

Ms. Mary Blanco, Board Member

SUBJECT: REQUEST CREATION OF TASK FORCE IN EFFORT TO INCREASE PERSONALIZED COUNSELING SERVICES TO M-DCPS STUDENTS

COMMITTEE: PERSONNEL, STUDENT, SCHOOL & COMMUNITY SUPPORT

LINK TO STRATEGIC PLAN: SAFE, HEALTHY, & SUPPORTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

School counselors provide counseling services in three critical areas: academic, personal/social, and career. These services help students address emotional, social, or behavioral problems resulting in improved academic achievement and healthier relationships. Additionally, it helps students develop a clearer focus and sense of direction for their post-secondary careers.

Studies published by Professional School Counseling verify the role of counselors in student success with improved ACT and SAT scores, more informed college decision-making, fewer disciplinary actions, improved attendance and more. There is also evidence that counselors are instrumental in recognizing and referring students experiencing academic and/or behavioral/emotional difficulties to school psychologists and mental health providers through the School Support Team. Counselors also play a critical role in establishing a cooperative and collaborative partnership between the home and school.

Since 1965, the American School Counselor Association has recommended a student-to-school counselor ratio of 250:1. Data from the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics showed the national student-to-school-counselor ratio was 408:1 during the 2021-2022 school year. The ratio in Miami-Dade County Public Schools in 2022 was 473:1.

Establishing a genuine human connection and rapport between a student and counselor is critical in ensuring that students can seek assistance when needed. To successfully assist students, it is critical that we increase our efforts to ensure that more personalized services to our students are provided throughout the year. Relationships need to be created early on allowing counselors to interact with students to establish a relationship built on trust and confidentiality. The Association of School Counselors recommends that counselors spend most of their time in direct service to and in contact with students, yet the high number of students on our counselors' caseload and additional duties counselors are often assigned make this difficult.

In addition, child mental health has become a national priority. Our state and school district have emphasized the importance of this by allocating additional funds and resources for our students. My fellow colleagues on the School Board and predecessors have proffered several board items promoting mental health. Miami Dade County Public Schools has increased mental health services significantly by creating new positions within our schools and by contracting additional mental health counselors through our community partnerships. While this is a much needed and necessary strategy, school counselors still provide other support services such as academic counseling, promoting school involvement, and assisting with post-secondary planning. These are critical areas of student support that are not addressed by mental health providers. Individualized attention is critical at all grade levels, from elementary through high school.

Students must receive adequate academic, emotional, and behavior support and all graduating high school students should have a post-secondary plan whether it is entering the job force, a certificate program, a community college, or 4-year university. Counselors remain the key factor in providing this support.

While a limited number of our schools approach the 250:1 ratio, the majority are closer to the national average, and many are almost 3-times the recommended ratio or higher. Currently there is a counselor shortage and while the district has made strides in working with universities to create a pipeline for some of our current employees to become counselors, a shortage remains. Additionally, there is a large population of undergraduate students, exploring careers in disciplines such as psychology and other related fields, who are unsure of what they can do with their degree once secured. This untapped population may likely be interested in working within schools and working with children. A concerted effort to attract these students into our schools as teachers, CAP advisors, or other positions could allow the District to fill other openings while also encouraging and facilitating obtaining a master's degree in counseling.

This item seeks to formulate an intentional strategy designed to alleviate current counselor workload and increase counseling services in order to increase student achievement, provide social and emotional support, and ensure all students graduate with a post-secondary plan.

This item has been reviewed and approved by the Office of the General Counsel as to form and legal sufficiency.

**ACTION PROPOSED BY
MS. MARY BLANCO:**

That The School Board of Miami-Dade County, Florida, authorize the Superintendent of Schools to establish a School Counselor Task Force, as follows:

1. Appoint the membership of the School Counselor Task Force to include a representative from the United Teachers of Dade; a representative from the Office of Academics and Transformation; a representative from Human Capital; a Region Superintendent; a Region Director; two currently employed M-DCPS counselors; a school principal; a school assistant principal; and other members as identified by the Superintendent of Schools;
2. Appoint the Chair of the School Counselor Task Force;
3. Designate the purpose of the School Counselor Task Force to make recommendations to reduce the overall student to school counselor ratios while prioritizing those schools with higher ratios and need by including, but not limited to:
 - a. Through the annual budget process explore the feasibility of increasing the number of school counselors to lower the student to school counselor ratio;

- b. Creating partnerships with local institutions of higher education to increase the pool of school counseling candidates;
 - c. Promoting and marketing job opportunities available to current college students and recent graduates with bachelor's degrees in psychology and other related fields for which they are qualified (i.e., CAP advisors, teachers, etc.) while also encouraging and facilitating the ability to obtain a master's degree in counseling;
 - d. Creating a greater number of partnerships with various South Florida universities who offer master's degrees in school counseling to create expanded opportunities that allow current employees enter their programs;
 - e. Declaring school counselor positions a critical staff shortage area, if appropriate;
 - f. Working with the Miami-Dade County Legislative Delegation to support legislation that may create a tuition reimbursement program specifically designed to promote more candidates pursuing careers in counseling; and
4. Provide a report of the School Counselor Task Force findings at the Personnel, Student, School & Community Support Committee of October 4, 2023.