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Testimony provided on 2/6/2025:

Good morning to the committee. The Vermont School Counselor Association appreciates the opportunity to speak today about the mental health needs of our VT students. VTSCA's mission is to represent the school counseling profession and equip school counselors to create equitable opportunities and inclusive environments that enable ALL students to succeed.

My name is Abbey Allen, a member of the Vermont School Counseling Association Advocacy Committee and a school counselor at Central Vermont Career Center in Barre. I am providing testimony on behalf of the Vermont School Counselors Association.

Unfortunately, there is still an increase in social emotional and mental health needs amongst our student populations. Examples of these needs include, an increase in anxiety, stress, and depression, self-harming and suicidal ideation, an increase in food/financial/housing insecurity, decreased motivation or capacity to attend school or remain present in school, increased aggressive behavior, especially at the younger grade levels, a lack of coping skills, and difficulties managing personal and social boundaries (e.g., peer to peer interactions, interacting with adults, time spent on social media, navigating the digital world, etc.).

These needs often lead to challenging behaviors. In turn, without more tools to manage these behaviors, students are sometimes caught in a debilitating cycle that impacts their ability to attend school, impacts their academic success, impacts their sense of belonging, and impacts their ability to thrive in the school environment.

Behavior is a means of communication. Whether it's in the heart of Chittenden County, the most northern or most southern part of the state, our students and families are communicating the same thing. They're telling us that they need more support. This is why we are with you today.

Thankfully, school counselors are uniquely positioned within the school community to support the various needs that arise mostly at a tier 1 level, meaning that school counselors provide support to all students in the areas of Mental Health, Academic and Career & College Planning. However, given this increase and amplified nature of these needs, current models and ratios of school counselors to students are no longer able to meet this increase of needs thus affecting delivery of a comprehensive program.

In addition to these concerns for all schools, there is elevated concern for more rural schools that are already located in areas where transportation and access to necessary mental health services are few and far between due to the scarcity in transportation and barriers with funding structures when it comes to school-based clinicians and social workers. **The bottom line is that**



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the need for resources is high and the access to funding/resources is low for many schools.

In addition, access to community mental health supports throughout the entire state have long waitlists and families are having difficulty accessing mental health care in their communities.

As a result, school counselors are often met with an ethical dilemma of sticking strictly to the role of the school counselor or wearing multiple hats to attend to the immediate concerns, needs, and challenges in front of them every day. **School counselors who are in a profession dedicated to mental health services should not have to sacrifice their own well-being to carry out the job they love dearly.**

As with many things in our community, one of the largest challenges is money. With so many other variables in the mix, it makes it even more difficult to advocate for the necessary resources to better help our student bodies across the state. Students benefit from comprehensive school counseling programs with school counselors focusing on the areas in which they are experts in. Some schools, unfortunately, have reduced school counselor support causing increased student to counselor ratios.

More school counselors means more preventive programming and early intervention. It means more direct service. It is proactive and not reactive, providing intentional support for students, staff, and families. It means more time dedicated toward mental health, academics, post secondary planning, and other things that are often pushed to the backseat in order to attend to the reactivity of immediate needs. Increased school counselors means more capacity for implementing school-wide and systemic initiatives with lasting success. More school counselors means an investment in our future citizens and leaders who deserve a healthier childhood.

To highlight a recurring theme that the current needs of our communities are outweighing the capacity of school counselors. More school counselors would remove debilitating barriers and allow us to more effectively carry out services to our youth and families with less burnout.

Thank you again for your time today. We are grateful for the opportunity to share with you what has been shared with us each and every day by those in our communities.