

Counselors are critical:

*How middle school counselors can support students in
Philadelphia's high school application process*

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supported by Research for Action and
a grant from the William Penn Foundation

August 2011



Acknowledgments

Support for this project was provided by the William Penn Foundation and the Institute for Education Sciences Grant #P305C050041. Special thanks to the 10 counselors who participated in this study, who shared their best practices and challenges with me and allowed me to observe activities related to the high school application process during the 2008-09 school year.

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Introduction

Every fall, 8th graders in the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) have the opportunity to apply to five district-managed high schools other than their own neighborhood school. One of the goals of Philadelphia’s tiered system of neighborhood, citywide, and special admission high schools—many with specific curricular programs—is that students find the right “fit” to complement their academic record, skills, and interests. This selective system requires students to understand the characteristics of different high schools and to assess whether they meet the admission criteria in order to make strategic application decisions. This brief examines the role of the middle school counselor¹ in helping students navigate this process. Students may also apply to charter or private high schools in separate processes, and some counselors discussed these options with students and their parents, but this brief focuses on the SDP high school application process.

This brief draws on the following data, collected in the 2008-09 school year at 10 K-8 and middle schools with varying student populations, Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) statuses, and counselor approaches to the high school application process.²

Interviews	Observations
10 counselors	2 8 th grade parent meetings
47 8 th grade students	3 high school assembly presentations
27 parents	45 counselor meetings with 8 th grade students (some including parents)
	1 day at the SDP High School Expo
Quantitative Data	
Regression analysis of high school applications and admissions for all district 8 th graders	

The research presented in this brief builds on a regression analysis of high school applications and admissions for all district 8th graders.³ The analysis found that characteristics of the schools students attend in 8th grade helps to predict their likelihood of getting into a high school of their choice, even after controlling for their

¹ This brief will refer to middle school counselors for simplicity, but many 8th graders attend K-8 schools and some 8th graders attend schools with other grade spans (e.g., 6-9, 7-12). Therefore, “middle school counselor” is shorthand for counselors in schools that serve middle school students.

² For more information on the sample, please contact the author.

³ This brief uses data from a larger, mixed-methods study conducted by Clarisse Haxton for her dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania.

individual background characteristics and 7th grade record.⁴ Specifically, students who attended a K-8 school had higher odds of high school admission than their peers who attended a school with another grade span. And, students who attended smaller schools had higher odds of admission than their peers at larger schools. In other words, students with equal 7th grade records have unequal odds of high school admission, based on the type and size of the 8th grade school they attend. School type and size can also impact counselors' ability to support their students. This brief presents a qualitative examination of the role of 8th grade counselors in the high school application process.

Counselors in this study agreed that school structure matters. Those at K-8 schools in the study reported the familial and nurturing nature of their schools and said that the K-8 structure allows them to get to know families better since students attend the school for many years. School size also matters for counselors' ability to provide individualized guidance counseling to students. However, the best practices described in this brief were implemented across schools of varying sizes.

This brief focuses on middle school counselors, recognizing the critical role they play in supporting students in the high school application process. It outlines best practices for counselors in the SDP, focusing on three lessons: 1) the high school application process starts in 7th grade; 2) students and parents need guidance in making high school application decisions in 8th grade; and 3) enabling conditions in some schools allow counselors to provide individualized supports to students and families in this process. It also acknowledges common challenges that counselors face in implementing these best practices. The lessons from this study apply not only to counselors but to principals, 7th and 8th grade teachers, and other school staff who seek to individually or collaboratively support students throughout this process. Appendix A provides an overview of the three lessons and all nine best practices.

⁴ A two-level hierarchical generalized linear model (HGLM) was conducted in which individual student characteristics (race, gender, English language learner status, special education status, 7th grade course grades, PSSA math and reading scores, attendance, and suspensions) and school characteristics (structure (K-8, middle), enrollment, AYP status, persistently dangerous, percent free and reduced price lunch) were regressed on the outcome of admission to any high school to which the student applied. For more information on this analysis, please contact the author.

