



HELEN KELLER MIDDLE SCHOOL

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Testimony of Patricia A. Thomas
Helen Keller Middle School Counselor
Board of Directors Connecticut School Counseling Association
In regards to

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

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 Patricia Thomas and I am the School Counselor in the Easton School District in Easton, Connecticut and on the Board of Directors for the Connecticut School Counseling Association. Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony in regards to **H.B. No. 6439 (COMM) AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE THIRTIETH, 2023, AND MAKING PREPARATIONS THEREFORE.**

There is a dire need to provide all students K-12 access to a school counselor to address the increasing social emotional needs of our students in our schools. Specifically it calls for school districts to have at least one school counselor for every 250 students in a school. It also requires boards of education to implement comprehensive school counseling programs in their schools, as well as at least 80% of the counselor's time spent in direct service with students.

Students attending Helen Keller Middle School consisting of grades 6-8, have diverse needs that exceed mastering academic skills. Middle school students, ages 10-14, experience neurological, physical and emotional changes that manifest increase stress and emotional reactions. Middle schoolers are at a vulnerable age where they want to fit in, but not stand out. They are expected to manage increased academic demands and social interactions while self-advocating, problem-solving, self-regulating emotions, and controlling inhibitions. Providing social emotional learning at this age can help students navigate challenges, improve skills, and promote a respectful school climate.

Identified as the only school counselor at Helen Keller Middle School, results in more reactive rather than proactive counseling. School counselors are trained to provide preventative services within the academic, career, and social emotional domains to all students within a school. We are able to work with students through the State's tiered intervention model making sure that student needs are addressed. The State Department of

Education has spent thousands of dollars on a social emotional screener for districts to identify all students with social emotional needs. However, with school counselor ratios already high and school counselors unable to meet the current demands, we may end up with a lot of students with needs and a lack of resources to address these needs.

As a school counselor, I am trained to recognize mental health concerns, provide short-term counseling and regular check-ins and provide preventative services through classroom lessons to all students. While it is important for a school counselor to spend at least 80% of their time carrying out their roles and responsibilities, there are other duties that are also required, such as administrative assignments and proctoring school-wide assessments. The counselor to student ratio of 1:322 at HKMS has created challenges when trying to effectively meet student needs, maintain a home school connection and consult with mental health professionals outside the school setting in addition to administrative responsibilities.

With the onset of the pandemic, providing students with the support they need has been extremely challenging. Managing school work and accepting social emotional support while in school is difficult for some students. As a result of remote learning due to COVID-19 the number of students and parents reaching out for counseling support has increased greatly.

Counselors impact student learning through the support they provide. This counselor supports student achievement by working with students who are struggling academically by facilitating the development of executive function skills (e.g., organization, time management, and study strategies). As the social emotional needs of students increase, more counselors are essential to provide support for these students. Connecticut ranks 37th in the country for average counselors to student ratio and as of 2018 - 2019, Connecticut's average ratio is 1:457. With a smaller counselor to student ratio and the necessary supports in place (i.e., SEL curriculum), this counselor will be better equipped to support students' social emotional needs and promote academic success.

There is a serious need for more school counselors in all schools, K-12 across Connecticut. If we are able to provide more proactive and preventative service rather than reactive approaches with the needs of students, we will save money in the long-term. We need to work with the underlying issues and provide services to make effective long-term solutions that promote success for all students. Therefore, we need more direct funding specifically for the hiring of school counselors, social workers, and school psychologists. If we want students to be successful we need to have the funding to provide the supportive services they need.

Thank you for your time and consideration

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