

**Testimony of Dr. Adam Oldham, LPC, NCSC
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Chairman Schweyer, Chairman Topper, members of the committee – thank you for hosting this hearing on mental health in our schools, and for the opportunity to speak with you today.

My name is Dr. Adam Oldham, and I am a full-time high school counselor at the Big Spring High School in Cumberland County. I am also the President of the School Counselor Section at PSEA, President of the Capital Area School Counselors Association, and Board Director of the Pennsylvania School Counselors Association. I am also a Licensed Professional Counselor and a Nationally Certified School Counselor. I come to you today as one of over 5,000 school counselors who work across Pennsylvania in our public-school districts, our cyber/charter schools, our career and technical schools, and our Intermediate Units who serve our nonpublic schools.

Student Mental Health is a Crisis

In 2021, the US Surgeon General released a public health advisory on youth mental health saying – “The challenges today’s generation of young people face are unprecedented and uniquely hard to navigate. **And the effect these challenges have had on their mental health is devastating.**”¹

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health challenges were the leading cause of disability and poor life outcomes in young people, with up to 1 in 5 children ages 3 to 17 in the US with a reported mental, emotional, developmental, or behavioral disorder.²

In 2016, of the 7.7 million children with treatable mental health disorder, **about half did not receive adequate treatment.**³

As we saw in the 10 years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health among students overall continues to worsen, with **more than 40% of high school students feeling so sad or hopeless** that they could not engage in their regular activities for at least two weeks during the previous year—a possible indication of the experience of depressive symptoms. We also saw significant increases in the percentage of youth who **seriously considered suicide, made a suicide plan, and attempted suicide.**⁴

During last year’s budget address, Governor Shapiro highlighted the needs from the mouths of Pennsylvania students themselves, saying⁵:

*Since we launched the [Safe2Say Something] program five years ago, we’ve received over 100,000 tips – but most of the tips weren’t about violence. **75 percent are from kids reaching out with mental health issues for themselves and their friends.***

*I’ve been to their schools. **I’ve asked these students what they need – and they’re very clear. Students want someone who can help them.***

¹ US Surgeon General (2021). *Protecting youth mental health: The US surgeon general’s advisory.*

² Perou, R., Bitsko, R. H., Blumberg, S. J., Pastor, P., Ghandour, R. M., Gfroerer, J. C., Hedden, S. L., Crosby, A. E., Visser, S. N., Schieve, L. A., Parks, S. E., Hall, J. E., Brody, D., Simile, C. M., Thompson, W. W., Baio, J., Avenevoli, S., Kogan, M. D., Huang, L. N., & Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2013). Mental health surveillance among children--United States, 2005-2011. *MMWR. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report Supplements*, 62(2), 1–35.

³ Whitney, D.G. & Peterson, M. (2019). US national and state-level prevalence of mental health disorders and disparities of mental health care use in children. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 173(4), 389-391. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2018.5399

⁴ CDC (2023). Youth risk behavior survey: Data summary & trends report [2011-2021].

⁵ Governor Shapiro’s Budget Address (2023). <https://www.governor.pa.gov/newsroom/governor-shapiros-2023-budget-address-as-prepared/>

School counselors are developmental experts uniquely trained to meet the needs of all students across the Pre-K-12 continuum⁶. We are school-employed, certified student services professionals who deliver mental health services that promote holistic health, wellness, and optimal development for all students. We provide instruction to enhance awareness of mental health, as well as services to address academic, career and social/emotional development. We provide short-term counseling interventions to individuals and groups and facilitate referrals to community resources for long-term support.⁷ **School counselors do these things with the intent of removing barriers to learning and helping the student fully engage in their educational experience.**

School counselors are a critical part of Pennsylvania's vision to help all students translate their unique strengths, interests, and aspirations into tangible college and career plans and choices. However, many school counselors are stretched thin, juggling many responsibilities and significant caseloads, and are often isolated in their work.⁸ In light of the intense needs of our students, and of the impact that school counselors have to address these needs, I would like to provide several recommendations to the committee to help guarantee all students have meaningful and equitable access to the school counseling services we know lead to better student outcomes⁹.

