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REDEFINING SCHOOL COUNSELING IN UZBEKISTAN: A POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR STUDENT SUCCESS AND EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY

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ABSTRACT

Uzbekistan's education system has undergone substantial institutional change since independence, with the pace of reform accelerating after 2016. The development of Presidential and specialized schools, new educational approaches, and expanded student-support functions has created a growing need for professionals who can help students navigate academic choices, educational opportunities, careers, and transitions beyond secondary school.School counseling has consequently emerged and expanded as a new professional function. Yet the profession has grown faster than the infrastructure needed to professionalize it. The central policy problem is therefore no longer whether school counselors are useful; it is whether Uzbekistan can build a coherent professional system around them.This paper argues that Uzbekistan should move from the introduction and expansion of the school counselor position toward the institutionalization of school counseling as a profession. It identifies six interconnected policy gaps: professional standards, preparation and certification, continuous professional development, role boundaries, workload and accountability, and professional infrastructure.The paper proposes a national framework built around a National School Counseling Standards Framework, a representative professional council, tiered certification, continuous professional development, a national digital platform, formal academic preparation, and outcome-based evaluation. The proposed model places the school counselor within a broader Student Success system linking academic development, career exploration, higher education, and employment.

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1. Introduction

Since independence in 1991, Uzbekistan has repeatedly restructured its education system. The reform agenda became particularly visible after 2016, when the government accelerated efforts to improve educational quality, modernize curricula, expand specialized institutions, and increase students' access to competitive educational opportunities.

The establishment of Presidential schools in 2019 was an important part of this transformation. Presidential schools were initially opened in Tashkent, Nukus, Khiva, and Namangan, creating highly selective learning environments designed around advanced educational approaches. The Presidential school initiative was established by a presidential decision dated February 20, 2019.

The broader expansion of specialized schools subsequently created a more differentiated education system. The 2022 presidential decree PF-106 addressed the expansion of the network of specialized schools under the Agency for Specialized Educational Institutions. These reforms created environments in which academic planning, university admissions, extracurricular development, career exploration, and student initiative became increasingly important.

My own professional experience began within this transformation. Working as a school counselor since 2022, I encountered a recurring problem: students and parents often understood teachers, psychologists, and administrators because these positions were familiar. The counselor position, however, required explanation. When I said that I was a school counselor, a common follow-up question was: "Which subject do you teach?" This simple question exposed a deeper institutional issue: the profession existed, but its identity and boundaries were not yet sufficiently established.

This paper therefore asks a policy question rather than a personal one: how can Uzbekistan transform an emerging school counselor position into a coherent professional system capable of improving student success and educational opportunity?

2. Development of School Counseling in Uzbekistan

In Uzbekistan, school counseling first developed within the emerging ecosystem of specialized and high-achieving schools. In my experience as a practitioner, early counselors were frequently recruited because they understood international education, foreign university admissions, and the educational pathways available to high-performing students. This created valuable capacity, but it also revealed a structural weakness: the profession developed without a dedicated national preparation pathway, common competency framework, or mature certification structure.

The second major stage was the expansion of specialized education. The 2022 PF-106 decree expanded the specialized-school network, creating a larger institutional environment in which student guidance functions could develop. However, expansion of the educational system did not automatically produce a unified professional definition of the counselor's role. The result was a profession whose responsibilities could vary substantially by school context.

A third and much larger stage began with the 2025 presidential decision PQ-277. The decision established the "Kelajak" centers and introduced the school counselor position in general secondary education institutions to support student initiatives. It also equated the counselor's salary with that of a deputy school principal and established an additional salary payment for counselors holding a managerial certificate from September 1, 2026.

The Ministry of Preschool and School Education subsequently established a competitive recruitment process involving testing and interviews. The official assessment framework evaluates candidates' competencies in student support and career guidance, leadership and initiative, education policy, digital literacy, and English, among other areas. By May 2026, more than 38,000 eligible applicants had been recommended for the second-season testing stage.

