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School counselors are vital to student support services

By Phyllis Erney Guest columnist

Published 12:01 a.m. ET Oct. 6, 2020

A column published Sept. 27 by Mark McGriff, chair of Citizens for Strong Schools, urged citizens to renew their vote for the One Mill for our Alachua County public schools.

It was an important reminder of the vital services the \$17 million annual funding would help support: school counselors, nurses, librarians, art, music and technology that create the school climate that is most conducive to promoting students' academic achievement. Due to COVID-19, we could lose as much as \$16 million just this year alone.

As a retired Alachua County school counselor, I want to bring attention to the specific services school counselors provide. They have long been a fundamental part of our public schools, but the variety of services they directly and indirectly provide are not always recognized until a crisis occurs.

In recent years, there have been several local and national incidents that bring attention to their role — from school shootings or student suicides and the aftermath, to the more recent COVID crisis and the unexpected, unprecedented stress on schools and families.

While national standards set by the American School Counseling Association call for a ratio of one counselor to 250 students, Alachua and most other Florida counties set the ratio at one counselor to 450 students, which creates an extreme challenge to provide the quality services that counselors are increasingly mandated to provide.

Alachua County has school counselors in every school who have master's degree level or above training and are knowledgeable mental health specialists. While school counselors historically have played an important role in providing programs essential to student academic achievement, there has been a steady shift in the last 30 years or more to deliver programs for personal and social development- to incorporate the needs of "the whole child" into their services.

As societal/cultural changes have increasingly impacted the school culture, there have been several state/district mandates that require school counselors to facilitate the delivery of these additional prevention and intervention programs that now include: anti-bullying, dating violence,

college/career planning, substance use/abuse and, most recently after Parkland, a mental and emotional health unit at all grades 6-12.

When asked about how COVID has impacted the school counselor role, Jennifer Taylor, supervisor of school counseling and student services, said, “Just as all educators are learning how to do their jobs differently, school counselors are being creative and working hard to meet the needs of all students. Counselors and social workers are providing counseling and support both in person and virtually.”

An anecdote from an elementary school counselor notes how she’s working to build connections between the Digital Academy and brick-and-mortar students with a countywide activity, “Start with Hello.”

“There is the passing of an imaginary ball between students across the digital divide, in an effort to help feel like one class. In classroom guidance lessons, the topic of safe/trusted adults comes up — being an upstander, to personal safety,” she said. “It’s great to see students internalize the idea that there are always at least a few trusted adults that they can identify to talk to when they need help with life’s challenges.”

While there has been a slight increase in overall funding from the state for additional resources such as social workers and mental health specialists that are shared by several schools, school counselors continue to serve all students in K-12 by providing comprehensive programs and serving as school leaders and student advocates. Parents find school counselors are also excellent resources for a variety of community resources.

The refunding of the One Mill is vital to help our district fund additional elementary school counselors and other important support resources needed now more than ever. Please vote “yes” for the One Mill.

Phyllis Erney lives in Gainesville and is a retired Alachua County school counselor.