CONNECTICUT SCHOOL COUNSELOR ASSOCIATION

Connecticut School Counselor Association

A Chartered Division of the American School Counselors Association

Testimony of Michelle Catucci
Director of School Counselor, Cheshire High School
Executive Director, Connecticut School Counselor Association
in regards to
H.B. No. 5005 AN ACT ADJUSTING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE 30, 2021.
Appropriations Subcommittee on Elementary and Secondary Education
Public Hearing - February 13, 2020

Senator Osten, Representative Walker, and respected members of the Appropriations Committee, my name is Michelle Catucci and I am a school counselor and Executive Director for the CT School Counselor Association. I am grateful for the opportunity to share in regards to **H.B. No. 5005 AN ACT ADJUSTING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE 30, 2021.**

I have been a School Counselor in Connecticut for the past 14 years, working at both the middle school and high school levels. I absolutely love the work I do with all students to help them reach their potential and goals, even when life can be difficult and stressful. In those 14 years, I have only seen the needs of my students grow - they need more academic intervention, social and emotional assistance and skill building, and support getting ready for the workforce and/or post-secondary education, and every day I come to work ready to take on the challenge of meeting my students' needs.

My passion for my students and my profession has led me to get involved with the Connecticut School Counselor Association (CSCA), which is the only professional organization in Connecticut dedicated to supporting and promoting the role of school counselors and is a chartered division of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA). I have served as President and Middle School Vice President, as well as on several committees for the duration of my career. Currently, I am the Executive Director of CSCA. Being committed to CSCA at such an intense level has only intensified my enthusiasm for not only my profession, but my desire that each and every student in the state of Connecticut has access to a school counselor and a comprehensive school counseling program.

School counselors, in accordance with the requirements set forth by the Department of Education are required to have a master's degree, graduate credits in counseling and special education, a professional educator certificate, practicum and internship experiences in school counseling. In my training to become a school counselor, I completed a 60 credit master's program that included both a practicum and internship. My education, training, and practical experiences focused on being a proactive counselor, seeking out and collaborating with all stakeholders - including students, parents, faculty, community members, and administrators - to ensure the academic, social emotional, and post-secondary success of EVERY student. School Counselors are trained in data-driven decision making, to identify barriers to student success, and to implement a program of services at all grade levels, with an emphasis on equity and Response to Intervention at all three tiers. This is a dramatic shift from the role of guidance counselors of the past, which stereotypically was more reactive and vocationally focused. This shift in our role in schools was acknowledged in 2018 when legislation was passed to ensure that school counselor was listed in all statutes where previously only guidance counselor was included.

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Currently, there are no requirements for school counseling programs to be implemented at any level in Connecticut school districts, however with legislation passed last year, guidelines for a comprehensive school counseling framework will be provided to all school districts to use starting in July 2020. In order for the framework to be delivered with fidelity to most benefit our students, it MUST be supported by having school counselors with reasonable ratios to enact the framework at every school at every level.

In Connecticut, our student-to-school counselor ratio averages 466:1 - one of the highest in the North Atlantic region. Fewer than 25% of our elementary school children have access to a school counselor. The elementary school years are an essential time to build knowledge and skills for lifelong impact. Last year, AT&T and the Center for Digital Education released a report that most children born today will have jobs that don't even exist yet, and we need to start early in building the skills and knowledge beyond basic literacy that will help students compete in the global economy.

A comprehensive school counseling program is, by design, a way to get these workforce skills introduced to ALL students when they first enter school, then build on and improve those skills over time. It empowers students to explore and pursue all types of careers pathways from childhood. That conversation should not be saved until the junior year of high school. To respond to the workforce needs we are currently seeing in Connecticut, we need to educate our youngest students and continue to work with them and foster their growth throughout their education, and one way that can be done is by not only adopting guidelines and recommendations for a comprehensive school counseling program in all school districts, at all levels, but to have appropriate student to school counselor ratios at all levels.

In addition, school counselors are spending increased time meeting the complex and growing social emotional needs of our students. The number of students with anxiety, school refusal, depression, self-harm, and suicidal ideation is overwhelming and continues to increase year after year, even in elementary schools. According to a recent report put out by the Center for Disease Controls (CDC), the rate of suicide is up 76% over the last decade within the 10-24 year old age group. School counselors are trained to recognize mental health concerns with our students, provide short term counseling and regular check-ins with students who need it, and to work to provide preventative services within the classroom to all students. School counselors are vital to the ever changing landscape of education.

We need more school counselors in all of our schools across Connecticut to address these concerns in workforce development and social emotional crisis. Sadly, school counseling positions are often on the chopping block when it comes to budgets in some districts. This is detrimental for our children in Connecticut. 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.

Michelle Catucci

Michelle Catucci
Executive Director, Connecticut School Counselor Association
203-985-5181
execdirectorcsca@gmail.com