

Good morning,

My name is Jen Beale, and I am a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor at Helen Thompson Elementary School in MSAD 11. I speak to you today regarding concerns with mental health supports in our current educational system.

When I went into education 27 years ago, my student teaching experience was impacted by the Columbine tragedy. We thought...I thought....that it was a horrible one off, a senseless shooting that would never happen again. Unfortunately, it was just the beginning.

Studies have shown that school shootings have risen in frequency to the point they now occur almost every 3rd day during the school year. Teachers and staff see verbal and physical violence daily. I was recently required to support a student who ended up pinching, hitting, and kicking me, before raising a large metal bar like they were going to hit me. It definitely made me question my life choices. That student cannot, by law, be suspended, which I completely understand. I love my job and the students I work with. But coming home sore, exhausted, and possibly injured, was not part of that equation.

In my job I fill the roles of both social worker and school counselor. However, more than an hour of my workday is lost supervising large groups of students instead of working with kids in need. That's 15% of my week I could be meeting with students, contacting parents, or communicating with other staff. This, by the way, has been common practice throughout my educational career across three states, at times comprising 30% of my day.

Meanwhile, we continue to be inundated, and I do mean inundated, with calls for check-ins with students, 504 and IEP meetings, and interventions to help teachers maintain the learning environment. Our administration is called multiple times a day to assist with behavioral concerns in class. Why am I telling you this? We are stretched too thin trying to cover everything.

Ideally, schools would have a school counselor to provide Tier 1 and Tier 2 interventions through classroom lessons and individual/small group meetings. They would have 1-2 social workers to manage Tier 3 concerns and meet 504 and IEP mandates, along with assisting classroom concerns. Instead, we're still short counselors and social workers, and desperately short of educational technicians across the state. Why? Funding and Choice. A lack of funding forces choices to be made, and extra duties to try and cover every need.

What can you do?

1. Obviously, increase funding for mental health supports. Starvation diets shed the weight, but they weaken the body.
2. Legislation. West Virginia passed two bills supporting mental health educators: HB 5262 in 2024, and SB 199 in 2025. They address mental health educators' duties, disruptive behavior, behavioral intervention plans, and disciplinary consequences, along with listing

duties counselors may not perform without written consent, such as testing, covering classes, and duties like supervising common areas.

But funding REALLY matters. Last year your committee funded less than 10% of the requested amount for mental health supports in LD 858, An Act to Ensure Behavioral and Mental Health Services Are Available to Students by Providing Grants to Schools That Contract for Those Services. That bill had a fiscal note of \$1.3 million and was designed to provide immediate grants to school districts so they can begin immediately contracting with mental health providers to get students the help they need as quickly as possible. The bill was passed but only had \$100,000 of funding each year – and the bill was held by the Governor and will not be effective until after the session. To quote a veteran teacher I spoke with about it, “we can’t keep doing this”. Our staff is burnt out. Our students are burning out. We’re asking for you to send in the firefighters so we can get our footing again.

Thank you for your time, and I’ll be happy to take any questions.