



NJSCA POSITION STATEMENT ASSEMBLY BILL #4860

We are excited to announce our support for Angela V. McKnight's sponsorship of Bill A-4860 introduced into the New Jersey Assembly. As we experience changes dealing in these uncertain times, know that your voice counts. The following will give some background on the inception of the bill and address items of concern. Please note that A-4860 can still be modified and we are in constant contact with Assemblywoman McKnight's Office of Legislative Services to consult with her team regarding the language of this bill. We look forward to our continued partnership with Assemblywoman McKnight as A-4860 evolves. NJSCA will be strongly advocating for the bill's passage into law.

For those desiring transparency regarding the creation of the bill:

During the month of February 2020, Assemblywoman Angela V. McKnight contacted NJSCA Executive Board members in hopes of ensuring that all students receive appropriate mental health support within all schools. Influenced by [Lauryn's Law](#), recently passed in Maryland, which requires specific Crisis Response and Suicide prevention training for School Counselors within their 5 year retraining cycles, the Assemblywoman wanted to provide similar incentives in NJDOE. Also important to Assemblywoman McKnight was her mission to decrease School Counselors' caseloads.

NJSCA's Executive Board was fully in support of her requests, but had to apprise the Assemblywoman McKnight of the fact that school districts within the state of New Jersey were not mandated to require the daily assignment of School Counselors to be present in every school, nor are districts required to provide professional development specific to the School Counselors' daily duties.

Understanding NJDOE-Mandated Professional Development Program Requirements:

Currently, all certificated members in New Jersey's educational community are responsible to maintain a Professional Development Program that consists of at least 20 hours of learning time annually to accumulate 100 hours within the span of 5 years to maintain their employment. For 'teachers' earning a summative evaluation score below 2.65, the PDP is replaced by the Corrective Action Plan (CAP). The CAP, by nature, is imposed upon the faculty member for the purpose of increasing his/her evaluation score.

NJSCA fully supports Assemblywoman McKnight's desire to have prescriptive training for School Counselors during the 5 year span of their Professional Development Plan. In their attempts to fulfill state requirements of providing staff member training, many district administrators offer their own PD. Unfortunately, that in-house training is not related to our School Counseling duties and instead is geared toward pedagogical improvement for classroom teachers. If passed into law, McKnight's Bill #4860 mandates would incentivize state leaders and district administrators to provide more appropriate and specialized training for School Counselors in New Jersey.

Bill #4860 proposes: *The State board shall require, as part of the professional development requirements, that each School Counselor complete training in areas **related to the duties of a School Counselor** including, but not limited to, the promotion of mental health awareness, suicide prevention, crisis-intervention, trauma-informed counseling practices, cultural competency and responsiveness, the New Jersey Tiered System of Supports, delivery of social and emotional learning programming, and college and career readiness.*

To be clear, this required training would be to 'maintain' credentials and are not in addition to the 20 hours of professional development already required. It is not "recertification," but rather a requirement to participate in prescriptive professional development training that includes relevant topics specific to the School Counseling field.

We are no longer certified under the title of 'Guidance Counselor' or 'Student Support Services':

Though there are still many districts that operate a 'Guidance' Department and have counselors who hold the former Student Support Services certification, since 2004, the state of New Jersey has certified counselors under the [official endorsement title of School Counselor](#). This was a change in both name and duty. Those serving in the role of School Counselor were no longer intended to provide solely career and college advising. Rather, the NJDOE changed the

endorsement title to reflect that the School Counselor supports the education of the 'Whole Child' using Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and ASCA-model platforms. Along with the endorsement title change 16 years ago, NJDOE officials also removed the requirement to be a certificated teacher, recognizing that candidates seeking certification might possess important experience from other industries, such as the mental health field.

Professional School Counselors who received their graduate training within the last 15 years and/or individuals who have actively participated in School Counseling-directed Professional Development would also be aware of the data informed [CACREP model](#). CACREP standards align with the ASCA Model. And many counselors who received CACREP training in their graduate or postgraduate degree are also eligible to apply to the NJ's Board of Marriage and Family Therapy Examiners to earn independent licensure as an Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC).

Today's School Counselors are vital members of the educational team and provide valuable assistance to students regardless of whether they work in an elementary school or middle school, high school or beyond. They help 100% of the student population in the areas of academic achievement and career and social/emotional development, ensuring today's students become the productive, well-adjusted adults of tomorrow.

It is also important for counselors who were trained prior to 2001 to become proficient in implementing the American School Counselor Model comprehensive approach to proactive school counseling programs. The model has undergone some modifications through the years, with its most recent listed in 2019. Here is the most up to date information regarding the [ASCA Model for Professional Standards and Competencies of School Counselors](#).

The Bill does NOT require ongoing, therapeutic individual counseling.