This scale changes the policy problem. A small emerging profession can survive through informal mentoring. A national profession cannot. Once thousands of practitioners enter a system, standards, preparation, supervision, professional development, accountability, and workload design become institutional necessities.

3. Professionalization Challenges

The first challenge is role ambiguity. Officially, the 2025 framework emphasizes support for student initiatives and participation, while the recruitment assessment also covers student support, career guidance, higher-education guidance, projects, training, networks, and decision-making in difficult situations. Together, these functions point toward a broad student-success role, but the boundaries among school counseling, psychology, administration, extracurricular coordination, and other school functions

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remain insufficiently explicit. Without a shared definition, the same job title can produce very different expectations across schools.

This variation is already visible across school contexts. In specialized schools, counselors may devote substantial attention to academic planning, international university admissions, scholarships, and postsecondary pathways. In general education schools, the role may be more strongly associated with student initiatives, extracurricular activities, and social participation. Local adaptation is reasonable, but a national profession still requires a common core of responsibilities, competencies, and ethical expectations so that students receive a recognizable level of service regardless of school type.

A second challenge is the distinction between school counseling and school psychology. The two functions should collaborate closely, but they are not interchangeable. A school-counseling model can focus on academic planning, career development, postsecondary preparation, educational opportunity, student engagement, and transitions, while psychological services require a different set of professional competencies and should remain within the appropriate psychological framework. Clear boundaries are therefore necessary not to create institutional silos, but to make collaboration safer and more effective.

The preferred policy direction is a multidisciplinary student-support model with explicit referral pathways. Counselors should know which concerns they can address through advising and planning, when collaboration with teachers or administrators is appropriate, and when a student should be referred to a psychologist or another specialist. This kind of role clarity protects students, reduces duplication, and gives both counselors and psychologists a more coherent professional identity within the school.

A third challenge is role overload. In practice, counselors can be drawn into event administration, communications, social media, design, information technology, or other duties created by staffing gaps. The problem is not simply that these tasks fall outside the counselor's core function; it is that they carry a direct opportunity cost. Time spent on unrelated administration is time unavailable for student advising, academic planning, career guidance, parent consultation, or analysis of student needs.

International evidence reinforces the importance of protecting counselors' professional time. The American School Counselor Association recommends a student-to-school-counselor ratio of 250:1 and recommends that at least 80 percent of counselor time be devoted to direct and indirect student services. Uzbekistan should not simply import either benchmark, because local staffing models and institutional conditions differ. The more transferable principle is that caseload and workload must be designed together, with enough protected time for the work that directly supports students.

4. Lessons from Selected International Models

International systems demonstrate that guidance is most effective when it is institutionalized rather than treated as an informal additional duty. The United States, Finland, and Australia differ in structure, but several common principles emerge: guidance is connected to educational outcomes; roles are defined; student data inform planning; professional development is continuous; and transitions to further education and work are treated as core student-development concerns.

In the United States, the American School Counselor Association's National Model provides a useful reference point because it treats school counseling as a comprehensive, data-informed, systematic, and developmental program connected to academic and postsecondary success. The model emphasizes defining, managing, delivering, and assessing counseling programs, while also identifying activities that do not align with the counselor's professional role. A synthesis of six statewide U.S. studies likewise reported evidence linking school-counseling program organization, student-to-school-counselor ratios, counselor time use, and specific counseling activities with positive educational outcomes (Carey & Dimmitt, 2012).

Finland provides a different but equally relevant example because guidance and counseling are integrated across educational stages. The Finnish National Agency for Education states that every pupil is entitled to guidance during school days, with support extending to school completion, study progression,

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life planning, further study, working life, and participation. In grades 7–9, the guidance counselor has the main responsibility for guidance counseling, and schools maintain guidance plans that define activities, responsibilities, transition points, and cooperation with stakeholders.

