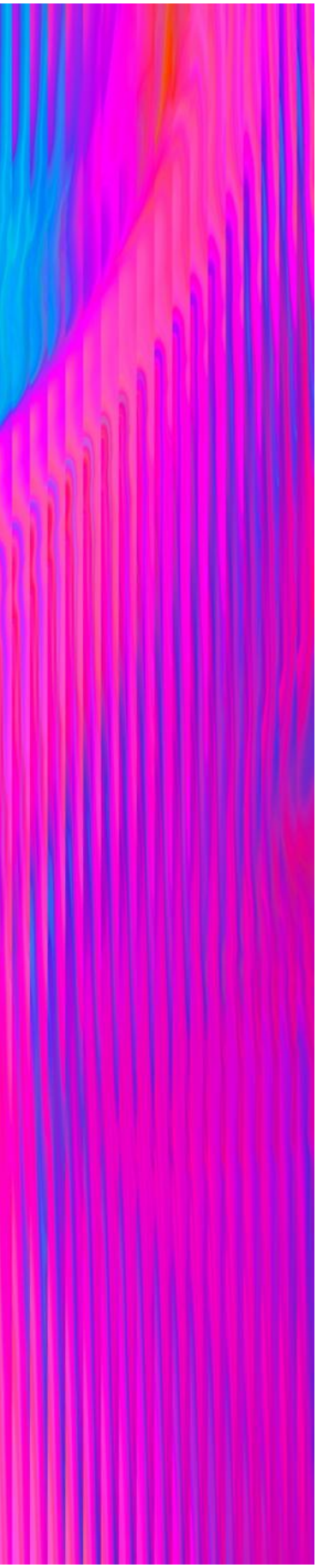
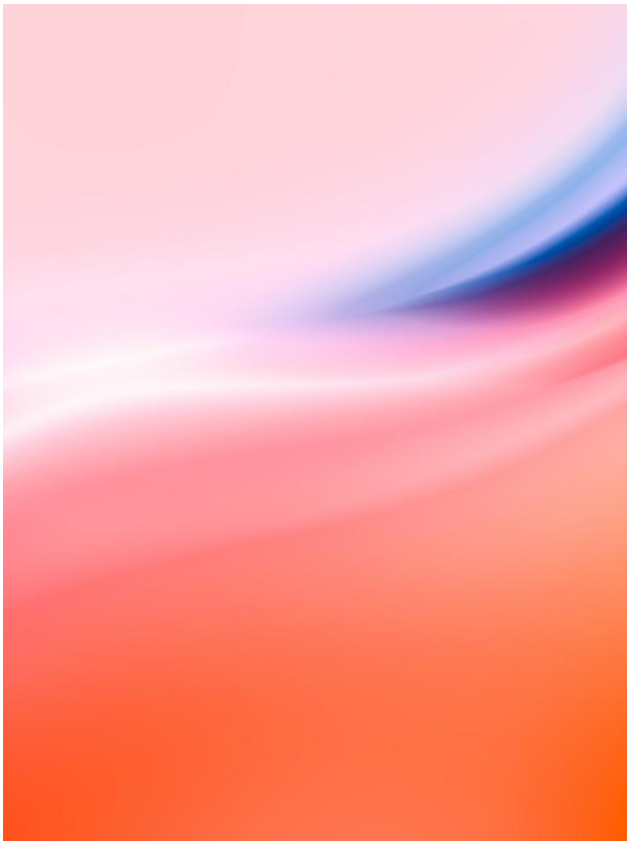


PROMOTING EFFECTIVE SCHOOL COUNSELLING IN HONG KONG

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report summarizes the key findings from a study conducted in 2024-2025. Our goal was to understand what makes school counselling effective in the unique context of Hong Kong. A total of 75 stakeholders (students, parents, school counsellors in international and local schools, and school leaders) across Hong Kong's international and local secondary schools were interviewed and the data were analysed to develop a model of school counselling effectiveness.

We identified a **cycle of marginalization** as **the central challenge to effective counselling in schools**. Cultural stigma around mental health, combined with an intense focus on academic results, often leads to counselling being under-resourced and viewed as a remedial and supportive service, not a central part of schools' provision for students. This results in low visibility and access, which in turn reinforces stigma.

The central finding. The single most important factor in breaking this cycle is **intentional leadership**. School leaders who understand and actively champion counselling in their school community, integrate it into the school's mission, and allocate sufficient resources create the conditions for effective counselling.

Effectiveness is a systemic outcome, not primarily driven by counsellors' individual practices. Our model shows that when leaders act intentionally, they empower counsellors and foster collaboration. This combined action can successfully counter stigma and academic pressure, leading to measurable improvements in student wellbeing and engagement.

