

Members of the Appropriations Committee,

My name is Sarah Magilnick and I am a first year School Counselor at Staples High School in Westport, Connecticut. I am writing to you with testimony for: H.B. No. 5005 AN ACT ADJUSTING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE 30, 2021 While, I have been a School Counselor for a little over 6 months now, I feel as though I am fortunate enough to share my experiences so far with you. I am in a school that is very fortunate to be well staffed and supported, our caseloads range between 185-190 for our counselors. We have about 1900 students in our student body which means we have 10 School Counselors and a department chair.

These appropriately sized caseloads truly have an impact on the work that we do in our school. We have implemented a new advisory system this year called connections. Our students are divided up by grade and by counselor, this group is their “advisory” period for their whole experience at Staples. In these connection groups, our counselors have valuable opportunities to visit with their own students frequently throughout the year to provide lessons and to get to know our students. These connections groups meet 2 times a week for 20 minutes at a time. We have already met with all of our students at least 2 or 3 times.

Along with connections, we have opportunities to go into classrooms frequently to conduct lessons on various topics from post high school planning to social and emotional learning. Having appropriately sized caseloads means that we are well staffed for these lessons and are able to meet with all of the students in a particular grade during one week. This also allows our counselors to take turns conducting lessons and makes it so that we don’t have to miss classes with certain students if a 504 or IEP meeting were scheduled during that time.

Having appropriately sized caseloads also allows us to really work with students and families to address needs or concerns. I met a counselor from one of our cities a few years ago who shared that they have 800 students on their caseload and bounce between two schools. Imagine that you had a child that was struggling with some mental health concerns. Their school counselor would most likely not be able to address this student’s needs. Preventative work would not be completed for this student and the counselor would most likely have a crisis on their hands down the road. Appropriately sized caseloads mean we can conduct preventative lessons, work one on one with those students who might need it and teach them those strategies that might prevent a crisis one day. It also allows us to be available when there is a crisis, working with such a large counseling team truly helps us manage when there are meetings being conducted and a student comes down with a crisis. Other counselors can seamlessly support their colleagues and step into meetings.

The appropriate School Counselor ratios are 1:250 or less, our current state average is 450, which is absolutely ridiculous. Our state needs to do better for our students, we are not supporting successful, well rounded students if we cannot support them within our schools.

Since I work at a high school I truly see the impact supports during middle school and elementary school years have on a student. Elementary School Counselors are also necessary because they implement classroom lessons for all students on a variety of social and emotional needs. Students need to learn to manage anger, cope with stress, advocate for their wants and needs. Having a school counselor in the classrooms to conduct these lessons would be invaluable. All students need to learn positive coping strategies and if they have a great baseline for them now, then they will be set up for success as a middle school student, high school student, college student, and within their career.

During elementary school years it is important for students to have developmental guidance lessons on career development and exploration. These are the years where kids eliminate career options from their minds, they begin to decide what they would not like to do and are stuck with few options of what they might like to do. Having these comprehensive lessons at the elementary school will allow them to explore a variety of options and gain some insight of what they would enjoy, jobs that they would not have considered before might be an interesting option after exploration!

I am very blessed to work in such a supportive and well-staffed district and I know that all students have a right to access their School Counselor. They deserve this opportunity and we are doing them a disservice by understaffing these crucial roles at ALL levels.

Thank you very much for your time and I would love to speak with you more about this if you would like.

Sincerely,  
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