

1 Tuesday, January 31, 2023

2 Beth Slette, Superintendent, West Fargo Public Schools

3 Support for HB 2340

4 Good afternoon, Chairman Elkin, members of the Senate Education Committee. My name is Beth Slette  
5 and I am the Superintendent at West Fargo Public Schools (WFPS), and with me is Andrea Richards, our  
6 district's Wellness Director. We are here today to speak to you in support of House Bill 2340 and to  
7 share how this bill will allow our district to better serve our students and support our educators through  
8 collaboration with our community.

9 First, I cannot emphasize enough how important school counselors are in the schools; they play a vital  
10 role in student support services. Some might think their only role is to provide mental health support,  
11 but that is not the case. Counselors are highly trained professionals and provide expertise in three areas:  
12 implementing academic achievement strategies, managing emotions and applying interpersonal skills,  
13 and planning for postsecondary options.

14 Current statute requires schools to have one school counselor for every 300 students. Non-school  
15 counselors with specialized training in career development may be included in this ratio in a limited  
16 sense. Logically, those with specialized training in social-emotional learning (i.e., mental health needs) or  
17 multi-tiered systems of support should also be included. For example, WFPS has dedicated ESSER  
18 funding to support social-emotional learning strategists at the secondary level focusing on restorative  
19 practices, an evidence-based approach that focuses on repairing harm instead of punitive punishment  
20 that can further perpetuate troublesome behaviors in school.

21 While all students need support from the skill sets provided by a school counselor, individual students  
22 might need social workers, specialized therapists, or the skills provided by a licensed school  
23 psychologist. The challenges we face will not be solved by a single credentialed specialist; rather, we  
24 must collaborate with our community to provide the best resources available to meet the individual  
25 needs of our students. Expanding the definition of counselor to include other mental health experts,  
26 including school psychologists, allows for districts to align support based on the unique needs of their  
27 students. Given the ongoing behavioral health provider shortage in ND, flexibility is important to ensure  
28 schools can meet these needs.

29 Thank you for allowing us to testify this morning. We will now stand for questions if there are any at  
30 this time.