

# **Boarding-School Counselors for at-Risk Children in Israel - Situation Report and Strategies to Cope with the Challenges of their Work**

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# Abstract

## Background

Boarding schools for at-risk children are out-of-home frameworks provided by the social service system to care for children whose family and community environments are unable to meet their needs properly in various areas. The educational counselors working in boarding schools are the key figures responsible for their daily care. However, evidence has shown that the counselors exhibit a high rate of burnout and turnover, which begs the question whether they receive adequate training and support to perform their job in a way that meets the children's needs. Increasingly, in Israel and abroad, there has been acknowledgment of the need to invest effort to upgrade the counselors' position into a recognized profession. This then is the background for the present study, initiated by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MOLSA).

## Goal

The goal of the study was to collect up-to-date, systematic data on the work of the counselors and the work patterns of the boarding school directors and professional staff with the counselors, as a basis to formulate policy and modes of action for the continued development of the counselors' position towards professional advancement.

## Study Method and Research Tool

The study had two stages:

1. **The questioning (using the method of Learning from Success) of six boarding-school directors whose work with counselors was identified as successful, to identify strategies of working with the counselors.** The directors were chosen on the recommendation of national inspectors.
2. **A survey of boarding-school directors to produce a national situation report on the counselors' performance and the work with them from the directors' perspective.** The questioning yielded eight central strategies of working with boarding-school counselors, and a questionnaire was distributed to 95 directors of schools under the responsibility of MOLSA's Service for Children and Youth. Of these, 75 completed the questionnaire (79%). The survey examined the extent of implementation of the successful strategies identified in the first stage, and the extent of their importance as perceived by all boarding-school directors on the national level. In addition, up-to-date data were collected on the challenges facing the counselors and the difficulties that the directors have in working with them, on the directors' perceptions of the counselors' job and desirable profile, their satisfaction with the counselors' work, and their approach to upgrading the counselors' position to a profession. The survey was conducted in June-August 2017.

## Findings

1. Eight key strategies of working with boarding-school counselors were identified relating to recruitment, training and support, as well as to employment arrangements. The survey revealed variation between the boarding schools in the extent that they used the different strategies and the way that they implemented them. Some directors described their efforts to provide the counselors with support, develop them professionally and build a staff team despite the problem of high turnover rates and the fact that some of them work part time. The directors pointed to the difficulties and barriers limiting their ability to implement the various strategies.
2. Some directors showed high rates of satisfaction with a range of aspects concerning the counselors' direct work with the children. Director satisfaction correlated positively with the extent of implementation of the strategies. Lower rates of satisfaction were found with the counselors' work in the areas of scholastic performance and contact with parents.
3. Boarding schools differed in terms of characteristics (classification, size, operational model), implementation strategies, counselor turnover, and director satisfaction with the counselors' work.
4. Most of the directors believe that the counselor's position should become a profession with formal training and licensing, and that the job requires high standards of personal attributes and professional skills. In contrast, a considerable portion of the directors held that in current conditions, it is neither feasible nor desirable to employ counselors fulltime for longer periods due to the weightiness of the job and the burnout involved, the low wages, and the limited possibilities of professional advancement.

## Conclusion

The study findings revealed a number of possible programmatic directions to improve the work of boarding-school counselors, such as: the expanded incorporation of strategies of action in the work with counselors, an examination of the counselors' employment model, the improvement of the processes of locating and recruiting counselors, access to preliminary training and the development of training materials for use by the boarding schools, a definition of the counselor's position as regards scholastic support and contact with parents, further discussion and action on upgrading the position to a profession.

It is recommended that learning and researching the topic continue by examining it from additional perspectives: the counselors themselves, other staff members of the boarding school, the children, parents, and personnel outside of the boarding school. Similarly, the quality of implementation of the various strategies should be examined along with the difficulties and successes at boarding schools of different types.

A MOLSA committee is currently exploring the formulation of up-to-date policy on the work of the boarding schools, including of the counselors. The findings of this report will serve as a basis for their work.