

School Counselor Ratio Grant

A Bill to Amend the School Aid Act of 1979

In a climate of diminishing resources and inadequate funding, Michigan schools are becoming increasingly more selective in deciding which programs to offer their students. This is evidenced by the alarming increase in Michigan's student to school counselor ratio. Although the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) recommends a ratio of 1 school counselor to 250 students to adequately meet the needs of students, Michigan currently ranks 47th in the nation with an average K-12 ratio of 1 school counselor to 628 students (ASCA, 2006). In Michigan, most school districts have no elementary counseling program at all, and those that do have a ratio of 1 school counselor to 928 students, yet current research shows the long-term impact on academic achievement has been demonstrated in schools with counseling programs (Whiston & Sexton, 1998). High ratios limit the impact school counseling programs can have on student development and stands in opposition to Michigan's Department of Education strategic goal to attain "...substantial and meaningful improvement in academic achievement for all students/children" (Michigan State Board of Education Strategic Plan, 2008, p. 1). Stakeholders in Michigan education urge the increased presence of school counseling professionals trained to improve the academic achievement of all children. This can be achieved through developmental guidance, direct counseling services, and consultation while utilizing data driven decision making to eliminate the achievement gap and align with district and state learning standards.

Since public schools in Michigan are confronted with a myriad of complex student challenges, there is a growing need for remedial and preventative services in schools. The US Department of Health and Human Service (1999) indicated that one in five children and adolescents will experience a significant mental health problem during their school years. Examples include stress, anxiety, bullying, family problems, depression, a learning disability, and alcohol and substance abuse. Serious mental health problems, such as self-injurious behaviors and suicide, are also on the rise, particularly among youth. Among the 2.2 million adolescents aged 12 to 17 who reported a major depressive episode in the past year, nearly 60% did not receive any treatment (SAMHSA, 2005). Of the adolescents who do get help, nearly two thirds do so only in school. In a recent study by the Annenberg Public Policy Center (2004), two thirds of school districts reported that the need for mental health services had increased since the previous year, while over one third of these districts also reported a reduction in school counseling program funding. School counselors are trained to be first responders to such issues as well as providing proactive and developmental programs that teach the skills to help students navigate these challenges.

The reduction of school counselor interventions and programs stands in stark contrast to recent empirical evidence that school counseling and developmental guidance services strengthen students' social, emotional, and decision-making skills also positively impacts their academic achievement, both in terms of higher standardized test scores and better grades (Fleming, Haggerty, Brown, Cataloano, Harachi, Mazza, & Gruman, 2005). Examples of these services include education on mental health issues, school violence prevention, social skills training, bullying prevention, suicide prevention, conflict resolution, and screening for emotional and behavioral problems.

Research also suggests that school counselors can have a positive impact on improving students':

Association of Michigan School Counselors & Michigan School Counselors Association

- *Academic development* (Sink & Stroh, 2003; Lapan, Brigman & Cambell, 2003; Gysbers & Sun, 1997, Lapan, Gysbers & Petroski, 2001; Webb, Brigman & Cambell, 2005),
- *Positive adjustment to personal, family, and social problems* (Bemak & cornely, 2002; Miano & Gumaer, 1997, Baker & Gerler, 2001; Rose & Rose, 1992), and
- *Career development* (Lapan, Tucker, Kim & Kosciulek, 2003; Blackhurst, Auger & Wahl, 2003; Petersen, Long, & Billups, 1999).

The continued reduction of school counseling programs can have serious social consequences. These include increased risk for school failure, social isolation, unsafe sexual behavior, drug and alcohol abuse, and suicide, while exacerbating long-term social problems such as incarceration, unemployment, and poor health. All are costly societal problems in terms of both personal and economic consequences. It is estimated that in the United States \$192 billion (1.6% of the Gross Domestic Product) in combined income and tax-revenue is lost with each cohort of 18-year olds who never complete high school. Increasing the educational attainment of that cohort by one year would recoup nearly half of those losses (Columbia University Symposium of the Social Costs of Inadequate Education, 2005). School Counselors are key players in reversing this trend.

Even though the current workload for school counselors is overwhelming, the trend continues upward. In a recent report on the status of Michigan High School Counselors by the Joyce Ivy Foundation (2008), 57% of Michigan counselors reported a higher student workload than three years ago, while only 7% reporting a reduction. Economic conditions in Michigan appear to have little influence on increasing workloads for school counselors, as other Midwest/industrial states such as Ohio, Indiana, Pennsylvania all report much lower student-to-counselor ratios, as do states with lower income per capita (ACA, 2006). An additional consequence of this trend is the decrease in time high school counselors devote to post-high school planning. Only 16% of recent high school graduates said they were helped by a guidance counselor in their postsecondary decision (EPIC-MRA/Your Child Survey of Post High School Experience: First 12 years, 2005).

In response to these growing student challenges and to the pressures to implement standards-based educational programs, the Association of Michigan School Counselors and the Michigan School Counselor Association are jointly introducing a bill to amend the School Aid Act of 1979. The proposed legislation establishes a three year grant for reducing School Counselor Ratios in selected school districts serving at risk student populations. Administered by the Michigan Department of Education, the bill would require awarded districts to submit annual evaluation reports to demonstrate the impact that a lower school counselor to student ratio will have on student achievement, school safety, attendance, discipline, graduation rate, and postsecondary choices.

As a first step in balancing the educational needs of children within a challenging fiscal atmosphere, it is urgent that your support HF (...). Passage of this legislation will demonstrate that properly funded school counseling programs with appropriate school counselor to student ratios are crucial elements in reaching Michigan's goal of increasing student achievement. What is the level of education you are willing to settle for in Michigan? If, like us, you believe that our students and their families deserve more from their state government, then supporting school counseling programs and services is the right thing to do...today.