Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Formica, Representative Lavielle and members of the Appropriations Committee, my name is Jennifer Parzych and I am a school counselor educator at Southern Connecticut State University, as well as a member of the Connecticut School Counselor Association’s Government Relations Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony in matters related to H.B. No. 7148 AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNium ENDING JUNE THIRTIETH, 2021, AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFORE. Specifically, supporting equitable access to comprehensive school counseling programs across the state as part of the ECS funding, or through a separate fund.

Disparate ranges of school counselor-to-student ratios exist in Connecticut, dependent on grade level and location. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) recommends a 1:250 ratio. In Connecticut, the average ratio is 1:491. As principal investigator of a research team studying the impact of ratios on student outcomes specifically in Connecticut (Parzych, Donohue, Gaesser, Chiu, 2019), state-level data was analyzed to identify higher- and lower-performing schools at each grade level (elementary, middle, high), and location (urban, suburban, rural). High-performing schools were defined as those that had a combination of highest values of graduation rates plus college-going rates plus achievement scores and lowest values of suspension plus absenteeism rates. Low-performing schools were defined as those with the opposite combination – lowest values of graduation rates plus college-going rates plus achievement scores and highest values of suspension plus absenteeism rates. Significantly higher school-counselor-to-student ratios exist in lower-performing schools (e.g., high school = 1:285, middle school = 1:891) versus caseloads in higher-performing schools (e.g., high school = 1:182, middle school = 1:211). Additionally, limited access to elementary level school counseling services exists in Connecticut. Approximately three-quarters (72%) of school districts provide no comprehensive school counseling services to K–5 students.

Socioeconomic status and community resources have an impact on the ability of school counselors to effectively deliver comprehensive school counseling programs. Focus groups held with school counselors from the identified 60 schools provided perspective not readily apparent from performance data alone. For example, middle school counselors in one of the identified lowest-performing school districts, in a lower SES school district, revealed a recent improvement in ratios. In response to years of low performance, the district’s newly hired superintendent “recognized the impact of school counseling programs [through results reports].” This ultimately resulted in the addition of two school counselors in this lower SES school district, lowering ratios from 1:400 to 1:215. Preliminary results suggest the school counselors are able to effectively deliver a comprehensive school counseling program.
program to better meet students’ academic, career and social/emotional needs. Specific to rising mental health needs (e.g., anxiety, depression):

“[Our] students needing outside counseling experience a four- to six-week waiting list for a counselor. With our new caseloads at 215 [students], we can more readily identify need, respond and connect them with members of our school support service team.”

Conversely, qualitative data gathered from high school counselors among the identified highest-performing districts, in a higher SES community, revealed significant concern if school counselor-to-student ratios were to increase from their current 1:150 to the ASCA recommended 1:250.

“We’re seeing a huge uptick in emergent mental health issues (e.g., anxiety, depression, self-harm). Kids are overscheduled and can’t attend to their mental health needs outside of school. We have a fully supported student support services [team] but worry if ratios rose to 1:250 across the board, it would negatively impact our ability to serve students.”

Students in districts with elementary school counselors have improved performance outcomes versus districts without. Fewer than 25% of districts in Connecticut have school counselors across all grade levels. Students in districts that have K–12 school counselors produce higher graduation rates, higher college entrance and persistence rates, lower chronic absenteeism rates and fewer out-of-school suspensions when compared to districts with school counselors beginning in grade 6. Improved performance outcomes are seen across urban, suburban and rural locations. For example, in districts with K–12 school counselors, 69.4% report graduation rates greater than 90%, compared to districts without elementary school counselors, where only 45.8% report graduation rates greater than 90%.

Access to a school counselor should not be an amenity reserved for students with privileged backgrounds. Research indicates regular access to a school counselor is a necessity, particularly for students most in need of intervention and support in high-poverty districts (Carrell & Carrell, 2006; Lapan, Gysbers, Stanley & Pierce, 2016; McIntosh, 2010; Utphall, 2006). Further, results from the current Connecticut study suggest that context matters. School-counselor-to-student ratios may be optimal at 1:250, but grade level and socioeconomic factors of a district require close consideration.

Poverty impacts students’ lives in multiple ways. It is no secret that students in high poverty schools are left at a disadvantage in comparison to students in more affluent districts. Access to support staff is essential in order to provide services to combat poverty related impact such as food and home insecurity, environmental stress, and home-school connection.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Jennifer L. Parzych
School Counseling Program Coordinator and Assistant Professor
Southern Connecticut State University
Parzychj1@southernct.edu

Connecticut School Counselor Association
Government Relations Committee, Member