

Good evening. My name is Ellie Kleinman, and I am a school counselor at New Hampshire Estates Elementary School in Silver Spring. New Hampshire Estates is a primary school serving the highest FARMs (Free and Reduced Meal) rate population in MCPS and our school community of close to 500 students includes many recent immigrants.

I am here tonight to ask you to increase the number of mental health professionals in our schools as aggressively as possible both this year and in coming years in order to meet the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) recommended ratio of **one (1) counselor to 250 students for all schools at all levels, to increase the number of school psychologist and social worker positions, and to fund the creation of 504 Coordinator positions to manage 504 plans for students across MCPS.**

This school year has been incredibly difficult for all students from a mental health perspective. Our children want to succeed in school, but many are suffering from anxiety, depression, and difficulties in building and maintaining relationships.

They are dealing with the impacts of trauma, including poverty, changes in housing, social isolation, and family instability, the death and illness of loved ones from Covid, and other factors, as well as some who have experienced child abuse and neglect. It is hard for our students to focus on their schoolwork, and **we don't have enough mental health professionals to support them.**

As an example, this year at New Hampshire Estates, we have had about 20 students in grades K, 1 and 2, who have repeatedly threatened to harm themselves or others. We have also had students who attacked staff members and put other classmates' safety at risk. Whenever such events occur, school counselors are taken away from any other responsibilities in order to complete a lengthy crisis center referral process and to monitor the student for the remainder of the day until a parent comes to pick them up. This process can take up between two to four hours of a counselor's time.

Thus during the time I managed those 20 referrals, I could have met with between 80-160 students. [The impact is even more staggering at the upper elementary and secondary levels where the number of Crisis Center referrals and the time allocated to support students in crisis is significantly higher.]

MCPS does not meet the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) recommended school-counselor to student ratio of 1 to 250 - particularly in the elementary grades, and we are seeing the impacts of this discrepancy now more than ever.

ASCA recommends that 80 percent of a counselor's time is spent providing direct services to students [which means meeting with them directly in either individual or small group counseling sessions, or teaching classroom lessons]. Many school counselors are limited in providing direct services to students due to their MCPS-determined role as the manager or coordinator of 504 plans, which take up an average of 5-10 hours per plan at the elementary level and as many as 20-40 hours per plan at the secondary level. With 504 caseloads in MCPS of up to 50 plans for high school counselors and up to 100 plans for elementary counselors, the amount of time taken away from providing direct services to students is substantial.

Please fund a new and separate position of 504 Case Coordinator in order to enable school counselors to provide more direct services to students and to meet the stated SEL (Social and Emotional Learning) goals of ASCA and of MCPS.

Students deserve to have their mental health needs prioritized, as well as the support that they need to focus on their academics by having an appropriate number of mental health professionals (**a 1:250 ratio of school counselors to students**) in **ALL MCPS schools**. Thank you.

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