February 18, 2026

Hello Members of the Education Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to write on an urgent and critical issue affecting students across our state: the student-to-school-counselor ratio and the broader need to strengthen student support services, particularly in our urban school districts.

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) recommends a maximum ratio of 250 students to 1 school counselor. This recommendation is grounded in decades of research demonstrating that when counselors maintain manageable caseloads, students experience stronger academic performance, improved attendance, healthier social-emotional development, and clearer postsecondary and career pathways.

School counselors are uniquely trained professionals whose work centers on three essential domains:

- Social and emotional development
- Academic planning and achievement
- Postsecondary and career readiness

However, across many districts—especially high-need urban districts such as Hartford—budget reductions and staffing constraints have stretched counselors far beyond their intended roles. Counselors are increasingly assigned non-counseling duties such as lunch duty, hallway supervision, classroom coverage, test proctoring, and administrative coordination responsibilities that extend well beyond appropriate counseling functions.

ASCA clearly outlines that such duties divert counselors from direct and indirect services to students. When this happens, students lose access to:

- Individual and small-group counseling
- Crisis response and mental health intervention
- Academic planning and course selection guidance
- College and career counseling
- Family consultation and advocacy

In Hartford, where students often face compounded social, economic, and community stressors, these services are not optional—they are essential. Without adequate staffing and protected time, counselors are forced into reactive crisis management instead of proactive, preventative support. The result is increased student crisis, diminished academic planning, and inequitable access to postsecondary opportunities.

At the state level, funding decisions directly shape whether districts can meet these standards. Urban school systems in particular rely on strong and sustained state investment to address concentrated need. Maintaining—and improving—funding for these districts is critical to ensuring that students have equitable access to comprehensive counseling programs and wraparound supports. When funding is reduced or stagnant in the face of growing student needs, it is our most vulnerable students who feel the impact first.

It is also vital to recognize the indispensable role of school support staff—including school psychologists, social workers, paraprofessionals, and other student support personnel. These professionals are often the first responders to student mental health concerns. They provide crisis intervention, de-escalation, family outreach, and ongoing emotional support—frequently while juggling multiple responsibilities throughout the building. In many cases, they are managing complex student needs with limited time and resources. Their work is foundational to maintaining safe, supportive learning environments.

If we are serious about closing achievement gaps, improving graduation rates, and addressing the growing youth mental health crisis, then we must commit to:

- Adopting and enforcing a maximum 250:1 student-to-counselor ratio statewide.
- Protecting counselors from being assigned non-counseling duties.
- Strengthening and sustaining funding for urban districts serving high-need populations.
- Investing in and expanding school-based mental health and support staff.
- Recognizing counselors and support personnel as essential professionals—not auxiliary staff.

Our students deserve access to comprehensive, fully functioning support systems. They deserve adults in their schools who have the time and capacity to truly know them, advocate for them, and guide them toward successful futures.

I urge this Committee to prioritize policies and funding decisions that align with professional standards, protect student services, and place student well-being at the center of our state's educational mission.

Thank you for your time and your continued commitment to the students and families we serve.

Sincerely,
Breana Soto
Lead School Counselor
Hartford Public Schools