



## The Ohio School Counselor Association

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Proponent Testimony on HB 367  
Nichole Miller  
November 19, 2019

Chair Jones, Vice Chair Manchester, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the House Primary & Secondary Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to share the Ohio School Counselor Association (OSCA)'s support for House Bill 367, bipartisan legislation that would require the Ohio Department of Education to create a universal job description for school counselors to promote better utilization of their time, skills and training in schools across Ohio. My name is Nichole Miller, and I serve as the President of OSCA.

OSCA is a statewide organization that seeks to empower, unite and support school counselors in their role of advancing student success. As school counselors, our primary concern is the wellbeing and achievement of our students. In providing this testimony, it may be helpful if I start by providing an overview of a school counselor's role for those who don't know.

School counselors serve students in three primary domain areas: academic planning, career readiness and social/emotional development. We do not provide clinical diagnoses or treatment, but often can identify students who might need that extra help through our frequent interactions with them while doing our daily work in any of our three domain areas. We can do counseling for disciplinary problems or absenteeism or small group counseling, individual academic planning and collaborative work with teachers. We sometimes also assist in advocating for students at IEP meetings, among other things. We go through master's degree-level training to be able to serve students every day in these appropriate areas, helping to establish a counseling program for our students that addresses the whole child, which is an important component of the Ohio Department of Education's Strategic Plan for Education.

However, in the current school climate in many areas of the state, we are largely unable to apply our education and experience to what it's supposed to be used for - providing direct services to students - because we are being used to respond to escalating testing demands and performing administrative work. Among our members, there is an overall feeling of being constantly overwhelmed and frustrated. Much of the work in our three domain areas requires proactive planning on behalf of our students. However, school counselors have unfortunately been forced into **reactive** environments given the all-consuming number of responsibilities they are juggling, allowing them little time to be thoughtful and strategic about each student's goals.

Compounding this issue is the growing severity and quantity of mental health needs among our children. We are seeing the number of suicides and suicide attempts increasing; *elementary*

*schoolers* are attempting suicide. This forces us to spend the little time we have on just a few students with those significant needs.

In the last month, I have worked with a student who was using meth until last year when the student went to rehab. The student's mother is a hoarder requiring the student to live with grandparents. The student just moved into my district, is credit deficient by two years, and last week walked out of class three times. Later the same day, the student went home with a "fever" a period later, but it was just school avoidance. The student has four diagnoses, including PTSD, and they told me that day that they don't intend to live past 21. Shall I send this student back to geometry where they are failing? Or what about the student I met with that same day who had to eat dog food at one point they were so neglected, and now worries about the 4-year old sister who is still with mom. Is this student concerned about failing health? I dealt with four of these types of students in one day last month. As of today, two of them have transferred schools, starting all over again. I am awaiting a custody hearing result for a third student which could result in them being returned to a neglectful mother. That's an average day for myself and my colleagues across the state of Ohio.

Educational small groups and classroom lessons have in the past been very effective in addressing some of the needs students have, and have provided students the tools to handle adverse situations. But this type of good, intentional work has taken a back seat. Instead, our role has become a catch-all. We are doing data reporting, cafeteria duty, administering entirely too many tests – including multiple different tests in one week, covering teachers' classrooms when substitutes cannot be obtained and acting as the building administrator when principals are away. The amount of paperwork and management within the school counseling world has become unmanageable. Not having the appropriate school counselor-to-student ratio on top of all the non-counseling responsibilities we have acquired has made the School Counselor's job next to impossible.

This unmanageable workload also prevents us from providing the more comprehensive academic advising and career guidance that our students deserve. Our members would love to work one-on-one with students to develop strategies to chart a path forward after receiving failing grades, or to thoughtfully debrief after job shadow days or career fairs. But obligations like back-to-back days of testing – often full weeks at a time – present an unsurmountable time vacuum that leaves us with little flexibility for such things.

Having a universal job description that appropriately defines what we should be doing – spending 80% of our time on these critical direct and indirect services to students and just 20% on other administrative and programmatic tasks – would significantly improve our ability to help our students be successful.

Now I'd like to turn it over to my colleague who will talk more about the stress school counselors are under trying to juggle all their multiple responsibilities, including those extraneous tasks that are not a part of their ideal job description.



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Michelle Grimm

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Chair Jones, Vice Chair Manchester, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the House Primary & Secondary Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Michelle Grimm, President-Elect of the Ohio School Counselor Association.

I want to add a little more about what we've heard from some of our fellow school counselors across the state. The widespread sense of exasperation about being consumed by non-counseling duties is – from our perspective at OSCA – taking a toll on the employment cycle. We are hearing even from school counselors who are **seeking employment** that they find themselves unwilling to apply to positions at many schools across the state because they know that, in those schools, school counselors have very little opportunity to work directly with students and families because they spend most of their time on non-counseling duties. I have had other school counselors admit to me that they have been hospitalized because of high stress levels, or had to commit to a regimen of anxiety medications due to the stress of the job and significant time commitment.

