



# Investing in Student Safety and Success

## The Growing Importance of Effective Staffing in Virginia Schools

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### Executive Summary

School counselors, social workers, psychologists, and nurses play essential roles in meeting the mental health needs of students, keeping all students safe, reducing the use of exclusionary discipline, and helping students achieve academic and career success. Over the past decade in Virginia, the number of school counselors and support staff has fallen, while overall student enrollment has grown – and the number of economically disadvantaged students who can benefit most from their services has increased dramatically. The result is that these professionals must do more with less. School counselors, social workers, psychologists, and nurses face higher caseloads than recommended standards and experience increased responsibilities. For some school counselors, this results in more administrative work and less one-on-one time with students. Inadequate staffing levels undermine the positive outcomes generated by these vital positions.

In its *2017 Annual Report on the Condition and Needs of Public Schools in Virginia*, the Virginia Board of Education (Board) recognized the importance of these positions to student achievement and well-being and recommended higher staffing levels to ensure that all students have access to academic and wellness support services. The Board recommended that the General Assembly amend the Standards of Quality (SOQ) – the formula used by the state to determine the level of support needed to provide a high-quality education – to require at least one counselor for every 250 students, one nurse for every 550 students, and one full-time social worker and psychologist for every 1,000 students.

The General Assembly has the constitutional mandate to either accept or revise the Board's recommendations, yet it did not act on them in the 2018 legislative session. Lawmakers should make this a key priority going forward. By investing in adequate staffing levels for these school professionals, we connect students with essential school support services and help ensure the success and safety of all children in school.



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### **School Counselors**

School counselors have a myriad of responsibilities in meeting the academic, career development, and social and emotional needs of Virginia's students. They assist in class selection, study skill development, and post-secondary planning. Counselors are also involved in the positive personal and social development of students both inside and outside of the classroom. Counselors work with small and large groups to address broader issues and spend time with individual students to work through concerns that may affect their ability to succeed as a student, such as family conflict, abuse, or problematic behavior.

### **School Social Workers**

School social workers take a holistic approach to student success. They have master's degrees in social work, and are trained to respond flexibly to students' life needs, recognizing that academic success requires a healthy home environment. Their responsibilities are wide-ranging and may include connecting homeless students to mainstream resources, assessing students' mental health, providing individual and family counseling services, and coordinating crisis response.

### **School Psychologists**

School psychologists have a specialist-level degree in school psychology. They analyze complex mental health problems and learning disabilities in students and recommend interventions. Their responsibilities range from conducting threat assessments to ensuring that curricula and learning environments are appropriate for a diverse array of learning needs. They also offer individual and group counseling services and connect students to mental health services available outside of school.

### **School Nurses**

School nurses attend to both the immediate and ongoing health needs of students and identify the social determinants of those needs, such as housing stability and access to health insurance. They are often the first responders to students in crisis, and are also health educators and care coordinators.

## **The Changing Landscape of Virginia Public Schools**

School counselors, social workers, psychologists, and nurses play an essential role in the Commonwealth's duty to provide a high-quality public education to all children and to keep students safe. Each of these positions supports academic and career development as well as the physical, social, and emotional well-being of students. These positions are particularly important for addressing the needs of Virginia's growing population of economically disadvantaged students, who may not have access to counseling, career development, and mental health services outside of school. Growing concerns about student safety and well-being and a greater focus on higher education and career success highlight the importance of these staff positions. Over the last decade, however, inadequate staffing and state resources have weakened the critical contributions of school counselors, social workers, psychologists, and nurses to the school environment.

