

March 13, 2017

RE: Testimony in Support of Increasing Student Access to Social Workers

Dear Chair Doherty and Members of the House Committee on Education,

I'm writing to express support for HB 2658. I support this bill because it will significantly increase the number of school social workers serving Oregon students, who will become tomorrow's leaders and workers in our communities. My name is Gerardo Jimenez. I work in Gervais School District in Marion County as a social worker in the kindergarten through 8th grade counseling program. I am honored to serve a student body that requires my profession to help families and children in our school district.

My objective today in presenting my testimony is to give a voice to the students I work for and to uphold my social work ethics with the primary goal to provide services to help people in need, to address social problems and to recognize the importance of building human relationships within our schools. For this reason, I support the proposal to direct Education Service Districts to include in their local service plans provisions related to access to social workers. This is a step that will lead to positive student outcomes.

Students currently deal with mental health issues and trauma, and these are becoming more evident in our community. I attest that many families I work with struggle with complex challenges and present with an array of pressing needs that may encompass physical, emotional, spiritual and social aspects of their lives. Therefore, a social work approach is crucial in providing a catalyst in understanding and changing these complex situations.

Part of my work as a social worker in Gervais involves both micro- and macro-level work. By micro-level, I mean direct services for individual students within a therapy modality to address social-emotional distress and anxiety, among other mental health impacts. Macro-level approaches involve providing services to families and essentially the Gervais community as a whole. Consequently, my role as a liaison to both families and the district allows me to advocate for changes on policies and practices to benefit both clients, such as the people I serve, and the agency I work within.

Once again, I strongly recommend and support the implementation of service procedures and policies for Oregon to have equal access to social workers in our schools. Also, ensuring student positive outcomes through pilot programs in our state will help increase learning, attendance and graduation rates. The connection between services like those school social worker provide and better student outcomes is supported by research. After all, a student with anxiety or mental health concerns is absent more often and cannot learn. In fact, research conducted by the National Collaborative on Education and Health identifies chronic student absenteeism as having great impact on health and education outcomes. Moreover, "Providing students with access to school-based mental health programs is a key strategy for improving student attendance."

I greatly appreciate Chair Doherty and other members of the House Committee on Education for working to ensure that we invest in our children to have access to encompassed opportunities. I invite this committee to be a part of the change in our collaborative approach to ensure social workers are included in the wellbeing of our children and their future.

Thank you,

Gerardo Jimenez
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Gervais School District K-8 Counseling Program