



April 8th, 2021

Testimony to the House Education Committee on S.115 Wellness from Tara Cariano, VTSCA President and School Counselor at Harwood Union High School

Good Morning,

My name is Tara Cariano, and I am the President of the Vermont School Counselor Association (VTSCA). I am also a School Counselor at Harwood Union High School and a resident of Northfield. I want to first thank you for the invitation to testify today regarding S.115 and for acknowledging the important and collaborative work of Vermont school counselors. We have long been overlooked in our expertise and dedication regarding the social-emotional health and wellness of students. We are social-emotional learning experts who carry a holistic view in all aspects of our work whether it be while we are working with students, colleagues, or on leadership teams in our schools. A significant part of our job is to help all students “manage emotions and apply interpersonal skills” through school counseling classroom lessons, small groups, and individually through short term counseling ([ASCA, The Role of the School Counselor](#)). This is wellness. So my question to you is: Why is school counseling not included as part of the defined “wellness program?”

In thinking about this question and what the WHY (the root issue) may be, I dug deeper and followed S. 115 back to the current Vermont Education Statutes. I found it concerning that the “Wellness Program” lives under the “Comprehensive Health Education” subchapter. This in itself is limiting and further creates silos of great work that is being done in our schools. School counselors, health educators, school nurses, and physical education teachers should be working collaboratively together to provide a holistic wellness program that includes physical fitness, social-emotional learning through a comprehensive school counseling model, and comprehensive health education. Unfortunately, this is not the reality in many of our schools which makes sense since the “Wellness Program” is listed under “Comprehensive Health Education” limiting it to only health educators, physical education teachers, and school nurses.

What if the title of Subchapter 7 of Title 16, Chapter 1 was instead “Wellness Program” with “Comprehensive Health Education” being listed as one of the elements of a Wellness Program? With this change, it would open up the possibility for a new education law regarding a comprehensive school counseling model for our schools. As you may know, VTSCA is currently developing a Vermont Comprehensive Model under the leadership of Patricia Tomashot and the VT ASCA Model and Role of the School Counselor Ad-Hoc Committee. This model will align with “[The ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success: K-12 College- and Career-Readiness Standards for Every Student](#).” We are excited about this work as it will further support school counselors in our state while also greatly improving the social-emotional, academic, and career knowledge, skills, and attitudes of all Vermont students.



According to how the Vermont Statutes are currently written, it is going to be challenging to make the case that a comprehensive school counseling program should be added to S.115. School counselors are not licensed health educators although our roles and expertise overlap in many areas covered under the definition of “Comprehensive Health Education.” A step in the right direction may be to acknowledge the expertise of school counselors in social, emotional, and mental health by making a stipulation that at least one person on the Advisory Council on Wellness and Comprehensive Health have expertise specifically in school counseling (Section 9). Additionally, in Section 10, school wellness program policies shall also “reflect nationally accepted best practices for comprehensive school counseling, such as the ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success or the (soon to be) Vermont Comprehensive School Counseling Model” (which will align with the ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors).

Lastly, maybe it’s time to consider a health education overhaul and truly look towards a holistic wellness approach. Students, especially teenagers, want to learn about and deeply connect to the “why” of their minds and bodies, especially their brains. With that being said, why not bring together all the wellness experts in schools to develop a truly holistic model that incorporates physical fitness, social-emotional learning through a comprehensive school counseling model, and comprehensive health education rather than educators in these areas teaching within their own silos as if they were separate content areas. Through this, it would finally fully align with the [CDC’s Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child Model](#) that holistically focuses on physical education and physical activity, nutrition environment and services, health education, social and emotional climate., physical environment, health services, counseling, psychological and social services, employee wellness, community involvement, and family engagement. Until the role of the school counselor is viewed similarly and just as important as a school nurse, health educator, or physical education teacher, we will continue to be the missing piece that could bring us all together.

Thank you for your time today and your continued support of Vermont school counselors.

Tara Cariano
VTSCA President
School Counselor, Harwood Union High School



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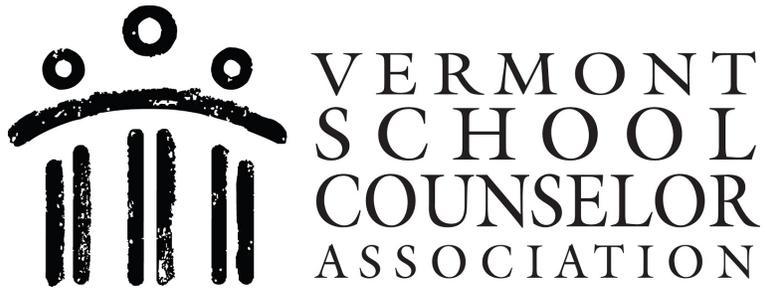
Testimony to the House Education Committee on S.115 Wellness from Suzanne Francke, past VTSCA President and current Treasurer and School Counselor at Union Elementary School

Good Morning,

My name is Suzanne Francke, I am a school counselor at Union Elementary School in Montpelier and a resident of Williston. I have served as President of the Vermont School Counseling Association and am currently the Treasurer. I have been a school counselor for 13 years. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding Wellness and Education. I will focus my testimony on our youngest students.

