

“Friends” of Schoolchildren or School Counselors?

Gunel Alasgarova

This IDD Analytical Policy Brief recommends transforming Azerbaijan’s laudable “Friends of Schoolchildren” (“*Məktəblinin dostu*”) pilot initiative into a comprehensive “School Counseling Program” nationwide.

Recognizing the essential role of school counselors globally, the paper urges the Ministry of Science and Education to align counselor responsibilities with international standards. The way forward requires placing greater emphasis on efficient recruitment and preparation as well as greater engagement with relevant institutions and stakeholders. The IDD paper goes on to outline challenges, draw international parallels, and provide an outline of the proposed policy, concluding with recommendations for the Ministry.

Overview

In 2016, the Ministry of Science and Education of Azerbaijan [initiated](#) its “Friends of Schoolchildren” pilot project in 30 schools in Baku. The primary objectives were to [foster](#) a secure school community and organize various after-school activities. However, the project primarily involves physical assistance, such as aiding disabled or elementary students daily and responding to emergency cases, rather than focusing on academic and social-emotional development. Approximately 400 Friends are [engaged](#) daily, assisting around 420,000 students. The project’s timeline has been extended until 2024, but without an expansion of participants or beneficiaries.

Friends operate without explicit requirements or duties delineating their daily activities or restrictions. Information on whether they undergo specific training or receive

Gunel Alasgarova is pursuing a Ph.D. in Higher Education and Student Affairs at Ohio State University. In 2022, she was awarded an M.Ed. degree in Research, Measurement, and Statistics at Kent State University with a Fulbright Fellowship and Margaret Boyd Scholarship. She previously worked at Oxbridge Academy and Baku Engineering University. The views and opinions expressed herein are solely those of the author.

compensation before commencing work is unavailable. However, expectations [include](#) monitoring security concerns on school premises, shielding students from undesirable habits like smoking, conducting informational and educational activities in collaboration with teachers, and engaging in educational conversations with students. The Ministry of Science and Education's annual report 2021 notes that the Friends of Schoolchildren initiative contributes to ensuring children's comprehensive, unique qualities and intellectual development and shaping their self-education and self-development skills. While the Ministry's [Annual Report](#) highlights after-school activities and competitions organized by the Friends of Schoolchildren initiative, empirical research regarding the extent of their educational, emotional, or social aid remains scarce. The project is considered to be a pilot initiative, implemented exclusively in three cities' schools, and has been impacted by the disruptions caused by COVID-19.

Despite the lack of empirical research, the positive impact of the Friends of Schoolchildren initiative on the school atmosphere [is evident](#) through parent interviews featured on TV and social media programs. While their primary focus appears to be security measures and after-school intellectual activities, stakeholders (including educational experts, school administrators, and parents) have praised the project. [Calls](#) have been made to extend the presence of Friends to all schools throughout the country, highlighting their perceived contributions to elementary, middle, and high school students, including providing first aid, reconciling conflicts, and offering mental and emotional support when necessary.

Drawbacks of the Current Project

Adopting a comprehensive perspective and excluding the COVID-19-induced gap year of 2020-2021, the Friends of Schoolchildren pilot project can be regarded as successful. The initiative largely met its stipulated expectations, yet specific inadequacies warrant scrutiny.

First, Azerbaijani schools inherently provide medical, psychological, security, and homeroom support up to the final grade of the school system, often supplemented by part-time professional staff for continuous security monitoring. Given the established safety measures in public schools, there seems to be minimal justification for additional resources to duplicate security responsibilities. Though commendable, reports of providing first aid to students have prompted inquiries into the roles of school medical personnel in such situations.

Second, after-school activities have traditionally fallen within the purview of Azerbaijani schools, overseen by subject and homeroom teachers under the vice-principal's supervision. The efficacy of non-experienced bachelor's degree graduates, like most of the Friends, surpassing teachers in orchestrating school-based activities raises questions, especially considering their limited backgrounds in teaching, pedagogy, or psychology.

