

Testimony of Lesli Myers
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On the Elementary and Secondary School Counseling Program Grant Program

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Good morning. My name is Lesli Myers, and I am the Director of Student and Career Support for the Greece Central School District in Greece, NY. My district received an Elementary and Secondary School Counseling Program (ESSCP) grant in 2006.

With this funding we hired additional school counselors and social workers and are implementing two prevention programs that will help students overcome barriers to learning so they can improve their academic achievement and become more successful both in school and in life after graduation.

The Greece Central School District, which is in western New York, is the state's eighth largest school district. We serve 13,500 students in 20 schools. Approximately 5,700 students attend the grades preK-5 in the district's 13 elementary schools; the remaining 7,800 students attend the District's seven middle and high schools.

Our district continues to have an urgent need for additional elementary school counselors and school social workers. We have high student-to-school counselor ratios, a lack of school social workers, and demographic and behavioral risk indicators.

This afternoon, I would like to provide a voice for elementary school children whose lives have been positively impacted by their counselors in the Greece Central School District. At the same time, I want to provide you with some context for these students' remarks.

From a fourth grade girl:

"My dad is an alcoholic. He acts a little mean some times. It really hurts in my heart. I have kept it locked up in my heart for a long time and I think I need to talk about it."

The Greece elementary student population is marked by socioeconomic diversity and is changing rapidly. In 2004-2005, 1,495 students moved into the District during the school year. In nine of 13 elementary schools, at least 10% of the students enrolled in the schools' highest grade were not enrolled in that school the year before. In 2004, an analysis of mobility at three Greece elementary schools revealed that only about half of the students enrolled in kindergarten were

present in the same elementary, or feeder pattern school, four years later. This means that there was approximately a 50% student turnover rate within just four years.

Many elementary students are economically disadvantaged, as measured by the free and reduced lunch rates. Nearly half of the students in four elementary schools qualify for free and/or reduced lunch. District-wide, the number of elementary students eligible for free and reduced lunch increased more than 23% during the past three years. Also in the past three years, the percentage of ethnically and culturally diverse students in Greece elementary schools has increased 43%. Five schools have doubled, or nearly doubled, their non-white student populations during that time.

From three fifth grade boys:

“Thank you for helping us. Since this is our last day together we’ll take your advice about us doing our work, keeping out of trouble and most of all having self control. We appreciate what you have done for us. Now I have a story for you. Here are three boys that have some problems but once they met a lady named Mrs. Smith then they sort of got straightened out.”

The number of Greece elementary school students who were suspended nearly doubled from 2001-2002 to 2004-2005. In 2004-2005, 88 different students were suspended from Greece elementary schools. There were 89 incidents of violent behavior and 12 incidents of weapons possession, indicating that some students were suspended more than once. A disproportionately high percentage of male, African American students were suspended. In 2005, African American males accounted for only 4 percent of the elementary school population, but represented 27% of the suspended students. The number of suspensions in Greece middle schools is high. In 2004-2005, there were 445 suspensions for violent behavior and/or substance abuse, an increase of 24% over 2002-2003, when 360 suspensions were recorded.

Elementary school counselors report they are providing intervention services for more students, are addressing more severe misbehaviors, and are often focused on crisis management rather than prevention services, although they recognize the importance of prevention programming. A kindergarten student, unable to follow classroom procedures, had to be removed from the kindergarten room almost daily. A fifth grade student, who became enraged in his classroom, began tipping over desks and chairs. Two adults were unable to calm the student, who eventually threw a chair through a classroom window. The police were called and the child was taken to the hospital where a mental health evaluation was performed. Physical immobilization is being used more often in all grade levels. Students have bitten, kicked, and hit staff members trying to intervene.

From a fourth grade girl:

“Thank you so much for taking time to listen to my problems and help me to think for myself in solving them.”

In January 2006, due to the increased number of behavioral incidents on buses, the Greece Transportation Department required all bus drivers to attend refresher training on the NYS “Anti-Bullying Campaign.” As the number and severity of these incidents increase, student well-being suffers, and the limited number of counselors and social workers spend a greater percentage of their time on crisis intervention rather than prevention.

