges and provide best practices and current research in supporting their academic, career, and social/emotional needs (ASCA, 2022 [a]).… school counselors advocate for students with special needs and disabilities, encourage family involvement in their child's education and collaborate with other educational professionals to promote academic achievement, college/career readiness, and social/emotional wellness for all. (para. 5 & 10).

Similarly, the Council for the Accreditation of Counselling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2024) emphasizes equipping future counselors with the knowledge and skills to effectively provide services to all populations, including those with disabilities (Standard 3.A.4).

The *ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors* (2022b) also provides guidance for collaborating with multiple stakeholders to address student needs. Being that school counselors hold many roles, in accordance with the *ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors* (2022b), school counselors work to ensure that school personnel are aware of the distinctions between which elements school counselors are prepared to perform and those that fall outside their legal responsibility and scope of practice. For instance, while school counselors are prepared to identify students who may qualify for a 504 plan, they may not have received pre-service preparation to write or supervise a 504 plan for students with disabilities. Further, school counselors are equipped to collaborate with families and other stakeholders to support the determination of services rendered. Providing training that includes Section 504-specific decision making information and skills better prepares counselors to coordinate 504 efforts.

When reflecting on ethical codes and legal issues, it is imperative to consider and evaluate the foundational intent guiding Section 504 and its implementation regulations (29 U.S.C. 28 CFR 35.104). As a civil rights law, Section 504 protects individuals with disabilities. Consequently, failing to abide by Section 504 regulations situates a district not only in noncompliance with the law but ultimately creates a space for discrimination based on disability and a denial of the civil rights of students with disability. As the regulating body of Section 504, OCR monitors the implementation of this law and investigates districts' implementation (or lack thereof) of the regulations when warranted. Investigation results are published for transparency and may guide other districts nationwide. In two unique cases in 2012, Memphis City School District (Pierre, 2012a) and Clarksville

Montgomery County School District (Pierre, 2012b) were each found out of compliance with Section 504 regulations. In both investigations, leadership appointed school counselors to serve as Section 504 coordinators for their assigned schools. In its findings related to Memphis City School District, OCR, Region IV (Pierre, 2012a) stated:

> At the school level, the guidance counselor is responsible for coordinating Section 504 activities. In this regard, the guidance counselor is solely responsible for ensuring that students who may qualify as students with disabilities under Section 504 receive interventions, evaluations, and where appropriate, Section 504-related aids and services, (p. 5).

As demonstrated in the above quote, school counselors in this role bore the responsibility to ensure students suspected of having a disability under Section 504 were evaluated and, when appropriate, provided interventions, accommodations, and/or specialized instruction as necessary to the provision of FAPE. Given minimal training, school counselors reported feeling ill-prepared to meet these obligations. OCR ultimately determined both districts in question failed to evaluate a large number of students suspected of having a disability and consequently failed to provide support and services as required under Section 504 (Pierre, 2012a; Pierre 2012b).

Contributing to the potential lack of preparation to take on the 504 coordination role and responsibilities are the ASCA Position statements regarding school counselors' role specific to 504 plans and working with students with disabilities. In the *Appropriate and Inappropriate Activities for School Counselors* chart (ASCA, 2025), ASCA lists "504 coordination" as "inappropriate". This guidance may hinder school counselors' preparation as they may avoid training specifically identified as relevant for the 504 coordination role (p. 10).

**STEP 3: Consider the chronological and developmental levels.** The third step in this ethical decision making model involves examining factors such as chronological age, developmental levels, and experiences of the individuals involved. For school counselors, some of these chronological and developmental factors to consider include years of professional service, past professional experiences, and level of training and preparation related to school counseling and Section 504. Seasoned school counselors who have worked regularly with 504 teams in supporting students with disabilities may feel more comfortable and better prepared to assume the role of 504 coordinator than early-career school counselors with minimal experience supporting students by serving on 504 teams. Conversely, new school counselors who have received targeted pre-service preparation and training concerning Section 504 may be better equipped to serve as 504 coordinator than school counselors with more years of professional service but little-to-no training specific to Section 504.

Similarly, school counselors determining their readiness to serve as 504 coordinators should also consider the chronological and developmental levels of the students whom they will serve in this role. The needs of students who qualify for a 504 plan are often diverse, varying greatly from one student to the next. Because of this, adopting a developmental perspective that considers both the chronological ages and developmental levels of students is vital, as the appropriate approach may differ based on educational level (i.e., elementary, secondary). School counselors considering the role of Section 504 coordinator may evaluate their understanding and knowledge

of child development and the unique individual needs of students with various disabilities within the educational setting they serve. As the school counselor's role includes serving the needs of each and every student within their school, including students with disabilities (ASCA, 2023), school counselors should strive to determine whether the interventions and supports provided are developmentally appropriate and aligned to the unique needs of students with disabilities. When serving as 504 coordinator, school counselors must be prepared to appropriately identify and ensure proper implementation of developmentally responsive services and interventions. Selecting appropriate services for students with disabilities necessitates tailoring accommodations, interventions, and related supports to the individual and their specific circumstances (Office of Civil Rights, 2023).

**STEP 4: Consider the setting, parental rights, and minor's rights.** School counselors need to be aware of students' rights and the rights of their parents regarding the development and implementation of 504 plans. Following the provisions outlined in Section 504 (29 U.S.C. 28 CFR 35.104, 1973), students and their parents have specific legal rights to protect their interests. These protections ensure students with disabilities are medically safe while at school, have the same educational access as students without disabilities, and are treated equitably. School counselors are responsible for understanding and supporting the rights guaranteed to students and families under Section 504. School counselors considering the role of Section 504 coordinator need to understand the intersection between relevant district policies, state laws/statutes/regulations, and federal laws/statutes/regulations concerning the rights of parents and students, particularly those pertaining to students with disabilities. Additionally, school counselors advocate for appropriate and reasonable accommodations in the 504 plan. This role requires understanding appropriate accommodations and what is possible within the school setting. Consequently, school counselors serving as Section 504 coordinators need to be knowledgeable regarding Section 504 requirements as well as overall school structure, resources, and facilities that may be utilized for 504 implementation.

**STEP 5: Applying the moral principle.** When determining what steps to take and what role they need to play regarding 504 plans, school counselors also need to account for the basic moral principles of autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence, fidelity, veracity, and justice (ASCA, 2022b; Corey et al., 2024; Kitchener, 1984; Meara, et al, 1996; Stone, 2017). Considering and prioritizing these basic moral principles can help school counselors explore options for addressing ethical dilemmas when called upon to serve as 504 coordinators within their schools. For example, a school counselor who is placed in a 504 coordinator role needs to examine the manner in which coordinator duties may potentially impact or enhance their abilities to fulfill their other responsibilities as a school counselor. Some school counselors may view 504 coordination as conflicting with one or more of the basic moral principles, as the responsibilities inherent to this role could create barriers in their efforts to implement a comprehensive school counseling program. Alternatively, serving as a 504 coordinator may allow some school counselors to more effectively support autonomy and justice for students with disabilities. Additionally, through the development of systematic 504 procedures incorporated with fidelity in a broader comprehensive school counseling

program, school counselors may more effectively address the needs of each and every student promoting beneficence and nonmaleficence schoolwide.

**STEP 6: Determining a potential course of action and its consequences.** After going through steps one through five, a school counselor should consider the potential and possible pathways for moving forward. As part of this consideration, it can be helpful for the school counselor to explore each option by writing it down. To examine potential courses of action, school counselors will also want to evaluate each option identifying potential positive and negative consequences. For example, a school counselor directed by their district to serve as the 504 coordinator, may consider refusing to serve in that capacity citing ASCA's position calling for school counselors to actively advocate against coordinating 504 services. Potential consequences for such an option could include, allowing space for the school counselor to better implement a comprehensive school counseling program; however, another potential consequence for such an action could include not being viewed by colleagues as being a "team player", facing disciplinary action such as being "written up" (aka "job target"), or even being dismissed from their position with the district for insubordination. Alternatively, school counselors in this position may consider serving in this capacity, however, make a commitment to evaluating their time using the School Counselor 504 Activities Scale (Boulden & Goodman-Scott, 2024) with the intention to drive further conversation with their supervisor in the future. In this option, the school counselor may experience challenges as they navigate implementing a comprehensive school counseling program, while simultaneously maintaining and continuing to build positive relationships with their colleagues and administrators, setting the stage for advocacy of new role assignments in the future. A third potential course of action could include the school counselor accepting the role of 504 coordinator recognizing the ways in which coordination responsibilities may align and integrate with their implementation of a comprehensive school counseling program. Potential consequences of this third option could include centralized leadership in the integration of 504 procedures and comprehensive school counseling program components allowing for improved fidelity and clarity schoolwide, ensuring appropriate interventions to address the needs of each and every student (including those with disabilities).

**STEP 7: Evaluating the selected action.** School counselors must evaluate each potential course of action using the information gathered and identified in step six. Through this evaluation, assessing potential consequences for all individuals and entities involved is important, including the counselor themself. This evaluative process contextualizes the consequences of each potential action, comparing one to another. School counselors thoughtfully examine how the potential course(s) of action may affect various parties involved in both

the short-term and long-term. By assessing the various factors and components related to the potential actions, school counselors can effectively appraise each action and ultimately select one for implementation.

For example, when evaluating potential actions such as the options listed above in Step 6, school counselors would want to compare the potential outcomes of each option, being mindful to also consider the potential impacts and implications each action could have on other stakeholders such as colleagues, students, and their families. If a school counselor decides to take the action of refusing to serve as a 504 coordinator, they may consider if any colleagues within their building have the knowledge and skills needed to serve in this role, and how their service may impact students. In comparison, if a school counselor agrees to serve as a 504 coordinator while actively advocating against the role, they may explore how colleagues may perceive their advocacy and how their actions may impact the climate and culture within the school.

**STEP 8: Consulting with peers.** Before implementing the chosen course of action, school counselors are encouraged to seek consultation from other professionals, preferably their supervisors or other school counselors. Consultation can reveal various aspects of the course of action school counselors may not have previously considered and be beneficial for making decisions moving forward. School counselors should not work in isolation; consultation is vital when determining a final course of action.

In the examples above, school counselors may reach out to other school counselors within their district to gauge their role(s) in Section 504 coordination. They may connect with their administrator to discuss the professional, legal, and ethical responsibilities of school counselors and the benefits versus challenges the school counselor may face in coordinating Section 504 within their building. Finally, the school counselor may reach out to other professionals within the field (e.g., higher education faculty, fellow school counselors, school-based clinicians/related service providers) for support and guidance.

**STEP 9: Implementing the selected course of action.** Once they have received consultation, school counselors move forward with the chosen course of action, remembering to document the steps they have gone through in making their decisions. Documentation may be particularly important in the event the school counselor's chosen action relating to Section 504 coordination is ever called into question. Using a case example, we explore the ethical dilemma of serving as a 504 coordinator as analyzed through the STEPS model.

## Case Vignette

*Ms. Villanueva, Rockwood Middle School's new school counselor, has been informed that serving as Section 504 coordinator for the school is a requirement of her position. While Ms. Villanueva has some familiarity with 504 plans, she has not received any formal training related to Section 504 from her preparation program. Feeling this situation presents an ethical dilemma, she turns to the STEPS ethical-decision-making model for support.*

*Ms. Villanueva begins by considering her emotional and intellectual response. Primarily, Ms. Villanueva feels conflicted. She wants to support her school, principal, and students appropriately. She is*

*also concerned, performing this role goes against the advice of organizations she trusts. Yet, Ms. Villanueva also feels she has unique training that enables her to think systemically, manage stakeholders, and support students' development. Next, she evaluates guidance from leading organizations. Ms. Villanueva is an active American School Counselor Association (ASCA) member and starts by reviewing ASCA position statements. Ms. Villanueva also graduated from a CACREP-accredited counseling program and reviewed CACREP guidance. After reviewing advice from leading organizations, Ms. Villanueva is torn: her duty to care for each and every student (including students with 504 needs) is clear; however, Ms. Villanueva is confused about the difference between* identifying *students and supervising students who qualify for 504 plans. As Ms. Villanueva continues exploring relevant laws and ethical guidelines, she considers students who have yet to be identified for 504 accommodations may not receive services if Ms. Villanueva does not facilitate the 504 team. Additionally, Ms. Villanueva considers the legal implications of her school not complying and not serving students with disabilities.*

*When considering the students' chronological and developmental levels, Ms. Villanueva is confident receiving 504 support is in the student's best interest so they can continue growing toward their greatest potential. Additionally, Ms. Villanueva considers her own development and past experiences as a school counselor. She recognizes her specialized training in counseling and human development equips her to uniquely understand and support students' learning and growth. Ms. Villanueva feels confident in her expertise and preparation regarding consulting with families and supporting students. From this lens, Ms. Villanueva knows she has specialized skills that are well-suited to coordinating Section 504.*

*As Ms. Villanueva continues through the STEPS Model, she consults with trusted colleagues and is surprised to find that many of her peers and veteran school counselors currently serve as 504 coordinators in their respective settings. Given how often school counselors seem to coordinate 504 plans in their schools, Ms. Villanueva is curious what specific Section 504 training and support her colleagues have been provided. While Ms. Villanueva is confident in supporting students and collaborating with families, she believes she would benefit from more specific preparation regarding disability laws and Section 504 programming.*

*After applying moral principles and evaluating several different courses of action, it's time for Ms. Villanueva to decide and implement her next steps. Ms. Villanueva appreciates the potentially conflicting positionality between the needs and expectations of students, her district, and the school counseling profession regarding roles within Section 504. She finds herself weighing her confidence in her ability to implement systems to holistically support each and every student in her school alongside her knowledge and understanding of the responsibilities and obligations of a Section 504 Coordinator. Ms. Villanueva knows coordinating a comprehensive school counseling program includes collaborating with relevant stakeholders, such as classroom teachers and students' families. She also knows she has specialized knowledge in leading and facilitating groups and is responsible for advocating for each and every student in her setting, including those with disabilities. Finally, Ms. Villanueva considers the legal ramifications of not acting as the Section 504 coordinator. After careful deliberation, Ms. Villanueva determines she can ethically support*

*students in her role as school counselor and 504 coordinator, utilizing both roles in overseeing the implementation of Section 504 as an embedded part of the comprehensive school counseling program at her school. To ensure appropriate Section 504 coordination, she requests administrative support in pursuing supplemental training in Section 504 and resources for developing policies and systems to effectively incorporate Section 504 within the comprehensive school counseling program.*

## Discussion

School counselors are tasked with developing and implementing comprehensive school counseling programs designed to improve student achievement and support students' social/emotional development and well-being (ASCA, 2023). "Students" refers to *each and every* child and youth served within the school, including students with disabilities who may require additional academic and/or social-emotional support and services to access and benefit from their education. Therefore, similar to a general education teacher serving students regardless of ability in their classrooms, school counselors extend services, programming, and support to students of all abilities as well.

Regarding Section 504, the field has long debated the responsibilities of school counselors, most often taking the stance, school counselors should support, *not* coordinate, Section 504 programming (e.g., ASCA, 2025; Boulden & Goodman-Scott, 2024; Goodman-Scott & Boulden, 2019; Griener & Hatton, 2023; Lambie et al., 2019; Townsend & Yount, 2019). While this stance may help protect the school counselor's time, leaving space to design and implement comprehensive school counseling programs, often there appears to be misalignment between this stance and actual practice in the field (ASCA, 2023). As job descriptions and/or supervisor authority require, many school counselors serve as Section 504 coordinators (ASCA, 2023). As previously established, OCR has made clear school counselors assigned as Section 504 coordinators are responsible for ensuring students with disabilities within their schools under Section 504 are evaluated, identified, and provided the services and support necessary to receive FAPE. Despite advocacy and tools designed to support school counselors in addressing the misalignment in recommended practices related to 504 coordination (Boulden & Goodman-Scott, 2024), the common practice of assigning 504 coordination to school counselors requires they receive adequate and comprehensive preparation to fulfill these expectations appropriately.

