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Testimony of Kimberly Shapiro
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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 Kimberly Shapiro and I am an elementary school counselor and elementary outreach liaison for the CT School Counselor Association. I am grateful for the opportunity to share 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.**

The Connecticut School Counselor Association (CSCA) is the professional organization representing the state's more than 1200 school counselors, while promoting leadership and advancing the professional school counseling identity. We are a charter division of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) which provides us with current and relevant information to enhance our skill level and professionalism.

Prior to The Covid-19 Pandemic, students across the state were in dire need of more mental health supports in schools. The past year has only exacerbated this need as we continue to see a rise in the social emotional needs of our students. Anxiety, depression, disconnectedness, academic decline, and behavioral challenges are at an all-time high while less than 25% of Connecticut students have access to an elementary school counselor. Counselors at the elementary level are crucial to equip our youngest students with the vital coping strategies and resiliency that they will need to become well-adjusted adults. Arguably, elementary school counselors provide the most proactive of supports by forming relationships with students early on in their life, and helping to prevent issues that may arise from a lack of mental health support in school.

While the ASCA guidelines state an ideal ratio of 1 counselor for every 250 students, CT ranks **37th** in the country with an average school counselor to student ratio of **1:457**. With caseloads this large, it is nearly impossible for school counselors to devote the time necessary to meet every child's growing needs. Personally, I consider myself fortunate to work in a building of just under 300 students. This caseload is, at most times, manageable and I am proud to say that I have a relationship with every student in my building. Through classroom counseling lessons, I teach all students how to regulate their emotions, utilize coping strategies, form friendships, and become lifelong learners. I conduct mindfulness lessons with every class as well, as science has shown how beneficial breathing/yoga/guided imagery can be with regards to improving behaviors and

mental health. Additionally, I conduct meetings with every child over the course of the year to check in, look for any red flags that require a follow up conversation, and reinforce my role and how I can support them. With a caseload any larger, I would not be able to accommodate all of these Tier 1 interventions.

The Tier 2 and 3 students that require more attention are seen on an individual or small group counseling basis. Through these interventions, more individualized supports are provided to help children struggling with social/emotional difficulties including but not limited to anxiety, depression, attention, impulsivity, emotion regulation, and social skills deficits. The size of my caseload ensures that I have the time for these sessions, in addition to the Tier 1 supports, crisis intervention, and other responsibilities that I uphold.

While I am managing my caseload, I want to make clear the fact that The Covid-19 Pandemic has caused an extraordinary amount of additional stress and difficulty in students. While my school has been learning in-person for most of this school year, many districts (or grade levels) have not had this same experience. Students, parents, and educators alike are struggling with a mental health crisis worse than was in existence prior to 2020. Distance learning proved difficult for a variety of reasons including accessibility to curriculum and supports, engagement, and disconnectedness. Students who have tumultuous home lives, for whom school is their safe sanctuary, have endured trauma that will need to be addressed for years to come. Academic gaps are prevalent, which cause anxiety and cause drops in self-esteem. Socialization has all but halted, with students losing the ability to engage with one another the way they once had. All of these factors have resulted in students who are more fearful, more frustrated, and externalizing their behaviors in a way unlike we have ever seen before. In my opinion, every school should be focusing on supporting mental health as a priority at this time. But we cannot do that, if there are too few school counselors being employed.

In closing, I would like to reiterate the importance of school counselors at the elementary level, caseloads of 250 or less, and additional mental health supports (such as school social workers and school psychologists) in every school. It is absolutely crucial to be teaching students as young as 4-5 years old how to manage their emotions so that they don't succumb to mental health crises as a teen or adult. If these resources are not given priority, we will be seeing the unfortunate results of this mental health domino effect for decades to come. I thank you for hearing my testimony, and welcome any further discussion on this important issue.

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