

Hello members of the County Council. I'm Dr. Jennifer Jones, MCPS graduate and 29 year employee with 22 years as an Elementary School Counselor. **It's my 6th year speaking to you to ask for more mental health supports for our students.** For the past 3 years I have served as the Elementary School Counselor Caucus coordinator affiliated with MCEA. I am also a member of the MCPS K-12 School Counseling Advocacy Committee. Previously, several of you knew me as the former Chair of the Montgomery County Mental Health Advisory Committee.

I would like you to support the County Executive's Operating Budget which fully funds the request from MCPS because Dr. Smith's stated the budget for FY22 **"will provide funds for additional mental health supports for students, including those most impacted by virtual learning."** Unfortunately, I did not see much evidence of increased mental health supports for students when I reviewed his budget. I am asking that you earmark funds provided to MCPS to increase mental health supports for our students. **Every year I testify about the urgency for more mental health supports and a critical need for a much lower elementary school counselor ratio.**

The socioemotional and behavioral needs of our youngest learners in elementary school have continued to escalate during the past several months as the impact of the pandemic health crisis has been felt across all socioeconomic arenas. This mental health crisis will continue to escalate as students and families deal with ongoing uncertainties.

Elementary students have been seriously impacted by virtual learning since they are the most dependent learners. My elementary counselor colleagues and I have seen our students in a variety of extremely challenging situations negatively impacting their mental health due to their young age. For example, some of those who thrive on social interactions with teachers and peers in class, have become uninterested, overwhelmed, angry, easily distracted, and depressed. Some students become disengaged during class, have poor attendance, and fail to complete assignments. Many must fend for themselves in families where parents must report to work during the day or night and rely on older siblings during the day for support. Those siblings must focus on their own learning which has left our youngest learners on their own when parents are not able to afford day care or a babysitter. As a result, some elementary age students have struggled to engage in their classes via Zoom due to their low level of reading ability, lack of English language skills, learning challenges, and other issues. Thus, they cannot learn and thrive to their fullest potential. At the same time, their mental health has deteriorated.

Even with many elementary students now back in school buildings, students continue to face numerous challenges my colleagues and I have described to you in detail over the years. Recently, I continue to make referrals for therapists, to Child Protective Services, to the Crisis Center, and do home visits for a variety of serious reasons. In school buildings, many students are struggling with the "new norm" involving social distancing and all of the rule changes they now face during their school day. They are emotionally struggling to cope with staying in their spaces, refraining from free interaction to play, and the kinds of "hands on" support staff had provided to them in the past to meet their needs.

In any scenario, whether virtual or in buildings, we need a much lower elementary school counselor ratio. Only 1.0 to 1.5 counselors per school is not enough to meet mental health needs of students.

The MCPS Strategic Plan includes BeWell 365 which takes some basic steps to support the overall wellness of students. I was on the elementary work group that designed and created the original BeWell 365

activities. This initiative is not nearly enough to address the needs of our students. For years, elementary counselors have shared with you the serious need for a better counselor ratio. Since BeWell 365 is a priority, and all counselors are being directly trained by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) to implement the ASCA model, **we need their recommended ratio of 1:250 for ALL K-12 schools regardless of FARMs rate** which is already the middle and high school staffing formula. The same concern can be stated about School Psychologists and Pupil Personnel Workers. They are greatly understaffed considering the huge task we have been facing this school year as we cope with the pandemic and beyond.

On June 20, 2020, I was fortunate to collaborate with my colleagues Matt Kamins and Melanie Travers to submit the opinion piece “Mental Health of MCPS Students Must Get Our Attention: Under Current Structure, Caseloads are Too High” that was published in Bethesda Beat. We discuss the myriad of concerns we have now seen unfolding in our schools regarding serious student mental health needs.