Influenced by ASCA's (2024) position indicating school counselors should not serve as Section 504 coordinators and the understanding that school administrators often require counselors to perform these duties, we turned to the STEPS model for guidance. Analyzing the nine steps helps to review this ethical dilemma systematically and may provide some clarity for professionals considering this issue.

We appreciate, however, that while the STEPS model may support professionals in clarifying this ethical dilemma, it does little to dampen the situational complexity. School counselors may feel an emotional obligation to actively serve students with disabilities under Section 504 but feel an intellectual pull toward restraint, guided by professional guidance and standards (Romano, et al., 2009). The emotional discomfort, hesitation, and fear may stem from an intellectual understanding that limited training and knowledge may negatively impact students, families,

colleagues, the school, and the district (Betters-Bubon et al., 2021). These feelings may be further entangled when school counselors are assigned Section 504 coordinator responsibilities by a direct supervisor. In such cases, school counselors may feel an emotional obligation to serve as coordinators, fueled by an intellectual understanding that their livelihoods are directly tied to their ability to meet job requirements.

When placed in the role of Section 504 coordinator, school counselors must consider the requirements of the law and regulations, taking into account the potential legal consequences that may result from findings of noncompliance. This understanding must be weighed in coordination with ASCA and CACREP policies and standards, both directly linked to Section 504 and the ethical practices of school counselors. Some school counselors may perceive an ethical obligation to assume these responsibilities, even when they feel ill-prepared to coordinate Section 504 services. Factors contributing to this sense of obligation include their expertise in human development, advocacy, engaging families, and facilitating multidisciplinary stakeholders to support the development and success of each and every student, including those with disabilities. This may hold especially true when no other professional within the building is available and/or trained to serve as coordinator. Ultimately, the school counselor's unique skill set, though lacking formal training in Section 504 coordination, may often make them the most qualified school professionals in their building to oversee and lead the implementation of Section 504. Driven by ethical principles to intentionally support each and every student, and in consideration of the potential negative impact their refusal to serve might have on students' well-being, academic progress, and protection of civil rights, some school counselors conclude they can ethically navigate both roles. These school counselors may find they can effectively integrate Section 504 procedures and oversight into their comprehensive school counseling program.

## Recommendations/Implications

When professional organizations take a unilateral stance on practice issues, it gives little leeway for alternatives. Consequently, school counselors struggling to adhere to organizational position statements and policies may feel isolated and left to navigate uncharted waters without professional support. Despite stated positions from school counseling organizations against serving as Section 504 coordinators, many school districts require school counselors to serve in these roles. By taking a firm stance indicating it is inappropriate for school counselors to serve in this capacity (ASCA, 2025), professional organizations may fail to acknowledge the experiences of school counselors in the field and, in doing so, leave school counselors without the guidance and training necessary to enact the full spectrum of job responsibilities they encounter successfully. As such, school counselors may need to advocate for revisioning their role related to Section 504, challenging assumptions that may hinder their ability to transform practices and better meet the needs of students with disabilities within their schools (Watkinson, 2015).

Similar to colleagues before us (Hall, 2015), we further advocate for developing counselor preparation standards related to school district regulations, requirements, and responsibilities specific to disability law and the education of students with disabilities. Even when school counselors are not serving as Section 504 coordinators, they remain active in the Section 504 process.

They are responsible for working within the regulations of Section 504 and disability law. School counselors may inadvertently make recommendations or take actions misaligned with Section 504 rules and regulations without fully understanding this civil rights law. By adding standard(s) related to disability law, school counselors in all programs would receive critical instruction in this area. Additional recommendations regarding policy and practice specific to state, district, school, and counselor education programs are provided in

**Table 1:**
*Recommendations for District Policy and Preparation Programs*

| State, District, School Policy | School Counselor Preparation Programs |
|---|---|
| Identify best practice as being—school counselors will not serve as coordinators; but when needed, key support will be provided for school counselors in the role of Section 504 coordinator | Include disability and special education related content and materials, including IDEA and Section 504, into core school counseling curriculum |
| Policy clearly defining the role of the Section 504 coordinator and distinguishing between the role and other professionals' roles | Distinguish between Section 504 and IDEA rules and regulations and how they intersect with school counseling practices |
| Establish timeline and process for district/school wide evaluation of Section 504 procedures and implementation | Advocate for the development and inclusion of disability-related counseling competencies into counselor education accreditation standards, as recommended by Chapin et al. (2018) |
| Develop and require training for newly assigned Section 504 coordinators (including training on FAPE, documentation, roles/responsibilities, etc.) within a specified timeline (e.g, within 1 month, 3 months, etc.) | Advocate for professional organizations, such as ASCA, to provide guidance and actionable steps for school counselors serving as Section 504 coordinators |
| Outline avenues of support for Section 504 coordinators seeking guidance related to Section 504 and coordinator responsibilities | Collaborate with teacher preparation and educational leadership programs to build multidisciplinary awareness about the roles and responsibilities of school counselors in supporting school programs, teachers, administrators, and students, including students with disabilities |
| Indicate best practices related to evaluation, identification, selection of services and supports, placement, implementation, reevaluation, and the provision of FAPE for students receiving 504 services | Develop ongoing training and resources for school counselors serving as Section 504 coordinators |
| Establish a comprehensive system for communicating 504 plans to relevant faculty and staff | Within the school counselor preparation curriculum, review and examine the alignment between 504 coordination tasks and the primary |

| | |
|---|---|
| | components needed to implement a comprehensive school counseling program. |
| Develop ongoing training and resources such as virtual communities of practices (e.g., ECHO) for Section 504 coordinators throughout the district/state | Explore ways in which 504 coordination duties may integrate with a comprehensive school counseling program, such as the ASCA National Model. |

## Conclusion

When asked to assume the role of Section 504 coordinator, school counselors may feel conflicted (Goodman-Scott & Boulden, 2019) due to guidance in the field indicating they should not be responsible for Section 504 implementation within their buildings (ASCA, 2025). School counselors may turn to the STEPS model to navigate this ethical dilemma. Given the complexity of this issue, and considering factors such as (a) professional guidance, (b) legal requirements, (c) the mission of a comprehensive school counseling program, and (d) the unique circumstances of the school population, setting, and workforce, using the STEPS model may lead school counselors to determine they can ethically serve as coordinators. In such circumstances, we advise school counselors to advocate for robust and ongoing training specific to disability law and Section 504. It is also recommended school counselors seek support and ask for clarification when needed. We suggest school counseling preparation standards reflect the experiences of school counselors within the field; therefore, including disability law and Section 504 within the standards is critical. School counselors play a vital role in creating a school environment where each and every student is supported, including students qualifying for Section 504 accommodations. By equipping school counselors with the knowledge and practices necessary to better engage with Section 504, professional organizations and accrediting bodies can support an equitable and comprehensive school counseling program benefiting *each and every student*.

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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# Teaching Students to Work With, Not Against, AI: A Classroom Model for Critical Literacy in Grades 6-12

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## Abstract

Today's secondary classrooms face the challenge of integrating artificial intelligence (AI) in a way that enhances learning rather than undermines it. This article presents a classroom model for developing *critical AI literacy* among students in grades 6–12, emphasizing collaboration with AI tools as learning partners instead of viewing them as threats. Grounded in current research and practitioner experience, the model outlines strategies for incorporating AI into teaching practices while fostering students' critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and creative problem-solving. Key components include mindset shifts toward AI, explicit instruction on AI's limitations and biases, and scaffolded activities where students critically evaluate AI-generated content. This single-author perspective offers practical guidance to help educators prepare students for an AI-enhanced world, with recommendations for implementation and future research on critical AI literacy in K–12 settings.

*Keywords:* Critical AI Literacy, K-12 Education, AI-Enhanced Teaching

## Introduction

Rapid advances in artificial intelligence (AI) are reshaping the educational landscape, prompting both excitement and concern among educators (Kasneci et al., 2023). In the wake of widely accessible generative AI tools, secondary students are increasingly using AI for schoolwork: one recent global survey found that over 80% of students have experimented with AI tools for learning (Digital Education Council, 2024). Simultaneously, many teachers worry that AI might weaken students' critical thinking or enable academic dishonesty (Schwartz, 2023). Rather than resorting to bans, there is a growing consensus that schools should *teach* students to use AI responsibly and intelligently (Selwyn, 2021; Baker & Smith, 2019). This requires going beyond technical skills to develop students' critical AI literacy – the ability to understand, evaluate, and effectively collaborate with AI systems while recognizing their limitations and ethical implications (Long & Magerko, 2020; Kamperman & Conrad, 2025). Current research highlights both the potential and the pitfalls of classroom AI integration. On one hand, AI-based tutors and writing assistants can personalize learning and improve achievement when used thoughtfully (Liu et al., 2025). Studies have shown that students who work alongside AI can achieve gains in efficiency and engagement (Atchley et al., 2024). On the other hand, scholars caution that uncritical use of AI may de-skill learners and introduce biases from algorithmic content (Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018; Perrotta & Selwyn, 2020). These divergent outcomes underscore the need for intentional pedagogical strategies. Educators must guide students in treating AI as a *collaborative tool* – a "second pair of eyes" or brainstorming partner – rather than as an infallible answer machine or a shortcut around learning (Bowen & Watson, 2024; Holmes et al., 2016). To achieve this, teaching practices should evolve to include explicit discussions about how AI works, its appropriate uses, and its moral and practical limitations (Ng et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2021).

This article responds to the urgent educational imperative by proposing a classroom model for critical AI literacy in middle and high school settings. The model is practitioner-oriented, designed by an educator for educators, and grounded in both learning science and emerging evidence from AI-in-education research. It aims to help teachers empower students to work with, not against, AI – leveraging AI's capabilities to enhance learning while keeping students' own thinking at the forefront. After a brief background on critical AI literacy, the article outlines the key components of the model, provides examples of classroom activities, and offers practical recommendations for implementation. All observations and claims are presented from a single-author perspective, reflecting the author's analysis and synthesis of the literature and classroom insights. The goal is to maintain an academic tone rooted in scholarship while delivering actionable guidance for teachers seeking to navigate the new AI-integrated classroom.

## Background: Toward Critical AI Literacy in K-12

**Defining Critical AI Literacy.** The concept of *AI literacy* has been defined as a set of competencies enabling individuals to understand and critically evaluate AI technologies and their impacts (Long & Magerko, 2020). Building on traditional digital literacy and media literacy frameworks, AI literacy encompasses not only knowing how to use AI tools but also understanding how they function and questioning their outputs (Ng et al., 2021).

Recent reviews emphasize four dimensions of AI literacy education: (1) **Knowledge** – understanding fundamental concepts of AI and machine learning, (2) **Use** – the ability to effectively operate AI applications, (3) **Evaluation** – critically interpreting AI outputs and recognizing errors or biases, and (4) **Ethics** – awareness of the ethical and societal implications of AI (Ng et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2023). *Critical* AI literacy goes one step further by embedding AI learning in a reflective, inquiry-based context that encourages students to scrutinize technology's role in society (Kenny & Antle, 2023). Rather than viewing AI as a neutral tool, a critical approach invites students to ask: Who created this AI system? What data or values might be influencing its responses? Where and when should AI **not** be used (Kamperman & Conrad, 2025)? This critical perspective is vital for empowering young people to navigate AI-informed environments responsibly.

## Challenges and Opportunities in the Classroom.

Integrating AI into K–12 education presents unique challenges. Secondary students may readily utilize AI writing assistants or chatbots to generate work, but without guidance they risk accepting AI outputs uncritically or misusing them (Selwyn, 2021; Schwartz, 2023). Educators have reported instances of students treating AI-generated text as authoritative fact, unaware that these models can produce inaccuracies or biased content (Baker & Smith, 2019; Bender et al., 2021). There is also concern that easy access to AI answers might short-circuit important learning processes – for example, if a student simply asks ChatGPT for a solution, they may bypass the productive struggle through which deeper understanding develops (Perrotta & Selwyn, 2020). However, when harnessed appropriately, AI can also be a powerful catalyst for learning. Research indicates that students using AI as a collaborator – for instance, to get feedback on a draft or to explore multiple solution paths – can improve their metacognitive skills and creativity (Atchley et al., 2024; Kasneci et al., 2023). AI tools can free up time from routine tasks, allowing students to spend more effort on higher order thinking and teachers to focus on individualized coaching (Luckin et al., 2016). The key is preparation: students and teachers both need support and training to use AI in pedagogically sound ways (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019; Starkey, 2020).

## Teacher Roles and Professional Competence.

A critical aspect of AI literacy is the evolving role of the teacher. In an AI-enhanced classroom, teachers become vital mentors guiding students' interaction with intelligent tools (Touretzky et al., 2019). This requires teachers to develop their own competencies in understanding AI and its classroom applications (Starkey, 2020). Professional digital competence frameworks now call for educators to be adept not only with general technology but specifically with AI's possibilities and pitfalls (Starkey, 2020; OECD, 2021). For example, teachers should know how to evaluate an AI educational app's claim, how to interpret an AI system's feedback to students, and how to mitigate issues like algorithmic bias or student data privacy (Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018; UNESCO, 2021). Teachers must also model *lifelong learning* and adaptability, since AI tools and their capabilities are evolving rapidly (Bowen & Watson, 2024). Embracing an iterative mindset – where teachers continuously experiment with AI in teaching, reflect on outcomes, and adjust strategies – is crucial (Kenny & Antle, 2023). With appropriate support and

mindset, teachers can lead by example, showing students how to engage critically and constructively with AI. Against this backdrop, the next section introduces a classroom-tested model that operationalizes these ideas into concrete practices for grades 6–12.

## A Classroom Model for Critical AI Literacy

The proposed model is designed to cultivate critical AI literacy by having students actively **work with AI tools** under guided conditions that emphasize reflection and analysis. The model consists of several interrelated components, each addressing an essential element of critical AI engagement. These components can be integrated across the curriculum in various subjects. The focus is on transforming typical learning activities to include AI in a way that enriches learning outcomes rather than undermines them. Below are the key components of the model:

- **1. Mindset Shift to AI as Collaborator:** Both teachers and students begin by reframing their attitude toward AI. Instead of viewing AI purely as a threat to academic integrity or a "cheat," the class treats AI as a collaborative partner that can augment learning when used thoughtfully (Bowen & Watson, 2024). The teacher explicitly discusses this mindset shift, reinforcing that using AI in class is about *improving* one's work and understanding, not avoiding it. For example, a teacher might say: *"Just as we consult spell-check or a calculator, we can consult AI for certain tasks – but we remain in charge of the final answers"*. This collaborative mindset sets a positive tone, reducing fear and encouraging responsible exploration (Atchley et al., 2024). Students are invited to share their prior experiences with AI (if any) and reflect on how AI could assist their learning process in ethical ways.
- **2. Explicit AI Literacy Instruction:** The model incorporates mini lessons to build students' foundational understanding of how AI systems operate and their limitations. Before students use an AI tool for an assignment, the teacher provides age-appropriate explanations of concepts like: *AI generates content based on patterns in data*, *AI can make mistakes ("hallucinations")*, and *AI can reflect biases present in its training data* (Baker & Smith, 2019; Bender et al., 2021). Students might examine simple examples of AI outputs that are incorrect or biased and discuss why that happened. By demystifying AI's inner workings, students become more critical consumers of its outputs (Long & Magerko, 2020). This component also includes establishing class norms for AI use – for instance, always verify facts from AI with a credible source (Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018), and always disclose when AI was used in an assignment. These norms reinforce ethical and transparent usage, aligning with guidelines from

educational bodies (UNESCO, 2021).

