

COLORADO STATE SENATE

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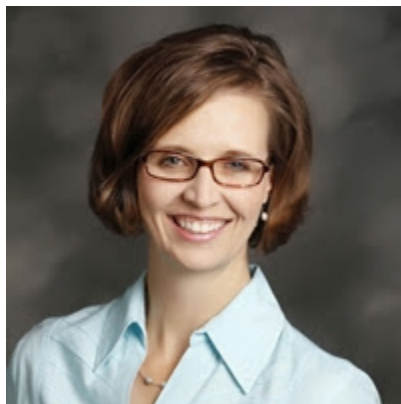
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Strong counselors make strong schools

Program with boost from new legislation will benefit all Colorado students

By Sen. Rachel Zenzinger



Tammy Lawrence is a graduate of Thornton's Horizon High School, an Adams 12 Five Star School, where she now works as a counselor. Tammy's been at Horizon since 2002. In 2010, she was part of the team forced to deal with millions of dollars in spending cuts that led to the departure of 13 counselors across the Adams 12 district.

Working as a counselor, Tammy has seen firsthand the critical work that counselors provide Colorado students. It's not just helping students overcome social and emotional hurdles. Every day, counselors are keeping students in school, helping them succeed academically, and guiding them through the college application process.

Colorado already has a program in place to invest in school counselors. The School Counselor Corps Grant Program (SCCGP) was established in 2008 with the goal of increasing Colorado high school students' access to effective counseling. The program provides grant funding to schools and districts to hire and train school counselors, with the dual goals of reducing dropout rates and improving students' readiness for college.

A 2013 report from the Colorado Department of Education shows that the program works. Schools employing counselors as a result of the SCCGP saw their student-to-counselor ratios improve from an average of 363-to-1 in the 2010-2011 school year to 261-to-1 the following year.

Tammy knows full well the importance of the Counselor Corps program. The same year that the district was forced to cut 13 counseling positions, Adams 12 Five Star Schools received a grant from the program that helped offset these cuts and allocate three full-time counselors to the four high schools in the district. In the three years since, these high schools have seen dropout rates decrease and rates of college acceptance increase, mirroring progress at other Counselor Corps participating schools across the state.

But student-to-counselor ratios are still too high, preventing students from receiving the personalized attention they need to succeed in high school and prepare for postsecondary education. More, better-trained counselors are needed to continue to reduce dropout rates and improve students' college readiness.

It's critical that we double down on this important effort -- and so Senator Nancy Todd, D-Aurora, and I have introduced Senate Bill 14-150. This legislation has passed both the House and the Senate and is headed to the Governor for his signature. The bill will extend the existing grant cycle to four years and double the size of the total grant amount to \$10 million. Senate Bill 14-150 gives priority to schools that demonstrate a particular need for strengthening their counseling programs.

The bill improves the likelihood that all Colorado students, no matter where they go to school, will benefit from effective counselors. By expanding eligibility, extending grant funding cycles, and increasing the size of available grants, we can help bring down Colorado's student-to-counselor ratio, which currently stands at an average of 400-to-1 -- an unacceptable level.

It's important that Colorado legislators focus on effective programs like Counselor Corps. As Tammy has seen firsthand, it's a critical investment in helping Colorado students succeed and excel in high school and college.

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About Sen. Rachel Zenzinger: Sen. Rachel Zenzinger serves Colorado Senate District 19, which spans most of Arvada and the Jefferson County portion of Westminster. She was appointed to her seat and sworn into office on Dec. 13, 2013. She serves on the Senate Education Committee, Senate Local Government Committee and she is a Senate advisor to the Colorado Commission on Higher Education. Her professional background is in education, and she was coordinator of the Regis University Master of Arts in Education program. For more information about Sen. Zenzinger, please go to www.RachelForColorado.com or call her at 303-866-4840.