



House Finance Subcommittee on Primary & Secondary Education

March 23, 2023

Ohio School Counselor Association

Interested Party Testimony

Chair Richardson, Ranking Member Isaacsohn, and esteemed members of the House Finance Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education: thank you for allowing me the opportunity to share the Ohio School Counselor Association's perspective on the As Introduced 2024-2025 state operating budget. My name is Heather Fairs and I am the Government Relations Chair for OSCA and a school counselor in the South Western City School District outside of Columbus.

School Investment

First, we are heartened by the additional investments the Governor has proposed to support schools, mental health initiatives, and students' academic and career development. In particular, we are strongly supportive of the continued phase-in of the Fair School Funding Formula, which dedicates specific funding for high school counselors plus the hiring of a social/emotional/security/support personnel at a 250:1 ratio. Ohio schools are suffering from an inadequate average student-to-school counselor ratio of 400:1 compared to the recommended 250:1. This lack of investment perpetuates the pattern of overwhelmed, overworked school counselors, consistently burdened by new testing and administrative responsibilities, who are unable to deliver the level of service they are trained to provide to students in academic, social and career development. Further, research shows students who have more access to school counselors are more likely to graduate and less likely to have behavioral problems. We understand schools are doing their best to manage students' needs with the resources they have, but we also know we can do better for our students if we had the time and more manageable caseloads.

The Governor's pledge to fund school resource officers in every school is a commendable response to justified concerns for student safety, which appears increasingly at risk by bad actors, often armed. In the same way, a similar commitment for school counselors could fill many of the gaps in mental and social development, work-based learning exposure and career planning that the Legislature often seeks to solve. For example, the Governor's budget allocates \$6.04 million towards a two-year pilot program for career navigators to provide career planning information to students and assist them in earning OhioMeansJobs-Readiness seals. This is work that falls squarely in a school counselor's domain and would be more of a priority of ours if only we had the time and resources to do it. We are in triage mode, more reactive than proactive, and unable to spend dedicated time on student development, especially because most of our time is spent serving students who are dysregulated. But funding school counselors at appropriate ratios and empowering them to focus on the work they're trained to do would also help with the safety concerns parents and lawmakers are expressing. In fact,

school counselors were mentioned in the Ohio School Safety Center's recently released comprehensive [School Safety Framework](#) containing recommendations on how to ensure safe schools. Better access to school counselors was explicitly mentioned in two of the eight recommendations. The connection is that students who are emotionally unstable, unsupported or don't have the conflict resolution or relationship skills that school counselors can instill may be more prone to behaviors that increase risk of physical harm to themselves or others. Safety means addressing internal risk factors as well as external. School counselors' preventative work with students is a critical part of their physical and emotional safety at schools, as well as their overall academic success.

In a similar vein, we believe fully funding school counselors at the appropriate ratio would help achieve some of the goals of the bolstered Student Wellness and Success Funds/Disadvantaged Pupil Aid. This idea is especially relevant given the new budget language requiring ODE and MHAS to conduct an evaluation of the impact of wellness funds on student measures such as school climate, attendance, discipline, and academic achievement. These are *all* outcomes school counselors are proven to impact positively through our national standards. We know the programs that have received wellness dollars were much-needed and delivered significant strides in ensuring students were more prepared to learn. However, if the goal of the funds is to influence the above areas, the one-on-one counseling we do, the preventative and trauma-informed methods we use, the interventions and supports we facilitate would all prove highly effective if backed by appropriate resources. Going forward, we would encourage policymakers to ensure the *existing* school support system receives the investment it needs to be successful in order to maximize staff and program potential and efficiency.

That's why we are respectfully requesting a budget amendment that would codify the recently created school counselor liaison position at ODE. This position, hired last August, has been a godsend for our members who previously experienced delays and inefficiencies trying to get information from ODE. School counselors' work is unique because it requires knowledge of numerous programs and education areas that are often constantly changing (ie. graduation requirements). Since the establishment of a direct contact for school counselors at the Department, we are saving time on repetitive phone calls and able to spend more time with students or in planning. Importantly, for the first time, we are also doing proactive work with the liaison to improve our ability to deliver services, such as making internships for students easier to find and reducing the paperwork burden of 504s. Ohio was the only state without a school counselor liaison in its education department prior to seven months ago. This is a resource that is working and we urge the committee to ensure the position remains a critical support for overworked school counselors across the state by codifying the position in Code.