### **Decreased Staffing**

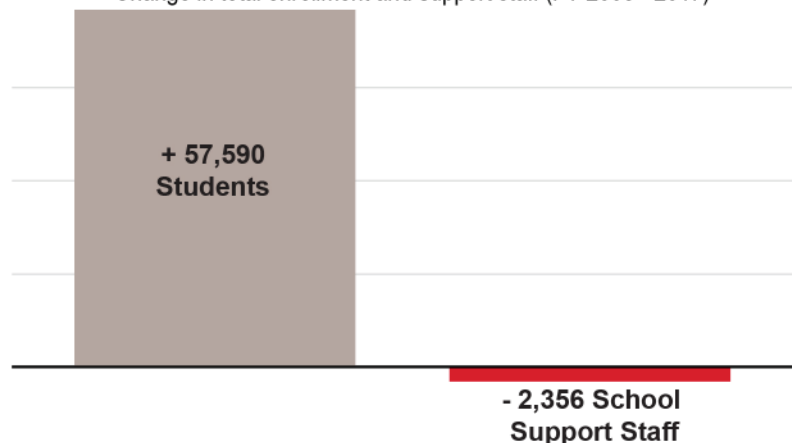
Student enrollment in Virginia schools has grown by more than 57,000 students since the 2007-2008 school year, while staff available to meet the instructional and support needs of these students has decreased. The increase in students and the decrease in staff positions has resulted in increased responsibilities for existing school counselors, social workers, psychologists, and nurses, as well as inappropriate additional burdens on teachers. In addition to increasing student caseloads, staff must take on additional responsibilities. For some school counselors, this often means taking on administrative tasks – including test administration – that had previously been handled by office support positions. This leaves less time for direct, one-on-one work with students.

Overall, support staff positions in Virginia schools (which includes school nurses, social workers, psychologists, and custodial and administrative services) have decreased by 2,356 positions since 2007-2008.

### **Fewer Support Staff**

Student enrollment has risen since 2008, support staffing has dropped.

Change in total enrollment and support staff (FY 2008 - 2017)



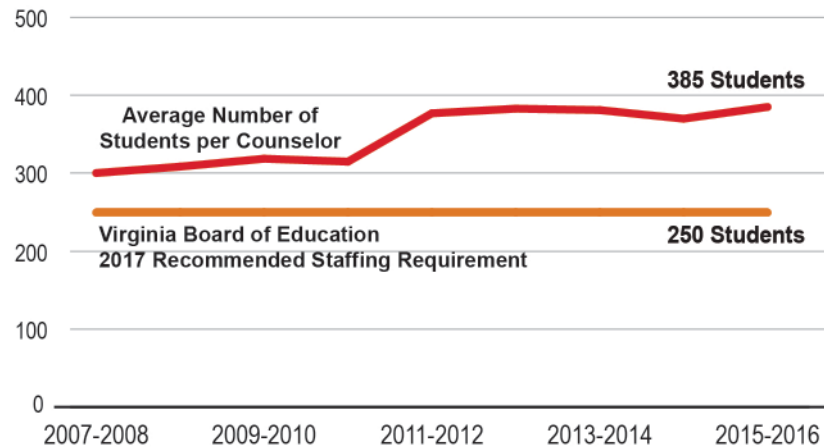
Note: Support staff include school nurses, psychologists, social workers, and other positions such as transportation, maintenance and operations, and administrative staff. Does not include school counselors.

Source: VDOE Superintendent's Annual Report 2007-2008 and 2016-2017

The number of school counselors has decreased by 769 positions, and their caseloads have grown significantly. The number of students per school counselor has increased from 300 students in 2007-2008 to 385 students in 2015-2016. That means, on average, school counselors in Virginia now assist 85 more students than they did seven years prior. The impact of these increased caseloads is less time with each student, all while the state is passing requirements demanding more one-on-one time with students for career planning. It also means counselors have less time to develop trust and strong relationships with students, so that students feel comfortable going to them with any number of challenges, including crisis situations.

## Increasing Caseloads

School counselors in Virginia have 85 more students than they did eight years ago.



Source: TCI analysis of US Department of Education, NCES, Common Core of Data (CCD) and VBOE 2017 Annual Report on the Condition and Needs of Public Schools in Virginia

## Adequate Staffing Is Critical for Student Safety

School counselors, social workers, psychologists, and nurses are vital for supporting the social and mental health needs of all students in ways that promote positive school climate and environments that feel safe for all members of the school community. Ensuring student safety requires schools to take a broad approach that meets the needs of all students, keeps all students engaged in the school community, and prevents bullying, harassment, and discrimination.