Finland's national Criteria for Good Guidance add an important equity dimension by emphasizing quality and equal access regardless of a student's location or circumstances. This principle is particularly relevant to Uzbekistan as the counselor role expands nationally. The policy challenge is not only to make guidance available, but to make the quality and scope of that guidance less dependent on the individual school, region, or practitioner.

Australia's Student Wellbeing Framework illustrates a third principle: student support is a whole-school responsibility supported by clear policy infrastructure. The framework emphasizes leadership, inclusion, safety, respect, resilience, and positive learning environments. For Uzbekistan, the lesson is not to reproduce the Australian system, but to place counselors within a coordinated school-wide support structure rather than expecting one professional to address every academic, social, psychological, and administrative need.

5. Key Policy Gaps in Uzbekistan

The current system reveals six interconnected gaps that are better addressed through policy than through informal local practice. The first two concern professional standards and preparation. Uzbekistan needs a national competency and ethical framework that specifies what school counselors are expected—and not expected—to do, including responsibilities, rights, confidentiality, referral principles, collaboration with psychologists and teachers, data use, and expected program outcomes. Recruitment testing is an important entry mechanism, but it is not a complete preparation system. Professionalization also requires a pathway from entry to advanced practice through postgraduate certificates, professional retraining, and, over time, specialized master's-level preparation in school counseling, educational guidance, or student success.

A second pair of gaps concerns continuous professional development and workload. A counselor's learning cannot end at recruitment; annual training should cover case consultation, peer mentoring, data-informed practice, career guidance, university admissions, safeguarding, student development, and changing labor-market conditions. At the same time, the system should distinguish caseload from workload. Two counselors serving the same number of students can face very different professional demands if one is also assigned substantial administrative work. A national framework should therefore combine staffing principles with protection of a defined proportion of counselor time for student-facing and programmatic responsibilities.

The final two gaps concern data, accountability, and professional infrastructure. Counseling should become increasingly data-informed through indicators such as attendance, academic progress, graduation, postsecondary applications and enrollment, participation in career planning, student engagement, parent satisfaction, and counselor professional-development hours. The purpose is not to reduce counseling to numerical targets, but to give the system a basis for learning and improvement. A rapidly expanding profession also needs a durable professional community. Informal communication networks can circulate instructions quickly, but they do not by themselves create a sustained knowledge base; a national professional platform and representative council could provide that infrastructure.

6. Proposed Student Success Model

The proposed policy framework is organized around a Student Success pathway in which the school counselor serves as a coordinating link between a student's current school experience and future educational and employment decisions (Figure 1). The pathway is not intended to imply that progress is perfectly linear; rather, it identifies the major transition points at which structured guidance can reduce fragmentation and help students make informed choices.

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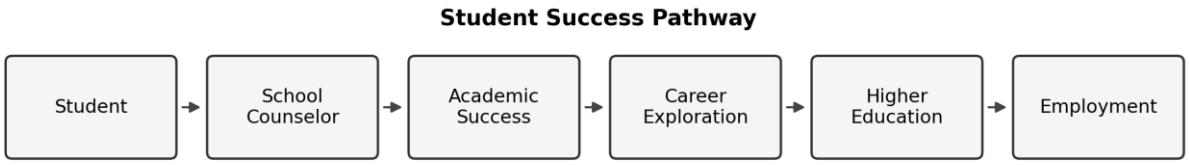


Figure 1. Proposed Student Success pathway for Uzbekistan.

Source: Author's conceptualization based on the Student Success model proposed in this paper.

This model broadens the policy objective from helping students complete secondary education to helping them navigate the decisions that follow it. It also provides a clearer rationale for the counselor's role: the counselor can connect academic planning, career exploration, higher-education preparation, and future employment choices that are often handled separately. A coordinated pathway can make educational opportunity more understandable and actionable for students and families.

The model does not mean that counselors should replace teachers, psychologists, career-service agencies, universities, or employers. Their role is better understood as coordination within a multidisciplinary ecosystem: providing guidance where they have professional competence, connecting students to relevant information and opportunities, and referring cases that require another specialist. This interpretation keeps the counselor's role broad enough to support student success without turning it into an undefined catch-all position.