FAFSA Requirement

OSCA would like to register our opposition to the budget provision that requires submission of FAFSA for graduation, even given the allowed parental opt-out. We believe tying a burdensome postsecondary paperwork mandate to the granting of a student's high school diploma is a perilous gamble that puts students' futures at unnecessary risk. In a time where we hear legislators urging emphasis on career-tech over college pathways, we feel this is a misguided

mandate that demands significant student and parent effort for a process that may or may not be relevant for that student. A variety of factors such as lack of internet access or parent knowledge may contribute to a student's inability to complete the FAFSA. Further, undocumented students are not eligible to fill out the FAFSA. Students should not be denied their diploma if factors outside of their control prevent them from submitting the form. We are also concerned about the way this requirement positions our members to face the brunt of parent frustration and confusion, especially if their student subsequently fails to graduate for lack of submission. In addition, taking advantage of the parental opt-out requires being aware of that option, which schools cannot guarantee will be the case when parents and guardians are sometimes hard to reach. Further, from our experience, we feel schools simply don't have the staff – including school counselor time – to be able to pull this off without other priorities slipping through the cracks. Although we believe increasing Ohio's FAFSA completion rate is an important goal, we would suggest, if the Legislature insists on requiring it, instead incorporating it as one of a few college tasks that can be completed to earn the College Readiness Seal.

Literacy

OSCA applauds the robust investments in literacy proposed in the Governor's budget. As you think about these dollars and programs, we would offer that there may be opportunities for targeted use of these funds for high school students who, yes, still need reading support. We see much unmet need among high school students who many assume have received necessary remediation at some earlier point in their education, but have not. The English learner population is particularly at risk of not receiving needed remediation, and supports for these students are often few and far between given the extent of work required to bring them back up to grade level.

College Credit Plus

OSCA wholeheartedly supports the \$15 million budget investment for grants to high school teachers to support completion of coursework necessary for them to teach CCP courses in a high school setting. Over the past year, OSCA has been communicating with ODE and ODHE about improvements to the CCP program and, as part of those conversations, have urged more aid to schools to ensure they can offer more classes in-house. This increases access to the program and eliminates many of the barriers that discourage students, particularly disadvantaged students, from participating. Allowing more qualified high school teachers the opportunity to become qualified CCP instructors is a smart reform to maximize the success of CCP.

Computer Science Promise Program

Finally, OSCA would like to raise some questions we have regarding the newly proposed Computer Science Promise Program. The prospect of exposing more students to in-demand industries is exciting, but we are concerned the scope of the program could mirror CCP, and become just as taxing and resource-heavy to manage. In many schools, management of CCP falls on school counselors, and is almost a full-time job. For this new program, determining student eligibility, transportation coordination, course scheduling, EMIS coding, among other responsibilities will likely be a heavy lift, and we want to ensure schools are prepared for a

successful implementation. We also have questions about determining credit eligibility, although we acknowledge these courses could be strong candidates for the technology graduation seal. As this program moves forward, we hope to work with ODHE to ensure that it is executed in a way that is manageable for schools.

In conclusion, we appreciate the investments the Governor has proposed, many of which are seriously needed. We simply urge additional consideration of the crisis facing school counselors through codification of an official liaison, urge removal of FAFSA as a graduation requirement and wish to offer our perspective on some of the other programs and policies being proposed. Our OSCA leadership is available and willing to take a seat at the table with initiatives that impact students' physical and mental well-being, career exploration opportunities, or partnerships with families and businesses. We truly believe that our children of today will be our future and the fact they have more obstacles to overcome in today's world means we all need to unite to better support their growth and potential. Thank you for your time and I would be happy to answer any questions.