

**Testimony of Dr David Lillenstein, NSCP  
Derry Township School District  
President, School Psychologist Section, PSEA Department of Pupil Services**

Good morning Chairman Schweyer, Chairman Topper, and committee members. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today about mental health in Pennsylvania.

I am Dr. David Lillenstein, a school psychologist with the Derry Township School District in Hershey. I am also the Section President for school psychologists who are members of PSEA, the Pennsylvania Delegate to the National Association of School Psychologists, and Past President and Board member of the Association of School Psychologists of Pennsylvania. I am speaking with you this morning on behalf of over 1,500 Pennsylvania school psychologists and also 1.7 million students in Pennsylvania.

In Pennsylvania, school psychologists work in public and private schools, IUs, and charter schools. School psychologists support students' ability to learn and teachers' ability to teach. We bring extensive training and expertise in learning, mental health, and behavior to remove educational barriers to learning and help students succeed academically, socially, behaviorally, and emotionally. School psychologists bring this expertise into the school environment, which is a natural setting where students can receive mental and behavioral health supports with limited stigma and financial barriers.

School psychologists provide direct academic, behavioral, and emotional support interventions to students; consult with teachers, families, and other mental health, special education, and pupil services professionals to design and improve support strategies; work with school administrators to improve school-wide practices and policies; and collaborate with community providers to coordinate needed services. We help schools successfully improve academic achievement, promote positive behavior and mental health, and create safe and supportive learning environments for all.

The recommended ratio is 1 school psychologist for every 500 students, and in Pennsylvania the current ratio is 1 to 1400. Pennsylvania is currently experiencing shortages of school psychologists across the Commonwealth and many districts this year have been unable to fill open positions. There is such a high demand for the services a school psychologist can provide, both with special education and mental health, that many districts are actively seeking to hire additional school psychologists. With too few school psychologists, activities are primarily reactive in nature. With more school psychologists and better ratios, there is more time for prevention activities that can reduce bullying, build student resilience, increase prosocial skills, and develop acceptable coping strategies.

Much money has been spent in PA in recent years on building stronger barriers to make our buildings more physically secure. While this may make for a more secure educational space physically, it does little to nothing to address the emotional security and challenges within our schools regarding

belonging, well-being, social, emotional and behavior concerns with which our students and our teachers struggle.

Increased staffing will promote increased opportunities for supervision, monitoring, and connectedness with students and their families. In addition, increased mental health staffing will allow for threat assessments and interventions to address student wellness and safety.

All students face problems from time to time related to learning, social relationships, making difficult decisions, or managing emotions such as feeling depressed, anxious, worried, or isolated. School psychologists can help students, families, schools, and members of the community understand and resolve both long-term chronic problems and short-term issues that students may face. We stand ready to help students, whether it's helping them through a life stressor or helping them access special education services. We are a highly skilled and ready resource in the effort to ensure that all children and youth thrive in school, at home, and in life.

Let's not allow the barriers above that we *can* control, such as limited financial support for the training of school psychologists and unnecessary special education mandates, to be added to the barriers that students face at home and school. We need to address the variables that we can directly control that may increase student access to help from school psychologists.

With your help, we can improve access to school psychology services. With your help, we can remove or modify some of the barriers to students and educators getting help. For example, IDEA provides states with some flexibility to delineate timelines to complete an initial evaluation for a disability as part of an IEP. Pennsylvania has decided that evaluations must be completed in 60 "calendar days", while other states have decided on "school days" or "school days of which the student is in attendance". It seems there is a pathway for states to have different timelines, and school psychologists have long advocated for the need for more flexibility. Following a calendar day timeline stresses already overburdened staff during times of school breaks such as fall, winter, or summer break when time ticks away, yet students are not available for assessments or interventions.

Another barrier to providing services to students is that Pennsylvania requires new or potentially unnecessary or redundant evaluations for students. For example, students in other states may be identified for special education using the early intervention disability of developmental delay, but in PA that disability is no longer an option when a student enters kindergarten, and oftentimes LEAs must conduct a new evaluation to change a disability when an early intervention evaluation may have just been completed. Similarly, when students move to PA from another state, PDE requires that students must be re-evaluated to determine whether they meet the criteria for a disability in PA, even though they are entitled to an IEP in PA when they move in with one and even though they may have just recently been evaluated in another state.

With your help, we can increase the number of school psychologists in the training pipeline through programs such as loan forgiveness, tuition reimbursement, and continuing to fund stipends for school

psychology internships in exchange for working in Pennsylvania schools after graduation (PA HELPS). With your help, we can maintain the amount of funding for training programs for school psychology or maybe even increase support for training and preparation so that universities can expand or increase training programs and mentoring opportunities for school psychologists. With your help, we can improve access to mental health services for students throughout this Commonwealth. Without a doubt this investment will pay dividends in our communities for years to come

Thank you for your time and attention to these important issues.