



Southern Connecticut State University

Testimony of Jennifer Parzych, Ph.D.
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in regards to

H.B. No. 6439 (COMM) AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE THIRTIETH, 2023, AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR.

Appropriations Subcommittee on Elementary and Secondary Education
Public Hearing – March 9, 2021

**Governor's Proposed FY 2022-2023 Budget for
Elementary and Secondary Education Agencies**

State Department of Education/School Counseling Funding

Senator Osten, Representative Walker, and respected members of the Appropriations Committee, my name is Jennifer Parzych and I am a counselor educator at Southern Connecticut State University, former high school and middle school counselor, as well as a member of the Connecticut School Counselor Association's Government Relations Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony in matters related to *in regards to* H.B. No. 6439 (COMM) AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE THIRTIETH, 2023, AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR.

House Bill 6439 sustains Educational Cost Sharing (ECS) payments at the 2021 level, and includes a 10.5% increase from the supplemental federal support in response to COVID-19. Specifically, I urge you to consider a significant portion of this federal funding and additional state funds to support increased student access to school counselors and other support service personnel like school social workers and school psychologists. I greatly appreciate that the Education Committee has raised HB 6557, AN ACT CONCERNING SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING, and recognize that it comes with \$10 million allocation to assist local districts in providing increased access to student support services.

Prior to the pandemic, issues of equity and access to school counselors and mental health supports in Connecticut endured. **Connecticut ranks 37th in the nation with an average student to school counselor ratio of 1:457, and fewer than 25% of our elementary school students have access to a school counselor.** It is important to know that the CSDE's data reporting system EdSight includes only a sum total of student support services employed at every school (*school counselors + school social workers + school psychologists*). Reporting in this way risks public assumption that schools have the full and appropriate realm of student supports in place, when in fact, no school counselor, social worker, or school psychologist may exist there. Transparency in reporting the distinct counts of each of these essential student support services is crucial to understanding the impact they have on student success.

To this end, and as part of my continued research with a team on understanding the relationship between school counselor-to-student ratios and outcomes, we sought specific school counselor numbers for 2018-2019 by special request, and just recently acquired this school level data. **Disparate ranges of school**

counselor-to-student ratios continue to exist in Connecticut, dependent on grade level and location.

Significantly higher ratios exist in schools with high rates of absenteeism, dropout, and suspensions (e.g., high school = 1:297, middle school = 1:1072) versus caseloads in schools with low rates of absenteeism, dropout and suspensions (e.g., high school = 1:161, middle school = 1:194). Additionally, limited access to elementary level school counseling services prevail in Connecticut. Approximately three-quarters (74%) of school districts provide no comprehensive school counseling services to K–5 students. In those that do, school counselors in lowest SES districts often need to split their time between more than one elementary school providing service to 800+ students.

I continue to struggle with the data in front of me, from both my team’s research specifically in Connecticut on ratios and student outcomes, and the CDC’s 10-year report on increasing mental health needs (2019). Prior to becoming a counselor educator, I was a middle school counselor in a Connecticut district for 13 years. I chose to work in that district because I knew they fully supported and implemented a comprehensive school counseling program across all grades K through 12. Over my time there, between 1999-2013, I saw our administration and Board of Education struggle with multiple cuts to the budget over time. There was thoughtful intention to limit staff reductions and positions cut to only those who were retiring. While this made sense on one hand as it reduced job loss, on the other hand, it was shortsighted and did not demonstrate consideration for the social emotional needs of our children. We went from a district with school counseling fully implemented from kindergarten through graduation and appropriate ratios, to program implementation limited to grades 6 - 12 and middle school ratios nearly doubling. Formerly, I was able to implement the model providing a program of both preventative and responsive services to 250 students, to then being tasked with meeting the needs for nearly 400 students. I recognize I was fortunate to perhaps ONLY have 400 students, whereas my middle school counseling colleagues in lower SES communities have 800+ ratios.

If we compare that trend of districts losing their elementary school counseling programs with an emphasis on prevention and increasing caseloads at the middle school level, to the CDC’s reported 10-year trend of 44% increased significant mental health needs since 2009, I wonder then, are we beginning to see a very real connection as access to school counselors and prevention programming continues to diminish, and with this, the ability to respond appropriately to mental health? This is a question I plan to dig into further with research, but in the meantime, I contend this something we cannot afford to continue to allow to happen. For the sake of our youth, I would much rather study the impact of lowered caseloads, evidence of school counselor effectiveness and relationship between mental health needs over the next 5-10 years. We must support mental health in schools and social emotional learning with appropriate and adequate support services at all levels, cognizant of the distinct needs of the state’s individual communities, and this responsibility must be one to be shared between state and local funding.

Research indicates regular access to a school counselor is a necessity, particularly for students most in need of intervention and support in high-poverty districts (Carrell & Carrell, 2006; Lapan, Gysbers, Stanley & Pierce, 2016; McIntosh, 2010; Uthall, 2006). Further, results from the current Connecticut study suggest that context matters. School counselor-to-student ratios may be optimal at 1:250, but grade level and socioeconomic factors of a district require close consideration (Parzych, Donohue, Gaesser, & Chiu, 2019). Poverty impacts students’ lives in multiple ways. It is no secret that students in high poverty schools are left at a disadvantage in comparison to students in more affluent districts. Access to support staff is essential in order to provide services to combat poverty related impact such as food and home insecurity, environmental stress, and home-school connection. I urge you to allocate significant educational funding to support local districts in increasing student access to critical support services.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jennifer L. Parzych". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J" and "P".

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