

Life Skills 2.0

Proposal

December 2020



South Texas Youth Congress

Life Skills 2.0

Proposal

Dear Friend

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic a student would meet with their counselor maybe five minutes during a semester. These visits are hurried and mostly related to class schedules, which courses lineup with a student's career path, and information on college applications. This time is all a counselor can dedicate to an individual student because on average they are responsible for 400-500 students. Add to this the disruptive behavior of some students places more strain on a counselor's time to be effective.

Further stressing a counselor's time are clerical duties, monitoring hallways and cafeterias, proctoring state mandated exams, and redundant paperwork.

Now in the pandemic, access to a counselor is further restricted by a virtual barrier.

What we are proposing is an update of the Life Skills Counselor proposal, as reflected in HB 1640 which passed the House in 2019, but unfortunately stalled in the Senate.

In this proposal we continue to insist on the urgency for a Life Skills Counselor. This counselor would work with district administration, certified therapists, mental health and social service professionals to provide therapeutic techniques to students. A Life Skills Counselor would give students a way to cope with academic pressure, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and bullying. We believe such a counselor can significantly improve the school learning environment and academic achievement.

A Life Skills counselor can act like a first responder. They can focus on students who are in a troubled mental state, provide means to tone down disruptive and belligerent behavior. Prevent the behavior from sinking into drug abuse, which leads to bringing in the police.

The Life Skills counselor would work with students identified with mental health issues. This would avoid unnecessary legal repercussions. With the guidance of the Life Skills counselor the student can recover and restore their life opportunities.

In today's pandemic, mental health issues have come to light. We know the struggles students are facing, learning over the internet, isolation, the adjustments to a new lifestyle.

The Life Skills Counselor ought to be seen as an investment in the safety, health, and wellbeing of students. We have reviewed some ISD budgets in RGV and believe that some items deserve a second look to assess relevance, and which perhaps can be realigned to support a Life Skills counselor, in shared cost with the state.

Education is the foundation on which our state is built upon, as such, we ask that our concerns be taken seriously and not seen as a problem, but seen as part of the solution.

We respectfully submit this proposal on behalf of the South Texas Youth Congress.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

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Life Skills 2.0

ADDENDUM

December 2020

Life Skills Counselor

PURPOSE:

The establishment of a special school counselor to work with ISD administration, certified therapists, mental health and social service professionals, and law enforcement authorities. The counselor would work with students who require specific attention to treat mental health issues, instances of bullying, or substance abuse. To help ease and relax tension.

HB1640 which represents this purpose was filed in 2019. The bill passed the House by a wide margin but stalled in the Senate.

TEXAS EDUCATION CODE

TITLE 2. PUBLIC EDUCATION

SUBCHAPTER A. SCHOOL COUNSELORS AND COUNSELING PROGRAMS

Sec. 33.006. SCHOOL COUNSELORS; GENERAL DUTIES. (a) The primary responsibility of a school counselor is to counsel students to fully develop each student's academic, career, personal, and social abilities.

(b) In addition to a school counselor's responsibility under Subsection (a), the school counselor shall:

- (1) participate in planning, implementing, and evaluating a comprehensive developmental guidance program to serve all students and to address the special needs of students:

Source: Texas Education Agency

- According to the State Board of Education, rules on general responsibilities of school districts states: (Texas Administrative Code, Title 19, Part II, §75.2)

“Every effort should be made to relieve counselors of extraneous tasks so that they may appropriately meet their responsibilities to consult and counsel with students as to their individual educational needs, goals, and aims.”

- In a 2019 report by the nonprofit Mental Health America—Texas ranks near the bottom for youth access to mental health care.
- Texas public schools had 266 fewer counselors and 227,996 more students in the 2012-13 school year than in 2009-10. According to the State Board of Education members.
- Counselors’ workloads have grown since 2011, when school districts reduced the number of counselor because the Texas Legislature cut \$5.4 billion to education.

Since then some of these cuts have been restored, which allowed some districts to hire counselor positions but did not reverse the statewide trend.

Numerous studies have shown the effectiveness of school counseling, with lower school counselor-to-student ratios correlating with less absenteeism, lower suspension rates, higher test scores, and other benefits.

