

September 6, 2019

Via Email and Mail

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Arizona

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Dale Baich
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Alessandra Soler
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RE: Time Sensitive Funding Opportunity for Student Support Staff

Dear [REDACTED]

We are reaching out to you about the opportunity to fund school-based behavioral health providers through the Arizona Department of Education's School Safety Program (SSP) whose application opens in a few days.¹ Arizona has the worst ratio of school counselors to students in the United States,² and also falls significantly below the national average for both school social workers and school psychologists.³ Research shows that school counselors and other school-based behavioral health providers improve graduation and student achievement rates, reduce disciplinary problems, reduce racial disparities in both achievement and discipline, and help prevent suicide. We urge you to apply for school counselors, social workers, and psychologists for the schools in your district this month through SSP. As discussed below, by increasing the number of these professionals within your school district, you will see a positive impact on behavioral health, school climate, dropout rates, academic achievement, and higher education outcomes for your local community.

Behavioral Health and School Climate

Research demonstrates that increased access to school-based behavioral health providers improves both student health and school safety.⁴ The majority of children do not receive mental health services in their own community because services are not available or are inadequate. However, of the children who do receive health services, most children are accessing them through their school.⁵ Youth are increasingly suffering from anxiety, depression, and trauma. Arizona students have some of the highest teen suicide and dropout rates in the United States,⁶ coupled with a crippling lack of access to school counselors, social

¹ The new application will open September 16, 2019 and close on September 27, 2019. Visit School Safety Program website for more information: <http://www.azed.gov/shs/ssp/>.

² Arizona student-to-school-counselor ratio is 905:1 while the national average is 455:1. Arizona PBS, *Arizona School Counselor to Student Ratio Worst in Nation*, May 8, 2019, available at <https://azpbs.org/horizon/2019/05/arizona-school-counselor-to-student-ratio-worst-in-nation/>.

³ Moreover, at least 25% of Arizona schools that do have a police officer on campus, do not have a social worker, psychologist, or school counselor. See, Whitaker, A., Torres-Guillen, S., Morton, M., Jordan, H., Coyle, S., Mann, A., and Sun, W., *Cops and No Counselors: How the Lack of School Mental Health Staff Is Harming Students*, American Civil Liberties Union, available at https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/field_document/030419-acluschooldisciplinereport.pdf.

⁴ Richard E. Cleveland and Christopher A. Sink, *Student Happiness, School Climate, and School Improvement Plans: Implications for School Counseling Practice*, *Professional School Counseling*, 21:1, 1-10 (2018).

⁵ Roness, M. and Hoagwood, K., *School-Based Mental Health Services: A Research Review*, *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 3, 223-241 (2000).

⁶ Peter Aleshire, *Arizona Has Fewest Counselors But Among Highest Teen Suicide and Dropout Rates*, White Mountain Independent, August 13, 2019, available at <https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/suicide-20-states-with-highest-rates/15/>; Sonu

workers, and psychologists.⁷ School-based behavioral health providers are often the first responders when a student is suffering from trauma, stress, severe bullying, or an unhealthy home life. These professionals are on the frontlines keeping kids safe, improving school climate, and increasing positive outcomes.⁸

Discipline, Drop Out Rates, and Academic Achievement

Many major concerns can be alleviated by increasing the number of behavioral health providers in a school. In Arizona, dropout rates are simply too high. A significant percentage of student dropout rates are related to behavioral health needs.⁹ Many students require additional supports in schools in order to successfully graduate.¹⁰ Schools with more behavioral health providers increase academic achievement and GPAs, lower rates of disciplinary actions such as suspension and expulsion, and improved rates of attendance and graduation.¹¹ Too often, harsh discipline policies harm students and families, reduce positive school climate, fuel racial disparities, and overtax teachers. Instead, lower student-to-school-counselor ratios are linked – not only to improved graduation rates – but to lower disciplinary incidents, especially for students in high-poverty schools.¹² In addition to decreasing racial disparities in discipline, school counselors can decrease racial disparities in academic achievement and increase school adjustment and GPAs for ESL students.¹³ Increasing the number of behavioral health providers in your school district would decrease behavioral problems, increase graduation rates, and provide supports and resources for both students and teachers.

Higher Education Outcomes

School-based behavioral health providers impact how many students from your school district will both attend and thrive in college.¹⁴ When the number of behavioral health providers is higher, counselors can spend more time with more

Wasu, *Teen Suicide Prevention: Highlighting the Warning Signs And What Is Being Done In Arizona*, ABC 15 Arizona, January 16, 2019, available at <https://www.abc15.com/news/region-phoenix-metro/central-phoenix/teen-suicide-epidemic-highlighting-the-warning-signs-and-what-is-being-done-in-arizona>; Veronika Vernachio, *Arizona Mental Health Expert: Suicide Rates Have 'Sky-Rocketed'*, KGUN9 ABC, available at <https://www.kgun9.com/news/local-news/arizona-mental-health-expert-suicide-rates-have-sky-rocketed>.

⁷ American School Counselor Association, *Position Statement: The School Counselor and Suicide Prevention/Awareness* (2018), available at https://www.schoolcounselor.org/asca/media/asca/PositionStatements/PS_Suicide.pdf.