Recommendation 1: Ensure school counselors are able to deliver services to students by passing the Pennsylvania School Counseling Services Act (House Bill 1665).

Across the United States, school counseling services are generally guaranteed to students through one of two state practices – requiring school districts to outline comprehensive school counseling programs, or establishing specific staff-to-student or building ratios. Some states adopt both approaches.

Pennsylvania is the only state in America that does neither of these things.

As the only state yet to take action on school counseling services for our students, we can think of no better or more timely reform than guaranteeing all Pennsylvania students have access to comprehensive school counseling programs.

School counselors in Pennsylvania are often confronted with the reality that their role is not well understood by school leaders and the general population. We must not only provide services to students, but we must simultaneously

School Counselors in American Schools

School counseling services in schools are commonplace across the United States. The two primary ways states incorporate school counseling services into schools are (1) requiring districts to develop comprehensive school counseling programs and (2) mandating school counselor positions in school buildings.



**37
states**

Comprehensive school counseling programs required in public school districts



**31
states**

School counselors required in public school districts



**49
states**

Pennsylvania is the ONLY state that does not require comprehensive school counseling programs or mandated school counseling positions in schools.



⁶ PDE (2014). The framework for elementary and secondary school counselor preparation program guidelines.

⁷ ASCA (2020). Position statement: The school counselor and student mental health.

⁸ PDE (2019). Every student succeeds act, Pennsylvania consolidated state plan.

⁹ ASCA (2019). *Measuring the impact of school counselor ratios on student outcomes*.

educate and advocate in our schools and communities about our roles and areas of expertise. Because the needs of our students are so great, and because in many schools the number of students assigned to school counselor's caseload is so high, the capacity to educate and advocate may be limited, and this is most likely to happen in the schools and communities that need school counseling services the most.¹⁰

The Pennsylvania School Counseling Services Act is a necessary solution because too many school counselors, who are uniquely trained in human development and mental health, **are unable to deliver this expertise to their students.**

The reason for this is **a lack of concrete parameters and definitions** for what school counseling services are supposed to be in our schools, which leads to inconsistent and inequitable service delivery and even availability.

This means in one school, school counselors have nothing to do with student scheduling, while in another school they are almost exclusively responsible for building master schedules. In one school, school counselors are able to meet individually with every student on their caseload multiple times a year, while in another school the office gets shut down during state testing season.

This is NOT because school counselors are not trained or able to deliver the support students need, or that evidence-based best practices don't exist. **It is because there is limited accountability to ensuring school counselors are able to do so.** School counselors are often pulled into non-counseling activities, serving as a "utility player" at the expense of being able to do our actual work.

We have highly trained student mental health professionals working in our schools who are counting test booklets for state testing, serving as data clerks to upload information into spreadsheets and computer systems, monitoring hallways and lunchrooms, and being used as substitute teachers – all while our students are consumed with mental health needs.

The Pennsylvania School Counseling Services Act would establish a guideline that **at least 80% of a school counselor's time be used for delivering services to students**, which aligns with best practice and the national standard set by the American School Counselor Association¹¹. It would also require all school districts to create a written, public-facing overview of their K-12 school counseling program, which promotes awareness of these services for students and families and creates stability in the services a school delivers.

The Pennsylvania School Counseling Services Act will provide clarity for students and families as to the services they can expect to receive from their school counselors, to school districts who are seeking to support their students effectively, and to taxpayers who can see their money fund efficient student support services that align with best practices, no matter their zip code or socioeconomic status.

With minimal, if any, fiscal impact, the Pennsylvania School Counseling Services Act would bring Pennsylvania into the 21st century and improve the quality of support our students receive from their school counselors.

I will also note that this bill is supported by PSEA, and a joint letter with the Pennsylvania School Counselors Association (PSCA) was sent to leadership in the General Assembly last spring. I am also attaching it in my written testimony.

