



February 13, 2020

Testimony in support of the need for Elementary School Counselors and a 1:250 Ratio for all CT School Counselors

As a counselor educator and former Connecticut middle school counselor, I want to share a very clear message with you. **One of the contributions to our static achievement gap in Connecticut is the lack of equitable access to high quality mental health supports in our schools.** Every student in CT deserves to have the support of a highly qualified school counselor available to them from kindergarten through grade 12 to help them to develop academically, socially, emotionally and vocationally. Navigating the minefield of childhood and adolescence requires the consistent support of not only parents and educators, but those individuals trained to foster positive mental health. **Early intervention is paramount - especially now when 1 in 5 children have a diagnosable mental health disorder but only 20% are ever identified or treated. Fully 75% of those disorders are diagnosable by age 14. That means we must do all we can to identify and support children and youth before they fall into unhealthy patterns of behaviors such as substance abuse, self harm, and suicidal or homicidal ideation.**

**Currently, access to school counselors is zip code dependent in our state.** As a school counselor educator, I drive from school to school and witness, first hand, the stark difference between plush school counseling suites with one counselor for every 200 students, a School Counseling department coordinator, large budgets, professional esteem and a lengthy list of community partners who collaborate to provide services to their shared student/family population. In these schools, less than 20% of students are living in poverty.

Down the road, separated by zip code and deeply dependent on local funding, these schools' counseling departments often lack resources, consistent leadership, access to professional development, and a paucity of outside partners positioned to support students and their families when the school day/year is over. In these schools, students often have high exposure to trauma. In addition, typically more than 80% of students live in poverty. ***So, why are there more school counselors in schools where children and their families already enjoy a high level of support?*** Because administrators in our suburban schools prioritize hiring a sufficient number of school counselors that are available to children and their parents. Parents in these districts expect that their child has an adult in the building who will support their child whenever the need arises. These parents are enfranchised and they demand that level of "customer service". **Conversely, research indicates that often parents in high poverty districts are completely unaware of this painful discrepancy in services unless they have sent their child to a better funded suburban schools.**

I will close by sharing this - the first night of my first year graduate course in school counseling, I asked my 20 students to stand on one side of the room if they had a positive experience with

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their school counselor and to stand on the opposite side of the room if they had a negative experience. Of the 20 students, 8 were students of color and 2 had attended low achieving schools. The remainder were white and had attended suburban high schools. All 8 students of color and the two who attended low achieving schools moved to the negative side. All 10 white suburban students moved to the positive side. This was only 2 years ago. These are the courageous conversations I have with my students. This is the courageous conversation we must have with lawmakers.

We cannot give our students with the most need the least amount of mental health support and expect things to change in CT. **We know that the presence of a consistent and caring School Counselor during their K-12 journey who provides a comprehensive school counseling program guided by evidence practices and aligned multi-tiered systems of support makes a difference to key students outcomes. These include attendance, academic achievement, and the number of students who attend 2 and 4 year institutions of higher education. It is crystal clear when we look at the data.**

*In my mind, it is a moral imperative to address this egregious imbalance that sustains the status quo.* Our kids deserve better. They deserve well trained, well informed, highly empathetic school counselors who reflect the diversity of our student population. Those school counselors should be present in ALL K-12 schools and no counselors should have to support more than 250 students during a single academic year. **School administrators would NEVER give a kindergarten or an AP biology teacher 50 students and expect high quality results. So, why would anyone assign school counselors in CT, on average, 435 students and expect them to support their students in a meaningful way??**

**I support any and all efforts to make access to school counseling equitable in the state of CT in order to ensure a brighter future for ALL of our precious children kindergarten through high school graduation who a brimming with potential.**

**Thank you,**

Dr. Peg Donohue  
Assistant Professor & School Counseling Program Coordinator  
Department of Counselor Education & Family Therapy  
Phone: (860) 832-2264  
Email: peg.donohue@ccsu.edu