Lesson 1: The high school application process begins in 7th grade.

Many students know that the high school application process begins in 8th grade, but they are not always aware that their 7th grade record is used for admission. Students' 7th grade record—including test scores, course grades, absences, latenesses, and suspensions—is a major part of high school admission criteria at SDP's selective high schools. Students and parents must be made aware of these factors and reminded throughout the 7th grade year so they can focus on improving or maintaining their record.

By the time students enter 8th grade, they have limited options if their record has flaws that disqualify them from admission at the selective high schools.

Best Practice 1: Stress the importance of students' 7th grade record (test scores, course grades, attendance, and behavior) for high school admissions.

Some counselors proactively repeated the importance of 7th grade records to students and parents. Counselor strategies included speaking at Back to School Night to all parents about the importance of 7th grade for high school admissions and stopping into 7th grade classrooms to remind students to try their best and maintain or improve their record. Several counselors emphasized the importance of repeating this message throughout the year, and one called it "planting the seed." One counselor said, "We reinforce repeatedly that they have to do what's necessary to get to the special admission schools." Another counselor explained,

"I try to make an effort with the 7th graders because I know I'll be working with them in 8th grade. I talk with them about high schools and let them know that 7th grade is the year that counts for their grades and all, when they're getting considered for high schools the next year."

In interviews, students at schools with counselors who reported emphasizing the importance of 7th grade seemed to have internalized this message. One student described how the counselor, principal, and teachers at his school reinforced the importance of the 7th grade year for high school admissions. He said, "At the beginning of the year, they said this is your most important year. And before the PSSA, they would hound us about it, and before all of the report periods, like before the end of them. So, mostly all the time they were saying it." Not all students heed this message,

but early awareness can encourage some students to try their best academically and behaviorally and to have good attendance in 7th grade.

Best Practice 2: Begin providing students with information about high school, college, and career options in 7th grade.

Because the SDP system of high schools offers career-based program offerings, understanding high school options goes hand in hand with encouraging students to begin thinking about their college and career interests and goals. For example, if a student wants to be a cosmetologist, they could use the High School Directory to find high schools with cosmetology programs. If a student is interested in medicine, they may consider high schools with a science, health, or college preparatory foci.

Encouraging students to think about their career interests, the educational requirements for different careers, and the various types of high schools in Philadelphia when they are in 7th grade prepares them to make their application decisions in 8th grade. This also encourages students to work to meet the admission requirements of the high schools they would like to attend. The two counselors interviewed who taught 7th graders all had class lessons or units on SDP high schools. The specific lessons they designed varied, but they all contained high school and career awareness components.

Additionally, some counselors included 7th graders in traditionally 8th grade activities that covered high schools. All counselors receive a flyer about the High School Expo and a High School Directory for every 8th grade student, but a few counselors also made this information available to 7th grade students. Many schools have high schools present to 8th graders, and one counselor invited 7th grade classes to attend these presentations along with the 8th grade classes.

Challenges to consider:

- Some students commented that their teachers tended to use negative reinforcement instead of positive encouragement to emphasize the importance of their 7th grade record. As one student explained, “When kids were acting up, they’d say, ‘When you go to a bad high school, you can blame it on yourself,’ stuff like that.”
- Counselors noted that students sometimes have a hard time heeding their reminders in 7th grade, when high school seems distant. One counselor explained, “They think they have a lot of time... I say, ‘Actually, this year is the

year. You have to work hard because when you're applying to high school, they don't know who you are. They only know your report card.'"

- Some students have no idea what career they are interested in when they are in 7th grade, which is a challenge of specialized high schools. However, increasing high school and career awareness may help them to make more informed decisions in 8th grade.

Lesson 2: Students and parents need guidance and support in making their high school application decisions in 8th grade.

