

# Increase Support Staff to Student Ratio In North Carolina

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## Subsidized Mandate School Support Staff to Improve Student Educational Success

We recommend that North Carolina mandate and subsidize support staff in K-12 public schools to improve students' educational attainment. Support staff are beneficial to students' academic success, especially for minority students and students with disabilities. After an increase in school shootings, public opinion in North Carolina favors funding support staff positions to achieve educational success and ensure safety. We evaluate educational success in terms of academic, emotional, and social improvement.

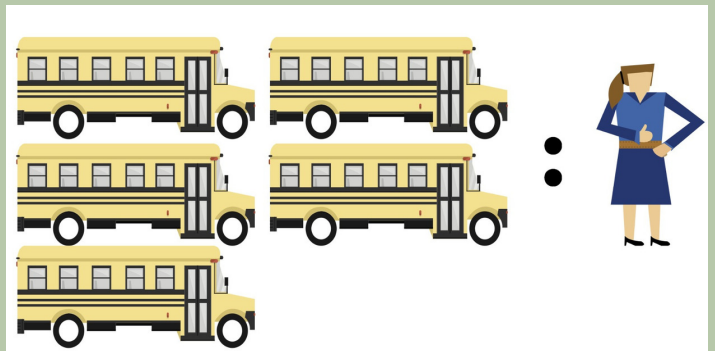
## Current Situation for Support Staff in North Carolina

Support staff in public schools refers to non-teaching staff members that provide specialized instructional and personal support to students. These members include nurses, teaching assistants, guidance counselors, psychologists, and social workers.

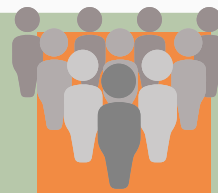
In 2018, a Charlotte school shooting prompted North Carolina constituents to support a plan that includes a \$688 million increase in funding for the next ten years to support staff (Hui).

In North Carolina, support staff presence in public schools is not mandated. A ratio of 1 counselor per 250 students is recommended, but the state average is 1 counselor per 351 students (American School Counselor Association). North Carolina has 5.7 times fewer social workers in schools than is nationally recommended. Due to the low numbers of psychologists and nurses in North Carolina public schools, there is no staff to student ratio available (Clotfelter 7).

## North Carolina Student-Counselor Ratio



There are currently 351 or 5 full school buses per counselor in North Carolina



Recommended

North Carolina has  
**5.7x Fewer**  
social workers than  
recommended



Actual

## Support Staff Help Students Academically

We define academic success by students' performance in educational assessments, including tests, overall grades, and literacy proficiency.

### Teaching Assistants (TAs):

TAs have a profound impact on educational outcomes, particularly among minority students and those living with disabilities. TAs prepare classroom activities, provide small group learning opportunities, perform clerical tasks, manage student behavior, and assist in grading assignments. They allow teachers to focus on instruction while also supporting those who fall behind (Clotfelter et al. 5).

TAs in North Carolina public elementary schools have a direct and positive impact on test scores. Studies show that one additional TA per 100 students increases reading scores by about 0.009 standard deviations. This effect is twice as strong for minority students than for white students. TAs can substantially enhance minority students' math skills and contribute to closing the educational gaps (Clotfelter et al. 21).

In the UK, a study also found that properly supported TAs can have a positive impact on the academic progress of elementary students with learning disabilities. This effect is seen in improving numeracy difficulties and especially pronounced for those with literacy and language difficulties (Farrell et al. 1).

### Guidance Counselors:

Guidance counselors help students navigate academics, social life, career, and college admissions through school counseling programs.

Elementary schools with more comprehensive counseling programs have higher proficiency rates in English/Language Arts and Math (Wilkerson et al. 173). In particular, comprehensive counseling services can greatly increase the academic success and behaviors of students in high-poverty schools (Lapan et al. 115). If guidance counselors employ intentional efforts and small-group interventions, they can reduce the racial disparities of students taking Advanced Placement exams (Davis et al. 3), decrease the achievement gap with immigrant students with limited English proficiency (Leon et al. 73), and improve the grades of 83% of the underachieving elementary school students ("How School Counselors"). School counselors can improve students' overall academic outcomes by strengthening their learning behaviors, including study skills, time management, and persistence (Kayler and Sherman 434).

