



House Primary & Secondary Education Committee
May 9, 2023
Ohio School Counselor Association
HB 8 - Opponent Testimony

Chair Bird, Vice Chair Fowler Arthur, Ranking Member Robinson and esteemed members of the House Primary & Secondary Education Committee: thank you for allowing me the opportunity to offer additional testimony on HB 8 on behalf of the Ohio School Counselor Association. My name is Doug Cook, and I am an Associate Clinical Professor/Coordinator in Counselor Education for the University of Dayton. I also serve on OSCA's Government Relations Committee. In addition to my colleague's comments, I would like to take the time to emphasize the positive impact school counseling has on students, and the way we believe HB 8 will undermine those services in Ohio.

Unfortunately, we know that many students struggle with unsafe or unwelcoming homes, homes ravaged by poverty or stress, or even comfortable homes where students just sometimes feel the need to vent about family matters. School counselors' offices are safe spaces for those students who see value in a neutral, detached listener as they talk through their thoughts. HB 8's mandatory disclosure of information a student shares with a school counselor threatens to upend that resource for students. Trust is at the center of what makes students feel comfortable using our services. And if a student decides to seek out a school counselor for an issue over friends or family members, we respect that student's decision to use the in-house resources available to them. We believe any safe adult is better than what that child might find on the internet or among peers. Should this bill pass, we want you to understand that, to ensure compliance, students throughout Ohio will need to be presented with this message at the start of school: Due to recent legislation, school staff are now required to report to your families any change in your mental, emotional, or physical health or well-being. This will likely be incredibly jarring for students and result in their being scared that they will lose the privacy of having a safe listener available to them at school.

Further, we are seriously concerned that this bill will have a chilling effect on broader school counseling services such as classroom guidance and small group work. If students know that school counselors will be forced to disclose what was shared in a private meeting, more and more of our students may hesitate before reaching out to us about sensitive issues, which often require the most emotional support. It is reasonable to expect that this hesitation would ultimately extend to *all* issues if students simply don't feel their school counselor can be trusted. This lack of engagement would deprive students of critical counseling they may need for failing a class, skipping school, or preparing for a career. School counselors are the *only* full-time staff dedicated to helping students with their academic and career development. And many different studies confirm that not having access to school counselors leads to poorer academic performance. Specifically, [research shows](#) that students with access to school counseling services consistently do better on state tests and have higher GPAs. They also have fewer interpersonal

issues at school, are more likely to feel their education is important, and feel safer at school. Student connections to school staff also reduces suicidality. According to [a 2021 CDC study](#) of U.S. high school students, students who felt connected to adults and peers at school were half as likely to attempt suicide. Based on what the research tells us, the trickle-down effect caused by the notification required under HB 8 would have severe unintended consequences for not only academic success, but school climate and students' mental health. Thus, maintaining students' access to supportive, confidential school counseling is a core tenet of school safety and student success.

Finally, we want to note that if a parent is concerned about a specific school counselor, or specific school counseling services offered at their child's particular school, there is already an avenue to opt their child out of school counseling services altogether. This is an option all parents have statewide and is part of informed consent. Most schools should provide information about opting out at the beginning of the school year. If a parent opts out, then school counselors cannot meet with their student even if the student requests it. If a counselor does get a meeting request from an opted out student, the counselor has to let them know they will need to call the parent to get their consent to meet with the student regardless of the topic. We would offer this as a better as-needed solution to parent involvement concerns in specific situations, as opposed to a statewide government mandate that intrudes into critical student supports that students struggling with mental health, learning loss and other issues need now more than ever.

We do what we do because we care deeply about our students. We want to continue to be able to support them in their academic, career and mental health development while working with parents, but we believe HB 8 would cause severe disruption to those efforts. Thank you for your time. I would welcome any questions.