- **3. AI-Integrated Learning Tasks with Reflection:** Central to the model is designing **authentic tasks** where students use AI as one step in a larger learning process, followed by critical reflection. Rather than assign work that AI could do in one click, the teacher creates activities that require students to *apply* and *evaluate* AI contributions. For example, in a writing assignment, a teacher might require students to use an AI tool to generate a first draft or an outline **and then** improve it significantly using their own skills (Bowen & Watson, 2024). Students would submit the AI's output alongside their revised draft, with a reflection on the changes they made and why (e.g., "The AI's draft lacked depth in analysis, so I added two original examples and cited evidence to support the arguments"). This approach transforms a potential academic honesty issue into a learning opportunity: students practice prompt engineering, critique AI-generated content, and strengthen their editing and reasoning skills (Atchley et al., 2024). Similarly, in a science class, a teacher could have students compare explanations of a concept from the textbook, a vetted website, and an AI chatbot – then discuss which was most accurate or clear and identify any AI errors. Such comparative analysis tasks train students to assess AI information critically (Kenny & Antle, 2023). The teacher's role is to facilitate reflection by asking probing questions: *"What errors did the AI make? Why do you think it made those? How did your knowledge help you improve the AI's answer?"*. These metacognitive discussions are essential for deepening critical AI literacy (Ng et al., 2021).
- **4. Emphasis on Process Over Product:** In this model, **how** students arrive at answers is given as much weight as the answers themselves. By shifting assessment to value process, the model discourages blind reliance on AI outputs and instead rewards critical engagement. For instance, a history teacher implementing this model might assign a research project where students must document their research process, including any AI tools used, and justify their decisions (Kamperman & Conrad, 2025). If a student uses an AI tool to generate a list of sources or to summarize an article, they would need to evaluate each AI-suggested source for credibility and accuracy, and that evaluation becomes part of their grade. This component aligns with assessment recommendations from AI-in-education researchers who propose focusing on the *creation process* (e.g., requiring AI chat transcripts or draft iterations) rather than solely the final essay or exam

answer (Bowen & Watson, 2024; Atchley et al., 2024). By grading the reasoning, fact-checking, and revisions students perform, teachers incentivize thoughtful use of AI and ensure students remain actively involved in learning. The process-centric approach also helps deter misuse: if students know they must explain and defend any AI-derived content, they are less likely to copy AI output unedited or use AI in prohibited ways.

- **5. Critical Evaluation and Verification Skills:** A pillar of critical AI literacy is learning how to double-check and scrutinize AI-provided information. The model embeds verification steps into class activities. Students are taught strategies like cross-verifying facts with trusted sources, testing AI answers with alternative questions, and recognizing red flags of AI-generated text (such as overly generic language or lack of specific detail) (Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018; Xie et al., 2023). In practice, a teacher might give students an AI-written paragraph containing some factual errors and ask them to find and correct the mistakes using their textbooks or reliable online sources. Another exercise is to provide multiple AI-generated responses to the same question (perhaps from different AI systems or after tweaking a prompt) and have students debate which response is most credible and why (Atchley et al., 2024). Such activities build students' analytical skills and reinforce that AI outputs are not automatically truth. Students become comfortable saying, *"I won't accept this answer until I've investigated further,"* thereby developing a healthy skepticism that is central to critical literacy (Perrotta & Selwyn, 2020). Over time, students internalize habits of verifying AI-assisted work, which will serve them well in academic and real-world contexts.
- **6. Ethical and Societal Context Discussions:** Finally, the model incorporates regular class discussions about the broader implications of AI. These discussions tie student experiences with AI tools to questions of ethics, bias, privacy, and the impact of AI on society (Selwyn, 2021; UNESCO, 2021). For example, after using an AI image generator in an art class, students might discuss issues of intellectual property and how AI models learn from artists' work. In an English class, students could debate the fairness of using AI for college essays or analyze a case where AI was used in hiring or policing and examine the consequences (Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018). The teacher's role is to present age-appropriate cases or news stories and facilitate an open dialogue, encouraging students to

consider multiple perspectives and the ethical trade-offs of AI applications (Baker & Smith, 2019). These conversations help students connect what they learn in the classroom to real-world AI issues, fostering a sense of responsibility and agency. Students begin to see themselves not just as users of AI, but as informed citizens who will shape how AI is used in the future. This component reflects the **critical** in critical AI literacy – aiming to produce learners who are critically conscious of technology's role in society and their power to influence it (Kenny & Antle, 2023).

Each component above is mutually reinforcing. For instance, treating AI as a collaborator (mindset shift) sets the stage for students to engage sincerely with AI in their assignments, while explicit instruction and ethical discussions provide the knowledge framework to do so wisely. The process-focused tasks and evaluation practice then give students hands-on experience in applying that knowledge. In practice, a teacher might implement the model in a modular fashion, starting small with one or two components and gradually combining them as comfort grows. An illustrative sequence in an English class might be: introduce AI with a mindset discussion and a mini lesson on how a text generator works (Components 1 and 2), then have students use an AI to brainstorm ideas for an essay and reflect on the output's quality (Components 3 and 5). Students then write the essay themselves, perhaps using AI for editing suggestions, and submit a process log (Component 4), followed by a class debate on whether using AI in writing is appropriate and where to draw the line (Component 6). Early evidence from the author's classroom implementations of such sequences indicates that students become more discerning and less likely to misuse AI when these strategies are in place. They report finding AI helpful for generating ideas or checking work, but they also express greater awareness that *"AI can be wrong"* and confidence in *"how to use it the right way"* (informal student feedback, Spring 2025). While systematic research is ongoing, these anecdotal outcomes align with broader findings that critical engagement strategies can mitigate AI's risks and amplify its benefits in education (Kasneci et al., 2023; Kamperman & Conrad, 2025).

## Implementation Considerations for Educators

Adopting the critical AI literacy model requires thoughtful implementation and adaptation to each school context. Based on the author's observations and related literature, several practical considerations can support success:

**Start with Clear Policies:** Educators should work with their school leadership to establish clear policies around AI usage in coursework (UNESCO, 2021). Clarity on questions such as "When is AI assistance allowed?" and "How should students acknowledge AI contributions?" creates a safe structure for experimentation. For example, a policy might state that AI-generated text can be used in early drafts or outlines, but final submissions must be students' own words with sources cited (Schwartz, 2023). By defining boundaries upfront, teachers can incorporate AI without ambiguity or fear of encouraging cheating. As part of policy, emphasize academic integrity in the age of AI – for instance,

treating undisclosed AI-generated work as a form of plagiarism – while simultaneously affirming that *disclosed, critical* use of AI is a valid learning strategy (Selwyn, 2021). This dual message helps maintain rigor.

**Professional Development and Support:** Teachers benefit from training and peer support as they implement AI-related activities (Starkey, 2020; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). School districts might offer workshops or learning communities for educators to share experiences with AI tools and classroom strategies. If available, instructional technology coaches can assist teachers in piloting AI-integrated lessons, troubleshooting issues, and finding age-appropriate AI resources. Even informally, teachers are encouraged to start small – perhaps testing an AI tool themselves for a task before introducing it to students – and to reflect on the outcomes. Administering short student surveys after an AI-enhanced assignment can provide insights into what students learned and where they faced difficulties, guiding further refinement of the model in practice (Xie et al., 2023). It is also important for teachers to stay updated, as AI tools evolve quickly. Setting aside time for ongoing learning (e.g., following research updates or ed-tech forums on AI in education) will help educators continuously align their practice with the latest understanding of AI's capabilities and challenges (Bowen & Watson, 2024).

**Equity and Accessibility:** When implementing AI activities, teachers must be mindful of equity. Not all students may have equal experience or access to AI outside of school. The model should be introduced in a way that brings all learners along. This might involve providing additional scaffolding for students who are less tech-confident, such as step-by-step tutorials for using a particular AI tool and extra practice in class (Luckin et al., 2016). Additionally, any AI tools used should adhere to student data privacy standards and be accessible to students with disabilities (UNESCO, 2021). If an AI application is not accessible (e.g., a vision-impaired student cannot easily use a certain interface), the teacher should have alternative means for that student to participate or consider different tools. Moreover, discussions about AI's impact should include diverse perspectives—such as how AI might affect different communities—to ensure all students see the relevance of critical AI literacy to their lives (Kenny & Antle, 2023). This aligns with the broader goal of culturally responsive teaching, recognizing that AI technologies can have unequal effects across society and thus engaging students in examining those issues.

**Assessment and Feedback:** Educators implementing this model will likely need to adjust their assessment practices. As noted, grading the process and reflection is key. Teachers might develop rubrics that allocate points for evidence of critical thinking, such as the thoroughness of a student's fact-checking of AI content or the insightfulness of their reflections on using AI. For example, a rubric criterion could be "Quality of AI Use Reflection: The student identifies specific strengths and weaknesses of the AI output and explains clearly how they addressed them." Providing regular feedback to students on these aspects will reinforce the learning goals (Atchley et al., 2024). It's important to reassure students that *struggling* with an AI tool or finding an error is not failure; rather, it is expected and part of the learning. Teachers can normalize this by publicly acknowledging when an AI tool made a mistake in a demo and praising students who caught it. This helps students feel comfortable being critical and not blindly deferring to the AI. Over time, as

students become more adept, assessment can gradually hold them to higher standards of critique and independence (Xie et al., 2023). Initially, for instance, a teacher might give full credit as long as a student identified *some* issue with AI's output, but later on the expectation might be to catch more subtle issues or to draw on external evidence in their critique.

**Iterative Refinement:** Finally, implementing critical AI literacy should be seen as an ongoing, iterative process. The author's experience revealed that some strategies worked better in certain subjects or grade levels than others, requiring adaptation. For example, middle school students might need more concrete examples and shorter AI activities to maintain focus, whereas high school students could handle more complex, open-ended AI projects. It is advisable to start with a pilot unit or a single class project incorporating the model, then collect feedback from students about what they learned and how they felt. Teachers can use that feedback to refine instructions, choose different AI tools, or adjust the balance between AI use and non-AI work (Kasneci et al., 2023). Collaboration with colleagues is also valuable - teachers can compare notes on how students responded to various AI tasks and share successful prompts or discussion questions. School leaders should encourage a culture of safe innovation, where teachers feel free to experiment with AI pedagogy and openly discuss both successes and failures. Given that the integration of AI in K–12 education is still relatively new, educators collectively are learning what best practices look like (Yang et al., 2023). This model is offered as a starting framework that will evolve over time as more classrooms adopt critical AI literacy approaches and contribute their insights.

## Conclusion

Artificial intelligence is rapidly becoming part of the everyday educational experience, and it is imperative that students learn to engage with AI critically, ethically, and productively. This article, written from a sole-author perspective, has presented a classroom model aimed at fostering critical AI literacy in grades 6–12. The model encourages educators to guide students in working *with* AI tools through a structured approach that includes mindset shifts, explicit literacy instruction, reflective AI-integrated assignments, process-focused assessment, and discussions of AI's broader impact. By implementing these strategies, teachers can help students move beyond treating AI as a simple shortcut or an adversary. Instead, students learn to see AI as a powerful resource that, when approached with skepticism and thoughtful oversight, can augment their learning and creativity (Bowen & Watson, 2024; Atchley et al., 2024).

Maintaining an academic tone, this work has drawn on emerging research and practical examples to demonstrate how critical AI literacy can be cultivated in real classrooms. The evidence so far suggests that when students are taught to question AI outputs, verify information, and reflect on the role of AI in their work, they become more engaged and responsible learners (Ng et al., 2021; Kamperman & Conrad, 2025). They also develop future-ready skills: the ability to collaborate with intelligent technologies, the discernment to spot errors or biases, and the ethical grounding to consider the consequences of technological choices (Kenny & Antle, 2023; Perrotta & Selwyn, 2020). These competencies will be increasingly important as AI continues to permeate higher education, the workforce, and civic life.

For practitioners, the classroom model offers a pathway to integrate AI in instruction without compromising academic integrity or rigor. It provides concrete steps and precautions that any teacher can adapt to their subject and student group. Of course, the model is not a static solution but a framework to be refined. Ongoing research is needed to formally assess learning outcomes of critical AI literacy interventions, such as measuring improvements in students' critical thinking or ethical reasoning skills over time (Xie et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2023). Additionally, as AI tools evolve – for instance, as they become more interactive or multimodal – educators will need to update their strategies and perhaps add new components to the model (Kasneci et al., 2023). The hope is that this work inspires further dialogue and experimentation among educators, researchers, and policymakers to collectively shape how AI is used in education.

In summary, teaching students to work with, not against, AI is a realistic and worthy goal. It shifts the narrative from fear and prohibition to empowerment and education. By equipping students with critical AI literacy, we prepare them to navigate a world where AI is ubiquitous – enabling them to harness AI's benefits while remaining vigilant about its drawbacks. As one student reflected after a semester of critically using AI in class, *"I've learned that AI can help me be more creative, but I always have to put my own brain into it and not just trust the AI"*. This synthesis of human judgment and AI assistance is exactly what we should strive for. Education in the age of AI should neither ignore the technology nor surrender to it but rather guide students in a thoughtful partnership with intelligent tools. The model presented here is one step toward that vision, demonstrating how educators can lead the next generation to become critical thinkers and ethical innovators in a world with AI.

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# Relationship of School Climate and Effectiveness: Perspectives of Stakeholders and the Correlation to Academic Achievement in Elementary Schools

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## Abstract

The study explored the relationship between school climate and school effectiveness in rural elementary schools, examining Kentucky Summative Assessment (KSA) academic indicators, KSA *Quality of School Climate* and Safety scores, and *Studer Education* surveys. Results from correlation analyses indicated that school climate demonstrated a strong, positive relationship with academic performance utilizing KSA climate surveys. Consequently, *Studer Education* surveys did not reflect statistical significance, nor a strong relationship, with employee surveys indicating a negative correlation. Statistically significant positive correlations were observed among KSA academic indicators, suggesting that schools performing well in one academic area tended to perform well across others.

*Keywords:* rural elementary schools, school climate, school effectiveness, academic achievement

## Correlation to Academic Achievement in Elementary Schools

School climate plays a significant role in shaping the learning environment and influencing student outcomes. School climate refers to stakeholders' shared perceptions of relationships, safety, expectations, fairness, and the overall learning environment within a school. Unlike culture, which reflects deeply embedded values, norms, and traditions of the school that develop over time, climate is reflected in observable conditions and stakeholder perceptions (Celikten, 2006; Altunay & Kaplan, 2024). Climate is commonly understood as the more visible, surface-level expression of those underlying beliefs and values (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2023). In this way, culture helps shape climate and climate reflects how culture is currently being lived out through interactions, expectations, and routines (Ornstein, 2004). Although school climate and school culture are related constructs, this study focuses specifically on school climate because it is more reality captured through stakeholder perceptions and state accountability climate measures.

The characteristics of a school's climate influence not only the quality of the workplace for employees, but also the learning experiences and performance of students. Research has consistently suggested that schools with more positive climates tend to demonstrate higher levels of engagement, stronger relationships, and improved academic outcomes. A positive climate can support academic learning by fostering trust, strengthening student-teacher relationships, reinforcing consistent expectations, and creating conditions in which students feel safe and motivated to achieve.

