

Testimony
Senate Bill 2177 – Relating to School Counselors’ Eligibility for a
Student Loan Repayment Program
Senate Human Services Committee
Senator Judy Lee, Chairwoman
January 18, 2021

Chairwoman Lee and Members of the Senate Human Services Committee:

I am Holly Johnson, a Licensed Board Certified Behavior Analyst who resides in Minot, ND. I testified last week in support of SB 2125 relating to the addition of ‘Licensed Behavior Analysts’ to the Health Care Professional Student Loan Repayment Program, the very same program SB 2177 is attempting to make accessible to ‘School Counselors.’ While there is no doubt in my opinion of the importance and value of school counselors for students in their formative years of development, I will be providing opposition testimony as to why this profession does not fit into the intent of this program.

School counselors assist students in reaching their academic, career, and personal/social goals, as a part of a comprehensive school counseling program based on the model put forth by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA). On their website, the ND Department of Public Instruction (DPI) supports the implementation of a comprehensive school counseling program based on this ASCA Model. This Model guides school counselors in the development of school counseling programs that are delivered to all students systematically, includes a developmentally appropriate curriculum focused on the mindsets and behaviors all students need for postsecondary readiness and success, and help close achievement and opportunity gaps.

Upon further investigation, the ASCA Personal/Social Development Crosswalk Tool provided in my handouts appears to be the most relevant

fit for addressing students' behavioral or mental health needs. In my other handout published by the ASCA titled, 'The Role of the School Counselor', you can see that appropriate duties can include providing short-term counseling. If school counselors are providing counseling but only on a short-term basis, they are assessing students and making referrals to other qualified experts or professionals, either outside the school district or within the school district, who provide appropriate services based on that student's long-term behavioral health needs.

The purpose of the Healthcare Professionals Student Loan Repayment Program is to provide relief from student loan burden to healthcare professionals providing full-time services directly to underserved populations. In my prior testimony last week, I spoke to the use of the program to entice and retain professionals. When analyzing school counselor workforce, it appears there are several options already made available to them that address a potential need for increased workforce. NDCC 15.1-06-19 outlines the Requirements for Counselor positions. Each school district must have available one full-time equivalent counselor for every 300 students grades 7-12. Additionally, one-third of this full-time requirement may be met by a career advisor. A career advisor is someone who holds a certificate in 'career development facilitation' under NDCC 15-20.1-24; and, NDCC 15.1-06-20 describes the use of this certification to provide career development activities, current career information, and related career exploration opportunities. Furthermore, there is an additional option for provisional approval as a career advisor under NDCC 15-20.1-25, which directly benefits a school counselor's ability to deliver services. This student loan repayment program is likely not a crucial incentive tool to recruit or retain school counselors in rural or underserved professional shortage areas.

In summary, please reconsider the suitability of adding school counselors as a recognized behavioral health profession under this Healthcare Professional Student Loan Repayment Program. It seems as if school counselors already have multiple options, specifically by supervising career advisors, to get the needs of all students met and to fill the demand of their workforce. School counselors, in my review, do not individually, nor specifically, address the needs of any one student's long-term behavioral health. Allowing eligibility in this program remain focused on disciplines who need to recruit and retain professionals to provide direct behavioral health services in underserved counties. While anyone with student loan debt would prefer to be eligible for programs such as this to help with the burden of that debt, this specific program just is not quite the right fit for a school counselor; and, they are already eligible as a profession for the ND Career Builders Loan Repayment Program. I thank you for your time and consideration of my testimony, and if I can be of assistance during deliberation, please contact me at holly.johnson.bcba@outlook.com. This concludes my testimony. I am happy to answer any questions.

Sincerely,

Holly Johnson, MS, BCBA, LBA

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All opinion expressed here is my own, and in no way represent the Department of Human Services, the Life Skills & Transition Center, or the Autism Spectrum Disorders Task Force, all of which I am actively involved with. This testimony has been provided on my personal time.