

Good Evening,

My name is Sam Runckel, and I currently work as a school counselor at Gresham High School. I would like to start by acknowledging the challenging nature of the work you do, and difficult decisions you have recently had to make.

With that said, I am here to express my concerns over what has happened, and what is coming for counseling in Gresham Barlow. To give context, our district currently employs 36 licensed school counselors, next year that number will drop by 6. That is a loss of more than 15% in our school counseling staff, and will mean a drop in our student to counselor ratio from 1:313 student to 1:400. This also comes in the context of long term declines in counseling in our district. At Gresham High School where I work, counseling staffing declined from 8 counselors in the 1990s, to 6 in 2008, and now to 4 next year. That is the fewest school counselors employed by Gresham High School since school counseling was recognized as a profession by the state of Oregon in 1967.

Since I know that students are the reason why we do this work, and why you volunteer your time to serve on the board, I'd like to share the impact of what these cuts will mean at Gresham High. When students come into the GHS Counseling Center they are asked to sign in so we can show data about our impact. In the past year (with five days remaining) we have had more than 4800 unique student sign-ins. Those run the gamut from discussions about college and careers, to check-ins about grades, to connections with food and housing, or serious mental health concerns and assistance. With a cut of 1.5 counselors at Gresham High School next year, we can conservatively estimate that 1309 fewer student sign-ins will take place. This isn't conjecture - we can't hurry up appointments, rush through crisis response, or offer group meetings for students' private family concerns. I am profoundly concerned that among those 1309 missed appointments will be critical, potentially life saving or changing moments.

Counselors are often among the only staff in schools licensed and trained to support students in crisis, so we also often respond to emergencies outside of our offices. We wear many hats within our school system, especially at the elementary level. In middle schools, our counselors are at the forefront of providing social and emotional education and support to students at one of their most significant developmental stages. And as high school counselors, we sit with our students as they make choices that will define the course for the rest of their lives. As you think about and prioritize what matters, it is critical to think about what is lost in the confidential work that we do. It may not easily show, but it is essential to building thriving schools and students.

For me it is too late. This week I made the incredibly painful decision to resign my position at Gresham High for next school year. I felt that I couldn't stay in a job that I know is so important for our students, with a district that is choosing to not support their best interests. I hope, though, it isn't too late to make changes for future years. Please prioritize this work, our students need it. Thank you for your time, and I will always be rooting for the best for Gresham Barlow.