<https://bethesdamagazine.com/bethesda-beat/opinion/opinion-mental-health-of-mcps-students-must-get-our-attention/>

I was hopeful that MCPS would make much more of an improvement towards closing the school counselor ratio gap between elementary and secondary schools for FY22. In Appendix C, I found **a very small improvement for Title 1 schools. They will receive an additional .5 counselor if they have 510 students instead of 550 students.** While we appreciate this addition, the staffing formula and **counselor ratio is exactly the same as it was the last 2 years** when Board of Education member Jeanette Dixon’s Budget Amendment passed with support of testimony from my ES Counselor colleague and myself. It allocated 6 additional .5 positions for 135 schools. It was an extremely small addition, but moved in the right direction. **This latest addition is still not nearly enough. Even if a school has 1.5 counselors, that means HALF THE TIME there is ONE counselor trying to respond and support the needs of all 510-900+ students who attend that school. Imagine only one counselor supporting all of those students all of the time which is the case at most schools.** Below is the staffing formula for FY22 with the small improvement as I stated:

*****Elementary Counselor Staffing Formula for FY22*****

1.0 FTE per school.

An additional .5 counselor is allocated to:

- **non-focus schools with projected Grades K-5 enrollment > 700**
- **focus schools with projected Grades K-5 enrollment > 600**
- **Title I schools with projected Grades K-5 enrollment > 510 and ≤ 650**

An additional 1.0 counselor is allocated to Title I schools with projected Grade K-5 enrollment > 650.

As members of the County Council, you are very aware there are mental health needs, as is the Board of Education. However, now these concerns are urgent and require immediate action as stated in the Maryland State Department of Education Plan for Recovery for Fall 2020. This Recovery Plan provided more proof we must lower the elementary school counselor ratio to support student mental health needs as stated in the research. This research was cited with a direct link on the Maryland State Department of Education website in their guidance and plan for returning to school last Fall.

The MSDE Plan for Recovery document stated:

"MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING: Research shows the importance of mental and emotional well-being for students and staff, which has both psychological and ultimately academic outcomes. Access to school counselors and school-based health clinics helps students. Counselors and school based health

centers will play an extremely important role in the adjustment period when buildings reopen."

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/pam.20528>

ASCA and a report of the Federal Commission on School Safety referenced research that there is "solid evidence in support of the impact that school mental health programs can have on academics". The earlier we provide mental health support to students, the sooner they have the socioemotional and academic skills they need.

Associate Superintendent Ruschelle Reuben said at our MCCPTA Delegate Assembly in Fall 2019, with only one counselor in most elementary schools, they did not have time to collect the desired data. As a result, data was missing from her presentation that evening. Clearly, this is unacceptable and it highlights the need to increase the number of elementary counselors at every school. Others who have supported lower elementary counselor ratios include the County Executive, MCEA, MCAAP, MCCPTA leaders, state legislators, and the Montgomery County Mental Health Advisory Committee. The Black and Brown Coalition also recognizes the need for more counselors.

ASCA and a report of the Federal Commission on School Safety referenced research that there is "solid evidence in support of the impact that school mental health programs can have on academics". The earlier we provide mental health support to students, the sooner they have the socioemotional and academic skills they need.

Please bring us even closer to an ES Counselor ratio of 1:250 at all elementary schools.

Our kids can't wait.

Thank you.

Research supporting a lower ratio referenced by ASCA at MCPS trainings:

Are school counselors an effective education input? Scott Carrell and Mark Hoekstra, Economics Letters 125 (2014) 66-69

Cost Effectiveness of School Counselors Implementing Model (Carrell & Hoekstra, 2011)

- School counselors cause economically & statistically significant increase in achievement (especially boys) and reduce misbehavior of boys (20%) and girls (29%).
- Hiring one additional counselor is twice as effective in raising achievement as hiring an additional teacher to reduce class size.
- Hiring one additional school counselor is equivalent to raising the quality of every teacher in the school.

"...educational interventions and initiatives that target these psychological factors can have transformative effects on students' experience and achievement in school, improving core academic outcomes such as GPA and test scores months and even years later." (Dweck et al, 2011)

"Strategies such as social emotional learning programs that address non-cognitive skills, including problem-solving, responsibility and resiliency, can also help students develop the skills needed to fully engage and

thrive in the learning environment.” Guiding Principles: A Resource Guide for Improving School Climate and Discipline, Washington, D.C., 2014.

Impact on students (Studer, et al., 2006)

Impact on student achievement (Dahir & Stone, 2009)

Connect counselor work to student success (Bosworth & Walz, 2005; Dimmitt, 2009; Paisley & McMahon, 2001; Whitson, 2002)

Professional & ethical duty (ASCA; Carey et al., 2008; Dimmitt, 2009; Studer et al., 2006)