The demands of a counselor, such as tracking credits, managing schedules, performing clerical and administrative tasks, supervising testing duties, and attending meetings, restrict their abilities to assist students. Establishing life skills counselors in Texas schools ensures that every counselor can manage their workload more efficiently. Life skills counselors also will provide students with the support system they need with issue or concern they might have. The stigma around mental health and mental illnesses will decrease as these Life Skills counselors are established, creating a healthier community and learning environment.

Link to report issued by the
Texas Education Agency

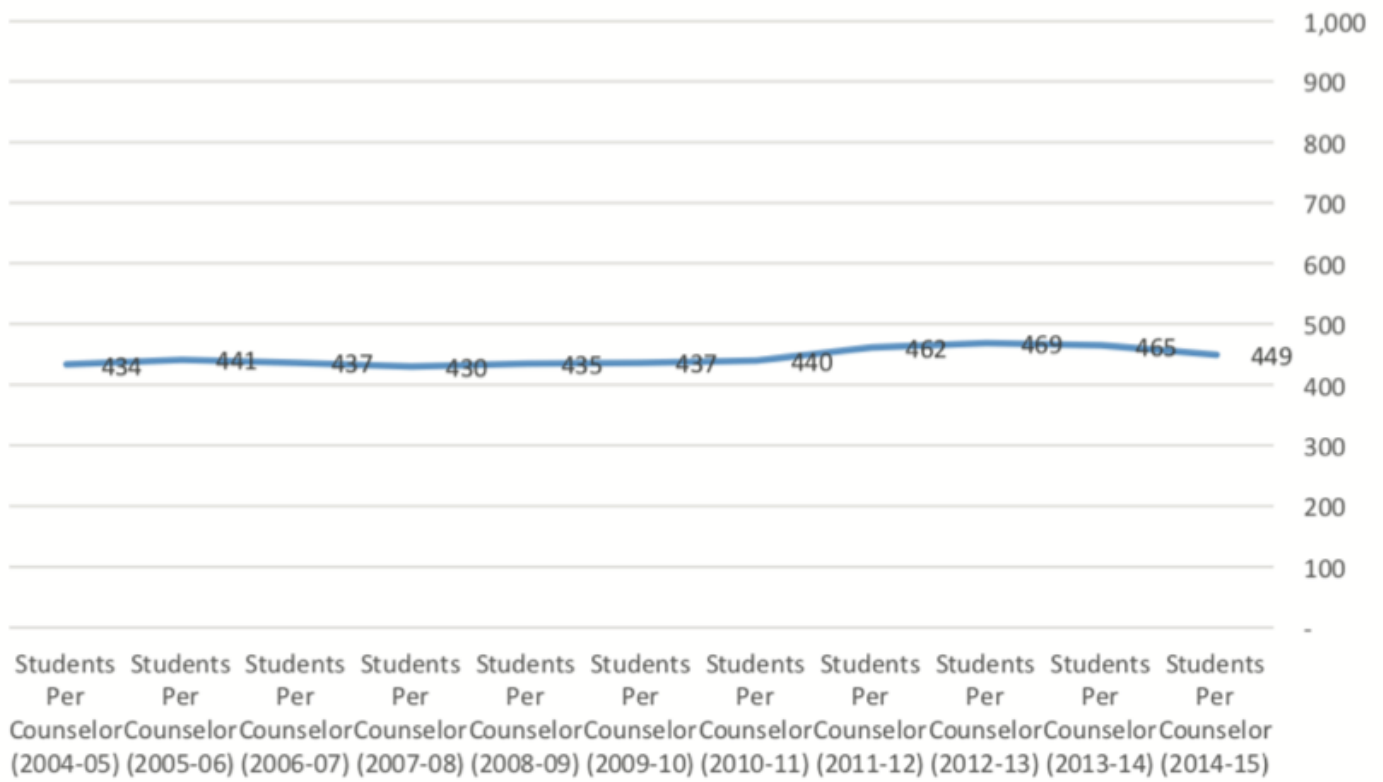
[Effectiveness of universal school-based mental health awareness programs among youth in the US: a systematic review](#)

Source: TEA

Counselor to Student Ratio

In 2017-18 the ratio was 450 students to 1 counselor. In some schools like in South Texas the ratio is 500+ to one.