School climate can be measured through concrete indicators on surveys that address relationships, sense of safety, fairness, academic support, engagement, and expectations from all school stakeholders (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2023). Climate can be captured by the perceptions of stakeholders, which may include students, staff, and parents, which can be improved with quality change. A positive school climate provides a welcoming environment, creates relationships, sustains trust, and influences students' academic achievement. Principal leadership that discovers ways to bring all students and teachers together and employs cultural sustaining pedagogies offers a climate for students to thrive (Altunay & Kaplan, 2024).

## Context

Effective schools are commonly described as those that implement a strong curriculum, maintain clear expectations, and build coherent systems that support student learning. Many models of effectiveness also emphasize the integration of academics with social-emotional learning and behavior expectations. While these components are frequently discussed as part of comprehensive school improvement, the present study defines school effectiveness through Kentucky's accountability indicators, focusing on academic performance outcomes. A healthy school climate, along with a strong evidence-based curriculum, promotes ongoing improvement and school effectiveness (Gandi et al., 2024; Hoy et al., 2006; Leithwood, et al., 2004; Macneil, et al., 2009).

## Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between school climate and school effectiveness of six elementary schools in a rural school district.

School effectiveness was defined by reading and math indicators and the overall achievement index as defined by the state's accountability assessment. The districts' combined *Studer* Education survey data sets were assessed to determine the relationship of school climate to the key elements required for school effectiveness defined by the state education department. Extensive research has reported that continuous analysis and utilization of data-driven evidence enhanced academic achievement and school effectiveness (Bayar & Karuduman, 2021; Courtney, 2022; Freeman et al., 2016; Gandi et al., 2024; Michael et al., 2023).

## Conceptual Framework

The concepts of the Systems View of School Climate (SVSC) were applied throughout the study. The core idea of the theoretical framework of SVSC is that school climate is the result of perceptions of all stakeholders within a school community. The multi-dimensional facets include social interactions, sense of safety, values, beliefs, and the academic environment (Rudasill, et al., 2018). The application of this concept would support the opinion that a positive school climate would lead to school effectiveness.

## Research Problem

This article examined the correlation between school climate and academic achievement by identifying various measures completed by diverse stakeholders to determine school climate. *Studer Education* surveys were administered at the beginning of the year to students, parents/caregivers, and all employees. The Kentucky Summative Assessment (KSA) *Quality of School Climate and Safety* survey was administered to students at the end of the year during the state accountability testing window.

## Research Question

How does school climate correlate with academic achievement?

a. How does school climate, as measured by student perspectives on the *Studer Education* survey, correlate with academic achievement?
b. How does school climate, as measured by parent/caregiver perspectives on the *Studer Education* survey, correlate with academic achievement?
c. How does school climate, as measured by employee perspectives on the *Studer Education* survey, correlate with academic achievement?
d. How does school climate, as measured by student perspectives on the KSA *Quality of School Climate and Safety* survey, correlate with academic achievement?

## Literature Review

## Culture and Climate

Research has shown the importance of a strong school culture and the impact climate has on establishing and maintaining school effectiveness (Altunay & Kaplan, 2024; Ismail, et al., 2021). Stakeholder involvement, with strong leadership that accepts and utilizes diversity (Evans, 2018;

Heiden & Saia, 2020), has led to organizational improvements to facilitate success in establishing effective schools where students thrive, attain or exceed standard proficiency, and strive for continuous improvement (Hadigah, 2024; Hegedus, 2018).

## Stakeholder Connections

According to the research study by Heiden and Saia (2020), a school's stakeholders included students, classified staff, certified teachers, school administrators, district administrators, and community members. This study determined that stakeholder engagement affected school culture through the provision of transparency and community support that improved the school's policy development.

Another research study by Hadigah (2024) reported that the school stakeholders comprised and shared unique competencies, which provided diverse benefits and contributed to a positive school culture. This study utilized stakeholders in research and practice, which enabled a community team approach to tackle common goals. The results of this study reported utilization of stakeholders in research and practice developed diversity, sustained stakeholder interest, and created a passageway to counter new challenges.

## Student Perspectives

Earlier researchers used an objectivist research design to observe, describe or measure student learning, yet this data failed to consider how students thought or felt about learning. An indicator to better understand how students learn best is to clearly understand their perspectives on learning. Becker, Geer, and Huges addressed this theoretical problem in 1968. This became the catalyst for more subjective research to emerge to investigate student perspectives on concepts related to learning such as responsibility for learning, commitment to goals, and the effect of classroom goals on the motivation to learn. In the early 2000s, a study of elementary students was conducted to fill the research gap which existed. Finding revealed that elementary students are truly interred in learning; however, variables such as an unchallenging curriculum, teacher behavior, classroom structure, and inadequate instruction hindered the learning environment and their ability to learn (Gentilucci, 2004).

As research continued in this area, a more recent qualitative phenomenology study used a semi-structured interview to examine school culture's effects on students' academic achievement from a student perspective. The students expressed that the school's behaviors, background, successes, circle of friends, school uniforms, and social activities defined the school culture. The students expressed that culture positively and strongly affected student achievement regarding motivation to study, sense of competition, and social development. The students offered suggestions to improve the school culture by increasing extracurricular activities, planning social activities, organizing trips, and improving laboratory and library resources while continuing to enhance positive attitudes and behaviors in teacher-student relationships (Bayar & Karaduman, 2021).

## Relationships

Altunay and Kaplan (2024) incorporated the distinct aspect of relationships into a study examining school culture's influence on school dynamics. The study examined ways to enhance student and teacher relationships while empowering school culture-sustaining pedagogies. These pedagogies provided favorable

environments to optimize student development and influence students' aspirations. On the other hand, another study reported that students who had perceived negative vibes, such as low expectations for success, often succumbed to that outcome. The results showed students did not care about school and failed to achieve (Marrero, 2016).

## Social Influences

Felice et al. (2023) reviewed multiple studies regarding the impact of social interaction on the acquisition of new knowledge. Their work included three areas: learner, teacher and interaction among social agents in the learning process. Early research by Vygotsky (1962, 1978) pioneered the study of the social environment on learning and development. His sociocultural theory viewed learning as an intrinsic social process. This concept has been accepted by many researchers in the area of developmental psychology (Rohlfing et. al, 2020). The review of literature supported the concept that social interaction is necessary to maximize cognitive development (Meltzoff et. al, 2009; Kuhl, 2007; Goswami, 2006); therefore, learning relies heavily on the social environment. In conclusion, Felice et al. (2023) summarized that solitary learning may not be adequate and that a key factor influencing acquisition of new knowledge may involve interaction with others. London et al. (2014) stated that school climate was determined by behavior regarding safety, relationships, and academic expectations, and referred to the overall atmosphere, environment, and quality of life within a school. The concept encompassed the physical, emotional, and social aspects of the school experience, as well as the perceptions, attitudes, and relationships of students, staff, and parents. This study examined a high-functioning recess program, reinforcing that a positive school climate was associated with favorable school outcomes, such as increased achievement and decreased problem behavior. The research team collected triangulated data from interviews, focus groups, observations, and a teacher survey to comprehend how behaviors changed during the implementation of the recess-based program, which allowed for more peer social interaction. The program offered opportunities for student engagement, conflict resolution, pro-social skill development, and emotional and physical safety. These social enhancements were determined to be an integral part of the school day and contributed to the school climate. The study reported that creating a positive recess climate helped students engage in meaningful social interactions and physical activity, enabling the student to return to class and focus on learning.

## Academic Achievement

Primary elementary grades focus on developing basic skills in reading, math, and social emotional learning (SEL) to prepare students to proficiently gain skills to learn and grow at the intermediate levels of elementary school in preparation for higher levels of more abstract skills needed in middle school, high school, and college. The Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) has determined the education standards to be mastered at each level and monitors schools for proficiency, providing an annual accountability overview of elementary schools. Literature has demonstrated the importance of using data-driven instructional strategies to set goals for staff and students that contribute to growth via heightened instructional time, expanded content delivery, and student empowerment,

which leads to improved school climate and academic improvement (Jimerson, et al., 2016; Nordengren, 2019).

## Reading and Math Instructional Relationship

Erbeli et al. (2021) examined the relationship between the cohesive developmental nature of reading and math learning. This study examined the dynamic journey of reaching benchmarks for both math and reading in Grades 1-4. The study reported that average and high levels of reading performance were associated with subsequent gains in math growth. In contrast, low levels of reading performance had negligible or no amplifying influences on change in math growth.

Hall et al. (2025) examined a reading intervention's impact on math fluency and problem-solving as well as the mechanisms of reading interventions' relationship to math fluency. Reading intervention had a small impact on math applied problem-solving. In addition, activating word-level reading skills through reading intervention impacted math fluency, which provided support for a causal mechanism of language in math fluency resulting from word-level reading ability. These results demonstrated that good reading skills influence children to develop math skills. The findings accentuate the importance of considering reading performance in treating math difficulties.

## Behavior Intervention

School climate has been shown to improve with positive behavior systems that discourage disruptive behavior with classroom management and discipline strategies such as defining clear expectations, consistent routines, using data to track progress, and reinforcing positive behavior. Research has supported equitable behavioral practices with student behavior referral and regular review of social, emotional, and behavioral screening data, and behavioral referral data (Brann et al., 2023).

Additionally, studies have shown that teachers with a greater sense of efficacy avoided inappropriate practices such as shaming, physical punishment, disrespect, or emotional degrading of children. These teachers also focused more on allowing and learning from mistakes, building autonomy, setting achievable goals, and providing support to facilitate understanding, with self-regulation techniques to generate solutions, and guide children through evaluation and reflective actions (Atiles, 2017).

## School Effectiveness

Kentucky defined school effectiveness for elementary schools through multiple measures, including the state accountability system. The key criteria assessed by KDE included reading, math, science, social studies, and writing. Additional components include English Learner progress, and school climate and safety. Not only are high levels of achievement expected but also reductions in achievement gaps, continuous improvement, and growth from previous years (KDE, 2025).

Ismail et al. (2022) conducted a quantitative study using a survey design to examine the impact of school culture on school effectiveness. Data collected from scales related to school culture and effectiveness revealed a significant influence on school effectiveness. Based on the findings, school effectiveness was enhanced by collaborative leadership, teacher collaboration, professional development,

and unity of purpose, collegial support, and learning partnerships.

Cornerstone ideals witnessed in effective schools have included a strong school culture and climate, student engagement, stakeholder and community involvement, student achievement, and proficiency of education standard benchmarks (Altunay & Kaplan, 2023; Bayer & Karuduman, 2021; Courtney, 2022; Evans, 2019; Freeman et al., 2016; Gandi et al., 2024; Ismail et al., 2021). Student and teacher engagement, principal leadership, building leadership capacity, and a continuous improvement mindset set the environment for success (Brown, 2016; Hadigah, 2024; Hegedus, 2018; Heiden & Saia, 2020; Lee & Bierman, 2016; Lynch, et al., 2017; Peddell, 2016; Ross, et al., 2016). The results of this study reflected the importance of creating a culture that empowers all school members to work toward common goals.

## Methodology

### Research Design

This quantitative research study used a correlation design to investigate the relationship between school climate and school effectiveness in a rural district's elementary schools. This design was used to explore the strength and direction of associations between the variables to determine if relationships were positive (increase or decrease together), negative (one increases as the other decreases), or nonexistent. This correlation used archival data on school climate, as represented by the district *Studer Education* surveys which were administered to employees, students, and parents/caregivers. Public data was obtained through the Kentucky Department of Education's (KDE's) School Report Card, which disclosed Kentucky Summative Assessment (KSA) *Quality of School Climate and Safety* survey results to measure climate and KSA reading and math indicators and the overall achievement index to measure academic performance.

The study examined the relationship of school climate and academic achievement, which prior research has shown a positive correlation with school effectiveness and continuous improvement (Altunay & Kaplan, 2023; Gandi et al., 2024; Ismail et al., 2021). The results can provide stakeholders data to create and maintain a cohesive vision and develop improvement plans. Communication of the progress of goals and growth are integral to gain and maintain support from stakeholders.

### Sampling

The research study's setting was a rural district's six elementary schools located in a western Kentucky county with a student population of 3,888 and 257 classroom teachers. The six elementary schools' total enrollment is 1,975, with 160 teachers and six school principals (https://reportcard.kyschools.us). Other demographics include 91.7% Caucasian, 4.2% Black, and 8.2% Hispanic, Latin American (KDE, 2025a).

The participants in this study were elementary school principals/designees in a rural school district. All six elementary schools in the district were included in the study. The primary investigator approached each elementary school principal in person to provide information about the study, asked the principal or designee to participate in the study, answered any questions, and provided them with a written consent form. The participants were asked to sign the consent and provide access to the school's database results.

## Variables

The variables measured included climate and academic achievement. The instruments used to measure the variables included the data obtained from *Studer* surveys and KSA scores. Data collection involved analysis of the school district's aggregate data sets including KSA reading and math indicators, KSA overall achievement index, KSA *Quality of School Climate and Safety* survey, and *Studer Education* surveys (student, parent/caregiver, and employees).

## Procedures for Data Analysis

This quantitative designed study used descriptive statistics (mean) and the inferential statistical analysis of Pearson's correlation coefficient to determine whether the climate of the schools, identified as A-F, correlated with academic achievement, with significance at $p < 0.05$. The research question examined how school climate correlated with academic achievement, from the perspective of various stakeholders using different instruments.

## Studer Education Surveys

The *Studer Education* surveys provided data on school climate, collecting the perceptions of experiences from the student, parent/caregiver, and employee perspectives on a 5-point Likert scale. Survey results provided the score from each stakeholder group and the overall mean survey score.

To measure school climate using the *Studer Education* surveys, results from Fall 2024-2025 were transcribed to a code sheet. The individual stakeholder results (student, parent/caregiver, employee) were indicated and the mean was calculated as an overall *Studer* mean (Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Studer Education Survey Scores*

| School | Student | Parent/Caregiver | Employee | Mean |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| A | 4.02 | 4.27 | 4.49 | 4.26 |
| B | 3.94 | 4.22 | 3.98 | 4.04 |
| C | 4.51 | 4.56 | 4.38 | 4.48 |
| D | 4.09 | 4.45 | 4.25 | 4.26 |
| E | 4.27 | 4.26 | 4.20 | 4.24 |
| F | 4.45 | 4.36 | 4.37 | 4.39 |

## KSA Data

The KSA was developed to measure the attainment of desired benchmarked standards. The KSA provided school districts with an overall performance rating of individual reading, math, science, social studies, writing scores, and an overall index rating. The index rating includes the scores for reading and math, science, social studies, and combined writing scores, as well as the results of the *Quality of the School Climate and Safety* survey. Performance in each academic area was made available and was categorized by weight as follows to determine an overall school index: reading and math indicator score (51%), science, social studies, and combined writing indicator score (40%), *Quality of School Climate and Safety* (4%), and a possible English Language Learner Progress (5%). Both the status and change data were provided to determine evidence of continuous improvement, or lack thereof. The scores were categorized as distinguished, proficient, apprentice, and novice, with ratings from highest to lowest performance, respectively. The status was also represented as a color, indicating performance levels as follows: red: very low (0-37.9), orange: low (38-54.9), yellow: medium (55-69.9), green: high (70-82.9), and blue: very high (83+).

