

Testimony of Tara Cariano to the Vermont Senate Committee on Education 2/20/19

Dear Senate Education Committee,

My name is Tara Cariano, and I am the President-Elect for the Vermont School Counselor Association and a 2018 Rowland Fellow. I am also a School Counselor at Harwood Union High School and a Moretown Resident.

I am concerned about the ever-increasing mental health needs of our students. School counselors across the state are reporting a significant increase in referrals for social and emotional challenges, nurses visits, overall stress seen as early as second grade, difficulties in self-regulation, overwhelmed parents, truancy due to anxiety and depression, pressure to succeed - "get into the best college," lack of sleep, social media and access to electronics 24-7, gaming addictions, social pressures, unhealthy relationships, sexting, bullying and harassment, alcohol and drug use, vaping, and lack of overall coping skills.

According to the 2017 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, a quarter of Vermont students reported feeling sad or hopeless almost every day for at least two weeks during the past 12 months that they stopped doing some usual activities. In addition, just over one in ten students made a plan about how they would attempt suicide during the past 12 months with 5% of students attempting suicide during that same time frame. Between 2012-2014, Vermont had approximately 9 youth die by suicide for every 100,000. This is a mental health crisis, and we are seeing this first hand in our schools. Students are constantly in crisis, stressed, overwhelmed, exhausted, pressured, reactive, anxious, addicted, and overall mentally unhealthy.

Previously known as a guidance counselor, the job of a school counselor is to "improve student success for ALL students by implementing a comprehensive school counseling program." This includes helping all students apply academic achievement strategies, manage emotions and apply interpersonal skills, and plan for postsecondary options (ASCA: <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/administrators/role-of-the-school-counselor>). Although, the data reports that Vermont has the lowest school counselor to student ratio in the country at 200 to 1, it is not equitable across the state. Some schools in our state have a 350 to 1 ratio while others have a ratio of 140 to 1. The need is specifically seen in Elementary schools across the state where school counselors may or may not be teaching school counseling (guidance) classes, running groups, and meeting with students individually while carrying a caseload of 300-400 students. As students get older, their needs often change as does the role of the school counselor, but one thing stays the same - the increased need for mental health support. In many schools in Vermont, the school counselor is looked upon to provide this unless the school has a school-based clinician or a home-school coordinator who often works with a small group of identified "at-risk" and high need students. The need for more mental health support is there and the school counselor cannot be expected to do it all no matter if they have a caseload of 140 students or 400 students.

As stated at the beginning, I am a 2018 Rowland Fellow. For those unfamiliar, the Rowland Foundation provides Vermont secondary school educators with a unique professional development and leadership opportunity and the resources to positively affect student achievement and the culture and climate of their respective schools (www.rowlandfoundation.org). I received a Rowland Fellowship for this school year, and I have been spending my sabbatical time researching the ways in which a school, specifically a high school, can integrate social-emotional learning and wellness practices to proactively support students and staff. According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), social emotional learning (SEL) is defined as "the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions." [You may be surprised to hear me mention "staff," but in schools, we know that if our teachers are not well, our students will not be well. As an adult in our society, you can imagine the stressors you live through and navigate on a daily basis. Now consider adding on the emotional fatigue that comes with

being an educator that is trying to help students get the help they need within a complex and often frustrating system. Our schools can only do so much, and we often need to collaborate with outside organizations who are also exhausted due to limited funding and positions.]

I recently went to California to visit schools that organically infuse social-emotional learning and wellness practices into the backbone of their school culture and environment. It was during this visit that I was introduced and witnessed the power of a “Wellness Center” while visiting the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD). After Columbine, there was a desire to make schools safer, but the San Francisco Unified School District decided to address unnoticed mental health with students. They developed a wellness initiative in collaboration with the Department of Public Health and the Department of Children, Youth & Families to keep students in school, assess and address needs, and then link students back to the community. The initiative included the development of a Wellness Center at each of their high schools. A Wellness Center provides a full range of free, confidential health services such as school-wide health education and events, group and one-on-one counseling, nurse services, medical referrals, and more. A typical Wellness Center model includes a Wellness Coordinator who provides the leadership and ensures all student needs are met, School Nurses who listen, educate, provide basic first-aid, help manage chronic health conditions, and provide medical referrals, Community Health Outreach Workers who engage students in Wellness programs and partner with Community Based Organizations (CBO) to provide services to students, Behavioral Health Counselors who provide one-on-one and group-based mental health and substance abuse counseling, and Youth Outreach Workers who are students trained to educate their peers about health issues. Community partners, school administration, and parents are also an integral part of this model. A few important factors to note are that the Wellness Center is in its own space - separate from the school counseling office (as it offers students who may need mental health support a more private, confidential space away from those who may just need academic support such as changing their schedule), and the Wellness Center is also non-punitive. It is also very welcoming, provides clear expectations (15 min. rule), utilizes a thorough data tracking system (sign-in and out), has food and tea, and is included as part of every new students orientation. We also saw a Wellness Center at Gunn High School in Palo Alto. They utilize the same model as SFUSD, but theirs was developed specifically due to their youth suicide rate which was the highest in the nation from 2003-2015 (14.1 per 100,000 residents).

From all of our schools visits in California, our common themes included:

- Wellness Center is KEY
- Integration of wellness throughout curriculum and physical environment
 - Intentional Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) instruction through a specific class and/or Advisory
 - Teacher involvement (referrals and professional development)
 - Teacher-student relationships - TRUST is the most important
 - “Homey”, calm, warm, and welcoming spaces both open spaces & confidential spaces
- Non-punitive restorative practices - separate from wellness offerings
- Student involvement and student leadership
 - Use of a variety of media outlets: posters, videos, pictures, announcements, in person delivery
- Teachers and students recognize that SEL is an important part of their schools which helps to create a healthy and de-stigmatized culture
 - Schools hire new faculty & staff that have SEL experience or willingness to learn & integrate SEL practices in their teaching & schoolwide

- Community collaboration is important- both “CBO” and parent involvement

In seeing these practices in action at schools in and around the San Francisco area, I believe that these ideas could help to more proactively support Vermont students and even be solutions to many of our educational problems including more proactive funding. When we think proactively, it keeps us from adding reactive “band-aids” that often increase spending in a non-sustainable way.

Recently, my superintendent Brigid Nease (Harwood Unified Union School District) announced the development of a districtwide Social Emotional Learning Task Force. Our task force includes administrators and educators K-12 who are looking at the possibilities of K-12 social-emotional learning integration within our district - we believe that social-emotional learning is as essential as literacy development especially in today's media world.

My hope is that this testimony helps you to see and understand the issues our students are currently facing, the important and integral role of the school counselor, and why social-emotional learning is essential for all Vermont students. Could this be the answer to the mental health crisis in our schools? Possibly. It may even provide the opportunity for a more proactive way to look at school funding. It definitely will help our students more thoroughly develop self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making - all of which they need to successfully launch out into this world to be thriving members of our society.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,
Tara Cariano