Our call to action. Transforming school counselling from a peripheral service to a core component of student success requires a shared commitment. We provide recommendations for school leaders, counsellors, and policymakers to work together to build a new normal where counselling is a core part of school and a pathway to healthy development and achievement.



INTRODUCTION

THE NEED FOR A HONG KONG-SPECIFIC APPROACH TO SCHOOL COUNSELLING

Hong Kong's students face significant pressures from academic competition, high family and societal expectations, and rapid social change. While school-based counselling is a proven, frontline means of psychosocial support, its potential in Hong Kong remains underutilized.

Global evidence confirms that effective school counselling improves mental health, wellbeing, and academic outcomes. However, simply importing Western counselling models does not work in the context of an Asian society like Hong Kong. The territory's unique context – deeply rooted cultural values, a competitive and high stakes academic culture, and a diverse school sector – demands a more indigenous approach.

This study listened to the voices of all key stakeholders to answer a critical question: **What does effective school counselling look like in Hong Kong, and how can we achieve it?**

WHAT IS EFFECTIVE SCHOOL COUNSELLING?

Effectiveness in school counselling is a holistic construct that includes both subjective student outcomes and the successful normalization of counselling within the school system. It is achieved through the proactive integration of counselling services, the creation of a supportive school culture that reduces stigma around mental health, and counsellors' ability to balance preventative (proactive) and responsive roles within contextual constraints.

Specifically, effectiveness is demonstrated by:

- **Subjective and observable student improvements**: Students feeling helped and supported, report positive emotional states, show behavioural changes (e.g., better sleep, improved social interactions), and increased willingness to seek help early.

- **Cultural and institutional impact**: Normalizing counselling through safe spaces, open conversations, awareness-raising initiatives, parental engagement, integration into the curriculum, and visible

institutional support, leading to reduced stigma and higher self-referrals.

- **Balanced service delivery**: Combining proactive wellness initiatives and tiered interventions that prevent crises with responsive, individualised support for immediate needs.

- **Reflective and data-informed practice**: Using a mix of quantitative measures (e.g., regular wellbeing surveys), qualitative feedback from students, parents, and teachers, and personal reflection to assess and improve practice.

In summary, counselling is effective when it fosters a school environment where mental health support is valued, accessible, and embedded, while producing meaningful, often subjective, positive changes in students' wellbeing.

PROMOTING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SCHOOL COUNSELLING

1. Leadership Intentionality: The primary driver of effective school counselling

- **The gap.** Counselling is seen by school leaders as tangential to the school's core academic goals. A significant divide exists between sectors. International school leaders often show greater understanding and support, while local school leaders more frequently view.
- **What works.** Leadership support is not passive approval; it requires active, strategic action. Counselling is most effective when senior leaders deliberately embed it within the school's vision, publicly advocate for it, allocate dedicated resources (budget, space, time), and include counsellors in key decisions. Effectiveness is not mainly about the individual counsellor's skill, but about how deliberately and consistently school leaders integrate, resource, and champion counselling.
- Supportive practices that enable effectiveness:
    - Making wellbeing and counselling a visible strategic priority equal to academics
    - Publicly valuing counsellors' expertise and including them in decision-making
    - Providing stable leadership, adequate staffing, dedicated rooms, budget, supervision, and professional development opportunities
    - Granting autonomy and influence rather than micromanaging or assigning non-counselling duties
- Unsupportive practices that undermine effectiveness:
    - Leadership turnover without succession planning, misunderstanding counselling (such as conflating counselling with social work), exclusion from leadership roles
    - Allowing counselling to remain reactive, under-resourced, and marginalised
- While these factors are relevant to all schools, international schools generally show stronger leadership support than local public schools, where systemic policy omission and academic pressure keep counselling weak and administrative.

2. Building legitimacy and trust: A Strong professional identity

- **The gap.** Counsellors often face role ambiguity, being tasked with administrative duties or conflated with other roles.
- **What works.** Counsellors must be seen – and see themselves – as qualified specialists, distinct from social workers, psychologists, learning support teachers, and others. This legitimacy is conferred by the school through clear role definitions, professional titles (e.g., Head of Counselling), private office space, and inclusion in leadership structures.
- Parents and students explicitly value "well-qualified, experienced, and stable" counsellors. Without institutional recognition, trust and impact are undermined. Counsellors with clear training, role clarity, and institutional recognition are trusted more by parents and leaders,

feel more effective, and can advocate successfully.

