

March 14th, 2023

From: Gabriela Balf, MD, MPH

Re: In Opposition to HB 1488

Dear Chairman Elkin, esteemed Committee Members,

My name is Gabriela Balf, I am a psychiatrist and a parent in Bismack, and I speak on my own behalf.

My psychiatry practice includes adolescents, and I am deeply concerned about the prospect of **taking away the reliable support that our schools provide**. Please keep in mind that there are children who don't have the fortune of having understanding parents/guardians, or their parents/guardians disagree on the child's upbringing.

I sometimes face these situations in my practice, where one parent/guardian is more educated than another regarding mental health care, and their disagreement is a source of significant stress and delay in care. I can recall at least a couple of instances where the child ended up in the hospital and only then both parents/guardians agreed on the diagnosis, let alone on pursuing the standard of care treatment.

I also treat parents with mental health problems or substance use disorders who do not meet the criteria for child abuse/neglect (I am a mandated reporter), yet their behavior and beliefs are not the most conducive to the adolescent's development. The only other supervised source of strength for the child is the school environment, created and maintained by people who specialized in education.

In medicine we face these situations all too often, and my colleagues in Family Medicine or ObGyn have provisions where they can maintain confidentiality in certain circumstances like mental health, sexual health, etc.

I believe children associations and clubs are a healthy socialization venue and, if we trust our children to go to a school, or drive by themselves, they can also practice judgment about how to pursue their interests, extra- or co- curricular or club-wise. Children and adolescents need to mature psychologically; the only way to do this is by **studying and socializing with peers, in a supervised environment**. I think we all agree that our ND schools, among the best in nation, are a wonderful environment for their safe growth.

Policies have to protect those in need and, while we all wish adults were educated and well-intended, I know quite a few who are not. In these rare instances, we must protect the children. I urge you to not take away healthy, safe ways to cope with stress and give a **DO NOT PASS** on HB 1488.

Respectfully yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Balf" followed by a stylized arrow pointing to the right.

Gabriela Balf, MD, MPH

Clin Assoc Prof – UND Dept of Psychiatry and Behavioral Science