

SB 2340
Senator Axtman

Chairman Heinert, house education committee members. For the record, I am Michelle Axtman, Senator from District 7, North Bismarck and I am before you to introduce Senate Bill 2340. During the past session, the number of counselors required was significantly increased to a ratio of one counselor per every 300 students for all grade levels. Since the increase in ratio, a large portion of school districts have found it difficult or even impossible to fill the position with a licensed school counselor. Despite not being able to hire a licensed school counselor as a FTE, many schools still recognize the need for support for their students. Many of these schools are either contracting out for services or are hiring an alternate professional trained in an aspect of behavioral support. However, these resources currently do not count towards their ratio. A recent survey on counseling services across 79 districts in the state revealed that over 24 percent are struggling to fill their counseling position. When hiring their last counselor, 23 percent had zero applicants and nearly 42 percent had only one to three applicants. Additionally in the survey, districts answered that their greatest need is for additional behavioral health specialists such as a school psychologist or clinical counselor. Senate Bill 2340 provides an option for schools who are unable to meet their current needs due to a shortage of licensed school counselors. It also helps our small, rural schools who struggle to fill the ratio requirements with an FTE rather than contacted employee. Our state is working hard to produce more school counselors, however, until we are able to fill the open positions across our state, it is important to give our schools the leeway to hire other behavior health specialists that can provide services to help our schools and students. I fully recognize the important role that a licensed school counselor holds with all students and the distinct qualifications of that profession. This bill is not trying to replace school counselors, or turn other behavioral health specialists into school counselors. It is trying to help our schools and students who are unable to fill positions under the mandated 300 to 1 ratio and in turn hopefully lighten the burden of the current undermanned and overworked counselors. I hope that someday in the future, current efforts across the state will eliminate the shortages, however until we do, lets help give our schools the ability to hire and get credit for the behavioral health specialists that can bridge the gap. Thank you committee for your consideration of Senate Bill 2340. There are quite a few people here to help explain how this will positively affect their schools and students but I also can stand for any questions.