- Parents explicitly say they become “allies” when counsellors are experienced, stable, approachable, culturally sensitive, and seen as specialists rather than generic “support staff”. In contrast, role ambiguity or conflating counsellors with teachers, social workers, and other professional roles creates confusion and erodes trust across stakeholder groups.

3. Breaking the stigma-academic cycle

- **The gap.** Especially among Chinese/Asian families, “losing face” and seeing mental health support as weakness remain powerful barriers (reported by parents, counsellors, and leaders). Schools’ overwhelming focus on academic results and university admissions reinforces stigma and leads to chronic under-resourcing of counselling. This creates a self-reinforcing loop: stigma → low parental engagement → low leadership priority → reactive, low-visibility services → further stigma and disengagement.
- **What works.** Acknowledging this powerful barrier is the first step to improving counselling effectiveness. The pervasive stigma (fear of “losing face”) and the belief that “Ivy League is more important than wellbeing” (to quote one parent) create a vicious cycle: stigma leads to under-resourcing, which leads to poor service visibility and effectiveness, which then reinforces the stigma.

4. The importance of structural stability

- **The gap.** Short-term funding and temporary contracts cause high staff turnover, rupturing therapeutic relationships. Long wait times and infrequent sessions signal that student wellbeing is not a priority. This structural precarity is a major systemic barrier.
- **What works.** Effective counselling requires continuity. Students need consistent, accessible relationships with their counsellors.

5. Proactive collaboration

- **The gap.** Communication is often ad-hoc. Parents reported feeling forced to act as “coordinators” between disconnected school staff. Proactive communication (e.g., counsellor-led assemblies, parent workshops) is vital to normalise counselling and make it visible.
- **What works.** Counselling cannot operate in a silo. Structured collaboration between counsellors, teachers, and parents is essential. This includes regular case meetings, clear referral protocols, and joint professional development.
- Effective counselling is relational and systemic, not siloed. Parents feel overburdened when communication is fragmented and they must coordinate between teachers, tutors, and counsellors themselves.

- Counsellors and leaders emphasise structured collaboration: shared language on wellbeing, joint case management, parent workshops, teacher training, and proactive outreach.

6. Multi-stakeholder advocacy

- **The gap.** All stakeholders want counselling to move from “band-aid” crisis intervention to embedded prevention: curriculum lessons, whole-school programmes, early identification, and cultural change. However, advocacy for counselling is weak and fragmented. Cultural stigma and a focus on academic success, and a weak understanding of counselling and its benefits limits the capacity for different stakeholders to advocate for more effective counselling.

- **What works.** Change is driven by a triad of advocacy:
    - **Counsellor self-advocacy:** Asserting professional boundaries and educating colleagues.
    - **Parental advocacy:** Using their voice as service-users to demand quality support.
    - **Leadership advocacy:** Championing counselling to school boards, parents, and the wider community.
- When these voices align, they create powerful momentum for systemic improvement.
- When leaders advocate, counselling becomes central. When counsellors advocate (especially via “lead counsellor” roles), they gain voice and legitimacy. When parents advocate (individually or collectively), they push schools to prioritise wellbeing over pure academics. All three groups must call for collective, culturally sensitive advocacy to break the stigma–marginalisation cycle.