7. Policy Recommendations

The first priority is to establish a National School Counseling Standards Framework with meaningful participation from experienced practicing counselors, education policymakers, psychologists, school leaders, and higher-education experts. The standards should define competencies, role boundaries, ethical expectations, service delivery, data use, referral practice, and accountability. A representative National School Counselors Council or professional association should support this framework by giving practitioners a professional voice and a mechanism for standards development, ethical guidance, research, mentoring, and continuing education. Representation should include both specialized and general education schools and reflect all regions of Uzbekistan.

A second priority is to create a transparent professional pathway from entry to advanced practice. A Junior/Senior certification structure could distinguish entry-level competence from advanced practice, mentoring, program evaluation, and leadership, with renewal linked to continuing professional development rather than a one-time credential. Certification should be supported by formal academic preparation. Uzbekistan could begin with postgraduate certificates or one-year professional retraining programs in school counseling, educational guidance, career development, or student success and later develop specialized master's programs as the profession matures.

A third priority is to build professional learning infrastructure. A national digital platform could provide methodological resources, case discussions, professional-development materials, university and scholarship information, career resources, templates, and peer communication. Its purpose should be to create a shared professional knowledge base, not simply another channel for administrative instructions. The platform could also support structured continuing professional development, helping counselors update their practice as admissions systems, labor-market information, safeguarding expectations, and student needs change.

A fourth priority is to protect professional time by defining core and non-core responsibilities alongside the standards. Counselors should not routinely become substitutes for vacant administrative, communications, design, information-technology, or unrelated positions because such assignments reduce the time available for student guidance. This recommendation is also informed by practitioner experience.

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In 2024, I established a counselor-oriented platform to facilitate communication and knowledge sharing, and in 2025 I developed the concept of MyWay—Mening Yo‘lim to help students access information about university admissions and educational opportunities. Although these initiatives were constrained by resources, they indicated demand for more structured digital guidance and suggest a principle that could be scaled institutionally.

8. Proposed Implementation Roadmap, 2028–2030

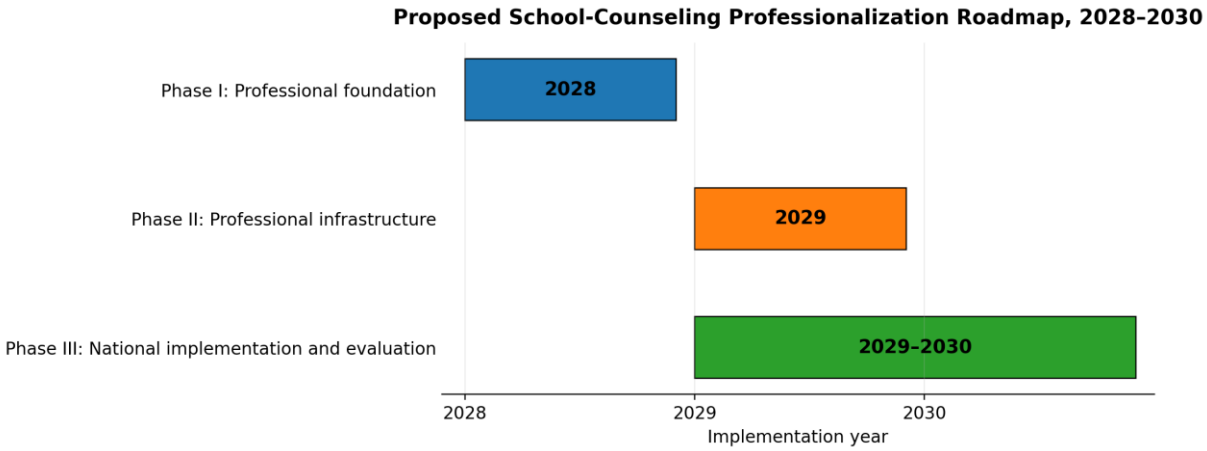


Chart 1. Proposed phased roadmap for school-counseling professionalization, 2028–2030.