¹⁰ PSCA (2023). PA School Counselor Staffing Report.

¹¹ ASCA (2019). *ASCA national model: A framework for school counseling programs*.

Recommendation 2: Provide all students adequate access to school counselors and other certified student services professionals with appropriate caseload sizes.

Almost one year ago, the Commonwealth Court of Pennsylvania found the existing system of school funding unconstitutional, and highlighted school counselors and other student services staff as evidence of the unconstitutional inequity in our schools¹²:

*The Court heard extensive credible testimony from educational professionals and experts as to **how other professional staff... such as [school] counselors...help students succeed. There was evidence that low-income students often require more support, so an adequate number of counselors is needed to meet those needs.***

*While it is true that there was testimony that several of the districts have **some** of these personnel, there was also testimony that it was **the bare minimum required by law, of an insufficient quantity to actually meet student needs.***

This need has been recognized for many years, though feedback collected by the Pennsylvania School Safety Task Force¹³, the Pennsylvania Attorney General's office^{14,15}, and by the Governor himself¹⁶. Just last week, the Basic Education Funding Commission issued its final report, recommending that **Pennsylvania ensures students have access to adequate and appropriate mental health services**¹⁷.

While the number of school counselors has slowly increased over the last several years, **SY 22-23 was the first year that Pennsylvania schools had more school counselors than they did in 2010**. In comparing school district school counselor staffing, school counselors in low-wealth school districts have significantly higher caseloads and serve a higher proportion of students from diverse backgrounds¹⁸. **Our most vulnerable students are the most likely to lack meaningful access – or any access – to school counselors.**

Almost half of the school districts in Pennsylvania have school counselors assigned to multiple buildings, which impacts over a quarter of a million students¹⁹. In practice, this means a school counselor might be assigned to two elementary schools, and only be physically present in each two or three days a week. This puts increased demand on the school counselor to be able to establish relationships not only with multiple groups of students, but multiple sets of staff, administration, parents, and communities. In some cases, a school counselor may be called from one building to go to another in the event of a crisis, or a crisis may be handled by another school employee who may not have the same qualifications and training as a school counselor.

¹² Commonwealth Court of Pennsylvania (2023). Memorandum Opinion. *William Penn SD et al. v PA Department of Education et al.*

¹³ PA Office of the Auditor General (2018). PA School Safety Task Force Report.

¹⁴ PA Office of the Attorney General (2022). Special report on student mental health.

¹⁵ PA Office of the Attorney General (2022). Brief for the petitioners as amicus curiae.

¹⁶ PA Office of the Governor (2023). Press release: Governor Josh Shapiro highlights plans to invest in mental health support for Pennsylvania students in visit to Greensburg high school.

¹⁷ Basic Education Funding Commission (2023). Report #2.

¹⁸ PSCA (2023). PA School Counselor Staffing Report.

¹⁹ Ibid.

The American School Counselor Association recommends a student to school counselor ratio of 250 to 1. In Pennsylvania, the median ratio is 353 to 1. Half of all Pennsylvania school buildings have ratios higher than 350 to 1, with 1 of every 10 buildings having ratios of 500 or more students to a single school counselor²⁰.

With the anticipation that the Commonwealth will be providing a robust investment in our public school system, we hope that some of these funds will be targeted specifically for ensuring **all students have access to a school counselor**.

As it stands now, despite students from low-wealth and higher-wealth school districts sharing similar levels of mental health challenges, the top 20 highest-spending districts in the state spend nearly 68% more on student support services than the 20 lowest-spending districts on student services - including 59% more for school counseling services²¹.

The scope of services that school districts provide has become more complex in the last several years, and while school counselors have adapted as flexibly as they can, their capacity to work effectively with students has been limited by two key barriers – minimal definition of the scope of services they are providing to students, and the need for reasonable student caseloads.