Middle school counselors are directly responsible for managing the high school application process at their schools, but at the time of the study, most also had teaching, behavioral, and administrative support duties. While all counselors were willing to help students and parents make strategic application decisions, some were less proactive in doing so. As one counselor explained, "I ask them if they want it, you know, come in and I'll help you... (but) most of the time, they don't come in. So, I'm not gonna force them." Another counselor explained that a few teachers remind students to turn in their forms and help students with their essays but, "As far as some sort of organized involvement, there really is nothing."

However, the high school application process was a priority for six of the study counselors, and they took it upon themselves to help families navigate. One counselor explained that the process was complex for families:

"Even though I send home the Directory and I send home letters explaining the process and explaining the eligibility requirements, you have children, and often parents, coming in like they're not really aware of this and they're making unrealistic choices."

Another counselor explained that the high school application decision was difficult for 8th grade students to make themselves. She stated:

"This is such an important decision in their kid's lives...the kids say things like, 'At Bodine, you can get steak sandwiches and at SLA, you can get chicken nuggets' ... because they're still kids. That's what's on their minds. It's crazy that they have to make this decision in 8th grade."

Best Practice 3: Invite high schools to present to 7th and 8th grade students.

Nine of the 10 study counselors had high schools come to speak to their 8th grade students in assemblies at the beginning of the school year.⁵ In these presentations, high schools brought current students and staff to talk about their school and its academic and extracurricular programs and allow 8th graders to ask questions about the high school. Student interviewees consistently mentioned these presentations and the High School Expo as two of the most useful ways to learn about high schools because they liked getting to talk to students about the schools.

Challenges to consider:

- Some counselors noted that high schools selectively recruit students by visiting certain middle schools but not others.
- These presentations are difficult to schedule at the beginning of the school year, as middle school and high school counselors and administrators are incredibly busy.

Best Practice 4: Discuss the high school application process with parents.

Two counselors held meetings for 8th grade parents to discuss the high school application process. These meetings provided parents an overview of the process and an opportunity to ask questions, and they were reasonably well attended at both schools. Several counselors also made themselves available to parents via phone and email, and they received many questions from parents throughout the application process.

Challenges to consider:

- Language barriers present issues for some parents to participate in school meetings. The counselors who had parent meetings arranged for a bilingual counseling assistant (BCA) to attend, but BCAs are not always on site, do not necessarily cover all languages spoken in a school, and are positions that are subject to budget cuts.
- Parents sometimes miss meetings because they are busy or have to work. Counselors who held these meetings offered options—in the morning, after school, or in the evening—to try to accommodate parent schedules.

⁵ The tenth counselor had invited high school speakers in the past but felt that students were disrespectful so she discontinued the assemblies.

Best Practice 5: Teach lessons or units on the high school application process.

Six of the counselors taught 8th graders in the study year, and these counselors all had lessons on the high school application process at the beginning of the school year. The lessons varied, but they included common elements:

- Activities to familiarize students with the High School Directory;
- Discussions of students' 7th grade academic record and the high school requirements;
- Activities to encourage students to think about their career interests and educational goals.

Some of these counselors also had lessons teaching students how to look up high school websites online, draft essays, and prepare for interviews.

Challenges to consider:

- There is no set curriculum for counselors' classes. The High School Directory served as an essential teaching tool for counselors and an essential source of information for students and parents (and new counselors). However, the High School Directory does not provide important information that could inform decision-making, including admission rates, graduation rates, and student and teacher attendance rates. Additionally, study counselors worried that the SDP has considered not printing the High School Directory due to budget constraints. All 47 of the interviewed students reported using the hard copy Directory, as did all of the English-speaking parents in the study. Several parents who did not speak English wished they could read the Directory in their language. At the time of the study, the Directory was available online in Spanish and several other languages, but this was not common knowledge. Furthermore, opening and printing a color PDF file is a barrier that many families reported.
- Some students reported looking online at high school websites, but high school websites are of varying quality.

Best Practice 6: Verify that students fulfill all of the requirements for the high schools to which they apply.