Texas Student-to-Counselor Ratio, 2004-05 to 2014-15



Percent Change Enrollment: +19%
 Percent Change in Counselors: +15%
 Percent Change in Student-to-Counselor Ratio: +4%

Resources to fund a Life Skills counselor



Gov. Greg Abbott highlights Frisco in his 2018 school safety action plan giving importance on school counselors and “emphasizes the need to prevent security threats in advance through early identification of students who are in crisis,” his report stated in a press release issue August 30, 2018.

Governor Abbott Releases Report Highlighting Progress On School Safety Initiatives In Texas

August 27, 2019 | Austin, Texas | Press Release

From [Press Release](#)

Preventing Threats In Advance

- The Mental Health First Aid program experienced a 37% increase in the number of public school district employees and school resource officers trained in fiscal year (FY) 2018 compared to FY 2017, and over 10,000 school personnel were trained in FY 2019.
 - Since August 2018, the Texas State School Safety Center (TxSSC) has held seven threat assessment workshops with 425 participants, and will host seven more workshops this August.
 - The 2020-21 state budget provides \$5 million to Texas Tech Health Sciences Center for the Telemedicine Intervention Triage and Referral (TWITR) Project, a model for identifying students at risk for committing school violence and intervening with those students before acts of violence occur.
 - **Senate Bill 11 provides districts with \$100 million in funding for school based mental health centers, the hiring of counselors, and other mental health needs, and provides \$99 million in funding for the Texas Mental Health Care Consortium.**
 - Seven federally funded fusion centers have been established in Texas, which coordinate with local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies to identify, prevent, investigate, and respond to criminal and terrorist acts.
 - Since the inception of the Department of Public Safety's (DPS) iWatch Texas App, there have been over 8,879 downloads. This app is a tool for citizens to report suspicious activities or behaviors that may indicate criminal, terroristic, or school safety-related threats.
- Senate Bill 11 provides districts with \$100 million in funding for school based mental health centers, the hiring of counselors, and other mental health needs, and provides \$99 million in funding for the Texas Mental Health Care Consortium.

NOTE: [SB11](#) permits school districts to solicit private and public funds to hire a Life Skills counselor.

Resources to fund a *Life Skills* counselor

Budget realignment an investment to:

- Dedicate time to guidance and social skills.
- Detect emotional distress and possible instances of unsafe behavior.
- Provide an outlet of input for the student body. (Student body policy advisory group)

Actual 2018 budget for a certain ISD in South Texas.

Actual 2018		Adopted Budget 2018-2019			
		General Funds	Fed	Total	
Revenue	183,443,392	Guidance & Counseling	6,349,283	1,458,889	7,808,172
Local	28,505,466	Social Work Services	976,860	542,326	1,519,186
State	132,958,070	Health Services	1,622,190	767,532	2,389,722
Federal	14,901,467	Security & Monitoring	3,393,431		3,393,431
Other Resources	7,078,389	Community Services	1,404,670	2,519,039	3,923,709
		Juvenile Alt. Ed.	100,000		100,000
		Other Intergovernmental	268,927		268,927
		Represents 11% of 2018 Revenue		19,403,147	
		Compare this to other departments.			

NOTE: Budget items to consider realigning to support a life skills counselor.

Counseling vs the Police

“there is no evidence that increased police presence in schools improves school safety,”

Nationally, schools reported more than 27,000 sworn law enforcement officers compared with just 23,000 social workers.

According to a study by the ACLU published March 2019, titled Cops and no Counselors, found that police in schools do not improve student safety, student educational outcomes, or student mental health.

Data by the ACLU show mental health professionals in schools “can also improve overall school safety,” the report found. Levels of depression and anxiety are at record highs for school children, the report said, which cited a 70 percent increase in suicide rates for children ages 10-17 over 10 years, from 2006 to 2016, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

ACLU Report

[School to Prison Pipeline](#)
[Cops and No Counselors](#)

Many schools over the past decade have invested scarce resources to fund more police in schools. School districts have shown a near obsession with “hardening” schools despite federal data revealing that the real crisis of schools isn’t violence, but a broad failure to hire enough support staff to serve students’ mental health needs.

"When there are no other behavioral resources at hand, some teachers request help from law enforcement," the report explained. "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."

Rather than invest in teachers and counselors, many school districts are instead spending scarce funds on hiring police to patrol their schools. These officers have not been trained to deal with the challenges young people are facing.



South Texas Youth Congress is the premiere initiative of the Dream Forward Foundation.
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