

**Legislative Testimony
In Support House Bill 1012
Presented to House Appropriations Committee**

2/2/25

By: Danica Nelson

Chairperson Nelson and Members of the House Appropriations Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in strong support of legislation providing behavioral health services and support grants to school districts. My name is Danica Nelson, and I am Bismarck Public Schools Student Support Services Director, speaking on behalf of students, families, educators, and mental health professionals who are witnessing firsthand the urgent need for increased behavioral health support in our schools.

The Growing Need for Behavioral Health Support in Schools

Schools are the frontline for identifying and addressing students' behavioral health needs. Over the past decade, we have seen a significant increase in students experiencing anxiety, depression, trauma, and other mental health challenges.

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), one in six youth aged 6–17 experience a mental health disorder each year, yet less than half receive the necessary treatment. Without adequate support, these challenges impact students' academic achievement, relationships, and long-term well-being. Our educators are dedicated professionals, but they are not mental health experts. They need trained professionals and resources to effectively support students.

Bismarck Public Schools use the funding in HB 1012

Bismarck Public Schools has received \$705,116.18 for the 23-24 and 24-25 school year. Investing in behavioral health services through school-based grants have enhanced Bismarck Public School systems by:

- An Increase Access to Mental Health Professionals
- Expansion of Intervention Programs
- Building of the RenewED Program
- Support School-Based Services
- Enhance Learning Through Curricular Materials
- Provide Calming Tools and Techniques
- Support Training for Educators

House Bill 1012: Strengthening School-Based Behavioral Health Services

House Bill 1012 includes a \$9,500,000.00 budget item (page 2, line item 4 of the budget bill) to support school-based behavioral health services for districts participating in Medicaid billing. This additional funding recovers the 50% of Medicaid funding that school districts do not receive. By filling this funding gap, we can ensure that school districts have the necessary resources to provide sustainable behavioral health services for students in need.

The Economic and Social Benefits of Funding Behavioral Health

Failing to address students' mental health needs carries long-term costs for our communities. Students who struggle with untreated behavioral health issues are at higher risk for dropping out, substance abuse, and involvement in the juvenile justice system. By investing in school-based behavioral health support now, we can reduce these negative outcomes and create healthier, more resilient communities.

Conclusion

Supporting behavioral health services in schools is not just an educational issue—it is a public health imperative. School districts need dedicated funding to provide comprehensive, sustainable mental health support for all students. I urge this committee to prioritize this legislation and allocate the necessary resources to ensure every student has the opportunity to thrive.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I welcome any questions you may have.