

January 23, 2019

ABOUT

Counselors, Not Checks: A Look at School Safety Bills Before Lawmakers

Students should be able to attend schools where they feel safe and have adequate access to counseling and mental health services. Yet that is becoming an increasing challenge as student enrollment grows and the number of support staff in Virginia's schools is still down from a decade ago. Because of these challenges, Governor Northam and legislators have put forward proposals to improve access to counseling and mental health services for students. These proposals are being debated right now during the state legislative session.

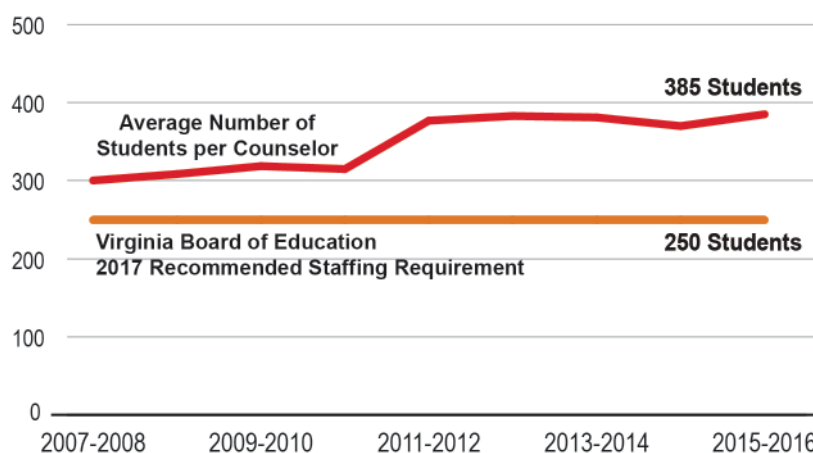
School Counselors - Staffing

In December, Governor Northam proposed funding to increase the number of counselors in Virginia's schools. Manageable caseloads are crucial for proactively identifying student behavior challenges, reducing exclusionary discipline, and implementing evidence-based alternatives to school exclusion. Studies show that schools with lower student caseloads for counselors have better graduation rates, higher attendance, and fewer disciplinary incidents than those that do not, especially in high-poverty schools.

Unfortunately, the average caseload for school counselors has grown from 300 students in the 2007-2008 school year to a high of 385 in the 2015-2016 school year – well above the recommended standard of 250 and above nearby states such as West Virginia, North Carolina, Maryland, and Tennessee.

Increasing Caseloads

School counselors in Virginia have 85 more students than they did eight years ago.



Source: TCI analysis of US Department of Education, NCES, Common Core of Data (CCD) and VBOE 2017 Annual Report on the Condition and Needs of Public Schools in Virginia



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Delegate McQuinn (HB2053) and Senator Dance (SB1406) have introduced legislation to implement the governor's proposal and phase in an increase in counselors that would get the state to the recommended standard of one counselor for every 250 students by the start of the 2021 school year. These bills appear to be making their way to House Appropriations and Senate Finance where some might see the fiscal cost to the state and local governments as a hurdle for approval. But given the growing state economy and increasing budget revenues, state leaders are positioned to make these needed investments in counseling, particularly with modest, phase-in strategies before them. This approach will reduce the initial cost to the state and local governments and give schools time to hire the additional school counselors.

School Counselors - Roles and Responsibilities

Legislators are also examining recommendations from the House Select Committee on School Safety. Coming from these recommendations is a proposal to require school counselors to spend 80 percent of their day providing direct counseling to students. This proposal aligns with the national model recommended by the American School Counselor Association, if implemented in conjunction with the governor's proposed increase of school counselors. Delegate Landes (HB1729) has introduced legislation to implement this recommendation; his proposal has been approved by the House and will crossover to the Senate.

However, the impact of this proposal will depend on the administrative capacity of schools to take on the responsibilities previously performed by school counselors. Additional funding from the state to hire these staff is vital for this proposal to make an actual difference in the day-to-day activities of the school.

Child Safety Savings Accounts

Finally, absent from the recommendations from the Select Committee on School Safety, is a bill from Delegate LaRock (HB2568) introducing Child Safety Savings Accounts. Under this legislation, students experiencing bullying or harassment – rather than getting the services they need to feel safe and secure in their learning environment – would be able to use taxpayer dollars to pursue private school or homeschooling. This is the latest version of a bill that has been introduced the last several legislative sessions to create a voucher-like payment system to families that want to send their child to private school or homeschool them.

The Child Safety Savings Accounts have many of the same problems as the Education Savings Accounts debated in past years. The payments to families are wholly inadequate to cover the costs of private school tuition. The average payment would be about \$4,500, while average private school tuition costs in Virginia are over \$10,000 for elementary schools and over \$15,000 for high schools. This effectively excludes the lowest-income families from being able to participate. The payment



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going to families is based on geography – where the student happens to live – not need or cost, and is set at 90 percent of the state’s share of the SOQ cost, which varies from about \$2,200 to \$7,000.

Yet, perhaps most importantly, the legislation does not address the underlying problem. Students who experience bullying, harassment, or hazing need a person they can trust and that they can go to for guidance and support. If schools do not have sufficient staffing and resources to adequately provide these services, then that is a problem we must fix.

The governor and legislators have laid out proposals to improve these services. That is the correct path toward offering safe, productive learning environments, not payments to parents or guardians to seek out these services on their own and leave the other students without.

– *Chris Duncombe, Policy Director*

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