By passing the Pennsylvania School Counseling Services Act and providing the sustainable funding to hire school counselors, we can ensure all students have access to the evidence-based supports that school counselors deliver.

Recommendation 3: Reduce the financial barriers to entering the student services professions.

I want to thank the General Assembly and the Governor for their commitment to improving the educator pipeline. The challenges of the teacher shortage apply similarly to student services professionals like us. The PA HELPS program²² provides stipends for school counselors and other student services professionals in training while we do our clinical work, similar to student teaching for teachers.

I would encourage investments in other programs that remove financial barriers as well, such as investing in future professionals up front through scholarship programs like the Nelly-Bly Scholarship from a few years ago²³, and in loan forgiveness to keep current professionals weighing the decision to leave the school setting for private practice in our schools.

Recommendation 4: Establish a Bureau or Office of Student/Pupil Services at the Pennsylvania Department of Education to facilitate access to and quality of student services across the Commonwealth.

We are incredibly grateful that the Pennsylvania Department of Education hired a School Counselor Advisor in 2023. This positions PDE well to support districts as they implement their school counseling programs when the Pennsylvania School Counseling Services Act is passed.

While this has been a valuable addition to our professional support across the Commonwealth, we still need more focused, coordinated leadership for student services in Pennsylvania. A cursory glance at other states shows

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Cooper, D. (2023). Testimony presented to the Pennsylvania basic education funding commission [Children First].

²² <https://www.pheaa.org/partner-access/schools/PA-HELPS/>

²³ <https://www.phillyvoice.com/pennsylvania-scholarship-affordable-college-plan-nellie-bly-governor-wolf/>

significantly more state-directed coordination of services provided by school counselors, school psychologists, school nurses, and school social workers than Pennsylvania has. As a result, the variation of what these services look like from district to district can be quite dramatic.

With the needs of our students as intense and pervasive as they are, having a focused group of professionals to support our schools with their programming and services would be greatly appreciated.

Conclusion

When you think about the kinds of mindsets school counselors work to cultivate in students through their programs, one that comes to mind is the idea that “just because you can, doesn’t mean you should.” For school counselors in Pennsylvania, the dilemma created by role confusion and unmanageable caseloads is too often “just because you should, doesn’t mean you *can*.”

Now, more than ever, our students need the kinds of screening, intervention, prevention, individual planning, and support that comprehensive school counseling programs, delivered by certified school counselors, can provide.

Pennsylvania is primed to join the rest of the nation with a solid infrastructure of over 5,000 school counselors in almost every school across the Commonwealth already.

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this discussion today. I look forward to working with the committee to address this and other important education reform needs in our schools across the Commonwealth.

Appendix A: State Action Impacting the Work and Role of School Counselors

School counselors are often on the front lines of interpreting and implementing state education policy, as they work at a nexus point between students and the education systems that surround them. This is a brief overview of recent state policy/legislative action and how these actions intersect with the work of school counselors.

School districts are required to “prepare a written plan for the implementation of a comprehensive and integrated K-12 program of the student services based on the needs of its students.”²⁴ Student services as defined in the PA Code “may include guidance counseling,”²⁵ but the definition stops short of guaranteeing these services to students.

This definition is written this way on purpose – the State Board of Education stated in 2005 that previous regulation regarding pupil personnel services was “too detailed and prescriptive for today’s educational environment” and “limit(ed) the flexibility of school entities in the design of a comprehensive system of student support services.”²⁶ The Board stated:

*By consolidating the regulations into the student services section (Chapter 12), previously addressed in Chapter 7, schools would be provided additional flexibility to deliver a comprehensive program of student services to their students. Depending upon implementation on the local level, **this might lead to improving the scope and quality of services provided to students while also providing cost savings.***²⁷

In light of the fact that Pennsylvania is the only state in America whose students are not guaranteed school counselors or school counseling programs, we wish to examine “the scope of services provided to students” in the years following this change in policy.