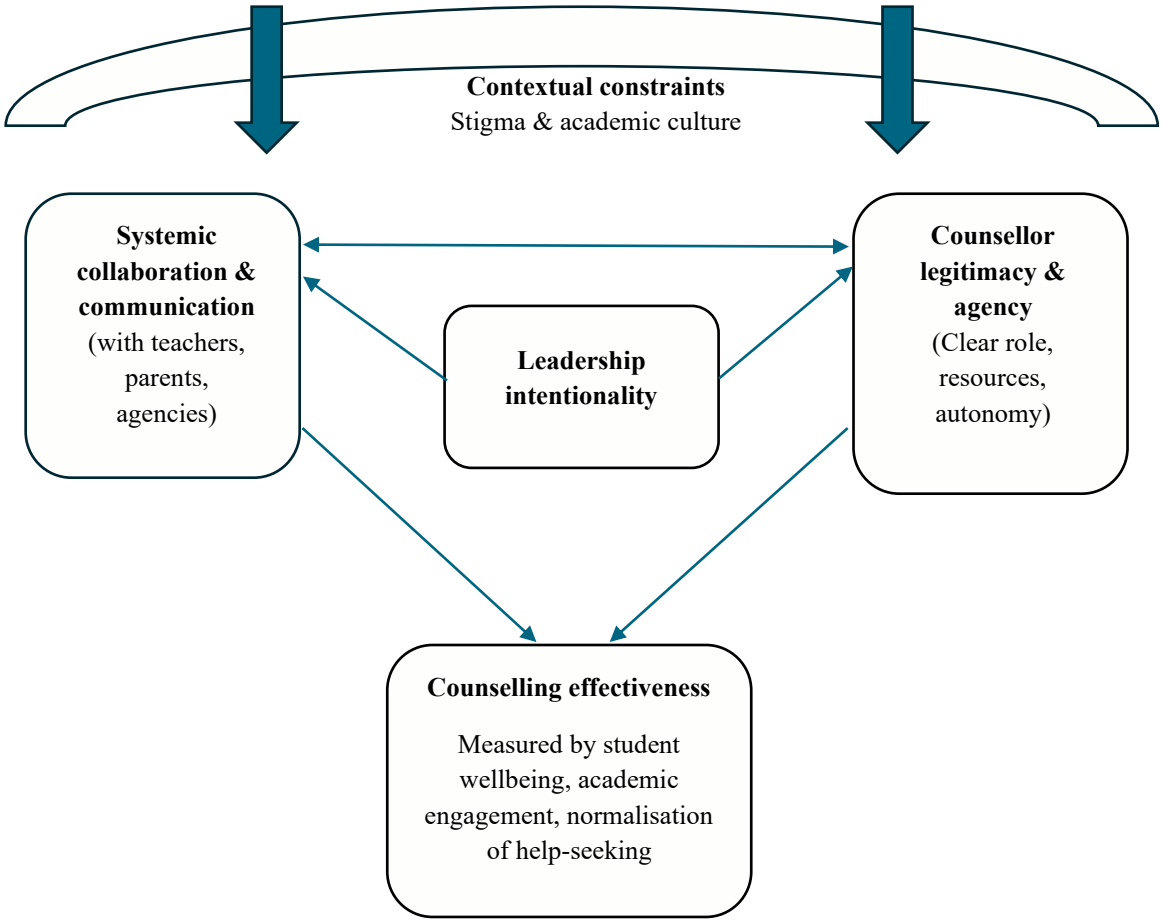
AN INTEGRATED MODEL OF SCHOOL COUNSELLING EFFECTIVENESS

The findings of our study have resulted in an integrated model of school counselling effectiveness.

This presents a dynamic system powered by leadership intentionality. When school leaders deliberately champion, resource, and integrate counselling into the school's core mission, they activate two essential domains: first, by establishing clear counsellor legitimacy & agency through professional recognition and stable resources, and second, by fostering robust systemic collaboration & communication among teachers, parents, and external support networks. These empowered domains work in concert to directly counteract Hong Kong's persistent constraints – namely cultural stigma and an intensely pressurised academic culture. The result is greater counselling effectiveness, evidenced by improved student wellbeing, greater academic engagement, and the normalisation of help-seeking. Crucially, these positive outcomes then reinforce leadership commitment and build wider community buy-in, creating a self-sustaining virtuous cycle that systematically displaces the original, damaging cycle of counselling marginalisation.

In summary, effective outcomes reinforce leadership commitment and community buy-in, creating a **virtuous cycle** that displaces the original vicious cycle of marginalisation.

AN INTEGRATED MODEL OF SCHOOL COUNSELLING EFFECTIVENESS



RECOMMENDATIONS

SYSTEM / POLICY-LEVEL (FOR EDUCATION BUREAU, SCHOOL ASSOCIATIONS, AND PROFESSIONAL BODIES)

1. Establish professional standards and registration for school counsellors
    - Create a recognised qualification pathway and voluntary/registerable title "Registered School Counsellor (Hong Kong)" requiring a degree in counselling and supervised practice.
    - Phase in mandatory registration for new hires within five years.
2. Include school counsellors explicitly in all relevant policy and guidance
    - Revise the Comprehensive Student Guidance Service framework and all crisis/SEN documents to define the distinct role of counsellors (separate from social workers, guidance teachers, and SEN staff).
    - Require every school to publish an annual "Counselling & Wellbeing Report" (staffing ratios, programmes delivered, outcomes) alongside academic results.
3. Fund and mandate minimum counselling provision
    - For local government and aided schools: provide recurrent funding tied to enrolment for at least one full-time counsellor per 600 students.
    - For international and DSS schools: make adequate counselling provision a condition of registration/renewal.
4. Require leadership training on counselling
    - Add a compulsory module on "Supporting School Counselling & Student Wellbeing" to all principal certification and continuing professional development programmes.
    - Include understanding counsellor roles, reducing stigma, and building collaborative systems.
5. Develop culturally responsive frameworks and resources
    - Commission bilingual (English–Chinese) parent guides, teacher training packs, and student videos that frame counselling as "academic and life-success support" rather than deficit/remediation.
    - Fund pilot projects for preventative, curriculum-embedded wellbeing programmes with proven models.
6. Create professional support structures
    - Establish a government- or NGO-funded clinical supervision subsidy scheme for school counsellors.
    - Support the formation of a Hong Kong School Counsellors Association with regular CPD, peer supervision networks, and advocacy voice.
7. Set up monitoring and accountability
    - Include student wellbeing indicators (e.g., counselling utilisation rates, self-referral rates, student wellbeing survey scores) in school inspection frameworks alongside academic metrics.