Third, urban schools in the capital and surrounding areas are well-equipped with qualified personnel, while rural schools face resource limitations. Focusing on urban schools exclusively, and thus neglecting the needs of rural counterparts, appears counterproductive. Rural parents dealing with tutor-related challenges for middle and high school students could find Friends as valuable replacements to address educational needs.

Lastly, the project's title implies a non-essential and ineffective role, diminishing its impact. High school student interviews suggest that Friends are perceived as mere greeters, outlets for complaints, and organizers of after-school activities. Also, some rare media reports highlight dissatisfaction among subject teachers, who perceive Friends as prone to reporting. The informal title of those involved in the initiative (“friends”) and undefined competencies contribute to tensions with teachers.

A comprehensive overhaul is thus proposed to address these issues and align with school counselors, renaming the project to “School Counselor” with clear duties. It is recommended that each school employs a full-time counselor at a ratio of 250 students to 1 counselor, starting as early as the upcoming academic year (2024-2025), if feasible.

School Counselor

In a global context and drawing insights from neighboring countries (e.g., Armenia, Georgia, Türkiye), the presented project can be examined with the established framework of School Counseling. [Described](#) as “certified/licensed educators who improve student success for ALL students by implementing a comprehensive school counseling program” by the American School Counselor Association, school counseling has evolved over a century (as vocational guidance in the U.S.), continually refining its structure and precise definition. However, establishing school counseling as a recognized and formalized profession [gained](#) momentum in the 1920s and 1930s. This period focused primarily on vocational guidance and helping students transition from school to work. As societal and educational needs changed over time, the role of school counselors in the U.S. [expanded](#) to include academic, personal, and social development aspects. Extensive empirical research [underscores](#) the merits of the school counselor role, emphasizing their positive impact on student’s academic achievements and mental well-being. School counselors, highly educated and professionally certified individuals, play a crucial role in education, primarily focusing on assisting students in academic success and future career planning.

School counselors emerge as key contributors to the school community, holding the destiny of their mentees in their hands. Drawing from observations in American middle schools, professional school counselors adeptly address students’ needs across critical domains: academic development, career development, college access, affordability, admission, and social-emotional development. Collaborating with subject teachers, the school counselors [impart](#) knowledge, skills, and attitudes vital for academic, career, and

social development. Empowered to organize programs and engage students in activities involving school staff, parents, and stakeholders, school counselors adopt a proactive approach, providing educational, preventive, and intervention activities. Importantly, they design, implement, and evaluate students' progress, maintaining accountability to both school administration and parents.

In the context of Azerbaijan's persistent Soviet-based educational structure, where subject teachers simultaneously [serve](#) as homeroom instructors, homerooms are deemed indispensable in all classes, and their elimination is not recommended. Despite school psychologists contributing to the school community, their impact on students' academic achievements remains generally limited.

My proposal suggests maintaining part-time homerooms and traditional psychologists, providing an opportune moment to appoint counselors from part-time subject teachers, and optimizing their capabilities through rigorous training and precise duty allocation to every Azerbaijani school.

Beyond homerooms and school psychologists, private tutors, college admission experts, and primarily hired subject teachers offer services to equip high school students for exams and university admissions. With the substantial cost and limited accessibility to tutors and experts (i.e., less than 40 percent of high school graduates can get acceptance after preparation), strategically endorsing an educational policy to provide every school with school counselors could offer a comprehensive solution.

Thus, the proposed policy advocates retaining traditional homeroom and school psychologist positions while assigning School Counselors instead of Friends. These counselors could seamlessly integrate counseling and admission expert roles, focusing on educational guidance without emergency aid obligations.

Policy Implications

Within the framework of a concrete set of policy recommendations, a dual strategy is thus proposed.

