**Elevator Pitch for the PA School Counseling Services Act (HB 662)**

Over the last several years, Pennsylvania students have faced perhaps the greatest disruption ever to impact our school systems and communities. The global pandemic of COVID-19 closed our school buildings, impacted how students received instruction, how and when they were able to see their friends, the employment of their families and neighbors, and the safety and stability of what school is supposed to be as they grow and develop.

While many of our students have demonstrated resilience and perseverance through these unprecedented challenges, many others are struggling to cope with the increased strain on their mental, social, and emotional health. Student mental health needs are at a crisis point:

* The vast majority of K-12 students have suffered significant learning losses of half a year or greater. Substantial numbers of students have continued falling further behind normal levels of learning for their age and grade. Students with disabilities have suffered disproportionate academic impact.[[1]](#footnote-1)
* Mental and behavioral health concerns have been and continue to be the top referral categories through Pennsylvania’s anonymous student reporting app Safe2Say Something.[[2]](#footnote-2)
* The rates of teenage suicide have been on the rise for the past decade,[[3]](#footnote-3) and in the last administration of the Pennsylvania Youth Survey (PAYS), depressive symptoms were reported by students as one of the main risk factors they face, along with low attachment to their communities, and a low commitment to their schools – all factors that have steadily increased across all grade levels since 2015.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Across the United States, school counseling services are generally guaranteed to students through one of two state practices – requiring school districts to outline comprehensive school counseling programs, or requiring a certain number or student to school counselor ratio in school buildings. Some states do both of these things.

**Pennsylvania is the only state in America that does neither of these things.**

As the only state yet to act on school counseling services for our students, there is no better or more timely reform than guaranteeing all Pennsylvania students have access to clearly defined, comprehensive school counseling programs.

School counselors in Pennsylvania are often confronted with the reality that their role is not well understood by school leaders and the general population. They must not only provide services to students, but must simultaneously educate and advocate in their schools and communities about their roles and areas of expertise. This means that not all school counselors are able to work effectively and efficiently with their students, and the types of services provided can look vastly different from one school district to another all across Pennsylvania.

While school counselors have provided responsive services for students in crisis for many years, the need for proactive, preventative, and educational programming specific to mental health and social- emotional learning has been magnified by the disruptions and aftermath brought to our schools by COVID-19.

The School Counseling Services Act (HB 662) will provide clarity for students and families as to the services they can expect to receive from their school counselors, to school districts who are seeking to support their students effectively through a global pandemic, and to taxpayers who can see their money fund efficient student support services that align with best practices, no matter their zip code or socioeconomic status.

In line with Governor Shapiro’s call to address the mental health needs of our students, the School Counseling Services Act would make sure schools are optimizing the services school counselors are trained and ready to deliver. With almost 5,000 school counselors currently working in Pennsylvania schools, maximizing the impact of these school mental health professionals is paramount to meet the needs of the student mental health crisis.

1. Center for Reinventing Public Education (2022). *The State of the American Student: A Guide to Pandemic Recovery and Reinvention* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Department of the Attorney General (2019, 2020). Safe2Say Something Annual Reports [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. CDC (2020). State Suicide Rates Among Adolescents and Young Adults Aged 10–24: United States, 2000–2018; CDC (2023). Youth Risk Behavior Survey. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. PA Commission on Crime and Delinquency (2019). 2019 PA Youth Survey (PAYS) Statewide Report Highlights [↑](#footnote-ref-4)