

**MEMORANDUM**

To: Georgia School Counselor Association

From: Nelson Mullins Georgia Government Relations Team  
Stan Jones  
Helen Sloat  
George Ray  
Sam Marticke

Date: July 20, 2020

Re: **Advocacy Report – April 1, 2020 to June 30, 2020**

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After a three-month hiatus due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the General Assembly completed its 2020 Legislative Session on June 26. This is thought to be the latest adjournment of a regular legislative session in Georgia history.

While legislators took up a number of issues as the session concluded, of primary concern was the FY21 State Budget, which took effect on July 1. Because of the pandemic's effect on businesses and employment, State tax revenues are projected to decrease substantially in FY21. While agencies were asked to prepare for a 14% reduction year-over-year in April, the actual overall budget reduction for this year will be closer to 10% thanks to improved revenue forecasts between April and June.

Since education is the largest segment of the State's budget (more than 52% between public K-12 schools and colleges and universities), education bears the largest dollar cut. The Quality Basic Education Program, through which funds are distributed to local districts and schools, has been cut by 10% (\$950MM). This is an across the board cut that does not single out any particular segment or employee group. Districts will have discretion on how to distribute their reductions, but it is believed that most districts will be able to use reserves and other sources of funding (including CARES Act dollars totaling \$411.5MM statewide) to prevent major reductions. There was also a reduction in funding of the APEX program within the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities; that program has continued to be implemented statewide and school counselors have continued to work with the Department on this effort to provide mental health services to students.

Despite the QBE reduction, there are bright spots in the education budget. First, it fully funds enrollment growth, training and experience, equalization, sparsity grants, and pupil transportation, dollars that all flow down to local districts. Also, while there were not sufficient funds available in the adopted budget to complete the final step toward fully funding the 1-to-450 ratio for school counselors that was championed by the House, the budget did include language indicating that it remains a priority once State

revenues improve. We have been and will continue to promote the importance of this item with legislators.

As noted above, local school districts have also been allocated \$411.5M in CARES Act funds to deal with challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Districts have wide discretion for how these funds are used, but among uses are supporting at-risk student populations, mental and physical student health, professional development, and continuity of staff and services. School counselors are at the core of each of these potential uses, and we recommend advocating your school and district leaders for access to these funds.

In addition to the budget, there are also several bills that passed that will affect school counseling if signed by Governor Kemp or otherwise allowed to become law, including:

- [HB 86](#), which provides for appeals of certain educator evaluations.
- [HB 444](#), which is a comprehensive revision to the Dual Enrollment program (already signed and effective as of July 1).
- [HB 855](#), which requires local schools to immediately and deliberately assess foster care students upon their enrollment and determine whether exposure to trauma has had or is likely to have an adverse impact on the foster care student's educational performance
- [HB 1090](#), which requires that teachers and employees be allowed paid breaks to express breast milk without impact to paid leave time.
- [SB 367](#), which reduces the number of mandated assessment in K-12 public school to near the federal minimum.

At the State Board of Education and Department of Education level, the focus remains maximum flexibility and resource provision for local districts in reopening and serving students amidst the pandemic. The Board and Department has been given substantial latitude by virtue of the Public Health Emergency and Governor's executive orders to waive rules and requirements on local schools, and the Board has passed most of that flexibility along to local districts. The Board and Department has also sought waivers of federal requirements, including waiver of federal testing requirements for the 2020-2021 school year, which is pending.

Much uncertainty remains in the days ahead. State revenues continue to show improvement in June (only down 8.5% year over year), but the resurgence of COVID-19 cases gives everyone pause. Support for the work of school counselors, and particularly student mental health, remains strong, but money remains the challenge. There is good reason to believe that, as the crisis mitigates and the State's financial conditions improves, advancing the profession and serving students can reassume its role at the forefront of conversation.

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The GSCA Advocacy Chairs and Leadership continue to work hand-in-hand with us to ensure counselors' voices are being heard in the General Assembly and at the Department of Education. We will continue to monitor, report, and voice concerns to actions at the agency level, and we continue to have conversations with agency and legislative leaders about how to support and empower counselors through and emerging from the current crisis.