

Committee: Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment

Bill Number: Senate Bill 545 – Primary and Secondary Education – Public School Employees – Salaries

Hearing Date: February 28, 2024

Position: Support

Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and Members of the Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee,

I am an assistant professor of counseling at the first HBCU in Maryland, Bowie State University, and I stand before you today to express unwavering support for Senate Bill 545. This bill highlights the progress for primary and secondary education, with a particular focus on enhancing the recruitment and retention of school counselors, a vital component of our educational system.

The Maryland School Counselor Association has already pointed out that SB 545 paves the way for necessary reforms in acknowledging that competitive salary increases are crucial for attracting and retaining school counselors. This legislation seeks to extend eligibility for salary enhancements, currently exclusive to nationally board-certified teachers (NBCTs), to include additional highly qualified educators, such as school counselors. This adjustment is not merely administrative, it is a recognition of the important role that school counselors play in the educational and personal development of our students.

School counselors are on the front lines, addressing the academic, career, and emotional needs of students. They are pivotal in creating environments where students can thrive academically and personally. The challenges of today's educational landscapes, including increased academic pressures, social and emotional challenges, and the need for college and career readiness, underscore the critical role of school counselors. Their expertise not only supports students in overcoming barriers to success but also fosters a school culture that promotes wellness and inclusivity.

The importance of recruiting and retaining highly qualified school counselors cannot be overstated. I see this first hand as a professor in the school counseling program. We have seen a reduction in the applicants to become school counselors, this will have a direct impact on the school counselors in the pipeline to be hired in our local school systems. With the ongoing challenges in education the role of school counselors has become even more vital. They are essential in supporting students' mental health, providing crisis intervention, and ensuring students remain engaged and motivated in their educational journeys. The proposed legislation acknowledges this by aligning the treatment of school counselors with that of their teaching colleagues regarding salary increases. This is a step in the right direction recognizing the value of all educators and ensuring that schools can attract and retain the best professionals.

In conclusion, Senate Bill 545 is an important piece of legislation that recognizes the essential role of school counselors in our educational system. This is also on par with other states that have similar legislation to support salary increases for school personnel. By expanding eligibility for salary increases to include these key professionals, we not only acknowledge their value but also take a significant step towards ensuring that our schools are staffed with dedicated, highly qualified counselors who can make a profound difference in the lives of students. I urge you to support this bill, affirming our collective commitment to the well-being and success of all students.

Thank you for considering my testimony on this critical issue.

Sincerely,

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