

Good morning Chairman Elkin and members of the Education committee.

For the record, my name is April Foth. I am currently the President of the North Dakota School Counselor's Association and have been a school counselor for 13 years. I am here today to ask that you amend SB 2340 in order to best serve the students of North Dakota.

**Definition:** The definition of a school counselor cannot be made to mean the same as the definition of a mental health counselor or social worker. The roles of these professionals, although they share some similarities, are vastly different from that of a school counselor. School counselors provide comprehensive services to ALL students through a variety of methods (whole school, whole class, small group, individual and referrals) while mental health counselors and social workers provide mostly individual intervention, maybe some groups. It is because of this that I ask you to amend the bill back to the original definition of "school counselor" and add separate definitions for any other mental health providers listed in the bill.

The definition of school counselor is important because the role of the school counselor is often misunderstood and under-utilized. Another testimony to this bill states the school counselor role is needed, but perhaps needs to look different and that schools need school counselors that can run social skills groups, meet with students to process trauma, provide supports and strategies for families to use at home, and help schools identify students in crisis. With the exception of processing trauma, school counselors are trained to do all these things! We can (and do) run small groups. We can (and do) provide families with support and strategies to use at home (not for mental health related concerns, but for concerns like self-esteem, stress or anger management & academic skills to name a few). We can (and do) help identify students in crisis and then advocate for them to help remove barriers to the additional mental health services they may need. Our role doesn't need to look different... our role needs to be utilized in a different way so that we can do what we have been trained to do. This would likely help in reducing the school counselor shortage as many leave the profession due to non-counselor related duties that impede their ability to work directly with students in their capacity as school counselors.

**Who Can Fill the Mandate:** I absolutely agree we need to help schools bridge the gap in mental health support while school counselors are in shortage and allowing schools to utilize other mental health services when unable to find a school counselor can help to close this gap. It is important to recognize, however, that this doesn't close the gap completely as mental health counselors don't provide social emotional learning for all students in a classroom setting nor do they provide college & career readiness services. Because of this, I ask that you consider amending this bill to allow for schools to hire mental health counselors and social workers to temporarily meet the school counselor requirements while continuing to search for and hire school counselors to fill these open positions. The reality is that the students we are serving today need school counselors AND mental health professionals. We need to continue to work toward solutions that make this possible!

**Ratios:** Last year I ended up covering for a counselor position in my district that was not filled. I had 575 students on my caseload. It is impossible to stay on top of this many students to help identify those who may be in crisis and require additional support, run small groups, provide support and strategies to families, meet individually with students needing additional support for academic and personal social skills, meet college & career readiness needs, provide preventative education for students and parents, this list could go on. When the ratio of students to school counselor is much beyond the American School Counseling Association recommendation of 250:1, the quality of school counseling services is

impacted, and it becomes easier for students to fall through the cracks. Administrators tend to monitor student to teacher ratios for classrooms, but who is monitoring the number of students on a school counselors' caseload if it isn't protected by law? It is because of this that I urge you to keep the ratio included in this bill intact.

I do agree that further discussion is required regarding schools that have enrollments of (for example) 310 falling just barely above the 300:1 ratio. It is unrealistic to expect schools to be able to fill 3% FTE school counseling positions. So, do we allow schools to meet those small percentages above the 300:1 ratio with outside mental health and social work services? Perhaps that could be an option. But taking school counselors out of schools is not the answer to better meeting student needs. It only creates new gaps that will need to be filled and will create new problems that will need to be solved.

It is my hope that we can continue to work together to find the best solution for our students. Our students need access to comprehensive school counseling services daily, but there are students who will need more than a school counselor can provide them. We need school counselors and mental health counselors to work in collaboration to truly meet the needs of ALL our North Dakota students!

Thank you for your time and consideration of this testimony. I am more than willing to answer any questions you may have.

Respectfully,  
April Foth  
NDSCA President