

Professional School Counseling



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To (a) highlight the experiences of school counselors working in rural communities, and (b) apply an ecological framework for understanding their experiences and interventions to address challenges experienced by rural school counselors.

With significant challenges such as limited mental health resources, poverty, high visibility, and physical isolation, rural school counselors face a set of unique experiences and challenges. While previous ecological frameworks have focused on the student and the systems the student interacts with, there has been no evidence of an ecological framework being used to understand the systems that affect rural school counselors. The authors present an ecological framework (McLeroy et al., 1988) to conceptualize the roles, responsibilities and challenges of rural school counselors, as well as provide intervention strategies to address these challenges that are contextually aware and could be tailored to the communities they serve.

Rural school counselors can use an ecological framework to better understand the unique experiences and challenges that present in rural communities, as well as potential opportunities to intervene in ways to support the needs of students and the community. We propose utilizing McMahon et al. (2014)'s ecological model to best understand the unique roles, responsibilities and challenges of rural school counselors to intervene in areas in which their systems are struggling.

School counselors can use the ecological framework to better conceptualize their role within a rural environment and ways they can advocate for change and new ideas within a rural setting. Because the present framework was adapted from previous models and frameworks that did not consider diversity of individual populations and experiences, the authors encourage using the framework along with a social justice and anti-racist lens to best understand the unique experiences, challenges, and barriers that might present at each systemic layer. The framework showed the complex relationships of rural school counseling systems, and how rural school counselors cannot tackle challenges in higher-level systems such as public policy until they first tackle challenges presented at the foundation (McLeroy et al., 1988; McMahon et al., 2014). To address issues such as systemic change and public policy, rural school counselors must establish their role within the school and community by fostering relationships with students, staff, families, and stakeholders (Grimes et al., 2013). Rural areas may show resistance to change and new ideas (Sutton & Pearson, 2002), and novice school counselors entering a rural area for the first time may struggle with being seen as an outsider compared to their colleagues (Grimes, 2020). School counselors entering the field of rural education can use the ecological framework to help develop their professional identity as well as their role within the school and community to best facilitate change and advocate for best practices for their students who face the unique challenges that rural education presents.