

Testimony of

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Connecticut Education Association

Before a joint meeting of the

***Public Health Committee &
Committee on Children***

Re:

HB 5001 AAC CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH

and

SB 2 AN ACT EXPANDING PRESCHOOL AND MENTAL AND BEHAVIORAL SERVICES FOR CHILDREN

February 25, 2022

Members of the Children's and Public Health Committees, my name is Kate Dias, and I serve as President of the Connecticut Education Association (CEA). CEA represents educators in over 150 school districts across the state.

CEA members will be testifying on various aspects of this bill separately to be sure we provide the educators' perspectives as fully as possible. Today I will focus on sections of the bill addressing the social worker and mental health specialist workforce.

We support HB 5001 and SB 2, and the focus on mental health for children by attracting more social workers and mental health and behavioral specialists. However, we urge committee members to include in the bill's reach proposals to drastically improve the staffing levels among certified school support staff, such as school social workers, school counselors, school psychologists, educators delivering special education, and others. As data we present in this testimony shows, elementary school staffing levels in our less-wealthy districts is abysmal. While these staff all support our students, they do so in unique and important ways. Insufficient staffing persists as a barrier to building successful school communities – as evident in the need for bills like those being heard today. What we know is that in communities where access is limited to one day a week to economize our staff allocations, students don't always cooperate and have their difficult days correspond to staff assignments. As a result, their needs get met either by non-certified staff or not at all. This is an unacceptable arrangement as all students are dealing with the fallout of the pandemic every day.

When we talk about building successful school communities, we are talking about building an integrated system of complementary services. In the school setting, all adults serve the important role of being a caring adult who is available to help students overcome challenges and to succeed. This is especially true for students who have experienced trauma, who often need more than a classroom teacher can provide. Specialists provide the necessary means and opportunity for true social and emotional growth.

But make no mistake, this is a numbers game. True mental health support requires people, not programs and curriculum. The single greatest influencer of improved student mental health is access to a supportive and trained adult.

Often, we think about the role of these specialists interchangeably, but they are truly unique. Each one provides an intervention that helps students in schools overcome behavioral and psychological obstacles to grow, learn, and succeed.

School counselors also address challenges to behavior and learning, but in a different way. They spend 80% of their time working directly with students from elementary school through grade 12. Their work is in three primary areas. First, school counselors help students with academic preparation. They coordinate instructional support services and help students set and achieve goals, including those required in student success plans (CGS 10-221(j)). Additionally, school counselors work with students to promote social emotional learning and emotional regulation. Third, and perhaps most familiarly, school counselors provide career guidance to help students plan for life after high school.

In addition to these key roles, a system of complimentary services requires sufficient numbers of school psychologists who are critical in providing diagnostic testing and more intensive support, special education teachers to ensure IEPs are carried out with fidelity, and speech pathologists to help students overcome communication deficiencies and with it build confidence. Unfortunately, as state and National Center for Education Statistics data show, the level of staffing in schools of critical support staff is insufficient.

The National Associations for School Counselors and School Psychologists recommend students per staff ratios of 250 and 500 respectively. How do Connecticut school districts stack up against these ratios? Here are some key observations in data from the National Center for Educational Statistics¹ (analyzed by CEA) and analyses commissioned by the American School Counselor Association:

School Psychologists

- **66.7%** of the second-to-least-wealthy districts (DRG H) are understaffed for children in grades K-8 (more than 500 students per school psychologists).¹
- **100%** of the least-wealthy districts (DRG I) are understaffed for children in grades K-8 (more than 500 students per school psychologists).²

School Counselors

- **100%** of the least-wealthy districts (DRG H and DRG I) are woefully understaffed for children in grades K-8 (more than 250 students per school counselors).
- Students in Connecticut districts with elementary school counselors report **51% higher graduations rates**.¹

¹ DRG H = Ansonia, Danbury, Derby, East Hartford, Meriden, Norwalk, Norwich, Stamford, West Haven.

² DRG I = Bridgeport, Hartford, New Britain, New Haven, New London, Waterbury, Windham

- “Students in districts that have K–12 school counselors produce ... **lower chronic absenteeism rates and fewer out-of-school suspensions** when compared to districts with school counselors beginning in grade 6.”³

The data is helpful, but it is only a snapshot of what educators see every day. There is a disconnect between what students need and the resources available to address those needs. CEA urges lawmakers to provide resources to ensure that staffing ratios of social workers, school psychologists, and school counselors meet national standards. For social workers and school counselors, the student to provider standard is 250:1; for school psychologists, it’s 500:1. We also urge members to address staffing shortages in special education, speech pathology, and other support staff that is critical to us collectively addressing the mental health crisis among Connecticut’s children. Mental health is not a luxury item. It is not something we can afford to discount or try to economize with staff. This is an investment that pays dividends far beyond the immediate and obvious. Children that have mental health support become adults that are productive and successful members of our society. At the center of every issue that we will talk about this session is the need to ensure students have access to the support personnel that can help them grow into strong, successful students.

Thank you.

³ <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/getmedia/5157ef82-d2e8-4b4d-8659-a957f14b7875/Ratios-Student-Outcomes-Research-Report.pdf> (p. 3)