Source: Author’s synthesis of the implementation sequence proposed in this paper.

Phase I, proposed for 2028, would establish the professional foundation. The government and relevant education bodies would convene a national School Counseling Forum, establish an interim representative professional council, map counselor competencies and role boundaries, draft national professional and ethical standards, and conduct a national workload and caseload study. This phase is intentionally diagnostic and standards-focused: the system should first define the profession and understand its operating conditions before introducing large-scale certification or evaluation requirements.

Phase II, proposed for 2029, would build the professional infrastructure needed to put the standards into practice. This stage would pilot Junior and Senior certification, publish national methodological guidance and case-based resources, launch the national digital professional platform, establish continuing professional development requirements, and begin postgraduate or professional preparation pathways. The central objective would be to give counselors practical tools, learning structures, and a credible pathway for professional growth rather than relying on informal mentoring alone.

Phase III, proposed for 2029–2030, would move from piloting to national implementation and evaluation. The standards would be implemented nationally while policymakers monitor workload, access, and service quality, introduce outcome-based program evaluation, refine certification and continuing professional development requirements in response to evidence, and publish an annual national school counseling report. The dates should be treated as a policy roadmap rather than fixed administrative deadlines; the essential principle is sequencing, with standards preceding large-scale certification, training supporting the standards, digital infrastructure supporting implementation, and evaluation informing later revision.

9. Evaluation and Accountability

The success of school counseling should not be measured simply by the number of counselors appointed. A stronger accountability framework would ask whether students actually receive meaningful guidance and whether that guidance improves access to opportunities and transitions beyond school. Evaluation should therefore combine service-delivery measures with student and program outcomes, while avoiding a narrow target culture that encourages counselors to optimize numbers rather than improve support.

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Possible national indicators include the counselor-to-student ratio, the proportion of counselor time devoted to student services, the percentage of students with academic or career plans, participation in postsecondary planning, application and enrollment patterns, student and parent satisfaction, professional-development participation, referral and collaboration patterns, and counselor retention. These indicators should be interpreted together because no single measure captures counseling quality. Used carefully, they can show whether access is equitable, whether counselors are able to perform their core role, and whether programs are improving over time.

This approach is consistent with the data-informed orientation of the ASCA National Model, which emphasizes program impact rather than the simple counting of activities. For Uzbekistan, the value of a national evaluation framework would be its ability to support learning: identifying where implementation is strong, where counselors are overloaded or underprepared, and where additional policy support is needed.

10. Conclusion

Uzbekistan has reached an important turning point. The country has moved from a small emerging school-counseling function toward a nationally expanding position. The next stage should therefore focus not simply on appointing more counselors, but on professionalizing the role through clear standards, preparation, protected responsibilities, professional learning, and accountable implementation.

The central policy questions are institutional: What standards define the profession? What preparation should a counselor receive? Which responsibilities belong to the counselor and which belong to the psychologist or other school staff? How should workload be managed? How should professional growth be recognized? What evidence should demonstrate impact? And what institution should represent and develop the profession? Addressing these questions together is more important than expanding any single reform instrument in isolation.

International experience demonstrates that effective guidance systems depend on more than individual professionals. They depend on frameworks, standards, professional learning, role clarity, data, and institutional support. Uzbekistan does not need to copy any one model. It can draw from these principles while developing a system that reflects its own educational structure, policy priorities, and emerging experience with school counseling.

The central proposal of this paper is to position the school counselor within a national Student Success system that connects academic development, career exploration, higher education, and future employment. If implemented carefully, this framework could transform school counseling from a newly introduced position into a mature educational profession with a clear purpose, defined boundaries, and a stronger capacity to support students across major transitions.

The ultimate objective is not to strengthen the profession for its own sake. It is to make educational opportunity more navigable and more equitable for students. A school counselor should do more than help a student complete school; the counselor should help the student understand what can come next, evaluate realistic options, and build a pathway toward them.

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