



The Ohio School Counselor Association

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Proponent Testimony on HB 333
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Chair Manning, Vice Chair Bird, Ranking Member Robinson, and esteemed 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 333, bipartisan legislation that would require the Ohio Department of Education to create a model job description for school counselors to promote better utilization of their time, skills and training in schools across Ohio. My name is Sara Hoffman, and I serve as the President of OSCA.

As you likely 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 are the first ones to identify students who might need those referrals because of our close relationships with students. We perform counseling for disciplinary problems or absenteeism, small group counseling, individual academic planning and collaborative work with teachers. In some schools, we 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 ways, and 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 – even before COVID, we are largely unable to apply our education and experience to what they are supposed to be used for - providing direct services to students - because we are being redirected to respond to escalating testing demands and to perform administrative work. Managing CCP and ever-changing graduation requirements is also an increasingly significant time commitment. Among our members, there is an overall feeling of being constantly overwhelmed and frustrated.

With respect to testing, an internal poll we conducted of 256 of our members 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.

With respect to administrative burdens, as many of you know, school counselors are often the go-to staff asked to oversee school operations when the principal is out, do data reporting, cover classes for teachers when substitutes aren't available and take over cafeteria duty. In these roles,

we cannot have meaningful interactions with students in our three domain areas. In addition, almost 70% of our members serve as their school's case manager for 504s. These plans require a significant amount of paperwork to create and entail outreach to multiple agencies and partner entities for information. Serving as the case manager for 504s is 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.

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. These numbers have only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. If you knew some of the stories of neglected children, children with untreated mental illness, middle schoolers acting as parents to siblings, and children working their way through the court system that we face every day, it would break your heart. The escalating anxiety and mental health needs these days forces us to spend the little time we have on just a few students with those most pressing issues. School staff as well are experiencing increasing anxiety and stress due to COVID circumstances, and so we are spending more and more of our time supporting them in addition to students, trying to help them manage their needs so they are ready to teach.

Proactive work like 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. 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 behavior and goals. We would love to be able to think thoughtfully about developing career pathways for students, take the time to create individualized and usable student success plans, write lengthier and more personalized college recommendation letters. Instead, our role has become a catch-all. The amount of paperwork and management within the school counseling world has become unmanageable.

Having a universal job description that appropriately defines what we should be doing – spending 80% of our time on our 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. It would provide the backing we need to redirect our time and energy to the impactful work our master's degree provides us the expertise to do in our three domain areas. In addition, if schools better understood our role, it would empower us to use our time more effectively.

You may be aware that the American School Counselor Association's National Model for School Counselors recommends a 250:1 student-to-school counselor ratio in schools. Using available ODE data from 2019, we found that Ohio's average ratio is an abysmal 453:1. Even this statistic can be deceiving. We have one OSCA member who serves 1,000 students in 3 elementary schools. There are over 1,050 schools in Ohio that do not have access to a single full-time school counselor at all. 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.

Especially with the way COVID has transformed our educational landscape, our students need and deserve more from their school counselors. We are the ones tying all the pieces of the educational support spectrum together – often the one trusted adult advocating for all students across every area of education. Supported school counselors means successful students, and HB 333 helps us reach that goal.

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 the various policy and statutory requirements that define the standards and goals of our three domain areas, and also that graduation requirements seem to be constantly in flux, 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 department. 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 precious time that we often do not have.

On behalf of the entire membership of the Ohio School Counselor Association, I want to thank our sponsors again for their dedication to addressing this issue through House Bill 333. Chair Manning and members of the committee, we appreciate this important step in the right direction and would welcome any questions.