



Connecticut School Counselor Association

A Chartered Division of the American School Counselors Association

Testimony of Virginia A. DeLong
School Counselor, Lebanon Middle School
Government Relations & Advocacy Chairman
Connecticut School Counselor Association

in regards to

S.B. 17 (RAISED) AN ACT REQUIRING THE COMPLETION OF THE FREE APPLICATION FOR FEDERAL STUDENT AID

Higher Education Committee Hearing - February 13, 2020

Representative Haddad, Senator Haskell, Representative Hall, Senator Hwang, and respected members of the Higher Education Committee, my name is Virginia DeLong and I am a school counselor and Chairman of the Government Relations and Advocacy Committee for the CT School Counselor Association. I am grateful for the opportunity to share in regards to raised **Senate Bill 17- AN ACT REQUIRING THE COMPLETION OF THE FREE APPLICATION FOR FEDERAL STUDENT AID.**

The Connecticut School Counselor Association (CSCA) is the professional organization representing the state's more than 1400 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.

As an association, after polling our members, we find several benefits to FAFSA completion, but we have several concerns about this legislation. This legislation would most certainly provide students who may not typically fill out the FAFSA the opportunity to do so and it would allow more students access to federal money to attend college or other post secondary programs. We know that there are already disparities among low-income and minority students and that disparity is even greater when they do not have access to the knowledge and information in regards to financial aid and post secondary education. This requirement would help to create access for students and families and help with equity among our students as it would no longer single out a specific type of student for college. However, many of our members do not feel that requiring the FAFSA completion for graduation is necessarily the best route to bridge these gaps.

There are many concerns with our members that this bill does not specify who would be responsible for making sure this mandate is carried out in our schools and we feel that it would most likely fall on the shoulders of the school counselors. Caseloads are already very high, with the average student to counselor ratio being 466:1 in Connecticut. If this bill were to pass, the state legislature really needs to consider the need for more school counselors and how we can put more school counselors in all of our schools. There is also the concern that school counselors are not trained financial planners. Financial advice should come from a licensed financial expert, not school personnel. The FAFSA requires very personal financial information that some families are not willing to disclose. Filling out the FAFSA should be a family choice, not a mandate.

There is also the concern about what message this mandate would send to students. By requiring every student to fill out a FAFSA which is intended for higher education purposes, the message that may be sent to students is that college is the path they should be taking after high school. As school counselors, we are specifically trained to work with students on their post secondary plans, which vary depending on the student and their future career goals. There is not a "one size fits all" approach to working with our students, and school counselors are trained to take a variety of approaches in order to help meet the needs of each individual student. The Connecticut School Counselor Association has major concerns with this bill as it does not address those individual needs of students, especially those who have chosen to enlist in the military or who have chosen a career path that does not require post secondary education.



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This legislation as a graduation requirement has nothing to do with student achievement and is contingent on parents behavior, not student performance. While it is understood that a waiver will be available, will school districts be looked upon unfavorably because they have a high number of waivers being filled out? The last thing we would want is for districts to be penalized in any way because students and families are choosing not to fill out the FAFSA.

While there are other concerns to consider, the bottom line is this legislation does not seem to be in the best interest of **all** students and does not seem to address the details of how this would actually happen. Instead of mandating this as a graduation requirement it might be more helpful to find ways to increase the awareness of this important financial form with families, especially within our neediest communities. Bringing back free College Goal Sunday and other financial aid workshops in order to provide accurate financial guidance on why applying for financial aid is beneficial and providing support in filling out documents like the FAFSA, could be a better solution to increasing the number of students and families filling out these forms. Another solution could be to partner with our Connecticut colleges and universities to provide ongoing workshops in the community for families, with an emphasis on our neediest communities.

The bottom line is that more education around the FAFSA is needed for all our families, so that they can make the best decision possible for their children. That education often comes from school counselors when they meet with students and their families to discuss future plans. It is imperative that we are also looking at how we can increase the number of school counselors in our schools, so that they can provide the necessary education around financial aid and refer families easily to those that can best support them in filling out these documents. We should not be requiring schools to take on the burden of getting families to fill out very personal financial forms.

We have an obligation to do what is in the best interest of ALL of our students in Connecticut. We need to find appropriate ways to provide access and equity to each of our students so that they can pursue the post secondary path that is best for them. We are happy to continue to advise our students in the direction that helps each of them to be successful and to reach their future goals. We appreciate the work that is being done to help provide greater access for any students who wish to pursue higher education, but we do not believe this legislation is necessary for that to happen. We would be happy to discuss this more as an association and provide any other feedback needed.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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