



## **MAINE COUNSELING ASSOCIATION**

*A State Branch of the American Counseling Association*

March 14, 2023

### Testimony in Support of LD 829 An Act to Improve Behavioral Health Support for Students in Public Schools

Senator Joseph Rafferty, Representative Michael Brennan, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs:

My name is Stan Pelletier, I am a certified school (guidance) counselor and licensed professional clinical counselor (LCPC), and have worked in Maine Schools and communities for over 25 years. I am also the Public Policy Chair for the Maine Counseling Association (MeCA), a state branch of the American Counseling Association (ACA), an organization representing professional counselors including school counselors. It is in this capacity that I express the support of the MeCA Executive Board for LD 829, along with some comments and requests for clarification of some points.

We are pleased that Maine Legislators are seriously considering ways to support the mental/behavioral well-being of students and families by strengthening the position of school counselors and school social workers to provide services. We support the intent to revise Sec. 4. 20-A MRSA §15672 and Sec. 5.-7. 20-A MRSA §15679 to improve the student to school counselor ratio in K-8 public schools to 250:1 from the current 350:1. This new figure would be congruent with the ratio currently applied to Maine students in public high schools, and also consistent with the recommendations of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA). We also support the intent to codify a similar ratio with respect to school social workers. We are interpreting the language disaggregating school social workers from “guidance staff” in Sec. 4. 20-A MRSA §15672, sub-§11 as a mechanism which facilitates funding with respect to comprehensive school counseling (guidance) programs, and not to mean that school counselors, guidance directors,

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and school social workers will cease to work collaboratively within the structures developed by working comprehensive school counseling programs. Perhaps this might be explicitly stated in a subsequent draft of the LD.

In regards to Sec. 1. 20-A MRSA §4008-A, sub-§2, we interpret the language of 80% direct and indirect student services to mean “counseling and social-work services” specifically, not other duties sometimes associated with public schools. The ASCA National Model suggests that “indirect services” specifically include the professional activities of consultation, collaboration, and referral. The guidelines set out in the ASCA model which have served to inform the above referenced legislation, are suggestions as to minimum “best practice” allocations of time by the professional school counselor. Note too, that ASCA recommendations regarding the remaining (no more than) 20% of time be spent in “program planning and school support activities” are specifically spelled out in the document [ASCA National Model Executive Summary](#) and do not include numerous other duties involved with school functioning (such as supervision of classrooms or common areas). We do not view the current wording within the statute as problematic and in need of revision, provided that it is interpreted as outlined here. Although school counselors and school social workers fulfill different roles within school communities, we believe that insofar as the 80% direct and indirect services allocation of time is concerned, any changes which would introduce disparity between the allocated time of school counselors to students and social workers to students should be carefully considered and modified only in response to demonstrated need. The provisions set forth in this bill which amend Sec. 4. 20-A MRSA §15672 and Sec. 5.-7. 20-A MRSA §15679 would seem to do a great deal to increase school counseling and school social work personnel in districts and the total amount of school counselors and school social workers available time to work with students in need (which is vast and only increasing), and perhaps render the suggestions put forth in Sec. 1. 20-A MRSA §4008-A, sub-§2 unneeded.

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In closing, let me say that we welcome thoughtful attempts by the legislature to assist with the implementation of comprehensive school counseling programs, and to support school counselors and school social workers in carrying out their vital functions in service to students and families in Maine public schools. We, the members of the Executive Board of the Maine Counseling Association, are ready to assist and consult with members of the legislature if called upon. We are committed as an organization to upholding the standards of professionalism of school counselors in service to Maine students, families, and schools. Thank you for your time and attention, and for the opportunity to share our views with the membership of the Joint Standing Committee.

Best regards,

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