Three counselors kept track of every high school's admission requirements and reminded students who applied to those schools of criteria for admission. In addition to completing the application form and meeting the appropriate 7th grade record

requirements, there are two different types of requirements to monitor: (1) essays or letters of recommendation that are due with the application, and (2) auditions, interviews, presentations, or exams that students may be invited to in a second round of the application process. The forms due at the time of application are more straightforward. One of the counselors explained,

“I have a list for each high school that requires an essay, and I have all the students who applied to that high school. I go into their advisory every day and do a quick announcement to remind them who owes me papers so I make sure I get them.”

Two of the counselors also coordinated with the 8th grade English teacher to help students write their essays, and one helped students individually if they came to her with a draft.

In the second round of invited auditions and interviews, these counselors helped students prepare and also helped students arrange transportation to the high school for their scheduled appointment. Attending an audition or interview appointment can be a barrier in the high school application process. Some students mistook their invitation letter for an acceptance letter, so having a counselor remind and encourage them to attend helped them get over this admission hurdle.

Two counselors worked with the art and music teachers to help students prepare portfolios or auditions. One counselor confirmed the appointments with parents. And in one case a counselor helped with transportation, explaining, “They don’t have a car and (the student) was nervous and wasn’t going to go, but I told her she had to go, to give it a shot... Afterwards, I picked her up and she was smiling when I asked her, ‘How did it go?’”

Challenges to consider:

- Staying on top of admission criteria requires constantly reminding students to finish essays, obtain letters of recommendation, prepare for interviews, and so on. It is most efficient if the counselor coordinates with teachers to help with some of the requirements, as outlined above.

Best Practice 7: Provide students with personalized guidance through individual meetings with students and their parents.

Six of the 10 study counselors tried to schedule individual meetings with 8th grade students and their parents, and three counselors got almost 100 percent attendance at these meetings. The information and advice that counselors offered was delimited by the students' 7th grade records, but these counselors prioritized helping students to understand all of their options in the system. Counselor recommendations took the following general form:

- Focus on “fit” for qualified students.
- Focus on “being realistic” for somewhat qualified students.
- Discuss charter school and/or private school options for unqualified students.

In individual meetings, counselors reviewed the student's application and their 7th grade transcript to make sure that students met the admission criteria for the schools to which they applied. If a student did not meet the criteria for any schools on their application, the counselors discussed these choices with the student and, sometimes, their parent/guardian. Counselors discussed how this was a sensitive issue because they did not want to discourage students, but they also agreed that it is one important aspect of the job to help students make realistic decisions. One stated, “That's my job, if I see (a student) doesn't have a good chance to get into a high school, to point it out... so they can have a better chance to get into some other school.”

These counselors took many concrete steps to advise students and parents in their individual meetings, including:

- Discussing students' 7th grade record and interest, checking their application, and providing recommendations if they were not qualified for schools on their list or if they did not apply to the maximum five high schools.
- Discussing students' and parents' willingness to travel across the city for high school, and encouraging planning for how students would get to school if admitted and enrolled.
- Discussing students' desire to be in different educational environments such as a big or small school, schools that emphasize group projects, or schools with alternative grading policies.

- Encouraging students to think about and articulate exactly what they like about the high schools to which they were applying.
- Encouraging parents to set up shadowing appointments for their child to get a feel for life as a student at the high schools they were considering.
- Giving tips to students who were applying to schools with interviews, such as reminding them to speak up, look the interviewer in the eye, and tell the interviewer that their school is the student's first choice.
- Giving students and parents information on the exact requirements for auditions and portfolios for specific arts-focused schools.

Decoding the admission requirements is an important benefit of the individual counselor-student(-parent) meetings because information in the High School Directory is incomplete. The Directory lists the general requirements at each school but the exact expectations are not made explicit. For example, the admission requirements listed in the Directory for the High School for the Creative and Performing Arts, one of the premier art-focused high schools in the city, includes, "successful audition in the chosen art major." At the time of the study, the Directory did not explain that applicants must be invited to an audition. This was a helpful addition in the 2010-11 Directory, but the Directory still does not explain the details of the audition—that dance, vocal, and instrumental music applicants must prepare a three-minute solo performance for the audition. Many students in the study were interested in applying to an arts-focused high school because they thought that "it would be fun" to learn a new skill, but in reality, arts-focused high schools expect experience or demonstrated aptitude in the specific program to which the student applies.

