Testimony of Kaitlin Smedberg, School Counselor

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 Bertel, and esteemed members of the Education Committee, my name is Kaitlin Smedberg and I am a school counselor in West Hartford and a member of the Connecticut School Counselor Association. 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 provide guidelines and recommendations to ensure that all students have access to a comprehensive school counseling program. Through classroom lessons, small groups, individual counseling, utilizing data, and other counseling responsibilities, school counselors work to address the needs of every student and seek to eliminate barriers to student success. Our programming provides academic, social-emotional, and post-secondary/career readiness preparation and is delivered by a certified school counselor. School counselors collaborate with social workers, teachers, administrators, school psychologists, parents, and other various community stakeholders to address the needs of every student. However, school counselors are faced with challenges due high caseloads and a lack of elementary school counselors, and thus a comprehensive school counseling program, in 75% of school districts statewide.

Research shows that implementation of a comprehensive school counseling program has a positive impact on student outcomes including improved attendance, reduced discipline, improved grades, increased SAT scores, increased graduation rates, increased college-going and persistence rates. While part of our duty as a school counselor is to address issues when they arise, a primary focus is to work proactively to identify certain needs year to year through needs assessments, surveys, and data from previous school years to plan our programming. School Counselors, working within a comprehensive school counseling program, provide education, prevention, early identification, and intervention to help their students achieve academic success, develop an understanding of career opportunities, and develop social-emotional skills in response to the issues they face. We work to not only identify but intervene as soon as we can to remove barriers to learning and educational success for each of our students. The goal is to provide these interventions as soon as possible, however student access to school counseling is not consistent across the state.

Current research in CT (Parzych, Donohue, Gaesser, Chiu, 2019) has identified that students in districts with elementary school counselors have improved performance outcomes versus districts without, regardless of location or socio-economic status. Lower-performing schools and schools in lower-SES communities maintain higher caseloads than higher-performing schools. While school counselor-to-student ratios may be optimal at 1:250, grade level and socioeconomic factors of a district require close consideration. In Connecticut, high-performing schools have an average school counselor-to-student ratio of 1:182 at the high school level, and 1:211 at the middle school level. However in low-performing schools, the average school counselor-to-student ratio is 1:285 at the high
school level and only 1:891 at the middle school level. If we want to be proactive and work to increase access to support for all students, we need to address this disparity.

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 funding to increase access to student support services. Thank you for your time and consideration.

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