

Milnor Public School District No. 2

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Chris Larson, Superintendent and Activities Director

Ryan Weber, High School Principal

Theresa Wittich, Elementary Principal

1 **Testimony in Support of House Bill 1449**

2 North Dakota Legislative Assembly

3 February 11, 2024

4

5 Chair Heinert and Members of the Committee,

6 My name is Dr. Chris Larson, and I serve as the Superintendent of Milnor Public School. I appreciate
7 the opportunity to testify in **support** of House Bill 1449, which acknowledges the critical need for
8 school counselors while providing **practical flexibility** for districts to meet this requirement.

9 At a time when student mental health, academic planning, and career readiness are more important than
10 ever, school counselors play a vital role in supporting student success. However, many districts,
11 especially in rural areas, struggle to recruit and retain licensed school counselors due to workforce
12 shortages and limited applicant pools. House Bill 1449 provides a common-sense approach to
13 addressing this challenge while ensuring that students continue to receive necessary support.

14 **Key Provisions That Strengthen Our Schools**

15 **1. Prioritizing Recruitment & Hiring (Section 5a)**

16 This bill reaffirms our commitment to hiring qualified school counselors by requiring districts to
17 actively recruit and attempt to fill positions. As a district leader, I can attest that we continually advertise
18 positions, network with universities, and explore incentives to attract qualified professionals.
19 Unfortunately, the availability of licensed counselors remains a barrier for many schools, especially in
20 rural North Dakota.

21 A personal example of this challenge occurred when I had a highly qualified social worker with a
22 master's degree in social work express interest in filling our open school counselor position. She had
23 years of experience working with students, understood the mental health needs of children, and was
24 eager to serve our school. However, because she did not hold the exact K-12 school counseling
25 credential, she was required to enroll in an approved university program, take coursework, and meet
26 credentialing requirements—even though she was qualified to teach those very university courses.

27 This bureaucratic hurdle delayed the time it took for a highly capable professional to step into a much-
28 needed role in our school. Situations like this highlight the importance of flexibility, allowing schools to
29 prioritize student needs while still ensuring high standards in counseling services.

30 **2. Alternative Methods to Serve Students (Section 5b)**

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1 Recognizing that hiring a full-time counselor is not always feasible, this bill **encourages practical**
2 **alternatives** to meet students' needs, including:

- 3 • **Shared services agreements** with neighboring districts to maximize resources.
- 4 • **Contracted services** with licensed professionals to provide direct counseling support.
- 5 • **Virtual counseling options**, which have proven effective, particularly in remote areas.

6 These alternative methods **ensure that students continue to receive critical services** rather than
7 leaving districts in a position where they are unable to meet counseling needs due to workforce
8 shortages.

9 **3. Accountability & Transparency (Section 5c & Section 6)**

10 This bill strengthens accountability by requiring schools to document their recruitment efforts and
11 alternative strategies. Additionally, making this information available upon request promotes
12 transparency and public trust in how districts are addressing student support services.

13 **Conclusion**

14 House Bill 1449 is a balanced approach that maintains the high standard of school counseling services
15 while providing districts the necessary flexibility to meet the needs of students when hiring challenges
16 arise. By supporting this bill, we ensure that schools are not penalized for workforce shortages beyond
17 their control while still prioritizing student access to academic, career, and mental health support.

18 I respectfully urge the committee to **support House Bill 1449**, as it **upholds our commitment to**
19 **student well-being while recognizing the realities faced by North Dakota schools.**

20 Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions.

21
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