

## Testimony for SB2340

Chairman Heinert, Vice Chairman Schreiber-Beck, and Members of the House Education Committee,

My name is Tessa Roberts, and I am a licensed professional school counselor at a large public high school. I would like to start by thanking you for taking the time to read my testimony today regarding SB 2340. I am writing with concerns that should this bill pass as it is currently worded, it would have unintended consequences on not only the access to equitable mental health services for our students, but the level of fidelity in which we execute our comprehensive school counseling programs.

The American School Counseling Association has stated that the appropriate school counselor to student ratio would be 1:250 students. The current ratio under North Dakota's Century Code is 1:300. There is a question of whether this ratio is necessary, as well as why other school professionals, such as teachers, do not have a ratio. Several studies have shown (which I will link at the bottom of this page) that smaller ratios support increases in standardized test performance, attendance, GPA and graduation rates, as well as decreased disciplinary infractions.

I worry that in an attempt to create equal ratios across all schools, we would be filling vacant positions with professionals that would be asked to work outside of their scope of practice, while putting the fidelity of comprehensive school counseling programs at risk. It is a huge privilege to have a variety of mental health services in a school system, but many of our students do not need intensive mental health supports that school psychologists and clinical mental health counselors would provide. Our students need equitable access to a licensed professional school counselors to provide them with academic, social/emotional, and career support to all students within our building, not just the select few in need of intensive support.

In talking with two colleagues of mine, a licensed social worker, and a licensed school psychologist, they felt uncomfortable with the possibility that they would be asked to assume the roles and responsibilities of a school counselor. They felt that they would be ill-equipped to offer the supports that we do. It is not a matter of whether or not they could, but a matter of whether or not they were trained and received the specialized training to. While all mental health professionals offer priceless supports and services to our students, we all serve our students in vastly different capacities.

I would urge you to reconsider the wording of this bill. While I agree that the ratios of school counselors should be protected and advocated for, I would recommend adding verbiage that professionals hired in lieu of school counselors would be hired on a temporary or one-year contract, urging schools to continue to search for and hire licensed school counselors.

I want to say thank you again for taking the time to read my testimony. I am hopeful that language can be reworded, or amendments added, to protect the fidelity of the work that licensed school counselors do.

Tessa Roberts

Below are links to research regarding school counselor ratios.

<https://www.schoolcounselor.org/getmedia/5157ef82-d2e8-4b4d-8659-a957f14b7875/Ratios-Student-Outcomes-Research-Report.pdf>

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/jcad.12221>

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2156759X0001600207>

<https://www.schoolcounselor-ca.org/files/Advocacy/Lower%20Counselor%20Ratios%20Equal%20Less%20Discipline.pdf>