To address these conditions, Greece CSD is using ESSCP funds to implement two school-based prevention programs to help students develop social competence and resistance skills. These two programs are delivered in classrooms by teachers and counselors working as a team to provide a seamless delivery of counseling support. Both programs have been researched with ethnically diverse students; special needs students; and white, middle class students and have been found to be effective.

From a fifth grade girl:

“I sincerely thank you for all you’ve done. Things have to get better! You gave me a new state of mind. If it weren’t for you, I don’t know what I would have done.

Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) is being implemented in Kindergarten through fifth grades. PATHS is a comprehensive program that helps develop students’ emotional and social competencies and reduce aggression and behavior problems. *Life Skills Training (LST)* is delivered in all third through fifth grade classrooms to support pro-social skill development and to teach social resistance skills. Full implementation of these two programs will improve the scope and quality of preventive counseling services offered in the elementary schools.

Teachers who have delivered PATHS in other school districts report significant improvements to children’s self-control, emotional understanding, toleration of frustration, and use of effective conflict resolution strategies. Teachers also have reported that special needs students exhibit fewer anxiety/depressive symptoms and conduct problems. LST has been evaluated and proven effective with white, middle class students; ethnically diverse students, especially African American and Hispanic; and in suburban settings. LST teaches students’ general personal and social competence skills, along with a strong emphasis on social resistance skills. A 2003 study of LST in elementary schools showed that students reported higher self-esteem, increased substance abuse knowledge and skills-related knowledge, less smoking, higher anti-drinking attitudes, and lower normative expectations for smoking and alcohol use

To implement these programs, Greece CSD used ESSCP funds to hire an additional 3.5 full-time school counselors and two additional full-time school social workers. The added school counselor positions allowed the district to eliminate shared building assignments, resulting in improved availability of school counselors at each school. The addition of school social workers more than doubled the number of schools that have access to the services of a social worker.

We are confident that our programs initiated through our ESSCP grants will yield significant results for our elementary students. Unfortunately, the needs are just as great among our middle and high school students, but ESSCP funding is not available to help students in the higher grades.

As many of you agree, high school reform should be a key priority in education reform. Effective high schools are vital in preparing students for life after graduation, and we believe that school counselors can be an integral component in high school reform. Programs initiated through ESSCP grants have demonstrated that school counseling improves student performance at the elementary level. As part of the No Child Left Behind Act, Congress expanded the Elementary School Counseling Program to include secondary school activities. However, due to the programs' statutory funding trigger, secondary schools will not benefit unless total funding exceeds \$40 million, with that base amount reserved for elementary schools. That is why ASCA is asking for the ESSCP to be funded at \$75 million to allow middle and high schools to receive grants to provide services to all students. Providing funding at this level will allow support of secondary schools for a similar amount as was provided for elementary schools in fiscal years 2005, 2006 and 2007. School counselors believe that every student from Kindergarten through 12th grade can succeed. School counselors provide students with the tools they need to help them plan and prepare for college and the world of work.

Greece's students are like countless others from across the nation, and I am sure that counselors around the country have received notes like these. There is nothing more gratifying than knowing that we play a role in helping children overcome obstacles and learning to cope with life circumstances so that they can be better prepared to focus on learning when at school.

This is why continued and expanded funding for the Elementary and Secondary School Counseling Program is crucial. ESSCP grants will facilitate the implementation of more programs that will generate data demonstrating the effectiveness of comprehensive school counseling programs. With this data, perhaps one day every school district will learn what we already know in Greece: school counseling makes a difference in the lives of our students.

Each day, children remind us that they often have to deal with outside events and circumstances that interfere with their ability to make the most out of their educational experiences. Let's be careful not to go back to the days when only those students most in crisis received services. Let's continue to utilize best practices in school counseling that focus on prevention and education by providing an accessible, equitable and comprehensive program to all students.

I would like to conclude by reading you a note from two fifth grade girls who wrote this letter to their school counselor:

You have made everyone's life a little easier. Whenever we need some help we know we can depend on you. If you do not already know that you really help, well you do. And thanks for listening to all our silly problems. It just makes us feel a lot better knowing that somebody cares... So please accept our gratitude because without you nothing would be the same."

Thank you.