



Testimony of Sharon Veatch
School Counselor, Housatonic Valley Regional High School
Board Director, The Connecticut School Counselor Association

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 Sharon Veatch and I am a School Counselor and Board Director 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.

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 use so that we can be sure to identify all of our students with social emotional needs. However with school counselor ratios already high and school counselors unable to meet the current demand, we may end up with a lot of students with need and a lack of resources to address that need. In order to support the many worthy plans that have been put forth by the Governor, there needs to be an adequate number of school counselors in place from K-12. All students not having access to comprehensive school counseling raises equity issues and jeopardizes these plans working.

As a rural public high school with limited outside agency resources, my time with the students is paramount. I am fortunate enough to have a caseload of 160 students, but I can tell you my days are full. With an increase in the anxiety and depression diagnosis of teens reaching an epidemic level, the mental health support within the schools is necessary. We are the frontline for students and their families to receive support whether through programming, therapeutic groups, or individual counseling. We are trained to do all of this in addition to academic and college and career counseling. The pandemic has just amplified the call for already existing needs for our students. I worry about everyone of those students I

can't get to, or have the ability to see as often as needed until they can be referred to an outside provider. I also worry about other students throughout the state that have even less access to someone to help them manage their mental health, academics and college/career aspirations - which are all intertwined.

I also enjoy the ability to work with any first generation student through the college process. My smaller caseload allows me to have multiple appointments with my students and their families. This means having to work with them to overcome their own self doubts as well as those from the family. As a first generation college student myself I am aware of just how important this is. The higher education admissions process is complex and ever changing. This is extremely intimidating to families, especially those who have had no experience with this process before. Our closest college is a minimum of 45 minutes away from our closest town. It is difficult to get our students the access to college that some suburban and urban students have. That is why I volunteer to work for various organizations like CSCA and the New England Association of College Admissions Counselors (NEACAC). This allows me to make connections that open this world to my students. I am able to get some of the representatives to visit our schools and speak with our students. What would make college dreams even better is the ability to build those expectations and awareness starting in elementary and middle school making those counselors important to the entire process as well. Helping younger students develop a strong foundation and sense of self lends to them being more prepared and successful at the high school level.

I have helped numerous students outside my district who come from districts where the ratio for their counselor is so high that it is difficult for them to meet with their counselor once let alone multiple times within a year.

While my ratio seems small, my job is big. With a lack of resources, availability of outside agencies and colleges in our area - my job becomes big. It is exhausting, but gratifying work. I have also worked at a boarding school and that experience was markedly different. While teenagers are teenagers, my caseload there was 40 students. I had the ability to travel to conferences and attend PD sessions that public school counselors can't fit in their budget. I had the ability to do an eight session college counseling class with no more than 15 students with juniors, I didn't have to beg for classroom time.

However, despite the importance of the work that we do with students in our schools, when it comes time for districts to determine where cuts are going to be made, school counselors are often first on the chopping block, which often then results in an increase in student to counselor ratios and a reduction in services. We need more direct funding specifically for the hiring of school counselors, social workers and school psychologists. If we want our kids back in school and we want them to be successful we need to also provide the support services that they need.

As an association, we are happy to work with the Appropriations Committee, the Education Committee and anyone else on ways to provide long term funding for the addition of school counselors in our schools. We have a few ideas of how we believe this can happen and would welcome any further discussion around this. Thank you for your time and consideration.

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