In schools with individual meetings, counselors reminded students and parents about the audition component before they submitted their application. In one counselor-family meeting, a student expressed an interest in learning to play piano and included two arts-focused high schools on her application list. However, when the counselor showed the family a copy of the audition invitation letter for one school, the family decided not to "waste the picks" because their daughter would not be able to prepare or perform a three minute solo piece as required.

These invitation-only admission requirements were not limited to the arts. For example, Science Leadership Academy requires applicant finalists to present about a research project they have done and some high schools require students to attend an interview.

By being explicit about the admission requirements in individual meetings, counselors help students and their parents make strategic application decisions that may increase their odds of admission.

Further, for students with flaws in their 7th grade record (e.g., more than 10 days absent, one or more suspensions, Cs, Ds, and/or Fs on their report card, low PSSA scores), individual meetings were helpful for students and parents to consider options outside the district high school application process. Parents overwhelmingly described neighborhood schools in such terms as “the bottom of the pit,” and they wanted information about other options for their children who were unqualified for selective high school admission. Counselors varied in their approach, but at minimum, they referred families to the list of charter schools in the High School Directory and explained that charter schools admitted students via lottery. None of the counselors recommended private schools to families, but in several individual meetings, counselors offered to write a letter of recommendation for students when parents discussed considering applying to private schools. The counselors explained that the students were “good kids” who had poor 7th grade records but had improved in 8th grade, and they lamented that such students had limited options in the district process.

Challenges to consider:

- Counselors must have time and flexibility in their day to schedule and conduct individual meetings. Counselors who hold individual meetings come before school and/or stay after school to accommodate parents’ schedules. There is also a fair amount of time spent scheduling, confirming, and rescheduling to have a high parent turnout rate.
- Counselors need to know about the range of high school options. Some counselors take it upon themselves to attend the High School Expo or build relationships with high school staff, but there is no system for teaching counselors about individual high schools or allowing them to visit high schools for their own professional development.
- Besides listing the names of charter high schools, there was no information in the High School Directory about charter high schools or their admission processes. A streamlined information source and/or application process would be helpful for students and parents to learn about charter schools in the already complex high school application process.

Lesson 3: Enabling conditions in some K-8/middle schools allow some counselors to provide individualized support to students in the high school application process.

Counselors in the study had many different job responsibilities in addition to managing the high school application process. Responsibilities included facilitating the Comprehensive Student Assistance Process (CSAP), which identifies students' needs and creates a plan to provide behavioral and academic support to students; serving as the special education liaison; coordinating transportation and busing; attending truancy court; and organizing the school's career day. Counselors also managed a variety of school support staff. Additionally, all counselors were responsible for crisis management such as bullying and child abuse cases. See Appendix B for more on the responsibilities of the 10 counselors interviewed for this study. Given their sweeping job descriptions, most of the counselors lamented that they did not have enough time to meet individually with students. After one counselor listed her many duties, she noted sarcastically, "And then there's, you know, counseling the kids, which I get to every once in a while." Another counselor agreed, stating, "I try to (laughs) fit in a little bit of counseling, and everything else I have to do, I just fit it in."

Best Practice 8: "Release" counselors from teaching duties.

Two of the six counselors who had individual meetings with 8th grade students and parents did not teach in the study year. These two counselors credited their principals for making the purposeful administrative decision to "release" them from teaching so they could focus on counseling, including high school guidance.

One counselor had taught eight classes a week in previous years, but her principal "was able to work out the whole budgetary thing" to make sure she would not be in the classroom during the study year. As she explained, "This year I am out of the classrooms, so I am certainly able to do a heck of a lot more stuff than I've been able to do in the past... I can breathe, I can do work." The second counselor had also taught five to 10 classes a week in previous years. He said that his principal saw that he was involved in so many things that she decided to take away teaching. He smiled widely as he said of her decision, "I'm one of the lucky ones." He was adamant that "counselors are not trained to be classroom teachers" and he explained that not being in the classroom allowed him to take more time with students.

