

Subject: Urgent Advocacy for School Counseling Programs and Equity in Restorations

Dear Chair, Members of the Gresham-Barlow School Board, and Superintendent,

Thank you for your continued dedication to the students, families, and staff of our district. I am writing to you today as a deeply concerned member of our educational community to advocate for our school counseling programs, to share the critical impact of recent budget reductions, and to highlight a specific equity issue regarding current staffing levels.

As school counselors, our work is often invisible to the public due to confidentiality and strict ethical restrictions. Because you rarely see the crisis interventions or the deeply personal breakthroughs, it can be easy to underestimate our footprint. However, school counselors are explicitly charged to remove the systemic, emotional, and behavioral barriers that make student success impossible. We serve each and every student in our buildings. We provide one-on-one short term counseling, small counseling groups, classroom lessons, family support, and community connections and referrals. We teach students *how* to learn, how to work, and how to navigate college and career paths. Crucially, we provide vital social, emotional, and personal support through multiple modalities.

Post-pandemic, student mental and behavioral health needs have escalated dramatically. To put this into perspective, our district has faced 729 suicide screenings post-pandemic, with the highest percentage shockingly occurring among our fifth graders. Because of this harrowing reality, many school districts across Oregon chose to keep their mental health teams—school counselors and social workers—completely intact, even when forced to make severe budget cuts elsewhere. They recognized that a student cannot learn if they are in crisis.

I understand that the current budget has been approved, and I am not asking you to rewrite history or go backward. However, having been involved in the 2008–09 budget reductions, I know from experience that grant money, unexpected revenue, or carryover funds frequently materialize during the fiscal year. I strongly urge you: if and when any funds become available to restore positions, please prioritize the well-being of our students and bring back our school counseling programs first.

Both of our High Schools have between 1600-1700 students. They will be reduced to 4 counselors each. They will be going from having ratios of 1 counselor to every 330 students to 413 students. The ASCA National Model recommends 1:250. Our middle schools next year will be: CCMS: 1:186 to 1:223; GRMS: 1:258 to 1:323; DMMS: 1:242 to 1:323.

Secondly, I want to bring to your attention a stark staffing inequity that I believe may have been an oversight, but one that carries a heavy impact on our youngest students. As I mentioned, 5th grade has the highest percentage of suicide screenings. The Oregon Health Authorities put out a letter for action to provide more support to this age group as the number of completed suicides is on the rise.

Currently, North Gresham Elementary has an enrollment of 612 students and has been cut to 1.5 counselors (1:408). Meanwhile, Clear Creek Middle School has an enrollment of 558 students and will have 2.5 counselors (1:223). Both of these schools have immense, complex needs, and both house vital programs, including our Dual Language Immersion (DLI) programs. While my ultimate hope is to see all counseling positions fully reinstated, allocating fewer counselors to a larger elementary population than to a smaller middle school population is a disservice to early intervention. North Gresham Elementary requires a minimum of 2.0 counselors to safely and effectively serve its 612 students. North Gresham comprises 13.3% of our suicide screenings, while Clear Creek equally comprises 13.4% of our suicide screenings.

Our elementary students are experiencing unprecedented mental health crises, as evidenced by our suicide screening data. Cutting resources at the foundational level only compounds the behavioral and emotional struggles these students will carry with them into middle and high school. East Gresham Elementary should be considered next with a student enrollment of 554 (1:369) and suicide screenings of 9.6% and our 2 big High Schools.

Thank you for your time, your leadership, and your thoughtful consideration of how we can use future resources to equitably protect our students' mental health and academic future.

Sincerely,

Karen Harshfield, MS, PhD Candidate

K-12 COSA

Gresham-Barlow School District