

Testimony of
Kristen Sands, School Counselor
Jacksonville Heights Elementary School
On Behalf of the
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Testimony of Kristen Sands
School Counselor, Jacksonville Heights Elementary School
Duval County Public Schools
Jacksonville, Florida

Good morning. My name is Kristen Sands and I have been an elementary school counselor in Duval County Public Schools in Jacksonville, Fla., for the past three years and I am an active member of the American School Counselor Association. I'm here to speak to you today about the Elementary and Secondary School Counseling Program grants that are funded by the U.S. Department of Education. We are respectfully requesting funding of 75 million dollars for Fiscal Year 2014.

Duval County is the 22nd largest school district in the nation, and the 6th largest in Florida. Our district, which serves more than 125,000 students in 183 schools, has many of the issues common to large, urban school systems across the nation. Fifty-five percent of our district's students are enrolled in free or reduced-price lunch programs, and sixty percent are minority.

In 2010, Duval County received the Elementary and Secondary School Counseling Program grant to improve the ratio of school counselors, school psychologists and school social workers to students. Our focus has been on reducing the number of discipline referrals and increasing direct counseling services to students at four identified schools. One of those is Jacksonville Heights Elementary, where I work in a position funded by the grant.

Jacksonville Heights has two full-time school counselors as well as a half-time school psychologist and a social worker serving as our counseling team. This type of staffing also has been put in place at the other three schools in Duval, improving the average ratio of school counselors, school psychologists and school social workers to students from 602 to 1 to 264 to 1.

This grant has had a tremendous impact on our students and helped improve student achievement at our school, which serves 779 students in grades kindergarten through five. A Title I school, Jacksonville Heights is located in an area greatly affected by high poverty and high crime. Our students have parents who are incarcerated. Many are being raised predominately by single mothers or grandparents. They are victims or witnesses to violence, receive inadequate supervision, and have few if any positive role models. Their caregivers often are in crisis mode and are unable to participate in their child's education.

We have a very diverse student body, Seventy-six percent of our students are minorities, eighty percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, and eighteen percent have disabilities. My school has three self-contained classrooms for students with severe emotional and behavioral disabilities and is home to two classrooms designed for students who have been retained two or more years. In 2008-09, on average, one discipline referral was written for every two students at our school for reasons ranging from disruption to violent behavior toward staff.

It is crucial that children develop the skills they need during the elementary grades so they can become successful learners and grow to become productive members of society in our ever-changing world, especially in schools with high needs. Nationally, 1 in 3 black males and 1 in 6 Latino boys born in 2001 are at risk of imprisonment during their lifetime, according to the Children's Defense Fund. A significant number of girls also are in the juvenile justice system. The rate of incarceration is endangering children at younger and younger ages. This is America's pipeline to prison — a path that leads to marginalized lives and often-premature death. Although the majority of our nation's fourth graders cannot read at grade level, states spend about three times as much money per prisoner as per public school pupil.

It is inherent to continue funding for grants like the one I'm working on so we can increase academic achievement and prevent future incarcerations. This grant has allowed us to put early preventive supports and intervention programs in place that did not exist before. Every Jacksonville Heights student now receives classroom instruction using research-based programs from our counseling team on various topics, such as how to manage anger, make good decisions, and resolve conflicts. Before we received this grant, only forty percent of our third through fifth grade students reported having knowledge about goal setting, career/college information, study skills, and self-calming/coping strategies. Today, ninety-three percent of these students report having knowledge of these skills.

We have developed partnerships with neighboring high school students, the U.S. Navy, and Big Brothers Big Sisters to provide students with mentors. These mentors check in weekly to encourage our students and monitor their progress academically and behaviorally. Just last month, a fifth grade student in this program wrote a letter to school staff about how she wants to turn her life around, stop being a follower, and become a leader. This student has a history of discipline issues and was indeed headed down the wrong path. Her behavior and attitude has improved drastically and she will join us on a trip to the University of Florida in May to explore career and college options. She has decided she wants to become a doctor one day.

On a typical day at Jacksonville Heights you will find students using "calm down" bean bag chairs to practice self-calming/coping strategies or our "peace corner" and peer mediation program to work out conflicts with friends. Our students are acquiring the skills necessary to be more proactive and in control of their own behavior and future instead of being reactive to situations and conflicts. They will use skills like these for the rest of their lives and it is powerful to witness students making the choice to use these strategies on their own.

The expanded counseling team has a full schedule of individual and small group counseling sessions, classroom observations and behavior intervention plans, and problem-solving team meetings to address specific student needs. We have even developed a check in/check out system that allows us to counsel with greater numbers of students. Students who are at risk check in with a member of the counseling team at the beginning and end of each week to make sure they stay on track. Students look forward to it and enjoy the positive attention. Additionally, our grant-funded social worker conducts home visits for these students to further address issues that are interfering with learning.

Students, teachers, and parents now seek our counseling services and are lined up outside our office doors at any given time of the day. Just last week a student came to me and said, “Mrs. Sands, I heard you teach anger management groups. I need to be in one.” We have built positive relationships within the school community. They know where to come if they need support, and they have voiced their concerns about what will happen once the grant funding ends as we will no longer be at Jacksonville Heights. They are worried, and so are we.

We have also developed several programs to increase parent involvement to get parents excited about their child’s learning. In December we hosted a “donuts for dads” breakfast before school to thank our involved dads and provide them with learning tools to help assist them to continue their child’s learning at home. Prior to the grant, 10 to 12 parents would attend a family workshop or event at our school. Today, an average of 100 parents come to each family workshop and event.

Last school year, a third-grader was hit by a car and killed outside the apartment complex where many of our students live. Several of our students witnessed the tragic accident and our school community was struck with grief. We were so fortunate to have our expanded counseling

team during this difficult time. The team immediately mobilized: the social worker connected families to community resources, and the school counselors and psychologist provided crisis response services to ensure the school environment remained safe and calm.

We have developed another partnership with a local church that provides food for the weekend to approximately 45 Jacksonville Heights students. These partnerships help ensure our students' basic needs are being met. We also recently started a girls group, called "Jax Heights Elite Ladies," that is for girls with the highest number of discipline referrals. We are teaching them social etiquette, self-respect, and how to carry themselves as ladies so that they will use these skills to be positive role models for our school and their classrooms.

As you can see, the grant has allowed Jacksonville Heights to develop a data-driven comprehensive school counseling program that reaches all students. Last month, we received notification that our program has been recognized as a national model school counseling program. In 2011-12, discipline referral rates dropped by twenty five percent at our school. Despite all of this good news, we still have much work to do. Please continue to fund grants like ours so that this work can continue not only in Jacksonville, but all over the country. Thank you.