

My name is Megan Leingang and I am currently the 6-12 school counselor at Washburn Public School. I am writing today in opposition of HB 1449 and its negative impact it will have on our youth. School counselors are vital front-line workers in our schools that serve as the first point of contact for a number of crisis in our school. We often serve as crisis management, help with coordinating services with other community resources (social services, outside mental health needs, community pantries, etc.), and offer short term interventions to help students who are struggling. This is a vital role that others in the school do not have time or training to assist with.

School Counselors also have specific training in areas different than any other position in the school. It is not enough to fill this role with a social worker or even virtual counseling. These are great options to have in addition to a full-time School Counselor, but they are not a substitution for the role. Students need to see this person face to face and know that they are their daily. We work on relationship building and trust in order to do our jobs and that takes us being physically present in the school and building rapport with our students. More than ever, our school and students are dealing with major mental health crises. This is not going away and the answer is not in cutting back on these services, but rather creating more robust plans to give students the tools they need to survive and thrive in these times of high anxiety and mental stress. We need to have the time and resources to teach all students coping skills and tools needed to handle the big emotions we are seeing. School Counselors are the first line of defense in this crisis and we need better systems to support their work, not a system that is devaluing all they have to offer.

I have seen first-hand how a system of “others” doing bits and pieces of the job is not effective in creating a sustainable and well-balanced program. The first school I worked for at the beginning of my career did not have a School Counselor at all the year before I was hired. They had a Social Worker coming in to teach classroom lessons, a Career Advisor to do high school planning once a week, and a School Psychologist to meet with individuals one day a week. None of the students had a close or trusting relationship with these people because they were there so infrequently. There was nobody planning programs to help with resources out in the community either. Students never knew who was there and if they could even get help with issues they were facing. Over 5 years at that school, I built a comprehensive school counseling program from the ground up. We began to give students skills and all teachers were trained in techniques to help students with issues. I reached out to local community resources and began partnering with them to get resources for families and assisted in filling out forms to get resources families needed (food, clothing, reduced rates on utilities, etc.). Finally, I was also a face in the building every day that students knew they could talk to about problems. I was the one to begin work on skills and give resources on how to deal with serious mental health issues as well as navigate how to handle situations at school or at home. I also referred students to further mental health resources if their situations required expertise beyond my training. With everything that I do in my role as a School Counselor, I don't see how anyone else has the time or training to do all of these things. Others that are similarly trained are not a substitute for our role. I am asking that our profession be respected, valued, and made a priority in our school system since I see us as being a vital role to the overall well-being of our students.

