

## Testimony Prepared for the Senate Education Committee

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By: Robin Lang

### RE: SB 2340: Relating to required school counselors

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Senate Education Committee:

My name is Robin Lang, and I have been a licensed teacher and credentialed school counselor in North Dakota for over 20 years. I am providing my testimony based on my personal experience.

First, I want to thank you for putting the health and well-being of our ND students in the forefront and supporting the role of school counselors and the implementation of comprehensive school counseling programs for all North Dakota K-12 students.

The purpose of the addition to the code as written, specifically section 4(b) of this bill is unclear to me. If it is to allow school psychologists, licensed social workers, licensed professional counselors, licensed marriage and family therapists, licensed psychologists, or licensed addiction counselors to be **hired and practice as a school counselor**, I strongly oppose this bill.

Each professional group mentioned above is recognized as incredibly valuable, and all provide critical work along the continuum of care for our schools, students, families, and communities. While there may be notable overlaps in each other's work, they are all distinctly unique and not interchangeable.

Each profession has their own specialized training (course work), internship requirements, credit hour requirements, level of degrees, level of licensure, different licensing agencies, renewal requirements, and scope of practice. [Scope of practice](#) is very important to note as it aligns our legal ethics with the role we perform in the schools. If the above roles were to practice as school counselors, what ethics would govern their work? Will they all need to meet the same rigorous requirements to be a [credentialed school counselor](#)? Will the above professions allow reciprocity and allow school counselors to practice within their respective fields?

[School counseling](#) is a specialized degree with specialized training. It is strongly based in the pedagogy of education, prevention, and early intervention within the three domains; **academic, career, and social/emotional**. It is important to note that the above professionals have limited is any course work or pedagogy in career counseling, academic counseling and perhaps limited work in youth and adolescent development as it pertains to education. We would be greatly short changing our students if we did not have qualified professionals to support all the required domains of a school counselor.

It is through the three domains that education, prevention and intervention instruction happens and during this time, school counselors recognize when students and families may need additional supports; such as change in course work, college prep courses, AP courses, career inventories, work based learning placements, referrals to outside partners for behavioral health supports and services to name a few. This is where the struggle exists, there is work force shortage in the behavioral health supports within communities for our students and families to access.

A work force shortage exists within most if not all of the above mentioned areas. The idea that allowing the above professionals to work as school counselors does not support the whole student and does not help with the work force shortage. If anything, one could suggest it may increase the problem. What happens when those professionals leave their current fields to practice as a school counselor and work within schools, creating a larger gap within their respective fields in our ND communities. This can be illustrated by the growing number of social workers hired within schools and the shortage of Human Service Zone social workers.

If we want to create stronger systems of service and supports for students and families, it can through intentional partner collaboration where all the professionals work together collaboratively within their roles. Many schools have collaborated with their local behavioral health or incorporated telehealth to provide services and supports without interchanging professions.

If this bill is to allow school psychologists, licensed social workers, licensed professional counselors, licensed marriage and family therapists, licensed psychologists, or licensed

addiction counselors in *addition to school counselors*, to count toward the district meeting the ratio requirement, I would question the purpose for that and caution for possible unintended consequences.

Currently, if a district **does not meet** the required school counselor to student ratio, there is not any negative consequences to the district. They simply outline the step due diligence steps they have taken to find a school counselor and submit that information to NDDPI. While not meeting the ratio may be unsettling for districts, that information is very valuable as it helps to illuminate critical shortage areas, which school counseling is current one area. This information is then utilized by various entities to seek grant opportunities to help address the work force shortages in school counseling. Two recent examples of this are [West Fargo Public Schools Behavioral Health and Wellness](#) Grant(which is nearly 12 million) and the [University of Mary's](#) (6 million)grant to address critical school counseling shortages.

If we would use the above professions to count toward the ratio, I would ask “why”? What problem are we trying to solve, who does it benefit, and what would be the unintended consequences?

In conclusion, long before COVID 19, ND student’s health and mental health behaviors were trending in the wrong direction in many areas. I do not see this bill having the clarity or helping us address these concerns and therefore I am respectfully asking for a **DO NOT PASS** as this bill stands.