## Support Staff Foster A Healthy School Climate

School climate describes the conditions for students' learning and healthy socio-emotional development. A positive school climate is defined by a sense of physical, emotional, and intellectual safety, and supportive relationships. School support staff help build this sense of community in schools. Students feel cared about and can better focus on academic achievement (Hopson).

### Social Workers:

Social workers play a central role in creating a positive school climate for students. They intervene when students face difficult situations and make them feel safer and supported. For example, students consistently report bullying as a severe problem in their schools (Cohen 23). Social workers intervene when students report bullying and provide support for students. A survey conducted in Californian middle schools paired up self-reported victims of bullying with social workers. Participating students reported that while bullying still occurred, they felt supported, practiced positive coping mechanisms, and became more confident in themselves (Wilson 50). This shows that social workers can significantly reduce the negative impact of bullying and foster a healthy school climate. This way, perpetrators of bullying are less likely to continue their harmful behaviors as they feel more connected to the school (Wilson 45).

### Guidance Counselors:

Guidance counselors help cultivate a better school climate by improving student behaviors, increasing general attendance, and fostering feelings of belonging and safety at school. They also help minority students stay connected to their identities and feel more included in their school environment (Malott et al. 257). Counselors can be especially helpful to youth at risk and students with mental health problems as they can develop prevention and intervention programs and involve the family in the educational process ("Effectiveness of School Counseling").

# Support Staff Help Students Beyond K-12

## Guidance Counselors:

Lower student-to-counselor ratios lead to more student enrollment in college. Schools with 250 student-to-counselor ratios have 91% graduation rates, 94% attendance rates, and only 2% discipline issue rates (“How School Counselors”). High school counselors play an important role in their students’ future plans. If they encourage students to have high expectations, students would improve their work ethics over time and are more likely to attend college (“Effectiveness of School Counseling”). Since counselors often provide guidance on college selection and application processes, greater access to such resources would greatly help highly qualified first-generation students. A 1% decrease in student-to-counselor ratio leads to a 0.4% increase in the likelihood of a highly first-generation student to enroll in college (Pham and Keenan 12).

## Policy Options

### ***Unsubsidized Mandate Support Staff to Student Ratio***

A legal mandate would require all public schools to increase staff support positions in every district school. This mandate is enforced through inspections and is commonly implemented based on a student-to-staff ratio. In Pennsylvania, a school nurse cannot have more than 1,500 students under their care (PSBA). An unsubsidized mandate will come at no expense to the state as the costs will be borne by schools.

### ***Subsidized Support Staff to Student Ratio***

Subsidizing the hiring of support staff can make it easier for schools to reach the mandated ratio. In Georgia, school counselor ratios are mandated by the state, and schools receive supplemental funding from local districts to achieve that goal. In 2000, Georgia school districts received \$78.40 per elementary school student to hire counselors for grades K–5 (Reback). Subsidies incentivize all schools across varying districts to recruit a higher number of qualified support staff. However, this subsidy will increase costs for North Carolina. The State Department of Public Instruction in North Carolina estimates an additional \$688 million in state funding to hire additional support staff to reach nationally recommended ratios (NCES 4).

### ***TA to Teacher Program***

NC can consider implementing a TA to Teacher program to increase the number of TAs in school boards. Arlington Public Schools (APS) in Virginia have an initiative where aspiring teachers can receive a scholarship and assistance in obtaining a Virginia teacher license after working as a TA for three consecutive years. To be eligible, applicants must have satisfactory references and evaluations. After completion of the program, participants are expected to seek teaching positions with APS and work within the district for at least three years (“Assistant to Teacher Program”).

Such programs can appeal to various stakeholders. Aspiring teachers in NC can gain relevant teaching experience and support for finding a full-time teaching position. Students can benefit from the skills and attention of TAs who care about education and want to demonstrate excellence in their positions.

## Policy Recommendation: Subsidized Mandate to Increase Support Staff

We recommend that North Carolina provide a subsidized mandate for support staff in K-12 public schools to increase students’ educational success. Support staff contribute to improving students’ academic achievement, emotional wellbeing, sense of safety, and social development. They are especially beneficial for minority students and students with disabilities. The benefits of support staff even expand beyond K-12 education and into college by increasing the number of students attending colleges. Although the state will incur a cost with a subsidized mandate, it is still in the best interest for North Carolina to provide quality public education and support its most disadvantaged students.

**Sources:** <http://tinyurl.com/WorksCited301>