The KSA data used for this study consisted of accountability scores for math and reading, overall achievement index, and school climate and safety for each school, A-F (Table 2). These categories were used to represent each school's academic effectiveness. The measure of school climate and safety was obtained from the KSA *Quality of School Climate and Safety* survey provided during the KSA accountability

window at the end of the 2024-2025 academic year, which served as an additional measure of school climate. School effectiveness was measured by the combined KSA reading and math indicator and the overall achievement index.

## KSA Climate and Safety Survey

The variable of climate was evaluated with the KSA's *Quality of School Climate and Safety* survey score completed by students in the spring during the state assessment window. These surveys measured how successful the school was in promoting an environment to reach the students' highest potential, create a cohesive mission, and providing a strong, safe and healthy school culture.

**Table 2**

*KSA Academic and Climate Indicators*

| School | Reading & Math Indicator | Overall Index | School Climate and Safety |
|---|---|---|---|
| A | 92.6 | 90.7 | 93.0 |
| B | 88.5 | 92.9 | 98.3 |
| C | 104.4 | 100.9 | 99.7 |
| D | 79.5 | 73.8 | 82.0 |
| E | 82.5 | 88.6 | 91.2 |
| F | 82.9 | 78.3 | 94.6 |

## Statistical Analysis for Research Questions

Pearson's correlation was conducted to examine the relationship between school climate and school effectiveness indicators across the six schools (A–F). A series of correlational analyses was conducted, applying various measures for school climate as measured by stakeholder perceptions. Additionally, these measures were explored to determine the correlation to academic scores as reported on the Kentucky School Report as reading and math indicators and overall achievement index. When analyzing data, $p < .05$ was set to determine statistical significance.

## RESULTS

Using the Pearson correlation (Table 3), a series of correlational analyses examined the relationships among the academic indicators and stakeholder perception measures regarding school climate. Statistical significance was determined by a $p < .05$.

Survey analysis revealed strong alignment between student and

parent/caregiver stakeholder groups ($r$ = .83), and both demonstrated strong associations with the Studer mean ($r$ = .90 and $r$ = .88), respectively, suggesting that the mean was influenced heavily by student and parent perceptions with statistical significance.

Analysis of survey relationships further revealed substantial alignment across stakeholder groups. Student and parent *Studer* survey scores were strongly correlated ($r$ = .83). Both the student *Studer* scores ($r$ = .90) and parent/caregiver *Studer* scores ($r$ = .88) demonstrated strong associations with the *Studer* mean, suggesting that the mean was influenced heavily by student and parent perceptions. Employee *Studer* surveys revealed that perceptions were positively associated with the *Studer* mean ($r$ = .75); however, in contrast, the employee *Studer* scores demonstrated notably weak relationships with both the overall index ($r$ = –.04) and Kentucky Summative Assessment (KSA) *Quality of School Climate and Safety* scores ($r$ = –.09), indicating a negative correlation.

Furthermore, results showed that KSA reading and math indicators demonstrated strong positive associations with the KSA *Quality of School Climate and Safety* score ($r$ = .72); however, reading and math indicators only had a slightly moderate correlation to student perceived climate when using student *Studer* survey scores ($r$ = .33), both student perceptions of climate yet completed at different times during the year.

Similarly, the overall index was strongly related to KSA *Quality of School Climate and Safety* survey ($r$ = .80), suggesting that schools with stronger accountability performance also reported more positive school environments by students during the accountability window; however, when the overall index was compared to the *Studer* student survey, the correlation was extremely low ($r$ =.15).

These results showed inconsistent findings that did not support the hypothesis that the school climate would have a strong correlation with academic achievement in reading, math, and other state accountability measures. The school climate, as defined by the KSA *Quality of School Climate and Safety* survey score, which was completed by the students at the end of the year during the testing window, showed strong correlations to reading and math indicators, along with the overall academic index. Contrasting students' perceptions of climate, as obtained by the Student *Studer Education* survey at the beginning of the year, yielded weak-to-moderate correlations. Parent and caregiver perspectives had moderate to high correlations with the academic indicators. Surprisingly, the employee perception of climate had a negative correlation to the overall academic index. These findings suggested that the strongest correlations between climate and academic achievement occurred among students at the end of the school year, when state accountability assessments were completed along with the KSA *Quality of Climate and Safety* Survey.

**Table 3**

*Pearson Correlation Matrix for KSA Reading/Math Indicators, KSA Overall Achievement Index, KSA Quality of Climate and Safety Survey, and Studer Education Surveys*

| Variables | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. KSA Reading and Math Indicator | — | .87 | .72 | .33 | .76 | .31 | .49 |
| 2. KSA Overall Achievement Index | | — | .80 | .15 | .48 | –.04 | .18 |
| 3. KSA *Quality of Climate and Safety* Score | | | — | .32 | .50 | –.09 | .25 |
| 4. Student *Studer* Survey | | | | — | .83 | .42 | .90 |
| 5. Parent/Caregiver *Studer* Survey | | | | | — | .47 | .88 |
| 6. Employee *Studer* Survey | | | | | | — | .75 |
| 7. Mean *Studer* Survey | | | | | | | — |

*Note.* Strengths of relationships: >.6 considered strong; .3 to .59 considered moderate, and .1 to .29 considered weak.

## Statistical Significance as Correlated to Academic Achievement

After reviewing all correlations, using the Pearson *r*, statistical significance was indicated on Table 4. Although not quite meeting the significance level, the overall academic index as correlated to the KSA *Quality of Climate and Survey* score neared the significance level ($r = .80$, $p = .056$), indicating a strong relationship. A statistically significant, very strong positive correlation was found between KSA reading and math indicator scores and overall index scores ($r = .87$, $p = .024$), indicating that schools with higher KSA reading and math scores also tended to receive higher overall accountability index ratings. No other correlations involving KSA scores reached statistical significance, although the relationship between KSA reading and math and parent *Studer* survey approached significance ($r = .76$, $p = .079$), along with the overall index and KSA *Quality of Climate and Safety* score ($r = .80$, $p = .056$).

Among perception-based variables, several strong and statistically significant correlations emerged. Student *Studer* survey scores were strongly and positively correlated with parent *Studer* survey ($r = .83$, $p = .041$). Student *Studer Education* scores also showed a very strong positive association with the overall *Studer* mean ($r = .90$, $p = .015$). Likewise, parent *Studer Education* scores were strongly correlated with *Studer Education* student scores ($r = .88$, $p = .021$). These findings indicated that student, parent, and mean stakeholder

perceptions were highly aligned across schools.

**Table 4**

*Pearson Correlations and p-Values for KSA Reading/Math Indicator, Overall Achievement Index, KSA Quality of Climate and Safety Score, and Studer Education Surveys*

| Variable Pair | *r* | *p* |
|---|---|---|
| Reading/Math Indicator – Overall Achievement Index | .87 | .024 |
| Reading/Math Indicator – KSA *Quality of Climate and Safety* Score | .72 | .107 |
| Reading/Math Indicator – Student *Studer* Survey | .33 | .523 |
| Reading/Math Indicator – Parent/Caregiver *Studer* Survey | .76 | .079 |
| Reading/Math Indicator – Employee *Studer* Survey | .31 | .550 |
| Reading/Math Indicator – Mean *Studer* Survey | .49 | .324 |
| Overall Index – KSA *Quality of Climate and Safety* Score | .80 | .056 |
| Overall Achievement Index – Student *Studer* Survey | .15 | .777 |
| Overall Achievement Index – Parent *Studer* Survey | .48 | .335 |
| Overall Achievement Index – Employee *Studer* Survey | –.04 | .940 |
| Overall Achievement Index – Mean *Studer* Survey | .18 | .733 |
| KSA *Quality of Climate and Safety* Score – Student *Studer* Survey | .32 | .536 |
| KSA *Quality of Climate and Safety* Score – Parent *Studer* Survey | .51 | .301 |
| KSA *Quality of Climate and Safety* Score – Employee *Studer* Survey | –.09 | .865 |
| KSA *Quality of Climate and Safety* Score – Mean *Studer* Survey | .25 | .633 |
| Student *Studer* Survey – Parent *Studer* Survey | .83 | .041 |
| Student *Studer* Survey – Employee *Studer* Survey | .42 | .407 |
| Student *Studer* Survey – Mean *Studer* Survey | .90 | .015 |
| Parent *Studer* Survey – Employee *Studer* Survey | .47 | .347 |
| Parent *Studer* Survey – Mean *Studer* Survey | .88 | .021 |
| Employee *Studer* Survey – Mean *Studer* Survey | .75 | .086 |

*Note.* Significant results ($p < .05$).

## Conclusions

Correlations for this study of six rural elementary schools were calculated by using the 2024-2025 data for the Kentucky Summative Assessment (KSA) combined reading and math indicators, overall achievement index, *Quality of School Climate and Safety* survey scores, and *Studer Education* survey scores for students, parent/caregiver, employees, and the overall *Studer* mean. This analysis indicated strong, positive relationships between reading and math academic performance, overall index scores, and KSA's *Quality of School Climate and Safety*, as well as high alignment among stakeholder perception measures. The student, parent/caregiver, and employee survey ratings were consistently interrelated, except that employee perceptions showed a negative correlation to index and climate scores and only a small correlation to reading and math indicators, with no statistical significance. This indicates a need to explore staff experience more deeply to find areas that may require growth.

## Insights and Interpretation

The robust correlation between KSA reading and math indicators and the overall achievement index implies uniformity between these two statewide accountability measures. The relationship between KSA and parent feedback indicates that schools attaining stronger academic results tend to reflect greater parental perceptions. The relationship between the overall index and climate, as indicated by the KSA *Quality of Climate and Safety* score that neared statistical significance, suggests that more effective school performance is associated with more positive student perceptions of the school environment when assessed by students at the end of the school year during the assessment window.

The strongest band of relationships emerged from the student, parent, employee, and *Studer Education* mean variables, which suggests alignment among the stakeholder perceptions, inferring schools viewed positively by one group are likely viewed positively by others. The employee perceptions were not strongly correlated with academic or climate measurements. This difference may underline disparities in staff experience or internal operational issues that do not immediately surface in academic indicators.

## Academic Achievement and Climate

The KSA *Quality of School Climate and Safety* survey also provided data related to climate, which was included in the schools' index scores. This survey was completed by students in Grades 3-6 at each elementary school. The KSA score for *Quality of School Climate and Safety* ranged from 82 to 99.7, with a district-wide elementary school mean score of 91.5 (Table 2). These results indicate that the student-reported school's climate and safety environment was conducive to learning and growth.

In contrast, negative correlations from the *Studer* employee survey, although not statistically significant, were derived from employees with vastly different roles and responsibilities. The data may not reflect a correlation with academics due to the dilution factor of the mixed survey group. The employees who completed the surveys included certified teachers, non-certified instructional staff, and classified employees. The perceptions of these combined employee groups may be shaped by factors that differ from those influencing academic outcomes.

## Conclusion

This study explored the relationship of school climate to school effectiveness. School effectiveness was measured by the KSA academic indicators. The descriptive measures of calculated means and inferential statistics of Pearson's correlation provided support for the school district's effectiveness at the elementary school level. These findings provide a data-informed foundation for planning and monitoring school improvement efforts across the schools included in this study.

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# The Counselors' Role in Assessment: A Qualitative Study of Current School Counselors and Their Responsibilities with Assessment

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## Abstract

Designed to learn more about the responsibilities of school counselors in regard to assessment, a survey was conducted in central Kentucky with current school counseling professionals. The method for this study included a qualitative approach as current school counselors reflected on ten questions presented to them in the form of a survey. These questions allowed for participants to describe which, if any, of their school counselor roles pertained to assessment planning, practice, implementation, and/or analysis. were gathered from elementary, middle, and high school counselors. Results tabulated from throughout the state revealed: while some public-school counselors spearheaded assessments within their schools, others provided more of a supporting role. It is suggested that administrators become aware of the ASCA framework and the counselor's role as it was designed. While it may not include all aspects of assessment, it does reference the assessment practices counselors should oversee.

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*Keywords:* assessment, collaboration, support, application, analysis

## Introduction

The school counselor's role is everchanging in Kentucky schools. With recent legislation, school counseling has been redefined. While some schools focus on their school counselor having a flexible approach to spending the majority of their time with students to support them both socially and emotionally, other schools have redefined the school counselor role to include responsibilities pertaining to assessment. Although the intention of this assignment is to have an additional person supporting students in their assessment goals, it can be burdensome for the counselor to forgo their opportunities to support social and emotional needs of students in an effort to complete the necessary paperwork and procedures related to the responsibilities of overseeing assessment.

## Literature Review

McGahey, Arenal-Mullen, & Akpan (2017) examined the roles assigned to school counselors and were troubled by the trend of a school counselor serving in the role as administrator, coordinator, and facilitator of state assessments. Instead of these direct roles with assessment, McGahey, Arenal-Mullen, & Akpan (2017) reminds readers that ASCA recommends for the majority of a school counselor's time to be served in direct service to students, (p. 82). Olsen, Foxx, Flowers, & Hayakawa (2021) shared from Nelson et al., 2008; Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008) "High school counselors spend more time on non-school counseling activities and administrative tasks, less time working directly with students than they prefer," (p. 34). Olsen, Foxx, Flowers, & Hayakawa (2021) shared in their finding of their study of 4,598 K-12 counselors that were current ASCA members "the majority of school counselors spend little time on important activities such as establishing program foundations (e.g. mission statement) and collecting, disaggregating, and analyzing data to make program decisions and meet the needs of underserved student populations," (p. 39).

Burnham, Fye, Jackson, Ocampo, & Clark (2024) reiterated in their introduction of their 2024 study ASCA's 2019 non-guidance/counseling responsibilities to include: "building a master schedule, coordinating testing, serving as a substitute, computing grade-point averages, writing individual education plans and entering data," (p. 3). Their study included 291 practicing school counselors. The responsibilities related to testing, when they analyzed their participants, were responsibilities of 269/291 participants so 92% of their total participants communicated they were involved in testing and assessment. All of these participants reflected that their assessment responsibilities included interpreting assessment results to parents, however approximately 68% of these participants were directly involved in coordinating testing at their schools, and 70% of them conducted in-service training on testing, (p. 6).

## Methodology

This study was a qualitative study collecting qualitative information and current school counselors on their roles and responsibilities related to Assessment. The interview questions were created in relation to the lens in which they viewed assessment as a portion of their responsibilities while

serving as a school counselor. Some of the questions probed knowledge of assessment terms which would be linked to the application of assessment. In some schools, the school counselor may serve as a member of an MTSS team and collaborate with colleagues in the formation of Intervention groups or they may be required to apply assessment results to student scheduling. To assess the participants' level of accountability in matters of assessment, there were questions related to the familiarity of current laws and regulations related to Educational Assessment, as well as the location for resources, they could access to increase their knowledge of current assessment laws and regulation. An additional question inquired on the counselor's role in interpretation of assessments followed up by questions connected to assessment validity and reliability, as well as the risks invalid and unreliable assessment tools could have on accurate assessment analysis. Additional questions inquired on the counsleor's role in implementation or design for assessment. Some schools require their school counselor to be the Assessment Coordinator for their school which means they would be required to design the school environment for state assessment including the compliance with overseeing the proctors and volunteers who would be partnering with the school counselor to provide modifications or accommodations to students with special needs when implementing the state assessment. A question related to collaborative partnerships to interpret or make decisions based on test results was included in the survey, along with a question that inquired on technology tools used for the administration, analysis, and reflection of various forms of assessment.

