

RE: SB 2340: Relating to required school counselors

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Senate Education Committee:

My name is John Wangen and I am an elementary counselor in Bismarck, a position I have held for 20 years in 3 separate schools. I am also a licensed teacher and feel like I can speak to what happens when attempts are made to “water down” the profession of school counseling.

School Counseling is a unique job and requires not only someone who has training in working with kids but also in Ethics and Mental Health theories, practices, and strategies. Effective elementary school counselors must have a child development background and be able to form and maintain relationships while teaching a social emotional curriculum. This can only be done through training and practice. When you take away the training, not requiring a teaching background or not requiring school counseling credentials, the practice suffers greatly.

I realize that those in favor are trying to fill positions, and I understand their push to do so. We need effective people in our schools that can impact lives and help set a course toward success for individuals in establishing good mental health strategies and positive coping skills. The future depends on it. Even after 20 years, I feel ill equipped as mental health concerns have increased in both severity and at an earlier age. I realize the need for more training to be effective in this ever-changing world. With the rise of anxiety and depression having additional and better training is essential in my profession. Putting me in a social work role or a school psychologist role would be a disaster, as I am not trained to do their job. In visiting with social workers and school psychologist, they also feel like their training is very specific to their role, not mine. They are a resource for me as I am to them. One would not allow a nurse to fill the role of a doctor unless they are trained to do so. The people that this matters to the most are the ones that will receive direct counseling services: children.

Elementary counselors see counseling services as preventative and proactive. We want to create lifelong learners that have experiences early in life in seeing counselors as effective helpers. This bill will directly impact that by putting untrained counselors in a school counselor role. This is dangerous in creating reasons for future lawsuits, as most school counselors are trained in accredited programs. Instead of replacing school counselors with other professions maybe a proactive approach through incentives and strengthening existing programs would be in order. There are reasons people are not going into school counseling, perhaps addressing pay or client load or burnout due to other duties would be a better use of the legislative process. Counseling is a very specific role, and the best counselors are trained and re-trained in that role. Perhaps “watering- down” the profession is not the answer to the current crisis. As the bill is written I would recommend a vote of DO NOT PASS.

Thank You,

John Wangen