I'll use myself as an example. My contract with my school lists my hours as 7:30 AM - 3:00 PM Monday – Friday. However, I don't remember the last time in my decades of school counseling that I worked those hours on a regular basis. It's often late in the evening by the time I leave school, and I'm usually taking paperwork home because there were multiple crises to deal with that took up much of my time. I have personally often sat with students in crisis waiting to be picked up by parents or to be evaluated at a crisis center beyond normal school hours because parents work until late evening or have to drive a distance to get to their child. I have also been called late at night and on weekends because someone saw a disturbing social media post and was worried for the well-being of another student. That requires a phone call to the student in crisis or notifying the police or sheriff to do a well check on the student. I personally never take a lunch break or take advantage of a conference period like other teaching staff do. Working on weekends to play catch up is also commonplace. All that being said, please understand that I will **always** choose to work extra hours to spend the time needed on a kid or family in crisis, and I know I am not alone among my fellow school counselors in that sentiment. However, our roles are so uniquely different from the teaching staff guidelines we work under, that that alone is a reason to require ODE to develop a specific job description for school counselors.

I am encouraged thinking about how a universal job description could transform our roles into what they should be instead of what they are. Having schools understand that we should be spending 80% of our time on direct and indirect services could empower us to use our time developing career pathways for our students, taking the time to create an individualized and usable student success plan, or assisting with application and documentation of the new graduation seals. We could actually focus on writing lengthier, individualized, thoughtful college recommendation letters, instead of having to be diverted to the planning and administration of end-of-course exams, which occur during that very same time of the year. Being the best school counselor for students requires much more time than we are able to spend now building relationships with parents and creating partnerships with communities. We need more time to give to students who are at risk, credit deficient, emotionally disadvantaged, or have to work to help support the family. Because of all the areas in which school counselors work within the

educational system, they play a vital role in preparing students and communities for bright futures. **Supported school counselors means successful students.** I urge passage of HB 367 as a step in the right direction on this issue.

Now I'd like to turn it over to OSCA's Past President to talk about some of the data she's collected that illustrates the gravity of the problem we're facing as school counselors.



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Heather Fairs  
November 19, 2019

Chair Jones, Vice Chair Manchester, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the House Primary & Secondary Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Heather Fairs, Past President of the Ohio School Counselor Association.

Earlier this year, I compiled available data from ODE on full-time school counselors in schools across the state. As you may have heard, the American School Counselor Association's National Model for School Counselors recommends a 250:1 student-to-school counselor ratio in schools. From the data we collected, we found that Ohio's ratio is an abysmal 453:1. Even this statistic can be deceiving. We have one board member who serves 1,000 students in 3 elementary schools. In addition, there are over 1,050 schools in Ohio that do not have access to a single full-time school counselor. That equates to over 380,000 students without that critical resource who can help them navigate their social/emotional needs and future professional trajectory. This lack of access is a disservice to our students. For those kids who do have access to a school counselor, we need to be ensuring that that person is using as much of their professional time as possible serving those students in our three critical domain areas. That is where having a job description as a guide will help us.

In addition, we did an informal poll of our members to figure out what the statistics actually look like with respect to how much of school counselors' time is spent on testing and "other duties as assigned." Our poll of 256 school counselors found that 48.6% of them spent more than 10 full days of the school year on testing – that's two full weeks of time that school counselors are not at all available to students in need. 23.5% of them spent between 17 and 23 days on testing – almost a whole month. In addition, 56.6% of our school counselors are considered an official "testing coordinator" for at least one test at their school. This is obviously a significant time commitment that takes them away from their direct student service on a regular basis.

For example, we continue to hear the burden from high school level school counselors. In certain districts, school counselors are responsible for all 7 end of course tests, all Advanced Placement tests, ACT, OELPA, PSAT, WorkKeys, Accuplacer, ALEX, and PreACT. In addition, we are utilized to coordinate and proctor make up testing and retesting.

Furthermore, 67.2% of our members polled reported that they served as their school's case manager for 504s. 504 plans are individual blueprints for how a school will ensure that a student with a physical or mental disability will receive suitable access to education and appropriate programming. These plans require a significant amount of paperwork to create and entail outreach to multiple agencies and partner entities for information. Our survey showed that the amount of 504 plans school counselors are managing averages out to 22 per counselor, but some have closer to 40 plans they are juggling. Serving as the case manager for 504s is also a significant administrative burden that does not fall under any of the direct and indirect services school counselors are supposed to be spending most of their time on.

As a final point, I want to touch on the part of the bill that requires ODE to designate a school counselor liaison. Given we are constantly navigating work between our three domain areas, which in and of themselves encompass a variety of different statutory and policy requirements ranging from graduation pathways to curriculum trajectories, we feel that having a single point

of contact for school counselors within ODE would improve the efficiency and effectiveness of communication between us and the agency. Right now, we have to put in separate calls to multiple ODE staff to ensure we have answers to all of our various questions. When we call, we are often referred to other staff or told the person with the answer to our question needs to be located. This is likely just as inefficient for ODE as it is for us. To our knowledge, Ohio is the only state without a designated school counselor liaison within its department of education, so we ask that Ohio join the rest of the states in taking this sensible step to improve communication and save us time, which – as we have just explained – we do not have much of.

On behalf of the entire membership of the Ohio School Counselor Association, we want to thank our sponsors again for their dedication to addressing this issue through House Bill 367. We appreciate this important step in the right direction and urge members of the committee to support the bill. We would welcome any questions.