## Data Collection

Data collection occurred through the implementation of a google forms survey of ten questions as described in the design section of this article. There were twelve participants who responded to these questions, and their experience spanned elementary, middle, and high school settings. Their questions were open ended so the participants had flexibility to answer their questions without restrictions.

## Data Analysis

The data analysis process began by looking at how the responses were weighted across placements. All participants in this study were school counselors serving within public schools, however, the majority of these participants (41.7%) were serving in high school placements. The next largest category of participants was serving in elementary (33.3%), with the smallest category of participants (25%) serving at the middle school level (see Figure 1).

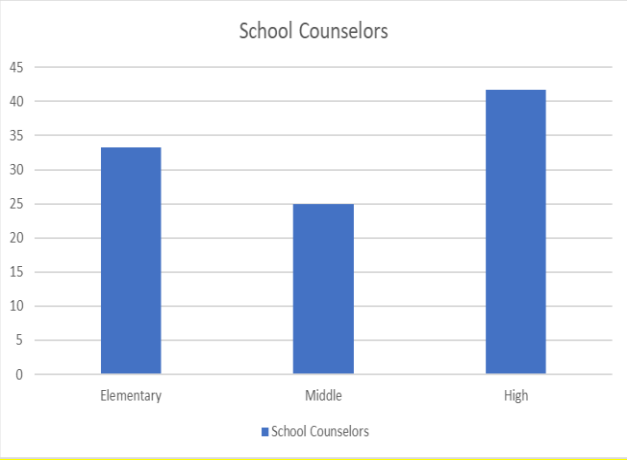


Figure 1 Graph of Participants

Clarke & Braun (2013) shared in their perspectives of qualitative research that

seeking to understand data through the lens of context is of utmost importance. Since the questions in this study were open-ended questions (See Figure 2), the themes considered in the analysis of this data did not only view the assessment responsibilities of current school counselors as a whole, but also looking within, through the lens of their location in which they serve (elementary, middle, or high school).

Figure 2 Survey Questions

1. What are some specific terms related to P-12 assessment that you and your collaborative partners discuss throughout your school year? (ex. mean, median, mode, gap groups, statistics, scales, standard deviation, etc.)
2. Do you feel you are familiar with current laws and regulations related to educational assessment?
   (Yes or No)
3. If yes, how do you stay current on laws and regulations related to educational assessment?
4. If no, are you aware of resources or contacts of individuals who can provide you with information relating to current laws and regulations related to educational assessment?
5. What is your knowledge of mathematical constructs and how do you utilize them in interpreting test scores?
6. Are you familiar with the terms: validity and reliability?
7. Please identify the threats you are aware of related to validity and reliability in assessment including potential bias.
8. As a school counselor, what application of analysis and/or the improvement of assessment practices have you been a part of in your school counseling role? (ex. as related to needs assessments, high stakes assessments, standardized achievement tests, aptitude tests, behavior tests, personality tests, and/or college and career inventory assessments etc.)
9. Please share about your responsibilities and knowledge in the design or collaborative partnerships you participate within, to plan for the accommodations of students during assessment.
10. What technology tools do you use in your current role related to student assessment to assist you with designing, accommodating, interpreting, or communicating results of student assessment?

The themes that emerged from the responses to the questions revealed themselves, allowing theories to not be constricted to pre-determined themes, but from inductive reasoning surrounding the authentic responses (Clark & Braun, 2013). To understand what the research revealed,

an open coding took place, categorizing responses according to similarities while revealing each participant's reflections.

## Results

The study began with examining the participant's response of terms they were familiar with which they affiliated with assessment. It was found their responses could be divided into two categories. 'Category A: Terms related to Reporting of Data: benchmark, gap groups, mean, median, mode, standard deviation, tiers, statistics, scales, averages, and percentiles. Category B: Terms related to assessment tools, or the purpose of assessment: progress monitoring, STAR testing, special education evaluations, IEPs, 504s, and Kentucky State Assessment data.

By reviewing the terms that these individuals shared they were most familiar, it appears their exposure to data was more related to responding to data vs. preparation for planning or instruction. In having served in public schools as a school counselor these authors could indeed see that it appears conversations of assessment for current school counselors continue to connect to the often role school counselors play in P-12 schools, that of which is serving on a Multi-Tiered System of Support Team. Other terms they were familiar with appear to connect to the school counselor fulfilling the role of chairing 504 and IEP meetings. These results revealed that career assessments, needs assessments, and threat assessments which are often implemented by the school counselor, were not the first connection to assessment these current school counselors considered. Although the school counselor's role is described as a multi-faceted role within school to promote academic, career, and personal development of students (Education Advanced, 2024), the first ideas of assessment to these counselors were more academic related than for the other two categories. According to the ASCA National Model (2025) at least 80% of a school counselor's time should be in direct and indirect student services, but unfortunately many school counselors spend their time in what ASCA references as inappropriate school counseling activities: "coordinating school-wide individual education plans, 504 plans, student study teams, response to intervention plans, MTSS and school attendance review boards," (ASCA, 2025).

In Question Three, these individuals were asked if they felt familiar with current laws and regulations related to educational assessment, 67% of them felt they were familiar, while 33% did not feel they were as familiar. However, these participants mentioned in their responses to Question Four which inquired on resources or contacts they could check with on legislations and laws related to the assessment, that their District Assessment Coordinator, through various PD opportunities, and their Building Assessment Coordinator would be options to assist them with staying informed on regulations and in some cases, even their Deputy Superintendent would be a contact option for these matters. Also, some of the participants mentioned KDE weekly emails were electronic resources that would assist them staying current on knowledge and regulations related to assessment.

In Question Five, participants were also asked to reference mathematical constructs which they utilize to interpret test scores. It was interesting that 42% of the participants in this study responded they had little to no knowledge pertaining to mathematical constructs as there were other

individuals in their schools who worked more with assessment data. One person mentioned they felt comfortable in organizing data for analysis, another provided more specifics of their encounters with mathematical concepts related to percentages, averages, identifying student needs, and monitoring their growth. A third person shared they were familiar with some construction of data in creating line plots and pie charts to provide visuals of data for their colleagues. The background of one counselor was shared to include a past career in speech therapy, which she shared aided in her assessment knowledge.

Another counselor mentioned how an assessment workshop hosted by Scott Tremble, a representative from the Kentucky Association for Assessment Coordinators, equipped her with skills and knowledge to apply in her interpretation of test scores. Terms like central tendency, percentiles, validity indicators, tiers, and intervention groups were also found in the responses shared relating to their knowledge as school counselors in their interpretations of various mathematical constructs.

When in Question Six, the participants were asked to share their understanding of validity and reliability, there appeared to be a large gap between their familiarity with the term validity (81.8%) vs. familiarity with the term reliability (18.2%). (See Figure 3)

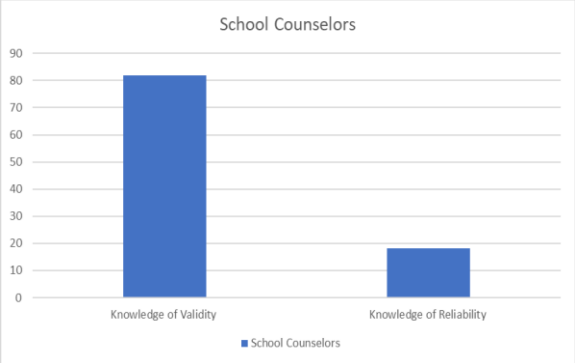


Figure 3: Participant knowledge of the terms of validity vs reliability.

In reflecting on the individual responses, only one school counselor who served in a middle school and one school counselor who served in an elementary school, shared they were familiar with the term "reliability." There was one participant who shared they did not really know what either term means. On the other hand, the majority of participants did describe one or both terms.

It appeared their responses to Question Seven on potential threats to validity and reliability could be categorized in two categories: Description A. Invalid or Unreliable Assessment Data Recognition and Description B: Other related terms. Description A. Invalid or Unreliable Assessment Data Recognition: can be recognized by the teacher when students have experienced trauma vs interventions which mean the interventions are implemented inconsistently and would affect validity, as well as be impacted by the lack of student motivation, increased distractions, lack of fidelity, and/or lack of triangulation of data. Description B: Other related terms: can show measurement related to bias, poor samplings, sampling bias, measurement errors, the consistency in the implementation of accommodations, and modifications after the measurement of data.

These results did reveal the necessity in recognizing both of the terms: validity and reliability. However, for this section, the connection and understanding of reliability appeared to be the term that they were not as familiar with. One individual interpreted the term reliability as unrelated to the tool but focused on if the results would be reliable based on a student's access to their required accommodations. Another counselor reflected on reliability as being impacted by proctor training. Although both of these perspectives are correct, these researchers were surprised there was not as much focus in their response on the scoring of an assessment, or the assessment tool when considering assessment reliability. The most intriguing response was reliability being questioned through the triangulation of data. This again related to looking through the lens of these results versus the reliability of the assessment tool itself, and if the results they triangulated were skewed or valid.

In Question Eight, these individuals were to reflect on their involvement and application of analysis and improvement of assessment practices. Two individuals mentioned they did not have any responsibilities related to this practice; others gave some specific responsibilities they had regarding this role. One specific individual mentioned standards-based assessment analysis, but that it did not play a role in content design. Two individuals described their role that included identifying groupings for assessment implementation, location of assessments being administered, keeping a record of accommodations needed by each student, and assigning individuals to provide those accommodations when assessments were given. A third individual mentioned they were involved in administering the assessments but did not analyze the data retrieved from those assessments. A fourth individual looked at data disaggregation, comparative analysis, trend analysis, and assisted in identifying targeted interventions. BIPs, Pre and Post Assessments, IReady, STAR, standardized achievement tests, KSA, KYOTE, and CERT were assessments found in Question Eight Responses that were not originally going to be part of a school counselors' role in planning for assessment. Thankfully, there were two participants who mentioned participating in assessment analysis for behavior assessments (FBAs), postsecondary readiness assessments, and needs assessments including screeners used for connecting students with Family Resource Coordinator (FRC) services, were more the type of assessments these researchers and ASCA would have planned for school counselors to oversee. ASCA 2025 defines the tools and assessments of which counselors should administer to be reflective of student and school needs specifically to: "Monitor students across life readiness, and academic success," (p .8).

In Question 9, the researchers wondered about the collaborative partnerships these current counselors participated in within their roles of assessment, and in planning for accommodations of students during assessment. To familiarize their context of these collaborative partnerships and to see how the answers varied according to placement, the researchers divided these responses into categories of High School Counselors, Middle School Counselors, and Elementary School Counselors. High School Counselors shared their collaborative partnerships to including their Special Education coordinators. Another individual shared that their co-counselor partnered with them in this role. However, a participant/counselor mentioned that currently she completes all of the assessment responsibilities herself.

Middle School Counselors shared their collaborative partnerships. One participant shared they collaborate with those they assign to administer the assessments, while the other shared they regularly collaborate with their Building Assessment Coordinator, their 504 team members and those who serve with her on an ARC (Administration Release Committee) which serves students who have an Individual Education Plan (IEP).

Elementary School Counselors shared that their collaborative partnerships included the trainers they had in preparation for the assessment windows, their proctors, and case managers they assigned for assessment implementation, Special Education teachers and staff along with administrators, often plan and implement assessment accommodations for students with IEPs and 504 plans, and one participant with an FRC was able to work with the administration of needs assessments. Question 10 inquired on student's perception of technology used in their school counseling role. Those mentioned were Tableau, Excel, Infinite Campus, Google, ViewSonic, and platforms related to assessment data management systems such as STAR and I-Ready etc.

## Discussion

Previous research has tackled the perception of roles for school counselors. The school counselor is ultimately to be aligned with a proactive perspective in providing support for students who complete assessments to guide them in achievement. It is also important that school counselors are equipped to execute their assigned roles in a productive manner, so in the reflection of this data, the multi-faceted role of a school counselor is spliced again as many of these participants have assessment as their responsibility at their home school. However, it does appear they will need additional support, to be successful in this role and for some of these participants, that was not their current reality. For others, they have individuals at the district or state level they must depend on, in their preparation for these responsibilities.

## Limitations and Delimitations

Although there is a small sample size involved in this study, when compared to previous studies, there continues to be a concern over the assessment responsibilities of school counselors. In reflection of the survey tool used to measure the counselor's roles with assessment responsibilities, there are features of some of the questions to consider, (see Figure 2).

Question 1 on the specific terms related to assessment that showed the provided list of terms for counselors to connect, were more teacher related and this could have had an impact on the participants' response.

In Question 2 when analyzing the participant responses through the lens of their job setting, it appeared the counselors who served in the middle school were those who felt the least familiar with legislation and laws related to assessment. These researchers wondered what some of the possible reasons for this trend could be. Is it possible that in the middle school setting counselors are not as involved in the administration and analysis of assessment as they are in the elementary or high school settings?

In Question 3 when reflecting on the reliability of the assessment, is it

possible that because often school counselors are carrying out the expectations of the state in overseeing the state assessment, there is an assumption of reliability? Also, in the cases of MAP and Iready, those assessments are nationally normal, so there are also possible assumptions that both are very reliable because of the national presence of both exams. However, it is the researcher who has firsthand knowledge that these testing options often replace one another in a district for reasons that pertain to the question of which exam is more reliable. There are also other universal screeners that are being explored by some districts in addition to NWEA, MAP and IReady. In the other questions that appeared in this survey, limitations and delimitations were not of as much concern as the phrasing of the questions that appeared to be more straightforward.

## Conclusion

Administrators need to be aware of the ASCA framework and the counselor's role as it was designed. While it may not include all aspects of assessment, it does so for the assessment practices counselors should oversee. They also need to reflect the meeting of student's needs as a whole. Collaboration opportunities for school counselors should include working with stakeholders not necessarily to analyze data, or to administer assessment, or to directly play a role in the analysis of assessment data, but rather to partner with P-12 and community partners to provide necessary support and assistance for students'

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# The Principal Well-Being Crisis: Examining Workload Isolation, and Sustainability in Kentucky School Leadership

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## Abstract

This mixed-methods study examines the working conditions and well-being of Kentucky principals through surveys (N = 66), focus groups (24 principals and 15 superintendents), and analysis of the Impact KY Working Conditions Survey (2023–2024). *The well-being crisis among school principals is not merely an individual concern but a systemic issue operating at school, district, and state levels, with far-reaching implications for schools and students.* Findings reveal a profession under significant strain, with principals reporting inadequate support to meet the complex demands of an ever-evolving role. Key themes include excessive workload, professional isolation, emotional exhaustion, and the 24/7 nature of the principalship that threatens sustainability in the role. Principals cite time constraints, compliance burdens, and lack of work-life balance as primary barriers to effectiveness and well-being. The Impact KY data revealed significant perception gaps, with principals rating working conditions 19–33 points higher than teachers, suggesting leadership may not fully recognize the depth of challenges facing both principals and staff. Both principals and teachers identified resources and emotional well-being as areas of greatest concern. The study documents how compliance requirements, inadequate staffing, and limited mental health supports contribute to principal burnout and attrition. Findings call for strengthened mentorship systems, policy streamlining, increased operational support, and coordinated well-being initiatives across state agencies, districts, and universities to ensure principal effectiveness and retention.


*Keywords:* principal well-being, workload, professional isolation, burnout, principal retention

## Introduction

School principals serve as the linchpin of educational systems, directly influencing school culture, instructional quality, and student achievement at the school level. Research demonstrates that differences in principal effectiveness through their school-level leadership practices, can translate into substantial student outcomes. For example, replacing a principal performing at the 25th percentile with one at the 75th percentile can increase annual student learning in math and reading by nearly three months (Grissom et al., 2021, p. 4). Despite this documented impact, the principalship has become increasingly unsustainable, raising concerns about the capacity of school leaders to sustain effective practice under escalating demands. Principals face mounting pressures from accountability systems, staffing shortages, student mental health crises, and ever-expanding compliance demands. Little to no support exists for their own well-being.

