

REASONABLE RATIOS: PA'S PATH TO ADDRESSING STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

SCHOOL COUNSELORS ARE KEY TO ADDRESSING STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH

A generation of students is facing unprecedented mental health challenges that are uniquely difficult to navigate. Students have suffered significant learning losses of **half a year or greater** as **one in five students reports seriously considering suicide**, according to a new report from the Pennsylvania School Counselors Association (PSCA).

Meanwhile, **school counselors are stretched too thin**, saddled with ever-increasing caseloads and significant work isolation. The average counselor-to-student ratio in Pennsylvania is 1:343, well above the 1:250 ratio recommended by the ASCA. Further, **half** of PA public school districts have a ratio of 1:350 or higher, and **1 in every 10 school districts** has a ratio over 1:500. To make matters worse, there are fewer school counselors in our schools than there were in 2010—even as class sizes have increased.

The inequality from district to district is staggering, and it hits our most vulnerable students the hardest. Of the 192 school buildings where students do not have access to a school counselor, roughly 80% of these are elementary schools, and 76% are Title I schools. Almost half of Pennsylvania school districts employ school counselors who are assigned to multiple buildings, making it impossible for students to meet with counselors when they are not present in the building. **We want sprinklers to be working every day, not just on days when there is a fire. Why is access to a mental health professional any different?**

It's up to our legislators and elected officials to support school counselors across Pennsylvania and establish reasonable funding and counselor-student ratios to reverse the trend of declining student health. How can we do that?

- An investment of \$130 million, less than 1% of the total state appropriations for education, would be enough to hire the total school counseling positions needed in Pennsylvania.
- By increasing the state's investment by less than \$100 per child, we can bring counselor-to-student ratios down to an average of 1:250 and ensure students have access to a qualified school counselor without compromising the counselor's ability to do their job.

Additionally, school counselors need a clearly defined scope of practice.

- For example, the ASCA National Model provides a clear definition of scope for counselors, recommending that 80% of counselors' time is spent in direct service of students, and 20% spent on program planning.
- Without clear guidelines, too many school counselors are being used for non-counseling roles, such as covering classes, monitoring hallways, and administering standardized tests - all which limit students' ability to access the mental health support school counselors provide.
- Providing a clearer scope of practice would help school counselors by guaranteeing appropriate roles and responsibilities in their buildings so that they can focus on the services they are uniquely qualified to provide.

Pennsylvania is the only state in America that does not require school districts to outline comprehensive programs or require a specific ratio of student to school counselor in school buildings.

- The School Counseling Services Act (HB 662) fills this gap by requiring schools to develop a robust school counseling plan with goals of improving access to quality mental health support via counselors, meeting the highly individualized needs of students, and easing student transition to post-graduation life.

CLOSE PENNSYLVANIA'S **\$4.6B** PUBLIC EDUCATION FUNDING GAP

Property taxes are rising, and public schools are struggling.