

Testimony on HB 6020 (May 5, 2022)

Student Mental Health Apprenticeship Retention, and Training (SMART) Internship Grant Program

Good morning,

I am Dr. Amanda Unger and I am joined by school psychologist intern and previous apprentice, Syriah Dobis. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. I work as a special education supervisor for West Shore Educational Service District (WSESD) in Ludington. I fully support proposed **HB 6020** as it is an excellent answer to the decimated workforce in the mental health field of our schools.

I supervise both school social workers and school psychologists. The professionals who are working in these disciplines are on the front lines of escalated behaviors and extreme emotions of students. No learning occurs until basic needs are met and students feel safe. The combination of this program along with what the legislature and the Governor have graciously done first through 310, provides an answer to fully addressing the mental health crisis we are experiencing in our schools.

After years of staff shortages, we at West Shore ESD have been able to pilot this type of **apprenticeship** program and have found great success. But in order to do it to the maximum level, we need support to better attract students earlier to the field and incorporate them into our schools. This bill does that.

This bill is purposeful in utilizing an **apprenticeship** approach to address the need by taking action to **'grow'** staff within our systems much like other professions have done for years. We thereby honor the dedicated, existing staff working in the school mental health field by rejuvenating them in their craft as they teach the next generation. There are also tasks that can be taken off of the plates of our experienced staff and given to the apprentices, which will help the apprentices to learn key foundational concepts. In addition, for the graduate students this will help them to connect with the school community, give them 'real-world' school experience, and help them to develop the 'soft skills' needed to work in their chosen profession.

Apprentice Reflections:

In graduate school, we are told that we shouldn't work, but that wasn't an option for me. I knew I had to work, but I had this dream of becoming a school psychologist and helping kids. In being an apprentice, I was able to get paid for working in schools while studying to become a school psychologist. This program made my dreams a reality.

Because I have had this experience as a school psychologist apprentice, it was an easy transition into my internship placement. I was able to form relationships within the school system and gain a better understanding of what a school psychologist does daily, which in turn, helped solidify my career choice. I feel that I have had a wider variety of experiences than a typical practicum student and am more proficient in day-to-day tasks. For example, as an apprentice, I was able to complete assessment paperwork, learn about school systems, and build relationships. I was actively part of school-based teams that typically would not be experienced until internship year.

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Additionally, I had the opportunity to co-facilitate Social-Emotional Learning groups with the school social worker. Let me tell you a story about a student I am going to call Sam. Sam was a Kindergarten student who was severely impacted by Autism. Sam would run out the classroom and school, scream, bite, kick, hit, etc. These behaviors were impacting his academics and other peers in the classroom. As you can imagine, this student was challenging for the teacher to work with in the general education setting. I had the opportunity to develop interventions with a team to address Sam's behavioral needs. I spent lots of time consulting with the teacher, modeling appropriate behaviors, and teaching Sam how to regulate his sensory needs. Today, Sam is able to function in a general education setting with reduced behaviors, ask for breaks when needed, and is making academic gains. Working as an apprentice has substantially increased my opportunities to provide behavioral interventions.

I was also able to be a substitute teacher in our center-based programs, which gave me a teacher's perspective and increased my skills in working with low incidence populations. Now, as a school psychologist intern, this perspective helps me to see things through a teacher's lens and I am better able to support teachers in the field which helps students to be successful.

This program helped me feel more prepared and confident going into my internship year. Working directly with students is incredibly rewarding and one the best aspects of this position! Because I've have a good foundation in this field, I am confident that I chose the right career path and will continue to positively impact the lives of students for many years to come. I would highly recommend all graduate students working as apprentices before the completion of their degree. ~ Syriah

Mentor Reflections:

"After having been short-staffed for several years in a row, the help that the apprentices were able to provide was such a relief! An added benefit of having the apprentices and interns has been to bring a fresh perspective to my role as a school psychologist and has reminded me of the excitement of many of the little things about this job!" ~ Sarah

"The Apprentice Program has been essential in supporting our School Psychology department the last two years. By having these highly skilled graduate students, we as School Psychologists have been able to move towards the NASP best practices of prevention and intervention work as our department continues to grow to meet the needs of the students in our local districts." ~ Kristie

In closing, we thank you for your consideration and for what you are advocating for in our schools. While I work in special education, this bill is not exclusive to that and it helps us to address the needs of **ALL** of our students so that most of their needs can be met without special education intervention.