As a school counselor at the elementary level we focus on supporting and educating the whole child including their mental health. Stress and anxiety are having a tremendous impact on our young people. At the elementary level, school counselors provide a developmentally appropriate curriculum that includes strategies for emotional regulation to teach coping skills using mindfulness, cognitive strategies to change our negative thinking and making healthy choices as part of our overall comprehensive program. When I think about Wellness and Health Education I strongly believe that it should include a focus on mental health and how our brains and our thinking affect our bodies and overall health. I believe that a Social Emotional Learning curriculum at the elementary level should include teaching proactive strategies such as mindfulness, breathing strategies and mindful movement, being present and building an awareness of emotions and an emotional vocabulary. Mindful movement or yoga is a lifelong skill and tool for dealing with stress and anxiety throughout our lives. Our school currently provides many opportunities for movement breaks for our students but we need to also offer strategies to address how our thoughts affect our feelings and the way that our bodies feel. As we become more aware of our own thoughts and feelings we are able to find coping skills that work for us.

Recently, I was asked to collaborate with our Curriculum Director on Health Education Standards for our students and how Social Emotional Learning can connect to a comprehensive health curriculum. I hope that we will consider all of the aspects of health and well-being and find a way to work collaboratively with each other to build a curriculum that meets our students needs in all areas. School counselors provide education and counseling about these topics on a daily basis and deserve a seat at the table when curriculum, standards and conversations about wellness are happening. We work with all educators in our schools to develop strong minds, healthy bodies and well-adjusted human beings.



Thank you for your consideration today, I appreciate the invitation to speak with you.

Suzanne Francke
Past President/Current Treasurer VTSCA
School Counselor, Union Elementary School

Thank you for your time today. My name is Patti Tomashot and I've been a licensed school counselor for 20 years - grades PreK - 12 and a high school administrator for nine years. I've been fortunate to provide on-site supervision for school counselors interns during all of this time and have been an adjunct/visiting lecturer for school counseling graduate courses.

My testimony is part three of the testimony provided by Tara and Suzanne. Today, I've been asked, specifically, to address the distinctions between school counselors and school social workers. In our schools, we have several school-based mental health professionals that address both the academic and mental health needs of children and adolescents include school counselors, social workers, and psychologists

There seems to be, and has been for some time, a misunderstanding of the school counselor role and what we do in comparison to school social workers.. School counselors are generalists...we work with ALL students at the universal level, working with the whole population. We work in partnership with school social workers.

More than ever, there is a great need for coordinating support services in our schools today. The ultimate goal of school support service providers is to improve the conditions for learning. Providing both prevention and intervention services promotes effective teaching and learning while collaborating with teachers and school staff to ensure that students receive high quality instruction.

School counselors support the mental health of children and adolescents - we work as leaders and collaborators focusing on the academic, career, and social/emotional needs of students and deliver services through individual counseling, small group counseling, and classroom programming. **Since school counselors have access to all students in our Vermont schools, we are often the first point of contact in identifying those students with social emotional needs and are well positioned to provide resources.**

School counselors receive training about learning difficulties and psychological concerns that commonly manifest in children and adolescents. We also provide referrals, recommendations, and education to parents about mental health concerns. Although school counselors typically do not act as long-term therapists, we help foster an environment where mental health stigma is erased, help bridge the gap between student and community resources, and make sure the developmental needs of all students are met. We make the referral to school social workers.

School social workers, work in concert with school counselors and provide a link between the home, school, and community and have experience in offering case management services. We value the collaboration we have with our school social workers.

Each school defines its unique organizational design based on local context, budget, personnel and skill sets. Clearly defining these two roles are vital in developing a common understanding - for working effectively together and in educating others. These two roles are not interchangeable - as there are unique capabilities and responsibilities of each role.

Finally, to be more clear...let me briefly break down the TWO key roles...



Key Roles:

- Student advocacy
- Program delivery that supports students' academic, social emotional, & career development
- Orientation and transitions from school to school, and school to career
- Short-term counseling; group counseling

***Works with all students
Within RTI Framework, supports at
Tiers I, II & III***

Key Roles:

- Home – School – Community liaison
- Home visits and truancy intervention
- Social emotional & behavioral assessment
- Ongoing counseling to support IEP goals

***Works with select students
Within RTI Framework, supports at
the Tier II & III levels only***

Thank you for time together. VT School Counselors appreciate being invited to speak about our role.

in school everyday we are on the pulse of the needs of students, families and faculty/staff.