⁸ Thomas J. Hernandez and Susan R. Seem, *A Safe School Climate: A Systematic Approach and the School Counselor*, *Professional School Counseling*, 7:4, 256-262 (2004); Lapan R. T., Gysbers, N.C., and Sun, Y., *The Impact of More Fully Implemented Guidance Programs on the School Experiences of High School Students: A Statewide Evaluation Study*, *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 75(4), 292-302 (1997).

⁹ Stagman, S. and Cooper, J., *Children's Mental Health: What Every Policymaker Show Know*, *National Center for Children in Poverty* (2010) available at http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_929.html.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ Goodman-Scott, E., Sink, C., Cholewa, B., and Burgess, M., *An Ecological View of School Counselor Ratios and Student Academic Outcomes: A National Investigation*, *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 96(10), 388-398 (2018); Lapan, R., Whitcomb, S., and Aleman, N., *Connecticut Professional School Counselors: College and Career Counseling Services and Smaller Ratios Benefit Students*, *Professional School Counseling*, 16(12), 117-124 (2012); Tan, K., Battle, S., Mumm, M., Eschmann, R., and Alvarez, M. *The Impact of School Social Workers on High School Freshman Graduation Among the One Hundred Largest School Districts in the United States*, *School Social Work Journal*, 39(2), 1-14 (2015).

¹² Lapan, R. T., Gysbers, N. C., Bragg, S., and Pierce, M. E., *Missouri Professional School Counselors: Ratios Matter, Especially in High-Poverty Schools*, *Professional School Counseling*, 16(2), 108-116 (2012).

¹³ Davis, P., Davis, M. P., and Mobley, J.A., *The School Counselor's Role in Addressing the Advanced Placement Equity and Excellence Gap for African American Students*, *Professional School Counseling*, 17(1), 32-39 (2013); Leon, A., Villares, E., Brigman, G., Webb, L., and Peluso, P., *Closing the Achievement Gap of Latina/Latino Students: A School Counseling Response*, *Counseling Outcome Research and Evaluation*, 2(1), 73-86 (2011); Steen, S., Liu, X., Shi, Q., Rose, J., and Merino, G., *Promoting School Adjustment for English-Language Learners Through Group Work*, *Professional School Counseling*, 21(1), 1-10 (2018).

¹⁴ Parzych, J., Donohue, P., Gaesser, A., and Chiu, M., *Measuring the Impact of School Counselor Ratios on Student Outcomes* (2019) available at www.schoolcounselor.org/asca/media/asca/publications/research-release-parzych.pdf.

students and better support them in college and career readiness. Schools with lower student-to-school-counselor ratios have higher SAT scores, higher college entrance and continuation rates, and increase the chance that underrepresented students will attend college and other post-secondary education programs.¹⁵ School counselors can improve college and career readiness whether working with elementary students or high school students.¹⁶ Overall, increasing the number of school-based behavioral health providers has wide-ranging benefits to individual students of all ages and the success of the school community as a whole.



Thank you for your time and attention to this critical matter. We request that you to take the time this week to review the current ratios at your schools and fill out an application for school counselors, social workers, and psychologists in order to improve student achievement, community safety, and school climate. We are hopeful that your school district will soon reach the recommended ratios in order to improve student health and school safety.¹⁷ If you have any questions on the importance of school counselors, social workers, and psychologist, please contact us.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Darrell Hill".

Darrell Hill
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For additional information on how the lack of school-based behavioral health staff is harming students, please review our report available at <https://www.aclu.org/report/cops-and-no-counselors>.

¹⁵ *Id.*; Cholewa, B., Burkhardt, C., and Hull, M., *Are School Counselors Impacting Underrepresented Students' Thinking About Postsecondary Education? A Nationally Representative Survey*, *Professional School Counseling*, 19(1), 144-154 (2015); Marsico, M. and Getch, Y. Q., *Transitioning Hispanic Seniors from High School to College*, *Professional School Counseling*, 12(6), 458-462 (2009); Pham, C., and Keenan, T., *Counseling and College Matriculation: Does the Availability of Counseling Affect College-Going Decisions Among Highly Qualified First-Generation College-Bound High School Graduates?*, *Journal of Applied Economics and Business Research*, 1(1), 12-24 (2011).

¹⁶ Mariani, M., Berger, C., Koerner, K., and Sandlin, C., *Operation Occupation: A college and Career Readiness Intervention for Elementary Students*, *Professional School Counseling*, 20(1), 65-76 (2016); Bryan, J., Moore-Thomas, C., Day-Vines, N. L., and Holcomb-McCoy, C., *School Counselors As Social Capital: The Effects of High School College Counseling on College Application Rates*, *Journal of Counseling and Developments*, 89(2), 190-199 (2011).

¹⁷ The American School Counselor Association recommends a ratio of 250 students per counselor and the National Association of Social Workers recommends a ratio of 250 students per school social worker. See, National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) and the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), *State-By-State Student-To-School-Counselor Ratio Report: 10-Year Trends*, available at <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/asca/media/asca/Publications/ratioreport.pdf>; National Association of Social Workers (NASW), *NASW Standards for School Social Work Services*, available at <https://www.socialworkers.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=1Ze4-9-Os7E%3D&portalid=0>.