



House of Representatives – Education Committee Hearing: School Safety and Security

Testimony of High School Counselor Dr. Adam Oldham, LPC, NCSC, PSCA Government Relations
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Chairman Schwyer, Chairman Topper, members of the committee – thank you for hosting this hearing on school safety and security, and for the opportunity to speak with you today.

I am Dr. Adam Oldham, a full-time high school counselor at the Big Spring High School in Cumberland County. I am also the President of the School Counselor Section at PSEA, Past-President of the Capital Area School Counselors Association, and former Board Director and current chair of Government Relations for the Pennsylvania School Counselors Association. I come to you today as one of over 5,000 school counselors who work across Pennsylvania in our public-school districts, our cyber/charter schools, our career and technical schools, and our Intermediate Units who serve our nonpublic schools.

As clearly as I can state it, if Pennsylvania genuinely desires to support student health and safety, **Pennsylvania must ensure our schools have adequate student services staffing and programming.**

The Safe2Say Something initiative, which launched in 2018 with the intent of reducing school violence, has overwhelmingly been used to report concerns about student mental health¹.

According to the Pennsylvania Youth Survey (PAYS), one in four Pennsylvania students report feeling like a failure, and one in six students report seriously considering suicide².

In 2021, the US Surgeon General released a public health advisory on youth mental health saying – “The challenges today’s generation of young people face are unprecedented and uniquely hard to navigate. And the effect these challenges have had on their mental health is devastating.”³

As we saw in the 10 years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health among students overall continues to worsen, with more than 40% of high school students feeling so sad or hopeless that they could not engage in their regular activities for at least two weeks during the previous year—a possible indication of the experience of depressive symptoms. We also saw significant increases in the percentage of youth who seriously considered suicide, made a suicide plan, and attempted suicide.⁴

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health challenges were the leading cause of disability and poor life outcomes in young people, with up to 1 in 5 children ages 3 to 17 in the US with a reported mental, emotional, developmental, or behavioral disorder.⁵

In 2016, of the 7.7 million children with treatable mental health disorder, about half did not receive adequate treatment.⁶

¹ Office of the Attorney General (2024). Safe2Say something annual report 2023-2024 school year.

² PA Commission on Crime and Delinquency (2024). 2023 PA Youth Survey (PAYS) State of Pennsylvania.

³ US Surgeon General (2021). *Protecting youth mental health: The US surgeon general’s advisory*.

⁴ CDC (2023). Youth risk behavior survey: Data summary & trends report [2011-2021].

⁵ Perou, R., Bitsko, R. H., Blumberg, S. J., Pastor, P., Ghandour, R. M., Gfroerer, J. C., Hedden, S. L., Crosby, A. E., Visser, S. N., Schieve, L. A., Parks, S. E., Hall, J. E., Brody, D., Simile, C. M., Thompson, W. W., Baio, J., Avenevoli, S., Kogan, M. D., Huang, L. N., & Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2013). Mental health surveillance among children—United States, 2005-2011. *MMWR. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report Supplements*, 62(2), 1–35.

⁶ Whitney, D.G. & Peterson, M. (2019). US national and state-level prevalence of mental health disorders and disparities of mental health care use in children. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 173(4), 389-391. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2018.5399

This is not to say that schools should not establish programs and systems to prevent school violence, but doing so without ensuring our schools have adequate student services staffing and programming is failing to address root causes of school violence.

Moreover, the challenges and barriers students and families face accessing treatment outside of school mean that schools are left to deal with these unaddressed needs throughout the school day.

Whether or not schools are equipped to deal with these unaddressed needs, these needs impact the learning environment for both the students experiencing them, and for their peers and the adults responsible for educating them.

It is the law in Pennsylvania that “each school entity shall prepare a written plan for the implementation of a **comprehensive and integrated K-12 program of student services** based on the needs of its students.”⁷

Recognizing that students may experience barriers that limit their ability to fully engage with learning and their school experience, Pennsylvania student services professionals are trained, certified, and employed to address student developmental needs throughout their enrollment in school.

Developmental services include [school] **counseling, psychological services, health services, home and school visitor services and social work services** that support students in addressing their academic, behavioral, health, personal and social development needs.⁸

Despite this law being on the books since 2005, schools have not had the staff to effectively deliver these services, and a lack of meaningful accountability from the state has allowed an unconstitutional level of variety in the quality or even the existence of these services from one school district to the next.

Then Attorney General Shapiro in 2022 echoed this sentiment in an amicus curiae brief his office filed in support of the petitioners in the school funding lawsuit⁹:

*The evidence shows that certain districts **are unable to hire an adequate number of school counselors and social workers** to meet the needs of their students. **No one can seriously dispute that...access to counselors and mental health resources...are necessary elements of a thorough and efficient education.** Yet the evidence demonstrated that Petitioners and other public school districts **lack the resources to provide these necessary elements.***

I agree with our Governor – **student services are necessary elements of a thorough and efficient education**, and many school districts lack the resources to provide them.

One strategy of funding to increase the number of student services professionals in our schools is the use of year-to-year grant funding, and examples of this include uses of the School Safety and Security Funds via the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD)¹⁰, or the ESSER/ARP funds¹¹ that were provided during the pandemic.