### *Meeting the Mental Health Needs of All Students*

This approach to student safety requires examination of the social and mental health needs of students. Nearly 1 in 5 children has a mental health need, and only 20 percent of those children receive specialized care. Unaddressed mental health needs can negatively affect school engagement and academic success. Among students 14 years of age and older with a mental health condition, more than 1 in 3 students drops out of school. When students arrive at school with unaddressed mental health needs or symptoms of childhood trauma, it can be difficult for them to engage cognitively and socially in the school environment.

School counselors, social workers, psychologists, and nurses are uniquely qualified to identify unmet mental health needs, provide direct mental health support for students, coordinate multidisciplinary student support teams, and connect students and families with wraparound services. These positions are also crucial for implementing school-wide trauma-informed practices.

### *Improving School Climate*

In addition to assessing students' individualized needs, adequate access to mental health and other support services contributes to a positive school climate and increases student safety.

A presentation from the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC) to the House Select Committee on School Safety noted the presence of mental health services and counselors are a proven strategy to improve school climate – a key component of school safety. Virginia measures school climate through a survey of students and staff in every school. The anonymous process relies on students and staff to answer questions about their experiences with disciplinary structures, bullying, feelings of engagement, and peer support, among other variables. A large majority of students (82 percent) report they feel safe in their school. Yet one-third of students report incidents of being bullied and about 20 percent report being

physically attacked or threatened. While 72 percent of students identify an adult at school they can talk to about a personal problem, only 28 percent of students who reported being teased or bullied actually told an adult what happened. This discrepancy speaks to the need of having adequate levels of specialized staff who are trained to identify and respond to bullying and violence.

A review by JLARC staff of academic studies found that improving school climate is associated with improvements in multiple measures of student safety including less delinquent behavior, less student victimization, and decreases in suicidal thoughts and behaviors. As such, these professionals are a crucial component of a healthy learning environment.

School mental health professionals are particularly important in collaborating to identify potential threats and safely intervene with students in relevant cases. Virginia law requires schools to establish threat assessment teams to assess students whose behavior may pose a threat to the safety of themselves, other students, or school staff. The Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines (VSTAG), which have been adopted widely throughout the state, call for students to be screened for mental health needs and for those needs to

be considered in developing a safety plan. This is particularly important since a July 2018 review found that half of the threat assessments conducted during the 2016-2017 school year involved threats of harm to self – not others.

The law requires these teams to include staff with expertise in counseling. School psychologists, counselors, and social workers help these assessment teams evaluate the seriousness of a threat and make recommendations based on the specific student's needs. Proper threat assessment procedure reduces the risk of both an overreaction to a non-serious threat and an underreaction to a substantive threat.

Research has shown threat assessments, when implemented properly, can be an effective violence prevention strategy with positive impacts on perceived school climate. As the first state to mandate threat assessment teams in every public K-12 school, Virginia is a pioneer in this area. But surveys have also shown that 34 percent of Virginia's K-12 schools are not conducting threat assessments. School counselors, social workers, psychologists, and nurses are essential for meeting the immediate safety needs of students and for implementing threat assessments properly, without overreacting to transient or non-serious threats.

## Keeping Kids in the Classroom

### *Reducing Chronic Absenteeism*

In order to succeed in the classroom, students must be in the classroom. Virginia recently selected chronic absenteeism as a statewide indicator of school quality for its consolidated state plan under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing more than 10 percent of the school year for any reason, including suspensions and expulsions. Chronic absence from school for adolescents is frequently associated with school climate factors such as bullying and lack of engagement in school. Students who are chronically absent are more likely to experience academic challenges and less likely to graduate on time. Economically disadvantaged students and students with disabilities are at heightened risk of chronic absenteeism.

Adequate staffing levels for school counselors, social workers, psychologists, and nurses are key to improving school attendance and preventing chronic absenteeism. Studies have suggested that employing full-time nurses and lower nurse-to-student ratios could result in fewer early releases and greater student attendance. A similar study in Missouri showed that – particularly in high-poverty schools – when counselors are responsible for no more than 250 students, these schools also had better attendance and graduation rates.

