

Testimony in Support of HB 2536

Chair Doherty and members of the House Education Committee:

Thank you for allowing me to testify today. I apologize in my late submission, but we in fact lost one of our High School Students yesterday to suicide and all the counselors in the district we pulled to Crisis Flight Team implementation for the day and many rest of the week. The recent events makes my testimony even more personal and from the heart. My name is Elizabeth Morgan and this is my 2nd serving the Oregon school counseling profession. I am currently finishing my classes in the School Counseling Program at Oregon State University for my School Counseling License and working at Highland Hills Elementary School in Hermiston Oregon. Prior to becoming a school counselor I have spent the last 10 years working in mental health and with children and families as a Licensed Clinical Social Worker. I moved here almost four years ago to return to my home state specifically to provide services in Eastern Oregon for children and families. I know there is not enough trained or staffed mental health providers and my mission was to come and change people limited access to services. I quickly saw that Eastern Oregon has not only a limited number of mental health agencies, but this half of the state is fighting to serve a higher need of mental health issues than they have the staff or resources.

As I am beginning my career as a Professional School Counselor in the state of Oregon I find it necessary for there to be an increase in support for Professional School Counselors in rural areas. Living on the Eastern side of the state we have less access to Counseling PDU's and trainings while encountering the same challenges the rest of that state are facing. 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. Hermiston is the largest school district and city in Eastern Oregon. We have counselors in every building and it is still well below the ASCA standards of 1:250 ration of counselor to student. I currently work in the smallest of the elementary schools with 467 student, The other elementary school are ranging from 520 students to as many as 650 all with one school counselor as well. The middle school has an even larger ration of student to one Professional School Counselor in the building. We solely front line and remain the first line of service for our students and families.

Our district does not yet(I have hopes this is soon to come) offer a 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. We work closely with one another at all times, but have a multitude of tasks that we are unable to complete when the routine crises occur. We are inundated with paperwork and often limited in our student contact time being the

only Professional School Counselor in each building. Providing access to training would greatly increase our knowledge, effectiveness, and ability to serve our students. With lower caseloads we would be able to teach Career and College lessons and Social Emotional Lessons to our students, in addition to the other tasks we complete. This would provide student a healthy ability to cope, adapt, and tackle challenges they face at school or in our communities.

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 neighboring districts(Stanfield, Umatilla, Heppner)in these smaller districts have little or no opportunity for professional development appropriate to their needs. The district may provide PDU's 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. We all support one another when a crisis hits, but we are struggling without access to seek appropriate School Counseling PDU's.

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.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Morgan
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Hermiston Oregon