

March 23, 2017

RE: Testimony in Support of SB 278

Dear Chair Roblan and Members of the Senate Education Committee,

I am a Nationally Certified School Psychologist who has worked at three elementary schools in North Clackamas School District since 2014. Before that, I was an intern school psychologist at an elementary and a middle school in Springfield, Oregon. I received my master's in School Psychology from the University of Oregon in 2014.

In all of my school settings, I have worked with populations with high and complicated needs. Currently, 86.6 percent of students at my school, Whitcomb Elementary, are eligible for a free or reduced lunch. In addition, there are high numbers of students who are either homeless, in foster care, in special education, impacted by trauma, or are undocumented immigrants.

We have an incredible support team at Whitcomb Elementary working to address these pressing needs in order to provide a safe and secure environment where students can learn and succeed. A key member of our support team is our school social worker. She fills the role of both counselor and social worker at Whitcomb, and I see the benefits of this dual role every day.

In high-needs elementary schools, our students, faculty, and staff face challenges that distract from teaching and learning. My school social worker alleviates this burden by leading with an expert hand. She supports our students in a multifaceted way: feeding hungry kids, arranging therapy for students with mental health needs, figuring out how to get insurance for families who are confused by the complicated process, arranging for rides to doctors/dentists/etc., calling Child Protective Services when we suspect abuse or neglect, working with parents on parenting skills, encouraging parents to pursue therapy for their own mental health needs, and so much more.

In addition to all of this, she fills the more traditional counseling roles of teaching classroom guidance lessons, running groups, supporting staff, running professional development (currently, on trauma and how it impacts students in school) and a lot of daily problem solving around student behavior and conflict.

My school social worker's understanding of systems (the Oregon Department of Human Services, special education, insurance, mental health, medical, etc.) allows every meeting, staff development, and student or parent problem-solving session to be imbued with knowledge and advocacy that brings us closer to solutions. I truly cannot imagine a more effective role at a school, and I am lucky to have spent my early years in my career under her expertise and guidance.

When I worked as an intern at a middle school in Springfield with a similarly high-needs population, I worked with two school counselors. They were wonderful, but far more limited in their capacity to fully address the needs of the students I worked with. At that time, I ran a middle school girls' group for 8th grade girls who were at risk for drug use, risky behavior and poor grades. Through the course of my group, we had multiple pregnancy scares, multiple discussions around significant mental health needs, and multiple threats of self-harm. Although the counselors at the school supported me in addressing these needs, we stopped short of taking a community-level approach to problem solving. I truly believe that a school social worker would have had a greater expertise to address these needs through a family and community systems approach, as well as an understanding of the deeper mental health issues.

Having a school social worker at my school currently allows such complex problem solving and advocacy to take place on behalf of children. I would support any and all bills that would help to increase the number of school social workers in Oregon schools. Please feel free to contact me should you have any further questions.

Sincerely,

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