

Advocacy in Action – Keep School Counselors in Schools

Melissa Mariani, Ph.D. and Elizabeth Villares, Ph.D.

Florida schools are lacking a critical component to student success – an adequate number of certified school counselors! School counselors are a necessary piece of the puzzle as they are trained to deal with the social, emotional, behavioral, and academic issues that students face on a daily basis. In many FL schools there is a counselor to student ratio of 1 to 1000. This makes providing critical direct services (individual counseling, small group counseling, classroom guidance, and consultation) more difficult. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model calls for school counselors to deliver a comprehensive developmental guidance program to all students and recommends a certified school counselor to student ratio of 250-to-1. With student numbers increasing, along with student needs, this task can be a daunting one.

One advocate, Senator Nancy Detert, R- FL (District 28, Venice/Sarasota), is sponsoring a bill that requires that every FL school district have an overall ratio of at least one certified school counselor for every 300 students and ratios at each school level (e.g., *elementary school* = 1 to 325, *middle school* = 1 to 300, and *high school* = 1 to 250). Senate Bill 154 (SB 154) requires a minimum of one certified school counselor in every school with additional assignments of certified school counselors to meet the certified school counselor to student ratios. Each FL school district would report their ratio of certified school counselors to students in their annual audit and adopt rules outlining the duties of certified school counselors. Additionally, SB 154 calls for each certified school counselor to provide counseling to students, develop and deliver curriculum at the appropriate grade level, coordinate activities and programs for each curriculum, and consult with school administrators, teachers, parents, and students. Furthermore, SB 154 prohibits that certified school counselors perform administrative duties such as coordinating, administrating, or monitoring academic testing and testing programs, working bus or cafeteria lines, or substitute teaching.

Visit <http://flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2013/0154> to read the complete bill. If lawmakers pass SB 154 Florida would join the other 24 U.S. states with mandated school counselor to student ratios. The proposed law and the appropriate funding would take effect on July 1, 2013.

School counselors help students cope with the problems they face and assist them in preparing for life after graduation. Advocating for this profession is critical. Anyone interested in advocating for the passage of SB 154 is encouraged to contact his or her elected Representatives and Senators. Here are some suggestions to help you get the most out of your communications with your legislators in Tallahassee.

General Tips

- Contact your legislators before the Legislature takes action on it. Your senator's <http://www.flsentate.gov> page will give you his or her mailing address, phone numbers, and email address. Similar information for your representative can be found at <http://www.myfloridahouse.gov/sections/representatives/representatives.aspx>

- Use a variety of communication methods. You might telephone, write, email, fax or visit your legislator in person. Taking a personal approach is more effective than using standard language or forms.
- Tell you legislators what effect you think a particular bill, if it becomes law, will have on you, your children, business, or community. Be concise, but specific.
- Be polite, even if you disagree strongly. Your communication will be more effective if you are reasonable in your approach.

Writing Effective Letters

- Verify the spelling of your legislator's name and address.
- Type or print legibly. Sign your name and give your address correctly so they can respond to your letter.
- Keep letters, email, and faxes brief. Never more than a page. Be concise and specific.
- State your position on Senate Bill 154 in the beginning and provide supporting facts to back up your opinions. Avoid abbreviations or acronyms.
- Don't send the same letter to more than one legislator. Personalized letters have more impact.

Address letters to Members of the House of Representative as follows:

The Honorable Joe Doe
 Florida House of Representative
 The Capitol
 Tallahassee, FL 32399-1300

Address letters to senators this way:

Senator Jane Doe
 The Capitol
 Tallahassee, FL 32399-1100

Calling or Visiting Your Legislator

- Keep your point and discuss only one issue – Senate Bill 154.
- If planning a visit make an appointment. Do not just drop in.
- Prepare a one-page fact sheet concerning to help him or her better retain what you presented.

To follow the progress of this Bill or to get involved in the Advocacy Initiative visit the Florida School Counselor Association (FSCA) Advocacy page online at <http://www.flaschoolcounselor.org/legislation.htm>.

Author Note:

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