Representative Sanchez, Senator McCrory, Representative McCarty, Senator Berthel, and esteemed members of the Education Committee, my name is Margaret Generali and I am a school counselor educator at Southern Connecticut State University and a member of the Connecticut School Counselor Association’s Government Relations Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony in strong support of Senate Bill 956- AN ACT CONCERNING A COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL COUNSELOR PROGRAM.

Senate Bill 956 adds that the State Department of Education, in collaboration with the Connecticut School Counselor Association, shall adopt guidelines and recommendations to ensure that all students in the State of Connecticut have access to a comprehensive school counseling program. School counseling programs provide students with the necessary supports to be successful in school. These supports target critical areas for student development in the following domains: academic, social-emotional, and post-secondary/career. The American School Counselor Association identifies these domains as a guide for comprehensive school counseling services provided to students in Kindergarten through grade 12. At present, a limited number of students at the elementary level have access to these services, leaving them at a disadvantage relative to their peers. Particularly, students in need of services are likely not receiving them. Research suggest that high risk behaviors have already begun in middle school, yet these outcomes could be mitigated with services that come earlier, in the elementary school years. As well, students adapt an attitude toward school and the world of work that starts to take hold during the elementary years, when school counselors can be there to provide guidance. Weaknesses in emotional regulation skills that are not resolved during the elementary years, if not addressed, can lead to patterns of risky behavior later on. As problematic behavior takes hold, for instance substance use, this further complicates the ability of school personnel to support these students. Education and intervention must occur earlier than middle school.

Schools with elementary school counselor programs provide students with an additional layer of protection. Schools without elementary school counselors represent missed opportunities and are denying students of equal access to supportive services. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) position statement underscores the need for a comprehensive school counseling program for all students as a means to improve “student learning and behavioral outcomes” (Carey & Dimmitt, 2012). Further, research supports the impact of SEL interventions on academic achievement in grades K through 12 (Bavarian, et al., 2013; Durlak et al., 2011; Hanedana & Darling-Hammond, 2015). Research supports the effectiveness of primary prevention and early intervention as key factors for school success.

In order to provide primary prevention and early intervention, school counselors need to be positioned at the elementary school level. Every student deserves this level of consistent support provided by the
implementation of a comprehensive school counseling program. Elementary school counselors do not work in isolation. In fact, school counselors are specifically trained to work collaboratively with teachers and other helping professionals to support students. It is this collaborative mindset and subsequent behaviors that ensures that students K-12 are identified and supported to impact success in academic, social-emotional, and post-secondary/career domains. Although all of these helping professionals do provide some overlapping services (short term counseling and intervention), the school counselor is uniquely equipped with skills to address career exploration. School counselors are also uniquely trained to deliver a curriculum that addresses skill development and primary prevention in the areas of academic, social-emotional, and post-secondary/career development. Through targeting these areas, school counselors are able to identify which students need more support in any of the three domains. Collaborating with teachers, school social workers and school psychologists they develop a plan for increased services to support individual student needs.

Early in my career, I worked as a middle school counselor in an urban public-school setting. My caseload varied from year to year based on the budget and hiring practices in the district. Any given year, I would have 250-500 students on my caseload. I worked tirelessly to support the students in most need, providing reactive services to students who presented from day to day. Yet, I knew there was more I could do for my students and early intervention was critical. For the past 12 years, as a school counselor educator, I have trained the next generation of school counselors. I am confident that I have prepared these school counselors to provide best practices in their service to students. They are not only knowledgeable about child development and learning, they have expertise in classroom strategies and primary prevention. School counselors are prepared to identify needs, plan interventions and access ancillary services for the students under their care. School counselors are trained to collaborate with teachers and other school support staff to provide students with a comprehensive school counseling program to meet the needs of all students. Unfortunately, there exists a disparity in the range of services provided by school counselors across the state of Connecticut. Moreover, there are very few opportunities to serve within elementary level school counselor positions. Without opportunity and state dictated guidelines, school counselor services will continue to be underutilized and/or completely absent from many school settings, particularly elementary schools.

With appropriate comprehensive program guidelines and recommendations from the State Department of Education and the Connecticut School Counseling Association, school counseling programming will consistently include the representation of a certified school counselor in every school, comprehensive school counseling programming for all students, at all developmental levels. I would ask that you amend the underlying bill to include the Connecticut School Counselor Association proposal to also have the State Board of Education adopt guidelines and recommendations for appropriate student-to-school counselor ratios and an increase in access to student support services. In order to support our K-12 students, we need to require appropriate school counselor-student ratios, a barrier to comprehensive programming.

Please ensure that all students have access to a program that provides academic, social-emotional and post-secondary/career readiness programming by a certified school counselor.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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