**While 72 percent of students identify an adult at school they can talk to about a personal problem, only 28 percent of students who reported being teased or bullied actually told an adult what happened. This discrepancy speaks to the need of having adequate levels of specialized staff who are trained to identify and respond to bullying and violence.**

## *Dismantling the School-to-Prison Pipeline*

Virginia schools continue to use exclusionary discipline at high rates, putting students at risk for disengagement with school, academic challenges, dropping out, and involvement in the criminal justice system. In 2015-2016, Virginia schools issued more than 131,500 out-of-school suspensions to more than 70,000 students, with troubling disparities on the basis of race and disability. The suspension rate for Black students was 3.8 times higher than for Hispanic and White students, while students with disabilities were suspended at a rate 2.6 times higher than their non-disabled peers.

Referrals to law enforcement also continue to plague Virginia schools. In 2013-2014, Virginia referred students to law enforcement more often than 47 other states – roughly 10 referrals per 1,000 students. The rate of referrals continues to climb, growing to 13 per 1,000 students in 2015-2016 (the most recent year of available data). The rate of referrals to law enforcement for Black students (23 per 1,000) was two-and-a-half times higher than the rate for White students (9 per

1,000). The disproportionate number of Black students referred to law enforcement is one of the reasons that Virginia is among the states with the most referrals.

Manageable caseloads for school counselors, psychologists, and social workers are crucial for proactively identifying student behavior challenges, reducing exclusionary discipline, and implementing evidence-based alternatives to school exclusion – including Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and restorative practices. When counselors are able to spend more individual time with students, they see better behavioral outcomes. Mental health staff will likely understand how to better address behavioral issues if they do arise, and advocate for appropriate student accountability, perhaps reducing the number of overly punitive reactions to behavioral concerns.

In fact, schools with lower student-to-counselor ratios have lower suspension rates, and studies have shown this to be especially true in high-poverty schools. In Virginia, where students of color make up a large share of students in high-poverty

schools, improving school counselor caseloads and the threat assessment process could help address the racial disparities in suspensions, expulsions, and police referrals.

## **Future Success Beyond the Classroom**

School counselors, social workers, psychologists, and nurses provide services that help ensure success far beyond graduation. Beginning with students entering ninth grade in the 2018-2019 school year (Class of 2022), all graduating students must meet the new high school graduation requirements set forth in the “Profile of a Virginia Graduate.” These requirements emphasize a wide range of skills necessary to make students “life-ready” – having or demonstrating the content knowledge, career planning, workplace skills, and community and civic responsibility deemed essential for future success.

The Profile of a Virginia Graduate emphasizes multiple paths toward college and career readiness to prepare students for success in the 21st-century economy.



**Adequately staffing these critical positions will help to address barriers that keep kids out of the classroom.**

School counselors in particular will play an integral role in developing opportunities for students to pursue internships, externships, and credentialing. The Virginia Board of Education has noted:

The Profile of a Virginia Graduate will intensify the need for additional school counselors further, as academic and career planning will be enhanced at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Academic and career plans, which are already required to be developed during the middle school years, will become integrated into the redesigned high school, requiring more one-on-one planning time as counselors work with students to select and periodically review their pathways to graduation.

Sufficient one-on-one time for students and school counselors is particularly important for students of color and students from low-income families. In one nationwide analysis, African-American students were found to be 1.85 times as likely as White students to name their school counselor as having had the greatest influence on their postsecondary plans. Similarly, first-generation prospective college students, who are more likely to be from families with low incomes, were nearly two-and-a-half times more likely than non-first-generation students to name counselors as their biggest influence.

School counselors have long played a critical role in helping students prepare for future success by helping students determine their post-secondary plans and fulfill necessary prerequisites. Their increased role in encouraging social and emotional well-being – combined with the additional expertise of social workers, psychologists, and nurses in addressing barriers and providing supports for students – may have an even greater impact on student success.

