

Testimony of
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School Counselor
Westside Middle School Academy: CT School Counselor of the Year 2021
CT School Counselor Association: Board of Directors

Before the
Public Health Committee & Committee on Children

Re:
HB 5001 - AN ACT CONCERNING CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH

February 25, 2022

Senator Daugherty Abrams, Representative Steinberg, Senator Anwar, Senator Kushner, Representative Gilchrest and respected members of the Public Health Committee, my name is Curtis Darragh IV and I am the CT 2021 School Counselor of the year. I have an amazing career at Westside Middle School Academy in the Danbury Public Schools. Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony regarding HB5001- An Act Concerning Children's Mental Health. Specifically, I am here today to testify about the need to include school counselors as "mental health specialists" in the language of this bill.

School Counselors are the front line and is always the main link between the community, parents, teachers and students. 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 school counselor's time spent in direct service with students.

As a practicing school counselor for the past six years, my career has increased in difficulty with our growing population, increasing caseload, and educational demands. Now with a school counseling framework, I'm afraid that my 375 students will not get an equitable school counseling curriculum that meets the academic, social, emotional and college career standards in a school year. The covid-19 pandemic has increased the mental health needs in many of our children across all backgrounds. The 2020-2021 school year has been a school like no other with many difficulties, and school counselors doing the best that they can. The 2022 school year just proves that the mental health that has affected many of our students can and has led to suicide ideations. I can't tell you how many times that I have been meeting with students and I have either a line or that ONE student that comes that I have to tell to "wait" because of all my other responsibilities as a school counselor. The 1:375 ratio is not ideal in the Danbury public schools and other cities in the state of Connecticut. Missing that "one" student is one of my biggest fears. This bill, will help mental health professionals across the state, but it needs to include school counselors.

CT ranks 37th in the country for average counselor to student ratios. As of 2019-2020, CT's average ratio is 1:457. Less than 25% of our elementary schools have school counselors and often elementary school counselors are split among several schools. In order for a school counseling curriculum to be effective in districts K-12, the model that CT has created can make a long-lasting impact and change for students in this state. Some districts that have less than the recommended 250 are making these

changes with their students. Able to give them time and dedication to their needs and families. Students who are on the honor roll, at times, may need that trusted adult they can go to in their building. With the New England Association of Schools increasing the credit requirement for most of our high schools, when it comes to scheduling all of our students, these students should not have to choose classes on their own, they should always have an individualized meeting with their school counselor, not only to discuss academics, but goals, interventions, and college/career planning more than once a year. These types of meetings create trust, bonding, and relationship building within the four walls of any school counselors office. If you're going to give me students, you can bet I will bring out the best of those students and turns those weaknesses into strengths in these growing times of middle school.

School counselors in K-12 are trained to identify gaps for our students through data collection and analysis. We identify where the needs are and through tier I, develop classroom lessons that are delivered to all students. We can create a tier II level of need for those students who benefit from small group instruction and if necessary provide tier III instruction to students who may need more than 1:1 attention over a short period of time.

School counselors play as a "link" to all students, parents, administrators, teachers, stakeholders and other services to determine what the needs are for our students. If we were to start early in elementary school, school counselors can provide lessons in the academic and social emotional domains, but also start with introducing students to career development. Whether that be college, the trades, or the military, school counselors can bring the best in every child that walks through those halls. Counselors also are spending more and more time meeting the social emotional needs of our students. 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. We are seeing a great increase in anxiety and depression diagnosis with our students, as well as a rise in special education referrals.

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 global world of education.

School counselors are needed now more than ever in the state of Connecticut. We need more of them in our high schools, middle schools and even our elementary schools. Connecticut needs to reshape the way we handle the growing needs of our children in this state. We need to start thinking of the future and the long-term effects school counselors can make on children, because the covid-19 pandemic will have lingering effects on our students and their families, and they are the ones that matter when it comes to this topic. What are we going to do for them? The CSCA has developed a framework that has been adopted by the CSDE. Now, school districts need to start implementing it and paving the road for what school counselors can do for their schools.

I come here representing and speaking for our middle school population, on behalf of CSCA and on behalf of Danbury. I am happy to work with the education committee, and anyone else on ways to provide long term funding for the addition of school counselors in our schools. CSCA has a few ideas of how we believe this can happen and would welcome any further discussion around this. I am asking the Public Health Committee to please amend the language in section 18 of this bill to include school counselors as part of the definition of 'school mental health specialists.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Curtis Darragh IV/CT School Counselor of the Year

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