

February 8, 2017

To: Representative Margaret Doherty, Chair
House Education Committee

From: Gene Eakin, PhD

Re: HB 2536 Support

Testimony in Support of HB 2536

Chair Doherty and members of the House Education Committee:

Thank you for allowing me to testify today. My name is Gene Eakin. This is my 41st serving the Oregon school counseling profession either as a school counselor or as a school counselor educator. I am currently the School Counseling Program Lead at Oregon State University and the Advocacy Chair for the Oregon School Counselor Association.

I also want to preface my remarks today about the state of school counseling in smaller districts by noting that the counselor education program at Oregon State Corvallis is unique in that it is the one program that is offered in a format that provides those living in all sectors of Oregon to earn a masters degree to become licensed as a school counselor. I meet weekly with students in my online internship supervision sections with school counselors working in Hermiston, Medford, Seaside, Astoria, McMinnville, Salem, Junction City, Molalla, Lebanon, and Beaverton. We have first and second year students from Grants Pass, Klamath Falls, Lincoln City, and Coos Bay.

I am here to speak on behalf of HB 2536. HB 2536 addresses the lack of mental health resources in the smaller communities and school districts in Oregon. Mental Health America recently released its annual State of Mental Health Report that ranked the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Oregon ranked 49th on the list in provision of mental health services to our citizens.

The lack of mental health services for children and adolescents in Oregon is even more pronounced than is the lack of mental health services for adults. The lack of mental health services for children and adolescents often makes the school counselor the first point of contact for these children or adolescents and their families. School counselors in all school districts are reporting significant increases in their students' need for mental health services. Larger school districts, however, are more likely to have developed a variety of responses to these issues and have central office personnel with school counseling background in charge of the school counselors in the district. These "counselors on special assignment" can advocate for increased mental health services for the students their counseling team collectively serves. Unfortunately, it is only our five largest school districts that have a "counselor on special assignment" assigned to this role of coordinating the comprehensive counseling programs mandated under OAR 581-022-1510.

School counselors in smaller school districts are much less likely to have any central office administrator in their district with school counseling background that can provide a coordinated response to addressing this increased need for mental health services. School counselors in these districts are also less likely to have mental health services available in their respective communities to which they can refer their students and families.

While the need for additional school counselors is abundantly clear with student-counselor ratios in Oregon at 580-1 and the national average at 490-1. You might be interested in noting that prior to the recession Oregon's ratios were at 440-1 which placed us at 27th of the 50 states whereas post-recession we are about 42nd meaning only eight states have worse ratios than does Oregon. The Oregon School Counselor Association considering advancing legislation which would provide funding for additional school counselors. At the same time we are aware of the budget challenges the legislature faces for the next biennium. It would require hiring approximately 225 new school counselors at an estimated cost of \$13,500,000 just to lower Oregon's ratios to the national average.

One relatively low cost approach to addressing the conditions that school counselors face in the smaller districts is to make online courses, workshops, and supervision more readily available for these school counselors. Many school counselors in these smaller districts have little or no opportunity for professional development appropriate to their needs. The district may provide PD but only directed at their teaching staff. Few districts have funding to pay for a school counselor's conference/workshop registration or travel/lodging expenses.

Online workshops and supervision allow the school counselor in these districts to receive the same quality of professional development as their counterparts in the five large school districts as well as have access to those in their profession for ongoing consultation as issues arise.

I, therefore, request funding be allocated for the upcoming biennium that would be placed under the jurisdiction of the school counseling specialist at the Oregon Department of Education. Educational institutions could then apply for that grant funding to develop and deliver these professional development services. Note that once the webinars and other programs are developed and delivered the first time that the cost for further professional development is significantly reduced. It is our intent that these services would be offered to participants at minimal cost.