Regarding student **academic development**, Pennsylvania students have been subject to numerous and substantial changes to their courses of study in this time. We adopted new academic standards – Career Education and Work Standards²⁸ in 2006, Common Core standards²⁹ in 2010, and the subsequent state-specific PA Common Core Standards³⁰ in 2014.

Pennsylvania eliminated the high school PSSA exams and replaced them with end-of-course Keystone Exams, which started as a measure of student readiness for graduation and work, and which evolved into a statewide requirement for graduation.³¹

Most recently, Act 158 of 2018 requires school districts to monitor student completion of one of five High School Statewide Graduation Pathways, with several of these pathways involving the collection of a portfolio of evidence

²⁴ 22 Pa Code Chapter 12.41

²⁵ 22 PA Code Chapter 12.16

²⁶ 35 Pa.B. 6510

²⁷ 35 Pa.B. 6510

²⁸ 36 Pa.B. 3528

²⁹ 40 Pa.B. 5903

³⁰ 44 Pa.B. 1131

³¹ 40 Pa.B. 240

demonstrating readiness for graduation.³² As with the previous Keystone requirements for graduation,³³ the implementation of this new framework had been postponed until finally going into effect for the class of 2023.³⁴

School counselors actively monitor student achievement and progress toward graduation requirements. We often manage these processes, especially as relates to academic planning and course selection, and we must remain knowledgeable about any changes in policy so we can provide meaningful and accurate advisement to students and families.

At the same time, school counselors are often responsible for test administration activities in our schools, which commonly disrupts our availability to students during testing seasons. There was a time when in my own district, our high school counseling office had to post a sign on our office door notifying students we were unavailable except in the case of an emergency, as we were proctoring and administering state tests and College Board exams, the entire month of May.

Regarding student **career development**, Pennsylvania indicated in its state plan for the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) that K-12 Career Readiness would be one of its federal School Quality and Student Success indicators, which included Career Ready Benchmarks as part of the Future Ready PA Index, each school district's public facing school progress report.³⁵

This aligned with regulation requiring school districts to have a written plan for vocational guidance on file "for the development and implementation of a comprehensive, sequential program of guidance services for kindergarten through 12th grade," referred to as a K-12 Guidance Plan, or more colloquially as a "Chapter 339 Plan."³⁶

For many years, school counselors across the state have participated in trainings developed through the Department of Education, led by a former school counselor and career development champion Mike Thompson. Mike and his team developed a toolkit³⁷ and training model that has been implemented in almost every school district across the state. While Mike tragically passed away last year, Pennsylvania is indebted to his relentless advocacy for students and their career development. He often said that "career development is not one more thing on the plate for schools to do – it IS the plate." He also reminded us all that "career development is one of the best mental health interventions a school can provide to children."

School counselors have been key leaders for schools in the development and implementation of student career portfolios, containing the collection of required student career artifacts aligned with both the Career Education and Work Standards and the PA Career Ready Skills^{38 39}. This process links directly to the Career Readiness Indicators on the Future Ready PA Index, and school counselors now manage these processes for many of our schools across Pennsylvania.

³² Act 158 of 2018 (P.L. 1146)

³³ Act 1 of 2016, Act 55 of 2017, Act 39 of 2018

³⁴ Act 136 of 2020

³⁵ Every Student Succeeds Act, Pennsylvania Consolidated State Plan

³⁶ 22 Pa Code Chapter 339.31

³⁷ PDE (2011). Tools for Developing a Comprehensive K-12 Guidance & Counseling Plan

³⁸ PDE (2019). Career Readiness...ESSA Accountability: Guidelines for Evidence Collection, Monitoring, and Reporting

³⁹ and PDE (2018). The Pennsylvania Career Ready Skills: An Introduction

Regarding **social, emotional, and mental health and development**, Pennsylvania has taken legislative action to recognize these needs in our schools. We required the adoption of suicide awareness and prevention policies.⁴⁰ Significant updates were made to Pennsylvania's child abuse reporting laws in 2015.⁴¹ Laws regarding student attendance, an additional federal indicator of School Quality and Student Success, were updated to require earlier intervention in student truancy, Student Attendance Improvement Plans (SAIPs), and to change the compulsory age of school attendance.⁴²