One, transform the initial pilot initiative into enduring roles for school counselors and endorse legislative measures in educational policy to mandate the placement of school counselors in every academic institution staffed by seasoned, well-qualified, and certified educators committed to substantial contributions to K-11 education. Additionally, define precise anticipations, benchmarks, and proficiencies associated with their roles.

In a short-term initiative, the Ministry of Science and Education could implement a school counseling policy, conduct comprehensive training programs, and administer a certification examination for school counselors. The focus should be on equipping

certified counselors to support academic, personal development, mental health, and college planning in all of Azerbaijan's schools, particularly addressing rural schools' specific challenges. As noted above, the Ministry should strive for an ideal counselor-to-student ratio of 250:1, allowing counselors to allocate 80 percent of their time to direct student engagement.

Additionally, the Ministry should define competencies for school counselors, emphasizing support for high school students in their college admissions journey. While the proposal has merits, challenges include training subject teachers for counseling roles, fostering collaboration with parents, and overcoming resistance to change in the Azerbaijani populace. The success of integrating school counselors into existing incentives, like the "Rural Teachers' Privilege" policy, could enhance affordability and accessibility, ultimately contributing to increased college admission rates.

Two, Higher Education Institutions should endorse establishing a formalized School Counseling degree or certification program as a sustained strategy.

The rationale behind such a proposal is twofold: first, it addresses the absence of dedicated school counseling faculties in Azerbaijani universities by developing a prospective degree program. Second, counseling courses should be integrated into existing graduate programs at ADA University, such as Educational Management or Teaching and Learning, to pragmatically incorporate counseling expertise into the educational framework. Given the annual introduction of up to ten new programs in various Azerbaijani universities, integrating a counseling program into any degree or project should be a manageable endeavor. As an alternative avenue, the Azerbaijani government has sanctioned dual-title programs in collaboration with international institutions, exemplified by the 2019 partnership between Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University and George Washington University, allowing for the integration of a comprehensive School Counseling program.

Another long-term strategy involves incorporating School Counseling preparation within the principal and teacher training program [initiated](#) by ADA University through the "Manifesto of a Teacher and an Educator" project. This project, partially conducted under the auspices of ADA University Foundation USA, successfully concluded its 2023-2024 cycle of principal-teacher preparation, paving the way for the inclusion of school counseling in subsequent projects. Perhaps the [ADA University Gazakh Center](#) could serve as a focal point in the time ahead.

Lastly, under the State Program for 2022-2026 for Enabling Youth to Study in Prestigious Foreign Universities, the Ministry could [integrate](#) a School Counseling program, extending funding mechanisms allocated to support the overseas education of graduate students in Educational Administration and School Psychology within the four-year strategic plan.

Implementing any of these proposed policies for the long-term strategy requires meticulous, collaborative, and sustainable efforts among ministries, higher education institutions, educational experts, local communities, and individual schools themselves.

Conclusion

Initiating the Friends of Schoolchildren initiative as a pilot project was deliberate and indispensable. With six years of average positive feedback, the imperative now lies in expanding the scope of the position's responsibilities, integrating it as an essential component of the entire school community throughout Azerbaijan.

Rebranded as "school counselors," these individuals could assume appropriate responsible roles at the school, municipal, and national levels. School counseling services and competencies, as proposed above, could provide comprehensive support for all K-11 students, encompassing their academic, mental, and physical well-being.

The successful implementation of such a proposal will require meticulous preparation and collaborative efforts. The possibility of initial resistance from homerooms and tutors, who may perceive potential damage to their reputation and financial benefits, should be weighed against the anticipated endorsement from parents, principals, and college admission committees due to the expected enhancement of student outcomes.

The establishment of a school counseling program should help elevate Azerbaijani students' academic, career, and social trajectories. My bottom-line assessment is that the provision of professional counselors for both academic and non-academic benefits is imperative for schoolchildren, which, to be successful will necessitate their prompt preparation and appointment.