



The Ohio School Counselor Association

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Opponent Testimony on SB 319
Nichole Miller, Past President
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Chair Lehner, Vice Chair Brenner, Ranking Member Fedor, and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide the Ohio School Counselor Association (OSCA)'s perspective on Senate Bill 319. My name is Nichole Miller and I serve as OSCA's Past President.

Although we appreciate the intent behind SB 319 - to help schools, students and staff across Ohio respond to the extraordinary circumstances we find ourselves in, OSCA has serious concerns about temporary language in the bill that allows school boards to authorize the furlough of employees for what could be, if the bill passes this month, up to a full year. In light of COVID-19, school staff have been putting in more hours than ever before trying to facilitate a prompt and effective pivot to a virtual education environment. The new circumstances have made school counselors' role addressing the academic, social/emotional and career development needs of students more critical than ever before. With state tests waived, graduation requirements shifted and other academic and program standards adjusted to account for closed school buildings, school counselors are the primary staff with the expertise to help students chart their new academic normal in light of the changes. And, with anxiety, depression and abuse still heightened due to extended quarantine, school counselors are working in overdrive to address students' social/emotional needs.

As we continue to tackle our jobs with dedication, passion and unprecedented effort, we are highly concerned that SB 319 empowers school boards to reward this effort by pulling the rug out from under us. We believe the financial situation of individual schools is still evolving, and that the Legislature should not assume that school boards would need to furlough hardworking staff until it becomes absolutely certain, if ever at all, given there may be more federal funding headed schools' way in the future. More importantly, if schools return to some form of a blended learning model in the fall, students will need more staff, not less, to help navigate the unique challenges associated with that. OSCA believes the Legislature should instead be encouraging school boards to increase, not decrease, their school staff's involvement in student educational experiences and support services during these challenging times.

Unfortunately, students in Ohio already have a serious lack of access to school counselors. Based on ODE data, the average student-to-school counselor ratio in Ohio is an abysmal 453:1. Even more alarming is that 384,193 students in Ohio do not have access to a school counselor at all. When budget cuts hit, we are the first to go because often individuals do not understand the critical role we play tying all the pieces of the educational support spectrum together. The

language in Section 13 of this bill adds fuel to this fire and threatens to undermine students' access to vital social/emotional, academic and career development resources.

However, if this committee and the sponsor insist on bolstering school boards' authority to furlough employees during this time, we would ask that language be added requiring that school boards allow furloughed employees to return to their previous position post-furlough. This, as well as requiring a continuance of insurance coverage and allowing for use of accrued paid leave, would provide us with some semblance of support if schools do, in fact, have to make those tough decisions. In addition, we would ask that this committee consider confining the furlough authority to the period of the declared emergency. As of now, these provisions give school boards broad authority to furlough employees even if pandemic conditions drastically improve before next June.

In closing, if school counselors are furloughed for any period of time at all, gaping holes will be left in critical support services for students in need. We recognize that the authority to make employment decisions ultimately rests at the local level with school boards, not the Legislature. However, OSCA believes the furlough language in SB 319 threatens to undermine student success by empowering school boards to cut back on critical supports and resources in a time when they're needed most.

OSCA would like to offer one final thought on the provision of SB 319 that allows students to use a final course grade as their grade for a cancelled end-of-course exam. Although we applaud the option for student choice here, we would encourage the committee to consider the administrative burden this might place on school counselors trying to determine for every student, without guidance, which grades should qualify as replacements. In addition, we would anticipate having to spend significant time meeting with each individual student to discuss this option, while inevitably fielding numerous questions from parents. There may be additional documentation and reporting obligations associated with this opportunity as well that might detract from our ability to focus on our core areas of social/emotional learning.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to share OSCA's perspective on SB 319. I would welcome any questions you may have.