School safety and security priorities and the subsequent trauma-informed approaches became required components of school programming, including the rollout of the Safe2Say Something anonymous reporting app in 2019.⁴³ As referenced earlier, since this program began, the top concerns reported each year have been mental and behavioral health concerns.⁴⁴

With so many important areas of state-mandated student engagement and support connected to the work of school counselors, it is vital that school districts ensure school counselors are able to balance these tasks effectively and efficiently. The Pennsylvania School Counseling Services Act would ensure school districts articulate how school counselors support these required services through a comprehensive school counseling program.

⁴⁰ Act 71 of 2014 (P.L. 779)

⁴¹ <https://archive.triblive.com/news/pennsylvania-enacts-modernized-child-abuse-laws-after-sandusky-scandal/>

⁴² Act 138 of 2016, Act 139 of 2019

⁴³ Act 44 of 2018, Act 18 of 2019

⁴⁴ Department of the Attorney General (2019, 2020). Safe2Say Something Annual Reports

Appendix B: Joint PSEA-PSCA Letter Supporting PA School Counseling Services Act**REQUEST TO SUPPORT THE PA SCHOOL COUNSELING SERVICES ACT**

(HOUSE BILL 662 - now 1665)

Dear Chairman Schweyer,

Today, the Pennsylvania School Counselors Association (PSCA) and the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA) are writing to ask for your support on House Bill 662, the Pennsylvania School Counseling Services Act, which was introduced in the House this spring.

Pennsylvania is the only state in America that does not require school districts to outline comprehensive school counseling programs or require school counselor staffing in schools. As a result, Pennsylvania school counselors not only provide services to students and families in real time, but must simultaneously educate and advocate in their schools and communities about their roles and areas of expertise. This means many school counselors are unable to work effectively and efficiently with their students, and the types of services provided can look vastly different from one school district to another all across Pennsylvania.

While school counselors have provided responsive services for students in crisis for many years, the need for proactive, preventative, and educational programming and support specific to mental health and social-emotional learning has been magnified by the “increased pressure on their mental health that previous generations have not experienced, from youth gun violence to bullying and isolation on social media” (PA OAG, Special Report on Student Mental Health Pennsylvania Office of Attorney General, 2022) and the disruptions and the aftermath of a global pandemic, as shown by data from the CDC, Pennsylvania Youth Survey, and the National Center for Education Statistics:

- More than 40% of high school students report feeling so sad or hopeless that they could not engage in their regular activities for at least two weeks during the previous year (CDC, Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2023).
- Nearly 70% of Pennsylvania students reported moderate or high levels of depression. One in four students report feeling like a failure. **One in five students report seriously considering suicide** (PA Youth Survey, 2021).
- 70% of public schools reported an increase in the percentage of their students seeking mental health services at school since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and roughly 76% of schools also reported an increase in staff voicing concerns about their students exhibiting symptoms such as depression, anxiety, and trauma. Yet, 88% of public schools did not strongly agree that they could effectively provide mental health services to all students in need due to an insufficient number of and inadequate access to mental health professionals, as well as inadequate funding (NCES, 2022).

House Bill 662 – the Pennsylvania School Counseling Services Act – will provide clarity for students and families as to the services they can expect to receive from their school counselors, to school districts who are seeking to support their students effectively in the aftermath of a global pandemic, and to taxpayers who can see their money fund efficient student support services that align with best practices, no matter their zip code or socioeconomic status. This Act would ensure schools are optimizing the services school counselors are trained and ready to deliver.

With almost 5,000 school counselors currently working in Pennsylvania schools, maximizing the impact of these school mental health professionals is paramount to meet the needs of the student mental health crisis.

Sincerely,



Emilia Peiffer
Executive Director
Pennsylvania School
Counselors Association



Rich Askey
President
Pennsylvania State Education
Association