Best Practice 9: If counselors must teach, administrators can make purposeful rostering decisions to have counselors teach 7th and 8th grade students.

Eight of the 10 counselors had a weekly teaching course load that ranged from four to 10 classes, spanned grades K to 8, and varied year-to-year. Counselors generally teach a group of students once or twice per week and have a teaching load that includes several grade levels and classrooms of students. In most schools, their course load did not seem to be systematically assigned, which inhibited them from spending time with 7th and 8th grade students on the high school application process. One counselor, for example, said that she talked to the 7th graders “but that’s only for like five minutes... I would like to do more intensive preparation for the 7th graders to make them more aware of what’s going to happen in 8th grade.” She teaches 7th grade some years, but did not teach 7th grade students in the study year.

Only one of the counselors in the study taught 7th and 8th grade students, teaching 8th graders in the first semester and 7th graders in the second semester to focus on the high school application process for both groups. She had arranged this with the principal because they both considered the high school application process a priority. This was the only example of a purposeful and consistent teaching assignment for counselors in the study sample.

Challenges to consider:

- Counselors need flexibility in their schedules to conduct individual meetings to provide students guidance counseling, and teaching is the most inflexible of the counselors’ duties.
- Several counselors mentioned that they are not trained to be classroom teachers.
- There is no set curriculum for counselors’ classes and no set grade levels they teach. Counselors’ lessons ranged from drugs and health to social skills, conflict resolution, anger management, friendship, college and careers. They covered “good touch, bad touch” for kindergarteners and helped fill out work permits, job applications, and high school applications for 8th graders.

Conclusion

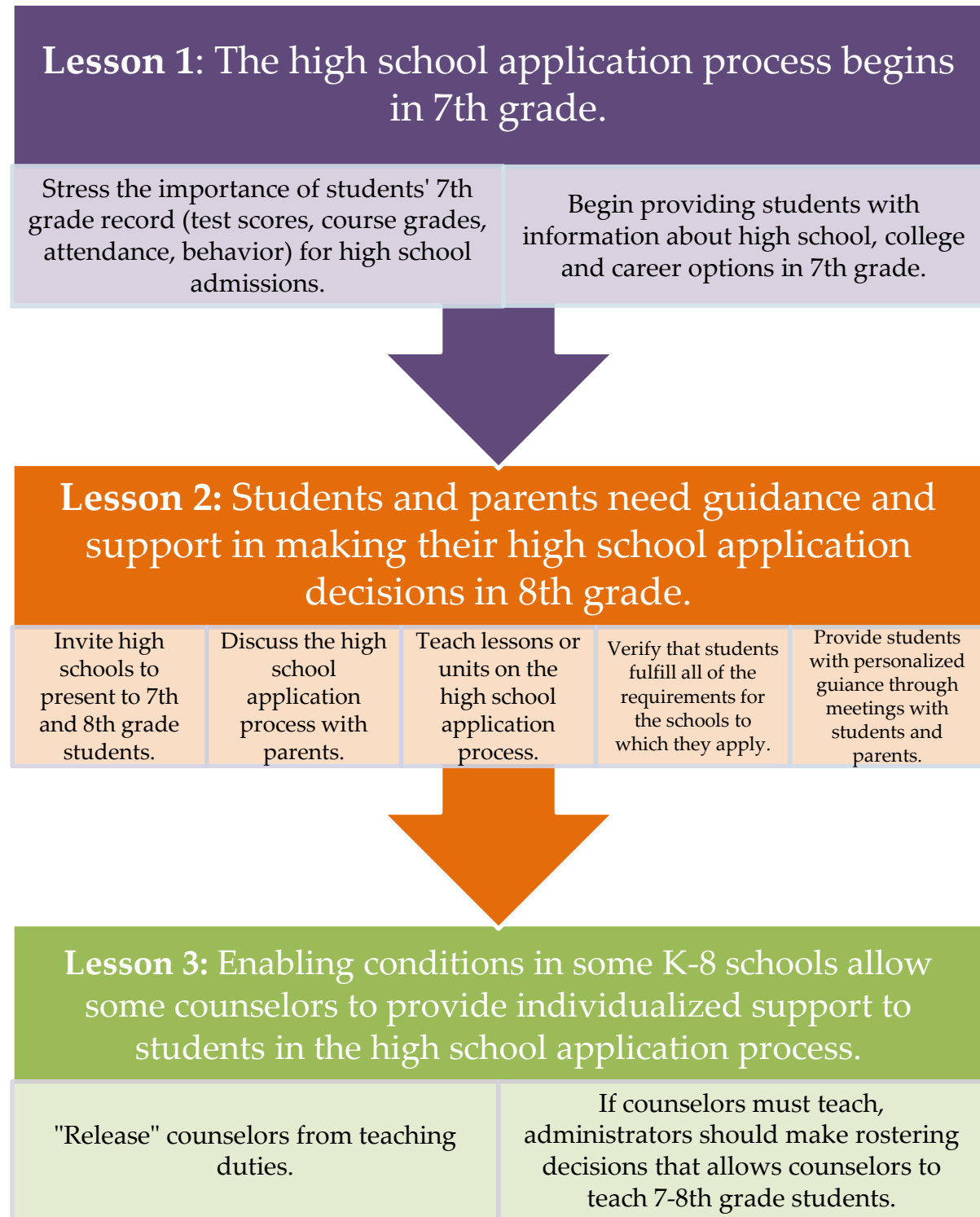
The best practices outlined in this brief demonstrate the many ways that counselors can help to influence students’ high school preparation, application decisions, and admission outcomes. In 7th grade, counselors can help increase students’ awareness—of

