Testimony of Virginia A. DeLong
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in support of
S.B. 956 (RAISED) AN ACT CONCERNING A COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL COUNSELOR PROGRAM.
Education Committee- March 6, 2019

Representative Sanchez, Senator McCrory, Representative McCarty, Senator Berthel, and esteemed members of the Education Committee, my name is Virginia DeLong and I am a School Counselor in Lebanon and Chairman of the Board of Directors for the Connecticut School Counselor Association. I am offering testimony in strong support of Senate Bill 956- AN ACT CONCERNING A COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL COUNSELOR PROGRAM.

The students of Connecticut are our greatest asset and they represent the future of this state. As adults, it is our obligation to provide the best education possible for our students. No longer can we solely focus on the academic component of what schools should be providing our kids. The needs of our students are much greater than that. In the last 15 years, I have seen the mental health needs of our students rise exponentially. However, the structures of Connecticut schools are not keeping pace with the needs of our kids. We have an opportunity as a state to change that and to be another model for other states across the country.

The role of the school counselor has evolved quite a bit over the last 20 years, which resulted in the name change from guidance counselors. We are trained to deliver comprehensive school counseling programs (CSCP) that are preventative in nature, encompass three domains of academic, career and social emotional learning, and are designed to meet the needs of all students within the school. Through a developmentally appropriate school counseling curriculum, school counselors provide Tier I services by delivering lessons to students that help them with skills that they need in the classroom and beyond. School counselors provide intervention services at the Tier II and III levels through small group counseling and individual counseling for students who may be in greater need of additional skill building. CSCP’s involve collaboration and consultation with teachers, administrators, support staff and outside providers so that we may find the best and sometimes most innovative ways to help our students.

In order for CSCP’s to be truly comprehensive, they need to be implemented K-12. Not all of our students in Connecticut are benefitting from comprehensive programs. Only about 25% of our elementary schools have a school counselor which means that we have students in Connecticut who do not have access to a school counselor and therefore are not receiving either preventative or responsive services that they may need. It puts a greater burden on middle school and high school counselors who then have to play catch up and provide more responsive “band aided” services for students. Imagine the impact school counselors could have on our students if they were receiving services starting in elementary school. I can imagine this. Research has shown that schools that have true comprehensive school counseling services starting in elementary school have greater rates of student achievement, higher attendance and more connectedness to school.

While we do a fairly good job of staffing school counselors at the high school level, we fail at staffing our elementary and middle schools with school counselors. Even in schools where we have elementary school counselors, they are often split between several schools and have caseloads upward of 500+ students. Our middle school ratios are lower, but still on the high end of 350+ students to one counselor. When you are responsible for meeting the academic, career and social emotional needs of all the students on your caseload, these ratios are unacceptable. I ask that the
legislature amend this bill to include that school counselors have ratios no higher than 250:1. We need our students to have access to school counselors so they can reap the benefits of comprehensive school counseling programs. No longer can we just focus on academically preparing our students. They need to have the social emotional and the workforce readiness skills that are delivered through a CSCP.

The workforce needs of Connecticut are great, and school counselors are on the front lines working with students to prepare them for their future careers. Without school counselors in our schools, students are not always receiving adequate career counseling services. These services need to begin at the elementary level, as many kids by the age of 9 have already discarded careers as potential options. Through a CSCP, school counselors are able to get into classrooms and work with teachers to help provide early exposure to careers, laying the foundation for future career work with students. We have a severe shortage of workers in manufacturing, law enforcement, military and computer science careers in Connecticut. We do a huge disservice to our students and our economy when we wait until middle school and in some cases, high school, to start talking about careers. However, in order for these discussions to take place earlier, we need to have school counselors in our elementary schools and comprehensive school counseling programs in our districts across the state.

The State of Connecticut has a Comprehensive Model in place (2008) that is currently under revision and is modeled after the American School Counselor Association’s National Comprehensive Model. We need all of our schools in Connecticut using this model, allowing all of our students access to highly trained school counselors who can help them with their academic, career and social emotional needs. The current way of doing business in our schools is no longer working for our students. We need to be more progressive and innovative in how we are helping our students to be successful. While academic needs are still important, we need to be placing more of a focus on helping students to develop their social emotional skills as well as their workforce ready skills. These are all areas that school counselors help to facilitate and teach every day.

With school safety, social emotional learning, trauma informed schools, all on the forefront of everyone’s mind, we need to start looking at this from the lens of getting to the root of problems and finding concrete, cost-effective ways to deal with it, rather than continuing to band aid the problems. Connecticut has a real opportunity to make great change in this state for our students and I hope as legislators and leaders for this state you will help facilitate the change that we need. Connecticut students are counting on you.

I appreciate the time you have taken with S.B. 956 and hope that you strongly consider supporting this legislation. I am happy to answer any questions that you may have, or discuss this further. Thank-you for the work that you do and for putting this legislation forth for a public hearing.

Sincerely,

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