

Good morning, Chairman Elkin and members of the Education committee.

For the record, my name is Amy Johnson. I have been a PK-12 school counselor for two years. Prior to that I was a clinical mental health counselor for three years. I am here today to ask that you amend SB 2340. I will discuss further why I think it would be more appropriate that any hires in place of a school counselor should be temporary.

Upon first hearing about this bill, I thought it was a great idea. As a professional counselor, I have found it frustrating to be limited in how I practice as a school counselor. For example, I cannot count my hours spent with students toward my mental health practice hours. I also have to be very mindful of how I operate as a school counselor, because the roles are different and it is ethically inappropriate to function as a clinical counselor while acting as a school counselor, regardless of my dual credentialing.

I probably would have never switched over to school counseling had I not happened to end up living across the street from a school in rural North Dakota. I watch many school counselors leave the field because we are not properly utilized. We did not go through specialized graduate programs to be used as substitute teachers, test administrators, or to take lunch numbers. It creates a feeling of helplessness to watch ourselves become so consumed with being the school's junk drawer that we cannot engage in the areas we are uniquely qualified to help in. I truly believe that the long-term key to addressing these shortages is to utilize school counselors properly and clear up confusion about the profession.

I am curious who would end up taking on tasks involved with being a CTE or choice ready coordinator. Who would monitor state scholarship progress, coordinate work-based learning/internship opportunities, provide RUnready lessons, audit transcripts, work through five-year plans, etc... There has been so much work done to prepare students for North Dakota's workforce, and I struggle to conceptualize who would be driving this progress forward.

My school currently contracts with a mental health therapist. She is a blessing to have given 6 month waits on referrals for mental health counseling intakes. However, the majority of student needs are not intensive enough to need clinical therapy. There are also hangups with insurance and qualifying for services. When students are struggling with more acute issues, it feels too overwhelming for them to have to have a parent come in for a formal intake session during which a treatment plan will be established. Students can stop by my office much more casually so we can work through skills to tackle whatever they are dealing with in the current moment. They will often claim to have a question about something like scholarships but then build the bravery to divulge much more personal issues.

Almost all of my very high-risk students this year have been students who would not have been on the list to meet with our therapist. I have a working relationship with my students because they get to know me in the classroom, or I call them into my office to discuss CTE or choice ready requirements. It is usually during these meetings that students will open up about the help they need. One student came to me after a lesson on healthy communication and relationships to talk to me about an abusive relationship. I have called students into my office to discuss academic goals, only to find they were planning to end their lives. Many times, I am the steppingstone between school and therapy. Students get a small taste of speaking to someone about their issues, and we walk through what therapy looks like so it does not feel so scary. It is after these conversations that students feel comfortable enough to discuss with their parents that they think they need help.

Schools already have the option to bring on mental health therapists. This is a wonderful tool to compliment a comprehensive school counseling program, but it is reactive in nature. Our students deserve an environment in which a healthy culture is fostered, and a preventative program is consistently in place. Let's try to build kids up with skills rather than scramble to put out fires.