

April 21, 2020

Dear Members of the Woodbridge Board of Education (WBOE),

I am writing you today regarding the proposed 2020-2021 school budget and potential cuts to personnel. It is my understanding that the budget for the upcoming school year will require fiscal cuts and tough decisions. As a parent and active community member, it is my hope that your decision-making process will take into consideration the needs of our children and be based in current research regarding best practices for school staffing.

Specifically, I hope the WBOE will consider the findings of the ACLU's recent report *Cops and no Counselors: How the Lack of School Mental Health Staff is Harming Children* (<https://www.aclu.org/report/cops-and-no-counselors>). I have attached the two-page executive summary of the report to this letter; however, I want to highlight a few key findings:

- Professional standards for school staffing recommend *at least*:
 - One counselor for every 250 students;
 - **One social worker for every 250 students**; and
 - One psychologist for every 750 students.
- Schools that employ more school-based mental health providers see:
 - Improved attendance rates;
 - Lower rates of suspension, expulsions, and other disciplinary incidents; and
 - Improved academic achievement.
- Data shows that school staff who provide health and mental health services to our children not only improve the health outcomes for those students, but **also improve school safety**.
- There is **no evidence that police in schools improve school safety**.

As a member of the WBOE Ad Hoc Safety Committee, I am concerned that that the WBOE is considering eliminating the part-time social work position at the school, which, as noted above, already falls below professional guidelines. As the ACLU report notes, our children are experiencing record levels of depression, anxiety, and trauma. School is often the first place that this trauma presents itself, often manifesting in the form of illness, acting out, self-harm, and other behavioral issues. Our children are not immune; in fact, these and more serious behaviors are what prompted the formation of the WBOE Ad Hoc Safety Committee. Research would suggest that if we want to improve safety and reduce behavioral issues, maintaining and potentially even increasing the social work position is critical.

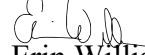
The conception that replacing the part-time social work position with a full-time psychologist somehow mitigates the loss of the social worker is misguided. While both of these professions provide mental health services, their training, licensing and job functions are extremely different. Social workers are trained to address the external social, behavioral, economic, and health problems that may impact a child. In this regard, their work may extend to helping children and families navigate systems (e.g., child welfare, health care) or access needed resources (e.g., government benefits, health insurance). In turn, a psychologist is specifically trained to focus on mental health, and their work often does not extend beyond the specific child they are serving.

The importance of having a social worker at Beecher cannot be overstated. In the time of COVID-19, however, the need for this position is even more pronounced. Current data suggests

that as the 2020-2021 school year begins, there will be an increase in families facing economic hardship as well as an increase in disclosures of abuse and neglect that occurred while children were isolating at home (please note those two items are not necessarily correlated). The role of the social worker during the 2020-2021 school year will be critical to ensuring that all children and families receive the support they need to successfully begin a new school year and deal with the inevitable repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In closing, I respect and recognize the important and difficult decisions that the WBOE will need to make to ensure the fiscal stability of Beecher during the 2020-2021 school year. It is my hope that as you move forth in your process your decisions will be as research and evidence informed as possible.

Warmly,



Erin Williamson

Licensed Clinical Social Worker

Mother of a Second Grader

Cops and No Counselors

How the Lack of School Mental Health Staff
Is Harming Students



ACLU

Executive Summary

The U.S. Department of Education recently required every public school to report the number of social workers, nurses, and psychologists employed for the first time in history. Data about school counselors had been required previously, but this report provides the first state-level student-to-staff ratio comparison for these other school-based mental health personnel, along with school counselors. It reviews state-level student-to-school-based mental health personnel ratios as well as data concerning law enforcement in schools. The report also reviews school arrests and referrals to law enforcement data, with particular attention to disparities by race and disability status. A key finding of the report is that schools are under-resourced and students are overcriminalized.