The well-being crisis among school principals is not merely an individual concern but a systemic issue with cascading implications for schools and students. Principal turnover disrupts school improvement efforts and negatively affects teacher retention, as new leadership often means significant shifts in school vision and instructional priorities (Snodgrass Rangel, 2017). When principals experience burnout and leave their positions, schools lose institutional knowledge and stability precisely when consistency is most needed for sustained improvement.

This study investigated Kentucky principals' professional well-being through the lens of workload, isolation, and sustainability. Using mixed-methods data from principal surveys, focus groups with both principals and superintendents, and analysis of the statewide Impact KY Working Conditions Survey, the lived realities of school leadership in Kentucky was examined. This work explores three central concepts:
(a) In which domains do principals and superintendents perceive the greatest need for support to improve working conditions and well-being? (b) What factors contribute to principal workload, isolation, and emotional exhaustion? (c) How do principals perceive support from state and local educational agencies in addressing these well-being concerns?

The findings revealed a profession at a critical juncture. While principals demonstrate extraordinary dedication to their school communities, systemic challenges threaten their capacity to sustain effective leadership. This article documents these challenges and proposes coordinated interventions to support principal well-being and retention.

## Literature Review

The literature on principal well-being, working conditions, and sustainability reveals consistent themes across contexts and time periods. This review examined research on working conditions, autonomy, professional isolation, and turnover. These are factors that directly influence a principal's capacity to lead effectively and sustainably.

## Working Conditions and Principal Effectiveness

Working conditions significantly impact a principal's ability to lead effectively. Principal burnout and turnover are fueled by excessive administrative tasks, increasingly high demands of the job, and inadequate resources (Rangel, 2017). Over time, the principalship has expanded beyond a primary focus on instructional leadership to encompass crisis management, mental

health coordination, legal compliance, and community relations—often without corresponding increases in support staff or resources. Research has consistently recommended reducing bureaucratic burdens on principals, increasing access to support staff, and fostering positive district–principal relationships to counteract these challenges (Grissom & Loeb, 2011).

Districts that invest in leadership development, recruitment, and ongoing support are more likely to experience stable and effective leadership across schools (Wallace Foundation, 2015). However, many principals report that their working conditions prevent them from focusing on instructional leadership activities most closely linked to student achievement. When principals spend disproportionate time on managerial and operational duties rather than instructional leadership, both their effectiveness and well-being are diminished, reinforcing concerns about the long-term sustainability of the role.

## Autonomy and Self-Efficacy

Autonomy is another critical factor influencing principal effectiveness and well-being. Principals benefit from increased decision-making authority, which allows them to tailor instructional approaches and allocate resources in ways that align with the unique needs of their schools (Leithwood et al., 2020). Research has shown that principals' self-efficacy is strongly associated with job autonomy, job satisfaction, and perceived contextual constraints (Federici, 2012). When district and state compliance requirements limit principals' ability to respond to local conditions, both confidence and performance suffer.

Support from district leadership in reducing unnecessary mandates and increasing flexibility in budgeting and staffing decisions enables principals to focus more fully on instructional leadership and school improvement efforts. Addressing these constraints by providing principals with appropriate authority and support can enhance leadership capacity and job satisfaction (Federici, 2012). Nevertheless, many principals continue to describe feeling caught between accountability pressures from above and operational realities on the ground, with insufficient latitude to exercise professional judgment.

## Professional Isolation and Decision-Making Burden

The principalship is inherently isolating. Principals are required to make final decisions on matters ranging from personnel issues and student discipline to ethical dilemmas, child-welfare reporting, and crisis response, often with limited opportunities for support due to confidentiality requirements. This isolation is compounded by the pace and volume of decisions principals must make daily. Earlier research on principal working conditions has demonstrated that the combination of high-stakes decision-making, confidentiality constraints, and rapid task demands contributes to emotional exhaustion and a persistent sense of professional isolation.

Recent scholarship has further conceptualized isolation as a structurally produced feature of leadership work rather than an individual characteristic. Contemporary research on leader loneliness highlights how leadership contexts create distinctive pathways to social disconnectedness through reduced peer equivalence, impression management pressures, and limited safe spaces for candid sense-making, making isolation consequential for leader judgment and well-being (Lam et al., 2024). Empirical studies focused specifically on principals echo these dynamics. Dor-Haim (2022) documented

how principals experience both episodic loneliness associated with acute events and ongoing day-to-day loneliness embedded within routine role structures, underscoring that isolation is a patterned feature of the principalship itself.

Isolation also interacts with the fragmentation and intensity of principals' daily work. Large-scale observational studies reveal that principals' workdays are highly fragmented, dominated by short task episodes and frequent interruptions—conditions that intensify decision fatigue, limit reflective problem-solving, and reduce opportunities for sustained relational leadership that might otherwise buffer isolation (Grissom et al., 2025). These findings extend earlier literature by demonstrating how workload structure and time fragmentation exacerbate both decision-making burden and emotional strain.

At the same time, research suggests that social connection functions as a critical protective resource for principals. Professional learning communities, peer networking opportunities, and mentorship structures enhance principals' ability to share best practices and receive ongoing support (Goldring et al., 2012). Longitudinal evidence further indicates that principals' social capital—including internal and external professional ties—is meaningfully associated with well-being, supporting the argument that networked professional support can buffer strain arising from high demands and limited opportunities to share responsibility (Beausaert et al., 2023). Related research from pandemic and post-pandemic contexts reinforces the conclusion that principal stress is shaped by the balance between job demands and available resources, suggesting that isolation and decision burden are system-conditioned experiences that can be mitigated through organizational supports, collegial networks, and role-appropriate staffing and boundary protections (Upadyaya et al., 2021).

Despite consistent recommendations in the literature, access to sustained mentorship and collegial networks remains uneven across districts and states. Structured mentorship programs and principal networks are frequently identified as essential supports, yet they remain inconsistently implemented, leaving many principals to shoulder complex decision-making responsibilities in relative isolation.

## Principal Turnover and Sustainability

Principal turnover remains a persistent challenge with implications for school stability and student achievement. Turnover rates are influenced by job dissatisfaction, lack of administrative support, and challenging working conditions (Snodgrass Rangel, 2017). High turnover disrupts school improvement efforts and negatively affects teacher retention, as leadership transitions often result in shifts in school vision, priorities, and instructional focus.

Research indicates that investments in principal development and support can mitigate turnover and promote leadership stability. Wallace Foundation studies have shown that strategic investments in principal preparation and development, when paired with effective hiring practices, are associated with gains in student learning and teacher satisfaction (Wallace Foundation, 2015; Grissom et al., 2021). However, these investments must extend beyond skill development to address systemic conditions—including workload, professional isolation, autonomy constraints, and insufficient organizational support—that undermine principals' capacity to sustain long-term leadership in demanding contexts.

## Method

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods design to investigate Kentucky principals' well-being, working conditions, and sustainability in the role. Under the direction of the Kentucky Department of Education, a subgroup of the University Principal Preparation Initiative conducted the research using multiple data sources to triangulate findings and provide both breadth and depth of understanding.

## Participants

### *Principal Survey*

The principal needs survey was distributed to all head principals across Kentucky through state listservs, university educator preparation provider representatives, and education cooperatives. Sixty-six principals completed the survey, representing all eight educational cooperative regions: Central Kentucky Educational Cooperative (22%), Green River Regional Educational Cooperative (19%), Kentucky Educational Development Cooperation (6%), Kentucky Valley Educational Cooperative (3%), Northern Kentucky Cooperative for Educational Services (1%), Ohio Valley Educational Cooperative (12%), Southeast South-Central Educational Cooperative (12%), and West Kentucky Educational Cooperative (24%).

Respondents were evenly distributed by gender (51% male, 49% female). The majority described their setting as rural (64%), with 24% suburban and 12% urban. Seventy-five percent led Title I schools. School levels represented included elementary (40%), high school (30%), middle school (15%), and other configurations (15%). In terms of experience, 39% had served 0–3 years as principal, 27% had 4–7 years, 15% had 8–12 years, and 19% had 13 or more years of experience.

### *Focus Groups*

Twenty-four principals and 15 superintendents participated in focus groups conducted either in person or virtually. Focus group questions explored principals' daily challenges, factors influencing their well-being, sources of support, and sustainability in the role. The protocol received Institutional Review Board approval, and all participants signed informed consent documents. Sessions were recorded, transcribed, and coded to maintain anonymity.

Focus group participants represented diverse locales based on National Center for Education Statistics classifications. Among principals, 10 served in rural districts, 8 in town settings, 4 in suburban areas, and 2 in urban contexts. Among superintendents, 9 led rural districts, 2 served towns, and 4 led suburban districts. Gender distribution among principals included 10 females and 14 males; among superintendents, 2 females and 13 males participated. Furthermore, focus group participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation across geographic regions (within Kentucky), district types, and leadership roles. Principals and superintendents were recruited through district leadership networks, educational cooperatives, professional associations, and partnerships affiliated with the University Principal Preparation Initiative. Participation was voluntary, and no incentives were provided.

### *Impact KY Working Conditions Survey*

The Impact KY Working Conditions Survey, administered biennially to all Kentucky educators, provided data on teachers', principals', and other education professionals' experiences and working conditions. The 2023–2024 administration yielded 39,406 respondents. The survey measured favorability across nine domains: staff-leadership relationships, educating all students, school leadership, managing

student behavior, school climate, professional learning, feedback and coaching, emotional well-being and belonging, and resources.

## Procedure and Data Analysis

Survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify patterns in principals' experiences and perceptions. Survey questions aligned with Impact KY categories, allowing for comparison between principal self-reports and statewide working conditions data. Many survey questions permitted respondents to select up to three choices, with results reported as percentages indicating the proportion of respondents who selected each item.

Focus group transcripts underwent thematic analysis using Artificial Intelligence (AI) to identify initial patterns and candidate themes. AI-generated outputs were treated as a preliminary analytic scaffold rather than final findings. Members of the research team independently reviewed transcripts alongside AI-identified themes to verify alignment with participant language and intent. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved through researcher consensus, and themes were refined to ensure they were grounded in the raw data and accurately represented participant perspectives.

The convergent design allowed for integration of quantitative survey data, qualitative focus group narratives, and existing statewide survey data. This triangulation strengthened findings by revealing where different data sources confirmed common themes and where they illuminated different dimensions of principal well-being and working conditions.

## Results

The findings revealed four major themes related to principal well-being and sustainability: (a) overwhelming workload and time constraints, (b) professional isolation and decision-making burden, (c) emotional exhaustion and work-life imbalance, and (d) significant perception gaps between principals and teachers. Each theme was supported by converging evidence from surveys, focus groups, and Impact KY data. While both principal and superintendent focus groups addressed overlapping topics, superintendent contributions most frequently emphasized issues related to decision-making burden, delegation, and leadership isolation; therefore, superintendent perspectives are most prominently reflected within that thematic area.

### Theme 1: Overwhelming Workload and Time Constraints

Principals consistently identified time as the most significant barrier to effectiveness. When asked what factor hindered their ability to provide meaningful feedback to teachers, 77% of survey respondents selected time constraints. This finding aligned with focus group narratives describing days filled with competing urgent demands that leave little room for instructional leadership.

Focus group participants described the principalship as requiring constant decision-making—what one principal characterized as "a thousand decisions" daily. Principals reported that the pace and volume of work make it difficult to prioritize instructional leadership activities. One principal noted spending "75 to 80 percent of my day managing special education issues," leaving minimal time for classroom observations, teacher coaching, or curriculum leadership.

The workload extends beyond the school day. Multiple principals described the 24/7 nature of the position, with one reflecting, "I took five days off in June, but my phone rang all day, every day." The constant connectivity through digital

communication means principals never fully disconnect from work responsibilities, contributing to exhaustion and preventing recovery time essential for sustained performance.

Principals identified several factors contributing to excessive workload. Survey respondents cited being asked to take on too many responsibilities (71%) and lack of staffing to address critical issues (59%) as factors contributing to negative well-being. In focus groups, principals described intensifying student needs—particularly in special education and mental health—without corresponding increases in specialized support staff. One principal explained: "Fourteen years ago, I'd get 70 applicants for one position. Now, I'm lucky if I get five—and sometimes none of them are qualified."

Compliance requirements emerged as another significant contributor to workload. Principals expressed frustration with state and federal policy demands that detract from instructional priorities. They voiced particular concern about the timing and utility of state assessment data, noting that delayed results make it impossible to use data for instructional improvement within the same year. One stated: "Science scores don't arrive until December," rendering the data largely irrelevant for current students and teachers.

Principals characterized many mandates as "compliance, not improvement," contributing little student value while consuming substantial administrative time. Frequent policy shifts compound this burden. One principal commented: "I need to know a year in advance if we're going to take the ACT or SAT. How do I plan for something that changes every summer?" This unpredictability prevents strategic planning and forces principals into reactive rather than proactive leadership.

### Theme 2: Professional Isolation and Decision-Making Burden

The isolating nature of the principalship emerged as a powerful theme across focus groups. Principals described decision-making as both isolating and emotionally taxing, particularly when decisions involved confidential personnel, student discipline, or ethical matters. One reflected, "Until you become the principal, you don't realize they really want you to make them—it's your decision."

The confidentiality inherent in many principal decisions limits opportunities for support. As one principal shared, "You can't always talk about what's weighing on you. Sometimes you just carry it." This inability to process difficult decisions with others contributes to the emotional burden of leadership. Principals noted that the weight of high-stakes decisions, combined with their confidential nature, creates a pervasive sense of isolation.

Survey data revealed that principals value trust as central to their work, with 77% identifying the level of trust and openness between leadership and staff as the factor most positively influencing their ability to engage teachers in shared decision-making. However, Impact KY data showed that trust between principals and faculty was one of the lowest-rated subcategories in the staff-leadership relationship domain, suggesting a disconnect between principals' perceptions and teachers' experiences.

This disconnect may relate to principals' difficulty with delegation. Superintendents in focus groups identified deficits in principal candidates' ability to delegate and distribute leadership, noting that "leaders must develop teams—they cannot do it alone." Yet principals in focus groups acknowledged struggling with delegation, contributing to their sense of

being overwhelmed and isolated in decision-making.

The emotional toll of decision-making extends beyond workload to the nature of decisions themselves. Principals described the tension between doing what is ethically right and managing the emotional consequences of those actions, such as reporting families to authorities or addressing staff misconduct. One superintendent noted the importance of transparency about these challenges, warning that aspiring principals need mentors who will be "100% transparent about what the job entails."

### Theme 3: Emotional Exhaustion and Work-Life Imbalance

Principals openly acknowledged the toll the position takes on personal well-being. When asked what factors would improve emotional well-being among staff, 80% of survey respondents selected improved work-life balance—the highest percentage for any factor. This finding suggests principals recognize that sustainable professional practice requires reasonable boundaries between work and personal life.

However, achieving work-life balance proves elusive for many principals. The constant connectivity of digital communication and pressure to be ever-present contribute to emotional exhaustion. Focus group participants described difficulty establishing boundaries, with the job's demands bleeding into evenings, weekends, and vacation time. Many principals expressed desire for district and state-level recognition of the importance of principal wellness, including structured time off, mental health supports, and reasonable workloads.