In order to make it clear that the Bill is not (and was not) intended to require School Counselors to provide ongoing therapy, the following wording has been added:

1. It shall be the role of a school counselor to:
 - a. Recognize and respond to the need for mental health services that promote social and emotional wellness and development for all students
 - b. Design and deliver a comprehensive program for school counseling that promotes the achievement of students
2. Each school counselor employed by a school board in a public elementary or secondary school shall spend at least 80 percent of their staff time during normal school hours providing appropriate school counseling services.
 - a. Appropriate duties include, but not limited to, providing:
 - i. Addressing needs relating to the academic, career, social and emotional development of all students
 - ii. Individual student academic planning and goal setting
 - iii. School counseling classroom lessons based on student success standards
 - iv. Short-term counseling to students
 - v. Referrals for long-term support
 - vi. Collaboration with families/teachers/ administrators/community for student success
 - vii. Advocacy for students at individual education plan meetings and other student-focused meetings
 - viii. Data analysis to identify student issues, needs and challenges

For many of our members who find themselves employed as the only School Counselor present in their district or school, Crisis Response falls very much under their purview. A majority of those 'lone' School Counselors also serve as [Chair of the School Safety Team under their Anti-Bullying Specialist \(ABS\) designation](#) as well. They are required to provide school-wide Proactive Social Emotional Learning programs, developmentally appropriate to their student population, which promote a Safe and Positive School climate along with providing Crisis Intervention measures to address mental health needs and student conflict with an immediate response. This approach encompasses the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) model which compliments [New Jersey's SEL Competencies](#) and [New Jersey's Tiered System of Supports](#) (NJTSS).

Counselors implementing PBIS and NJTSS programs within their schools compliment such initiatives with the ASCA model, thereby promoting [Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success](#). These well-trained counselors are responsible for delivering SEL lessons to the entire population of their school, then intervening with group and/or individual counseling responses to address specific needs that arise within the course of the school year.

According to the statistics below, it is unlikely that today's School Counselors are responsible solely for schedule changes, college fairs, or update bulletin boards or websites. Perhaps, though, students in crisis are simply referred to another department within your school. Going forward, it is important to understand the following facts about today's students:

- **1 in 4** children have been exposed to a traumatic event that can affect learning and/or behavior.*
- **1 in 5** children from birth to 18 years has a diagnosable mental disorder.
- Onset of mental illness may occur as early as 7-11 years old, and half begin by age 14.
- Suicide is the second leading cause of death for ages 10-24.
- Children who struggle with mental health may miss copious amounts of school, and their rates of suspension and expulsion are three times higher than children without a mental health concern or illness.
- Of school-aged children who receive any behavioral or mental health services, 70-80% of them receive them only at school.

*Due to the pandemic, ALL children have now been exposed to a traumatic event.

Please be assured that nowhere in Bill #4860 does it state that School Counselors would be providing long-term therapy, nor is that the intent behind the bill. To clarify, the element which stipulates training in 'Trauma-Informed Counseling Practices' simply means to be mindful when working with the traumatized student, parent, or staff member. It requires a paradigm shift in thinking from "what is wrong with that person?" to "what happened to that individual?" and approaching the situation accordingly. Being a knowledgeable responder within the trauma-informed care model also helps to prevent the possibility of re-traumatizing individuals. School counselors play an integral role in promoting a trauma-sensitive environment by identifying students affected by trauma and providing needed support and resources ([\[ASCA\], 2016](#)). Also important to recognize is that within the New Jersey's endorsement of School Counselor and the ASCA National Model, all School Counselors are tasked with the duty of developing and coordinating relationships with community agencies to best support students in need.

For those believing the bill "does more for the current leadership of the NJSCA than for the counselors they represent."

The NJSCA Executive Board firmly believes that Bill #4860 fully reflects and represents many of the purposes of the Association, as described in Section 3 of the [organization's bylaws](#):

- To advance the profession of school counseling in order to maximize the educational, vocational, personal, and social growth of each student.
- To improve the standards of school counseling and the relationships with other pupil personnel services for students in P-18.
- To assume an active role in helping young people to understand and improve such services.
- To promote the publication of scientific, educational, and professional materials with the purpose of raising the standards of all who work in school counseling.
- To promote the National Standards for School Counseling and the New Jersey Model for Comprehensive School Counseling Program Development.

It often feels as if we already have too much on our plates to respond to those in crisis, as well. That was the impetus behind Lauryn's Law in Maryland. A mother reached out to her child's assigned School Counselor to ask for help. For whatever reason, the counselor never attempted to contact that child in crisis. A few weeks later, the student died by suicide. Perhaps a simple call from the counselor could have helped. Perhaps not. However, this is what both NJSCA leadership team and Assemblywoman Angela V. McKnight are seeking to prevent. We want New Jersey's School Counselors to be dedicated to becoming fully-educated about the role as established by the NJDOE in 2004, and better prepared to possibly save a life.

The intent of Bill #4860 is to ensure that New Jersey's School Counselors are ready and able to assist students with all types of issues, ranging from academic to personal/social/emotional, by ensuring that School Counselors are spending the vast majority of their work time performing relevant tasks, that School Counselors are trained in trauma-informed care appropriate to their role, and that their caseload is small enough to be able to identify and address any and all types of issues that might be occurring for their students.