

SB 2340
Chairman Heinert
House Education Committee
March 8th, 2023

Good morning. Chairman Heinert and members of the House Education Committee, for the record, my name is Steven Holen and I am the Superintendent of Schools for the McKenzie County Public School District #1 in Watford City. I am here to testify in support of SB 2340 and its added flexibility to meet the full-time equivalent school guidance counselor requirements set in law and to also address the needs of student and families as school districts struggle to hire certified school guidance counselors as one of the most difficult areas to fill in an overall difficult employment market in education.

School guidance counselors are critical to the success of a school district, regardless of size, due to the role provided and the many gaps filled with a quality, certified guidance counselor in a school district. Many factors impact a school building climate and culture; a school guidance counselor can have as large an impact in this area as virtually any position. It has been my experience in education and in working with school districts, guidance counselors are not an area of which school districts intent to save money or reallocate to other areas. School districts willingly allocate funding for guidance counselor positions due to the importance placed on the positions, especially in current school environments and the challenges faced by today's students including college and career readiness initiatives. School districts unable to fill guidance counselor positions is driven by the lack of certified guidance counselors in the field and applying for open positions. SB 2340 clearly states the intent to meet the guidance counseling ratios currently in NDCC will remain and only in situations of which this is not possible will other options be considered. I believe SB 2340 can improve the work environment for guidance counselors by providing additional resources and opportunities to address areas of need without burning out our current guidance counselors by taking unfilled positions and reassigning duties to them. The flexibility provided in SB 2340 should be viewed as a support for current licensed guidance counselors and in no way a replacement for these critical positions.

The McKenzie County Public School District #1 has struggled to find and retain licensed guidance counselors the past several years. The retention rates for our new guidance counselors has averaged 1-2 years and we have been understaffed in this area for the last 5+ school years. For the 2022-2023 school year; our school district was only able to retain 4 licensed guidance counselors for our 2,000 students K-12; three full time equivalencies under the intended goal set forth in SB 2340 due to zero licensed applications received for open positions. The receipt of an application from a licensed school guidance counselor for an open position is viewed as a luxury with a very low probability; employees on a plan of study are more common, however, have lower retention rates in our school district. School guidance counseling requires the obtainment of three specific graduate credits before eligible for a plan of study provisional which also makes it a difficult area of which to utilize provisional staffing options compared to other professional positions. The ability to fulfill the full-time equivalence requirements is not

a matter of compliance, but in most cases an unachievable and unrealistic goal regardless of your school size or offerings. The shortage of school guidance counselors has exceeded the usual alert status with other hard to fill positions and reached a critical status of which no easy solutions exist.

The McKenzie County Public School District #1 has added the following services the past several years to address student needs and support of student development; social workers, school resource officers, school nurses, assistant principals, family facilitators, and recently contracted services for licensed mental therapy. Despite these additional positions, the role of the school guidance counselor has not diminished, but has been supported to focus on the areas of which they are licensed and can offer the best impacts for students. The hiring of these positions did not reduce guidance counseling position pursuits or intent; the school guidance counselor value is understood and the delineation of job duties is clear to warrant the need for all positions and their education and skill sets without concern of displacing school guidance counselors with options provided in this legislation.

Please consider a yes vote on SB 2340 to provide realistic options to meet current NDCC requirements as other efforts are considered to increase the pool of candidates for school guidance counselors. SB 2340 is an effort to maintain and improve services and options for students and families in supporting academic achievement and mental health supports and deserves your strong consideration.

Thank you for your time and consideration and I will stand for any questions.