Impact KY data revealed that emotional well-being and belonging was the second-lowest rated category among both teachers (53% favorable) and principals (77% favorable). While principals rated this domain more favorably than teachers, a 77% favorability rating still indicated significant concern. Only 44% of teachers and notably higher percentages of principals responded favorably regarding their own personal emotional well-being as a result of work. Additionally, only 34% of teachers expressed favorable views about concern for colleagues' emotional well-being.

Principals identified multiple contributors to negative well-being. Survey data showed challenging student behaviors (73%) and being asked to take on too many responsibilities (71%) as top factors. The intensification of student needs—particularly mental health and behavioral challenges—compounds principals' stress. One principal noted the difficulty of maintaining energy and optimism: "Keeping adults inspired is harder than keeping kids focused." Others observed growing burnout among staff leading to a "3:30 mentality," where employees disengage at day's end due to exhaustion.

Despite these challenges, many principals described deliberate self-care and boundary-setting strategies as essential to sustainability. Several emphasized the importance of modeling healthy habits for staff, noting that "if you don't feel cared for, you're not going to perform." However, systemic factors often work against individual coping strategies, suggesting that principal well-being requires organizational and policy-level interventions, not merely individual resilience.

### Theme 4: Significant Perception Gaps Between Principals and Teachers

Impact KY data revealed striking perception gaps between principals and teachers across all working condition domains. Principals rated all categories 19–

33 points higher than staff, with the largest gaps in feedback and coaching (33-point gap), professional learning (32-point gap), and school leadership (32-point gap). These substantial differences suggest that principals may not fully recognize the challenges teachers face or may experience their work environment fundamentally differently than their staff.

The perception gap extends to specific practices. Impact KY showed that school leader responsiveness to feedback had a 36-point difference between teacher (62% favorable) and principal (98% favorable) ratings. Similarly, principals felt they effectively engaged teachers in decision-making, yet teachers rated this area among the lowest in favorability, indicating only 52% favorability regarding teacher input toward important decisions.

Communication emerged as a particular area of concern. While 46% of principals identified "communicating effectively with all stakeholders" as one of their top three ways of setting a positive tone, superintendents specifically highlighted communication skills as an area where principals need improvement. Superintendents noted that "it's not the amount but the quality of communication that matters" and emphasized principals' need to "read the room" and understand what quality messaging stakeholders need at a given time.

Interestingly, despite widespread perception gaps, principals and teachers agreed on the two lowest-rated domains: resources (principals 73% favorable, teachers 47% favorable) and emotional well-being and belonging (principals 77% favorable, teachers 53% favorable). This convergence suggests that while principals and teachers may disagree about the extent of challenges in most areas, both groups recognize resource limitations and well-being concerns as critical needs.

The perception gaps raise important questions about principal awareness, evaluation systems, and support structures. If principals consistently rate working conditions more favorably than teachers, they may underestimate the support teachers need or fail to recognize problems requiring intervention. Alternatively, the gaps may reflect principals' positional pressure to present favorable assessments or genuine differences in how leadership and staff experience the school environment.

## Discussion

This study documents a principal well-being crisis characterized by overwhelming workload, professional isolation, emotional exhaustion, and significant perception gaps between principals and teachers. These findings illuminate the complex challenges facing Kentucky school leaders and have important implications for policy, practice, and principal preparation.

### The Workload Dilemma: From Instructional Leadership to Crisis Management

The finding that 77% of principals identify time as the primary barrier to providing meaningful feedback represents more than a scheduling problem—it reflects a fundamental tension in the modern principalship. Research demonstrates that principals' instructional leadership activities have the strongest correlation with student achievement (Grissom et al., 2021), yet principals in this study report spending the majority of their time on operational management, compliance tasks, and crisis response rather than instructional leadership.

This tension is exacerbated by intensifying student needs without corresponding increases in specialized support staff. Principals describe managing

complex special education cases, coordinating mental health services, and addressing behavioral crises—responsibilities that in better-resourced contexts might be distributed among school psychologists, social workers, special education coordinators, and behavior specialists. When one principal reports spending 75–80% of time on special education issues, it becomes clear that the role has evolved far beyond what can be reasonably expected of a single individual, regardless of preparation or skill.

The compliance burden compounds workload challenges. Principals' characterization of many mandates as "compliance, not improvement" echoes research documenting how accountability systems can devolve into bureaucratic exercises disconnected from meaningful school improvement (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). When state assessment data arrive too late to inform instruction for current students, the data collection becomes purely compliance-driven rather than improvement-focused. This disconnect between policy intent and practical utility creates cynicism and contributes to principals' sense that much of their work adds little value to teaching and learning.

## Isolation as an Occupational Hazard

Professional isolation emerged as a defining characteristic of the principalship, with important implications for well-being and effectiveness. The confidential nature of many principal decisions—personnel matters, student discipline issues, family crises—means principals must often process emotionally complex situations alone. While confidentiality serves important purposes, it also creates an occupational hazard: principals carry the emotional weight of difficult decisions without the collegial support available to teachers who can debrief with peers.

The finding that principals struggle with delegation and distributed leadership suggests that isolation is not merely circumstantial but may be reinforced by principals' own leadership practices. Superintendents' observation that "leaders must develop teams—they cannot do it alone" points to a potential intervention: helping principals build leadership capacity in others not only distributes work but also creates colleagues with whom principals can share decision-making and problem-solving.

However, structural factors limit the effectiveness of individual-level solutions. The research literature on principal working conditions emphasizes that mentorship programs and professional learning communities can mitigate isolation (Goldring et al., 2020), yet such supports remain inconsistently available across districts. When principals lack access to sustained mentorship or peer networks, they must navigate complex challenges without the benefit of experienced guidance or collective problem-solving.

## The Sustainability Crisis: When Well-Being Becomes Untenable

The finding that 80% of principals identify work-life balance as essential to improved well-being, combined with narratives of constant connectivity and inability to disconnect, reveals a profession approaching unsustainability. The principal who reported that vacation days still meant "my phone rang all day, every day" illustrates how the 24/7 nature of contemporary school leadership erodes the recovery time essential for sustained high performance.

This finding aligns with research on burnout, which identifies insufficient recovery time as a critical factor in

emotional exhaustion (Boyd et al., 2011). While individual principals described self-care strategies and boundary-setting efforts, systemic factors often overwhelm individual coping mechanisms. The culture of constant availability, combined with legitimate emergencies that do require immediate principal response, makes it difficult for principals to establish and maintain boundaries even when they recognize the need to do so.

The convergence of principal and teacher concerns about emotional well-being, despite their divergence on most other domains, suggests this is a school-wide crisis rather than solely a principal issue. Impact KY data showing that only 44% of teachers report favorable emotional well-being as a result of work indicates that the stress and exhaustion principals experience cascades throughout the organization. This finding has important implications: interventions to support principal well-being may need to address organizational culture and workload at the school level, not just individual principal practices.

## Understanding Perception Gaps: Implications for Leadership and Evaluation

The 19–33 point perception gaps between principals and teachers across all working condition domains represent one of the study's most troubling findings. These gaps suggest either that principals significantly underestimate challenges facing teachers or that principals and teachers experience the school environment so differently that they effectively work in separate realities.

Several factors may contribute to these perception gaps. Positional bias may lead principals to view conditions more favorably because they have greater autonomy and authority than teachers. Social desirability effects may cause principals to report more favorable assessments when completing surveys about their own schools. Alternatively, the gaps may reflect genuine differences in how leadership and staff experience school culture—principals may focus on inputs and intentions while teachers focus on outcomes and implementation.

The perception gap regarding communication is particularly notable given superintendents' identification of communication as an area where principals need growth. The disconnect between principals' confidence in their communication effectiveness and superintendents' assessment of this as a deficit suggests that principals may lack awareness of how their communication is received. Superintendents' emphasis on "reading the room" and understanding stakeholder needs points to a more nuanced communication skill set than principals may recognize as necessary.

These findings have important implications for principal evaluation and supervision. If principals consistently overestimate working conditions and their own effectiveness in areas like feedback, professional learning, and communication, traditional evaluation approaches that rely heavily on principal self-assessment may miss critical areas for growth. This suggests a need for evaluation systems that incorporate multiple perspectives, including teacher feedback, and that explicitly address the perception gaps documented in this study.

## Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings point to several critical areas for intervention to support principal well-being and sustainability. These implications span state policy, district

practice, and preparation programs, requiring coordinated action across multiple levels of the educational system.

## Reimagining Principal Workload Through Policy Reform

State educational agencies must undertake comprehensive review of compliance requirements to eliminate mandates with little demonstrable impact on student learning. The finding that principals characterize many state requirements as "compliance, not improvement" suggests that policy streamlining could significantly reduce workload while potentially improving, rather than harming, educational quality. Such reviews should include clear, evidence-based links between any new mandate and student outcomes.

Assessment systems require particular attention. The utility of assessment data depends on timely reporting that allows educators to use results for instructional improvement. When principals report that science assessment scores arrive in December—long after the tested students have moved on—the assessment serves accountability purposes but provides no instructional value. States should establish standards for assessment reporting timelines that ensure data can inform practice for current students.

Districts can reduce principal workload by increasing operational support staff. The finding that principals spend 75–80% of time on special education management suggests a need for specialized personnel who can coordinate services, manage compliance documentation, and support teachers working with students with disabilities. Similarly, student mental health needs require mental health professionals rather than asking principals to serve as de facto counselors and social workers. Investments in School Administration Managers and other operational support positions would allow principals to focus on instructional leadership rather than operational management.

## Addressing Isolation Through Structured Mentorship and Networks

The pervasive isolation principals experience requires systemic intervention through structured mentorship programs and professional learning networks. Research demonstrates that high-quality mentorship supports principal effectiveness (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007), yet such programs remain inconsistently available across districts. State and regional education agencies should establish formal, funded principal mentorship programs that span at least two years and include peer networking opportunities.

However, mentorship programs must be carefully designed to avoid adding burden to already overwhelmed principals. One experienced principal noted serving as mentor for multiple new principals while acknowledging, "I'm in year 13 in this district and I'm working with principals that are in year 1, 2, and 3, so I've been a mentor for the last 5 or 6 years. I do feel like there's somebody else I need to go watch, but I'm busy helping these new principals." This comment highlights the need for mentor compensation, reduced workload expectations for mentors, and careful consideration of mentor-mentee ratios.

Professional learning networks should be restructured to serve principals' needs rather than district compliance requirements. Principals expressed desire for job-embedded professional learning that occurs in or near their buildings rather than requiring extensive travel. Regional cohorts, virtual learning communities, and embedded

coaching models could provide collegial support while reducing the stress of leaving buildings during critical operational periods.

## Prioritizing Well-Being Through Organizational Culture Change

The finding that 80% of principals identify work-life balance as essential to well-being requires organizational and cultural interventions, not merely individual coping strategies. Districts should establish clear expectations regarding after-hours communication, model healthy boundaries at the district level, and protect principals' ability to take leave without work intrusion. When principals report that vacation days still mean constant phone calls, the problem extends beyond individual boundary-setting to organizational culture that treats principals as perpetually on-call.

The convergence of principal and teacher concerns about emotional well-being suggests that interventions must address school-level culture rather than targeting only individual principals. Districts should provide resources for school-wide wellness initiatives, ensure adequate staffing to prevent overload, and include well-being metrics in school and district evaluation systems. The finding that challenging student behaviors contribute significantly to negative well-being points to a need for comprehensive behavior support systems and mental health resources that reduce rather than increase principal burden.

State agencies can support principal well-being by establishing policies that explicitly recognize its importance. This might include principal wellness grants, regional retreat opportunities, or requirements that district principal evaluation systems include well-being and sustainability indicators. When principals model self-care and healthy boundaries for their staff, they contribute to broader organizational wellness—but this requires systemic support rather than expecting principals to manage well-being while facing overwhelming workloads and constant availability expectations.

## Addressing Perception Gaps Through Enhanced Feedback and Evaluation

The significant perception gaps between principals and teachers require enhanced feedback mechanisms that help principals develop more accurate awareness of their schools' working conditions and their own effectiveness. Principal evaluation systems should incorporate multiple perspectives, including structured teacher feedback, rather than relying primarily on principal self-assessment or supervisor observation.

The specific finding that principals rate their communication effectiveness highly while superintendents identify communication as an area needing improvement suggests that preparation programs and professional learning should include explicit instruction in stakeholder communication, including simulation exercises that provide feedback on how communication is received. Superintendents' emphasis on "reading the room" points to social-emotional and contextual awareness skills that may not be adequately developed in traditional preparation programs.

Districts should consider implementing 360-degree feedback processes that systematically gather input from teachers, parents, and district leaders to help principals develop more accurate self-awareness. Such feedback mechanisms should be growth-oriented rather than punitive, positioning perception gaps as opportunities for learning rather than deficiencies requiring remediation. When

paired with coaching and mentorship, enhanced feedback can help principals develop the awareness necessary to bridge perception gaps and respond more effectively to stakeholder needs.

## Conclusion

This study documents a principal well-being crisis in Kentucky characterized by overwhelming workload, professional isolation, emotional exhaustion, and significant perception gaps between principals and teachers. These challenges threaten not only individual principal well-being but also the sustainability of effective school leadership across the state. As one focus group participant reflected: "We love the work. We just need a system that loves us back."

The findings reveal that principal well-being is not merely an individual concern but a systemic issue requiring coordinated intervention across state agencies, districts, and preparation programs. Workload must be addressed through policy reform that eliminates low-value compliance requirements and increases operational support staff. Isolation requires structured mentorship programs and professional learning networks designed to provide collegial support without adding burden. Emotional exhaustion and work-life imbalance demand organizational culture change that establishes reasonable boundaries and prioritizes sustainability alongside effectiveness.

The perception gaps documented in this study highlight the need for enhanced feedback mechanisms and evaluation systems that incorporate multiple perspectives. When principals consistently overestimate working conditions and their own effectiveness in critical areas, they lack the awareness necessary to improve practice. Closing these perception gaps requires both individual development—helping principals become more attuned to stakeholder experiences—and systemic change in how principals receive feedback about their performance and their schools' environments.

The stakes are high. Research demonstrates that principal effectiveness significantly impacts student achievement, with the difference between a 25th and 75th percentile principal equivalent to three months of additional learning annually (Grissom et al., 2021). However, effectiveness cannot be sustained when principals experience chronic overload, isolation, and exhaustion. Principal turnover disrupts school improvement efforts and negatively affects teacher retention, creating cascading consequences for students and communities.

Addressing the principal well-being crisis requires recognition that current conditions are not sustainable and that incremental adjustments will prove insufficient. State agencies must fundamentally reconsider compliance requirements, assessment timelines, and policy stability. Districts must invest in operational support staff and establish cultures that prioritize well-being alongside accountability. Preparation programs must better prepare candidates for the realities of the role, including the emotional demands and need for boundary-setting.

Most importantly, the system must recognize principals not as superhuman individuals who can sustain impossible workloads indefinitely, but as professionals who require reasonable working conditions, ongoing support, and opportunities for recovery and renewal. The principals in this study demonstrated extraordinary dedication to their school communities. The question is whether the system will demonstrate equivalent dedication to supporting their

well-being and sustainability in this critical role.

Future research should examine the effectiveness of specific interventions designed to address workload, isolation, and well-being concerns. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking principal retention and effectiveness in relation to working conditions and support systems would provide valuable evidence for policy decisions. Understanding which supports most effectively promote principal sustainability will be essential as Kentucky and other states work to ensure that school leadership remains both effective and sustainable for the educators willing to take on this demanding role.

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