⁷ 22 Pa. Code Chapter 12.41.a

⁸ 22 Pa. Code Chapter 12.41.b(1)

⁹ PA Office of the Attorney General (2022). Brief for the petitioners as amicus curiae. <https://www.attorneygeneral.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/2022-05-17-William-Penn-v.-PDE-Shapiro-Amicus-Brief.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.pccd.pa.gov/schoolsafety/Pages/School-Safety-and-Security-Grants-Program.aspx>

¹¹ <https://www.education.pa.gov/Schools/safeschools/emergencyplanning/COVID-19/CARESAct/Pages/default.aspx>

Over the last several years, Pennsylvania has allocated hundreds of millions of dollars to supporting student mental health and school safety through the PCCD grant process.

To help school districts identify uses for state safety and security grants, the PCCD School Safety and Security Committee produced a set of Behavioral Health and School Climate criteria¹² to establish a “baseline” for what safe, secure learning environments look like. The best practices identified in these criteria for behavioral health include appropriate ratios for school counselors, school nurses, school psychologists, and school social workers.

That said, in May 2023, this committee updated their baseline criteria, **which removed these ratios for student services professionals from both the Level I and Level II baseline**¹³. What were the baseline criteria that were removed?

- School entity has at least one full-time school counselor for each level (elementary, middle, high)
- School entity has at least one full-time school nurse
- School entity has at least one full-time school psychologist
- School entity has at least one full-time school social worker

And yet, when PCCD surveyed schools across Pennsylvania as part of Act 55 in 2022, the number one resource identified by a **WIDE margin** to improve mental health in our schools **was additional funding to hire staff**¹⁴.

Why would we remove a best practice of having student services professionals in our schools? Those baseline criteria were already a pretty low bar – one school nurse or school counselor per school entity, for example, might mean that those individuals are running between multiple buildings, despite having hundreds or even thousands of children relying on the services they provide.

A lack of money – a lack of sustainable money – has long been cited as the reason why Pennsylvania can’t do anything about student services staffing in our schools. PCCD knew it couldn’t establish a baseline expectation for Behavioral Health and School Climate without providing sustainable funding to make it happen.

Fortunately, in response to the Commonwealth Court decision which found Pennsylvania’s school funding system unconstitutional, the state delivered over one billion dollars in new funding for the 24-25 school year¹⁵.

One of the specific uses of this money listed in the guidance from the state is **student services infrastructure**.

We need to stop making vague platitudes about “school mental health” and “safety and security” – we need to invest in our established student services infrastructure. This means explicitly school-employed school counselors, school nurses, school psychologists, and school social workers.

¹² PCCD (2021). Baseline criteria – PCCD school safety and security committee. Behavioral health and school climate. <https://www.pccd.pa.gov/schoolsafety/Documents/Assessment%20Criteria/Behavioral%20Health%20Baseline%20Criteria.pdf>

¹³ PCCD (2023). Crosswalk of Revised vs. Original Behavioral Health Baseline Criteria <https://www.pccd.pa.gov/schoolsafety/Documents/CROSSWALK%20-%20Revised%20vs%20Original%20SSSC%20Behavioral%20Health%20Baseline%20Criteria%20Standards.pdf>

¹⁴ PCCD (2022). FY22-23 school mental health survey results. [https://www.pccd.pa.gov/schoolsafety/Documents/School%20Mental%20Health%20Survey%20Aggregate%20Data%20and%20Findings%20\(September%202022\).pdf](https://www.pccd.pa.gov/schoolsafety/Documents/School%20Mental%20Health%20Survey%20Aggregate%20Data%20and%20Findings%20(September%202022).pdf)

¹⁵ SB 1001

Not a contract with a private contractor. Not “Mr. or Ms. So and So” who comes in on Tuesdays. Not “what’s your insurance we can see if there are slots available.” Not “we’ll make every teacher do a training on mental health.”

This tendency to dismiss student services - a specific set of highly qualified professionals who are trained, certified, and hired to deliver a set of effective services and programs - to talk about generalized "school mental health" or "therapy" or "safety and security" misses the mark.

And it also devalues the individuals who work in these disciplines, which exacerbates the workforce issue, as people choose not to work in schools.

This is a real shame, because as a school counselor, I love the work I get to do with students and families and other educators – this is an incredible career opportunity to make a huge difference in the lives of children.

It’s hard to sell that vision when it’s not just about money or working conditions. It’s also constantly overlooking these local and state policy conversations that ignore our qualifications, training, certification, and expertise – that we aren’t worth acknowledging as a solution to the student mental health crisis or to school improvement efforts, despite being specifically trained to work with these needs.

If Pennsylvania wants to be serious about addressing school safety and security or student mental health, **we need to invest in Chapter 12 student services. Full stop.**

If Pennsylvania can require every school to hire an armed security officer, Pennsylvania can deliver on the promises it makes on paper and make sure kids have enough school counselors, school nurses, school psychologists, and school social workers to deliver organized and effective student services programming.

This isn’t really an innovation – we’ve had rules on the books in some form or fashion for delivering student services in our schools since the 1970s at least.

For years the excuse was “well, there’s no money.”

Now there’s money.

It’s time to hold schools accountable for delivering student services in an effective, efficient manner.

We already employ approximately 10,000 student services professionals here in the Commonwealth¹⁶ – let’s make sure we’re designing and implementing these services in a way that gets us the return on investment we know they can deliver for our kids.

¹⁶ PDE (2024). Professional personnel individual staff report.

<https://www.education.pa.gov/DataAndReporting/ProfSupPers/Pages/ProfPersIndStaff.aspx>