SCHOOL-LEVEL (FOR PRINCIPALS, SENIOR LEADERSHIP TEAMS, AND GOVERNING BODIES)

1. Make wellbeing and counselling a non-negotiable strategic priority
    - Include explicit, measurable counselling/wellbeing goals in the school development plan equal in status to academic targets.
    - Publicly state (on school websites, prospectuses, assemblies, parent evenings) that "student mental health is as important as university offers".
2. Resource counselling properly and sustainably
    - Adopt a maximum student-to-counsellor ratio of 250:1 (ASCA recommendation) as a medium-term target; interim target 400:1 for large schools.
    - Budget for at least one full-time, master's-qualified counsellor per 400–500 students plus funded clinical supervision (minimum 1.5 hours/month per counsellor).
    - Provide permanent, private, welcoming counselling spaces — not shared or temporary rooms.
3. Clarify and protect the counsellor role
    - Create and publish a clear job description that explicitly excludes non-counselling duties (discipline monitoring, exam invigilation, routine admin).
    - Introduce a "Lead/Head of Counselling" position with senior leadership team membership in every school with >600 students.
4. Build intentional collaboration systems
    - Establish a standing Wellbeing Coordinating Team (principal or deputy princial, lead counsellor, heads of year/pastoral, SENCO, one parent rep) that meets monthly.
    - Mandate regular parent workshops (at least two per year) in English and Cantonese/Mandarin on "how counselling works" and "mental health as academic support".
    - Require counsellors to deliver at least one INSET/training session per year for all teaching staff on recognising distress and making appropriate referrals.
5. Increase visibility and normalisation
    - Counsellors run assemblies, teach wellbeing curriculum units, and are visibly present at school events.
    - Celebrate "Counselling & Wellbeing Week" annually with student-led activities and parent involvement.
6. Actively counter stigma
    - Frame counselling messages around strength and academic enablement: "Talking to the counsellor helps you perform at your best."
    - Invite students or alumni to share positive experiences.

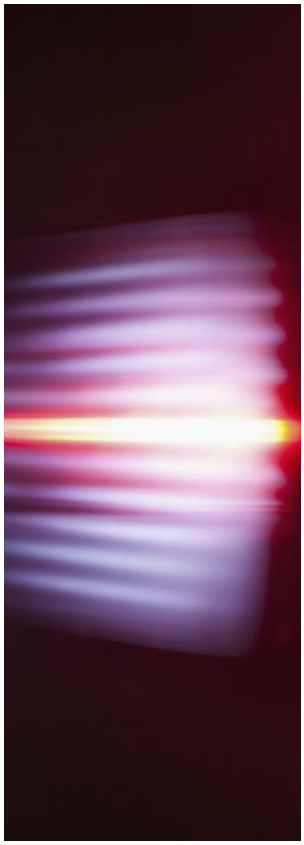
Implementing even half of these recommendations would move Hong Kong schools from the current "crisis-only, marginalised" model to a proactive, collaborative, culturally accepted system in which counselling is seen — by leaders, counsellors, parents, and students — as a normal, valued, and essential part of education.

CONCLUSION: A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

The effectiveness of school counselling in Hong Kong is a systemic choice. The cycle of marginalisation can be broken. By embracing intentional leadership, promoting professional identity, and fostering a culture of collaboration and openness, we can reposition counselling as a normalised, proactive, and essential component of every student's school life.

Ultimately, effective counselling supports not only emotional wellbeing but also the academic excellence that Hong Kong values. It is an investment in our young people's capacity to thrive. Achieving this vision is the shared responsibility of the entire educational community.

In Hong Kong's high-pressure, academically focused, high stigma context, school counselling is only as effective as the school's leadership can make it. Where leaders intentionally centre counselling, resource it properly, clarify roles, and build collaborative systems, counselling becomes proactive, trusted, and impactful. Where leadership is absent, inconsistent, or exclusively academically focused, counselling remains reactive, marginalised, and stigmatised — despite the best efforts of skilled counsellors and concerned parents. Effectiveness is a whole-school responsibility, not an individual counsellor's burden.



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