

March 23, 2017

RE: Testimony in Support of SB 278

Dear Chair Roblan and Members of the Committee,

My name is Debra Sankovitz. As a licensed school counselor who has worked in a number of elementary and high schools in two different school districts, I am writing in support of Senate Bill 278. I have worked both in Title 1 schools with high rates of poverty and schools in North Clackamas and Portland Public Schools with low rates of poverty. I have worked alongside counselors and school social workers. Both of these trained professionals are needed in schools to meet the ever-increasing mental health and community support needs, especially in the schools with high rates of poverty.

At the high school level, I have seen a huge need for professionals trained specifically in mental health counseling/therapy. I have worked at schools where there were none. It was difficult and frustrating knowing there were students with significant mental health needs that are beyond the scope of training of a licensed school counselor. In addition, with the high case load numbers of students that high school counselors are responsible for managing (academic issues, general social/emotional support, and post-high school planning), we do not have the capacity within the day, nor the in-depth training, to provide needed therapeutic intervention for students in mental health crisis. I've worked on student support teams that have included an individual trained and solely identified to provide this type of support, which better meets the needs of our teens in today's society.

When I have worked in schools with a social-worker as part of the team, together we were able to provide the services needed for students to remain engaged in their education and progress successfully toward graduation. For example, when I became aware of a student who had a family situation and needed support, or a student was homeless, or a student had a recent loss or mental health concern that indicated the need for ongoing counseling, having the opportunity to provide this support within the school more likely ensured they would access the intervention needed. It is also hugely beneficial to coordinate with someone within the building to support students, rather than attempting to coordinate with providers in the broader, non-school-based community. Many more students who had experienced or were currently experiencing trauma were served as we worked together as a team.

Schools need more counselors and school social workers. Research shows that students who eventually dropped out of high school missed significantly more days of school in first grade than their peers who graduated from high school. With more and more students coming to school with traumatic experiences and the research showing the impact trauma has on school performance, we need to provide supports early and ongoingly through their K-12 years. School social workers and school counselors are needed inside the schools on a daily basis. That is what will make the difference with our most vulnerable students.

Debra Sankovitz
Licensed School Counselor
Portland Public Schools
dsankovitz@pps.net