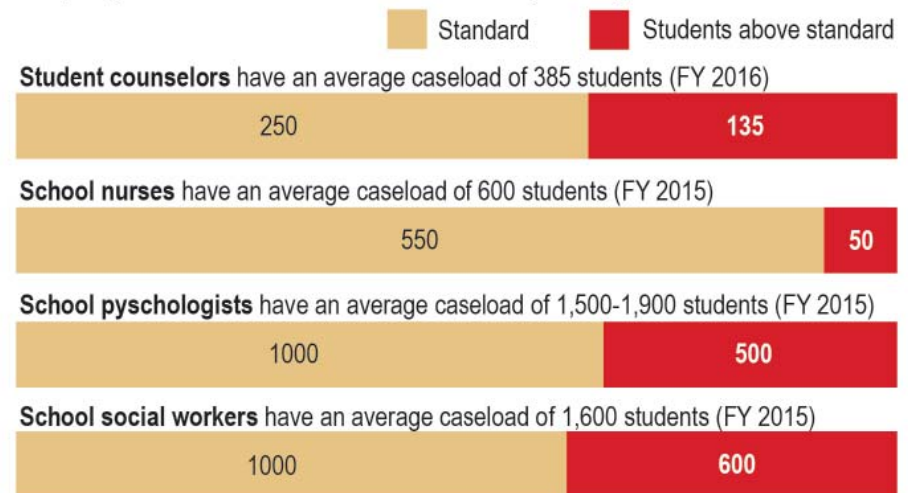
## Opportunity for Improvement and a Path Forward

Ensuring that students have the resources they need is critical to their success and safety – and those resources include time. Reducing caseloads for Virginia’s staff who provide critical support to our students means more time available to work with students, whether it is exploring postsecondary plans, addressing personal issues that may be barriers to positive development, attending to the physical and nutritional health of students, or identifying concerns before they become tragedies.

In its *2017 Annual Report on the Condition and Needs of Public Schools in Virginia*, the Virginia Board of Education recommended that the Standards of Quality (SOQ) be amended to require each local school board to employ one school counselor for every 250 students, one full-time nurse for every 550 students, one full-time social worker for every 1,000 students, and one full-time psychologist for every 1,000 students.

### Staff Caseloads Exceed Recommended Standards

Comparing caseloads to standards recommended by the Virginia Board of Education



Note: VDOE estimates are approximations due to inconsistent data reporting and staffing arrangements  
 Source: VBOE Annual Report on the Condition and Need of Public Schools in Virginia, VDOE FY 2015. (Psychologists, Social Workers, and Nurses) and NCES Common Core of Data FY2016 (Counselors)

Virginia is currently well below those benchmarks. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics from 2015-2016 indicates there were 385 students for each school counselor in Virginia. Data on current staffing levels for other positions in Virginia is limited, but the Board of Education estimates that for the 2015-2016 school year, there were approximately 600 students for each nurse, roughly 1,600 students for each social worker, and roughly 1,500 to 1,900 students for each psychologist in the Commonwealth.

A significant investment is needed from state and local governments to increase staffing to meet the recommended caseloads for these positions. For fiscal year 2018, the Virginia Department of Education estimates the state cost for all four positions would total \$175.5 million: \$82.4 million to meet the standard for school counselors, \$48.7 million for school social workers, \$42.7 million for school psychologists, and \$1.8 million for school nurses. There is an additional cost to localities of \$143.6 million, since local governments are required to provide 45 percent of the costs of meeting the staffing standards.

School counselors, social workers, psychologists, and nurses have a great impact on student success. As their responsibilities increase, that positive impact could expand as well. But only if the Commonwealth supports sufficient staffing conducive to providing and maintaining a high-quality education in Virginia's schools, as is required by the Constitution of Virginia. By investing in these positions, we are investing in students. The return on that investment is invaluable in ensuring that every student succeeds and that every student is provided greater and more equitable access to pursue their dreams beyond the classroom.

| <b>A Path Forward</b>  |          |
|--|----------|
| State investments needed to meet recommended student caseloads |          |
| One school counselor for every 250 students (K-12)             | \$82.4 M |
| One full-time social worker for every 1,000 students           | \$48.7 M |
| One full-time school psychologist for every 1,000 students     | \$42.7 M |
| One full-time school nurse for every 550 students              | \$1.8 M  |

Source: Virginia Board of Education's 2017 Annual Report on Condition and Needs of Public Schools in Virginia



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