the importance of their attendance, behavior, grades and test scores, the range of high school options in the SDP, and colleges and careers. In 8th grade, counselors can help students and parents navigate the high school application process.

The research presented in this brief shows that middle school counselors are an important institutional support for students and their families in this process. Further, the brief points to ways that school context can create conditions that either enable or hinder counselors' support for students and families applying to high schools—particularly the amount of time they have to focus on preparing 7th and 8th graders for the application process, given their other responsibilities. Those counselors who implement the best practices in this brief advantage their students at several points in the high school application process, from encouraging them to have a strong 7th grade record, to deciding where to apply, to making sure they prepare for and attend auditions and interviews.

Of course, responsibility for supporting students in this process should not lie solely with the counselor. The principal, 7th and 8th grade teachers, and other school staff can collaborate to create systems to help students navigate the high school application process and land in high schools that fit them well. The high school a student attends can have a significant impact on their school experience, likelihood of graduation, and future opportunities. Supporting them through the application process and transition to high school is therefore a critical responsibility of middle schools and counselors in the SDP system.

Appendix A: Counselors are Critical: Lessons and Best Practices At-a-Glance



Appendix B. Overview of Counselor Duties at Study Schools

	Coordinating programs					Managing staff						
	Comprehensive Student Assistance Process (CSAP)	Special education	Transportation	Attendance & Truancy	Career Day	Point person for Consultation & Education (C&E) services, parent ombudsman, student advisor liaison	Point person for behavioral health agency staff	Point person for other programs	Principal designees	Crisis management	Teaching (number of classes per week)	Total number of duties
P.S. 1	X			X		X	X		X	X	4	7
P.S. 2	X	X	X	X		X	X		X	X	0	8
P.S. 3	X	X			X		X			X	0	5
P.S. 4	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	5	10
P.S. 5	X	X	X				X			X	5	6
P.S. 6	X						X			X	4	4
P.S. 7	X	X	X	X			X		X	X	4	8
P.S. 8	X			X			X			X	8	5
P.S. 9	X		X	X	X	X	X	X		X	8	9
P.S. 10	X	X			X		X			X	10	6