Today's school children are experiencing record levels of depression and anxiety, alongside multiple forms of trauma. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the suicide rate among children ages 10 to 17 increased by 70 percent between 2006 and 2016.¹ Approximately 72 percent of children in the United States will have experienced at least one major stressful event—such as witnessing violence, experiencing abuse, or experiencing the loss of a loved one—before the age of 18.²

School counselors, nurses, social workers, and psychologists are frequently the first to see children who are sick, stressed, traumatized, may act out, or may hurt themselves or others. This is especially true in low-income districts where other resources are scarce. Students are 21 times more likely to visit school-based health centers for treatment than anywhere else.³ Schools that employ more school-based mental health providers see improved attendance rates, lower rates of suspension and other disciplinary incidents, expulsion, improved academic achievement and career preparation, and improved graduation rates.⁴ Data shows that school staff who provide health and mental health services to our children not only improve the health outcomes for those students, but also improve school safety.⁵ However, there is no evidence that police in schools improve school safety—indeed, in many cases they are causing harm.⁶ When in schools, police do what they are trained to do—detain, handcuff, and arrest. This leads to greater student alienation and a poorer school climate.

Given this information, we would expect school boards, school principals, and government leaders to be working to remove law enforcement from our schools and using every available resource to build up school-based health professionals. But that has not been the trend. Instead, funding for police in schools has been on the rise, while our public schools face a critical shortage of counselors, nurses, psychologists, and social workers. As this report reveals, millions of students are in schools with law enforcement but no support staff:

- 1.7 million students are in schools with police but no counselors.
- 3 million students are in schools with police but no nurses.
- 6 million students are in schools with police but no school psychologists.
- 10 million students are in schools with police but no social workers.
- 14 million students are in schools with police but no counselor, nurse, psychologist, or social worker.

Our report reveals that schools fortunate enough to have mental health professionals are still grossly understaffed. Professional standards recommend at least one counselor and one social worker for every 250 students, and at least one nurse and one psychologist for every 750 students and every 700 students

respectively. These staffing recommendations reflect a minimum requirement. Nonetheless, 90 percent of students in public schools fail to meet this standard when supporting students. Even in schools with a significant lack of health support staff, law enforcement presence is flourishing. Many states reported 2-3 times as many police officers in schools than social workers. Additionally, five states reported more police officers in schools than nurses.

The consequences for these funding decisions fall on the most vulnerable students. Teachers are often not equipped to deal with the special needs posed by children with disabilities. Furthermore, historically marginalized students, such as students of color, may attend schools with fewer resources and supports. When there are no other behavioral resources at hand, some teachers request help from law enforcement. This results in an increased criminalization of our youth: we found that schools with police reported 3.5 times as many arrests as schools without police. As a result, students with disabilities and students of color are most frequently criminalized. Consider these findings:

- Students with disabilities were arrested at a rate 2.9 times that of students without disabilities. In some states, they were 10 times as likely to be arrested than their counterparts.
- Black students were arrested at a rate 3 times that of white students. In some states, they were 8 times as likely to be arrested.
- Pacific Island/Native Hawaiian and Native American students were arrested at a rate 2 times that of white students.
- Latinx students were arrested at a rate 1.3 times that of white students.
- Black girls made up 16 percent of the female student population but were 39 percent of girls arrested in school. Black girls were arrested at a rate 4 times that of white girls. In North Carolina, Iowa, and Michigan, Black girls were more than 8 times as likely to be arrested than white girls.
- Native American girls had a school arrest rate 3.5 times that of white girls. Native American girls were 12 percent of girls in Montana but were 62 percent of female arrests in that state.
- Black and Latino boys with disabilities were 3 percent of students but were 12 percent of school arrests.

This report presents detailed results, state by state. It outlines which states have the least support staff and greatest police presence. In addition, it puts this data in context by reviewing the history of how we got here. Lastly, it presents key recommendations to reverse course, including:

- Federal, state, and local dollars must prioritize counselors, psychologists, social workers, and nurses instead of police.
- The Department of Education should not just continue to collect the data on school support staff and student interactions with police, it should also take steps to ensure the data is more complete and accurate.