School counselors are needed now — more than ever

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Delca Ortiz talks to a student at Mott Hall School in Harlem.

After more than a decade teaching secondary English, Marie Bordinaro felt called to do more.

"I loved my job, my kids and my colleagues, but I just started to see how kids, teachers, administrators and families all needed a go-between and I saw where something outside of the classroom was getting in the way of a student's learning," she said.

Seventeen years ago, Bordinaro became that go-between — a school counselor. Now working with vocational and special ed students at the Orange Ulster BOCES and a member of the New York State School Counselor Association, she said she is amazed at the variety of roles counselors fill in schools across the state.

Angela Reformato agrees. As the citywide chapter leader of about 2,700 guidance counselors for the United Federation of Teachers, she noted that school counselors are key in ensuring schools maximize student achievement.

"The responsibilities of counselors have increased tremendously over the years," said Reformato, also a member of the NYSSCA. "Counselors are an integral part of the whole school community working to help children, teachers and other school personnel and parents."

Pride in the work counselors do is one reason the two are pushing for recognition of National School Counseling Week, Feb. 7-11. This year's theme is "School Counselors Point You in the Right Direction."

"Counselors help children face challenges, tough classes, peer pressure, friendship problems, depression and more — all that can be roadblocks to future success," said Reformato.

One roadblock is that there simply are not enough counselors. Many elementary schools do not have any guidance counselors. Staffing is not adequate in secondary schools. New York State United Teachers' legislative program supports state legislation to require at least one full-time guidance
counselor in every school. The bill's philosophy recognizes that, too often in
tough budget times, counselor, social worker and psychologist positions are
first to be cut.

More counselors are needed when buildings are large, noted Reformato in
recent testimony to the New York City Council. In the city, counselors at
middle and junior high schools generally work with caseloads of 500 to 800
students. "Amazingly," she added, "most guidance counselors in the middle
and junior high schools don't have their own desktop computers."

For information on National School Counseling Week, go to
www.schoolcounselor.org or to www.nyssca.org for the New York State
School Counselor Association's tips on celebrating the profession.

— Betsy Sandberg