

# The Role of the Guidance Counsellor in Supporting Student Wellbeing in Schools

## Introduction

Guidance counsellors play a vital role in supporting the wellbeing of students across schools in Ireland. Though often associated with the vocational and career aspects of their role, their work encompasses far more. This article highlights how guidance counsellors support students' emotional wellbeing and educational development, fostering a more balanced and supported experience for our young people.

Guidance counselling is recognised as a key part of the school guidance programme, offered to individuals or groups as part of developmental learning, and during moments of personal crisis (Government of Ireland, 2023). It aims to empower students to 'make decisions, solve problems, address behavioural issues, develop coping strategies, and resolve difficulties they may be experiencing' (DES Inspectorate, 2005, p.4).

This dynamic role spans three interlinked domains: personal/social, vocational/career, and educational guidance – highlighting the holistic nature of guidance and its critical role in facilitating life choices and supporting students' wellbeing. The holistic approach recognises the interdependence of wellbeing and education and a student's personal, educational, and social worlds (O'Toole & Simovska, 2022), and aligns with the Department of Education's emphasis on wellbeing as central to student achievement and growth.

## Wellbeing

Promoting student wellbeing in schools has received increasing focus (McLellan et al., 2022). Its inclusion in the curriculum *Junior Cycle Wellbeing Guidelines* (NCCA, 2021) and other relevant policies provides direction on the integration of whole-school approaches to wellbeing



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**Guidance counsellors in schools play a pivotal role in supporting student wellbeing across personal, social, educational, and career domains. Their holistic approach helps students make decisions, cope with emotional challenges, and navigate their educational and career paths. However, limited guidance hours and inadequate resources highlight the need for increased support and recognition of their essential contributions to student wellbeing.**

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incorporating guidance: *Well-Being in Post-Primary Schools* (DES et al., 2013), and *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018–2023* (Government of Ireland, 2019).

The student support team plays a vital role in promoting wellbeing, adopting a whole-school approach that significantly contributes to ‘supporting and promoting wellbeing in education’ (DE, 2024a, p.8). Through the continuum of support, the team addresses students’ social, emotional, behavioural, and learning needs (NEPS, 2021). The guidance counsellor contributes significantly to these efforts. Activities that can be documented in the whole-school guidance plan, as part of the Junior Cycle programme, include guidance-related learning and school-developed short courses and units of learning focused on wellbeing-related areas, such as study skills (NCCA, 2021). The team also collaborates with external services, developing referral pathways to ensure students receive appropriate support beyond the school environment.

#### *Personal/social support*

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One of the most significant roles of the guidance counsellor is offering a supportive space for students to address personal challenges, which today are immense compared to those of previous generations (Dooley et al., 2019; O’Sullivan et al., 2021). The Institute of Guidance Counsellors’ National Survey 2022/2023 (IGC, 2024a) found that participants (n=254) encountered mental health issues more frequently in second-level schools and colleges than in career decision-making. The top two issues reported were ‘mental health concerns, such as anxiety, self-harm, and suicide ideation’ (97.6%) and ‘career decision-making’ (97.2%); 92.5% reported daily or weekly issues related to ‘self-esteem, self-confidence’ and ‘family, friendships, or relationships’.

These evolving challenges underscore guidance counsellors’ critical role in supporting student wellbeing. The safe, confidential setting with a skilled guidance counsellor can empower and support the student (DES, 2016). Establishing the core conditions, such as empathic understanding, congruence, and unconditional positive regard, allows the student to speak about their difficulties without fear of being criticised or judged (IGC, 2016). Guidance counsellors are often the ‘one good adult’ who offers early intervention, reducing the need for more intensive interventions later (Choi, 2018). An appointment could be for career, educational, or personal/social purposes, which makes it easier for an anxious student to seek help. Early intervention is critical to long-term wellbeing, and guidance counsellors are instrumental in identifying at-risk students and providing timely support.

#### *Educational and career guidance*

Guidance counsellors are also central to helping students navigate their educational and career paths (IGC, 2024a). Through one-to-one appointments

and group settings, they help students develop study skills, manage time, and set goals. This is essential in helping students build the confidence and resilience necessary to achieve their academic potential. By guiding students through career decisions that are often overwhelming, guidance counsellors can help students gain the knowledge and skills they need to make informed choices.

## Allocation challenges

Despite their crucial role, many guidance counsellors face challenges in the allocation of hours to enable them to perform their roles fully and meet the demand for their services (ibid.). The IGC urges a review of guidance allocation to ensure equal access to guidance across the lifespan. Many guidance counsellors have only partial guidance hours or are timetabled to teach non-guidance-related subjects as part of, and external to, guidance allocation (ibid.). The whole school guidance team is well positioned to meet the school's needs. However, guidance counsellors should have the flexibility to prioritise one-to-one guidance appointments and the organisation and work of the student support team, ultimately leading to better outcomes for student wellbeing.

While the IGC appreciates new initiatives and services, such as the announcement of Neart awarded to Jigsaw (DE, 2024b), it appeals to policymakers to recognise school guidance counsellors' skills and competencies (IGC, 2016). The existing infrastructure of guidance counsellors should not be overlooked, since they are often the only members of the student support team with a qualification in counselling skills (DE, 2023).

Their multidimensional role can be misunderstood, and their contribution to personal/social development is not always acknowledged (Aontas, 2023; ETBI, 2023; Houses of the Oireachtas, 2023). Accordingly, in advocating for guidance counsellors, the IGC recognises the importance of promoting clear understanding of the role (IGC, 2024b) and emphasises the need for a robust and consistent message.

## Conclusion

Guidance counsellors play a multifaceted role in supporting student wellbeing by addressing personal, social, emotional, educational, and career-related challenges. Providing early intervention, promoting wellbeing initiatives, and working collaboratively with the student support team are essential to students' holistic development. As schools continue to emphasise the importance of

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wellbeing, it is crucial to ensure that guidance counsellors are adequately resourced and recognised for their vital contribution to students' lives.

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## Fears of being left behind by AI are causing organisations to focus on staff's technical skills



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According to the annual survey from the Learnovate Centre, organisations are increasingly concerned that they will be unable to compete in the market because they have failed to develop workers' technical skills in response to advances in Artificial Intelligence and other technologies.

The Learnovate Centre is a global future-of-work and learning research hub funded by Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland and based at Trinity College Dublin. The centre's Learning Signals Survey was designed to gain insight into the experiences of learning professionals and those who work in companies that create learning technology or content.

The Learnovate Learning Signals Survey 2024 polled more than 140 individuals involved in various industry sectors and found that the number of respondents who plan to prioritise the development of their technical skills increased from 33% to 41% in the past 12 months. Learnovate believes this is due to AI's growing role in the market.