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HB 1449
Testimony of Amy De Kok
House Education Committee
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Chairman Heinert and members of the House Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. My name is Amy De Kok, and I serve as the executive director for the North Dakota School Boards Association. NDSBA represents all 168 public school districts and their governing boards. I am here today to express our support for HB 1449, which provides much-needed flexibility for school districts as they work to meet the state's school counselor requirements. This bill acknowledges the critical role school counselors play in supporting student success while also recognizing the significant challenges districts face in recruiting and retaining these essential professionals.

Under existing law, school districts must strive to employ one full-time counselor per 300 students in grades K-12. However, this requirement has become increasingly difficult to fulfill due to the persistent shortage of qualified school counselors in North Dakota. Many rural and small school districts, in particular, struggle to attract licensed counselors due to workforce shortages, geographic constraints, and financial limitations. These staffing challenges leave districts unable to comply fully with the statutory ratio, despite their best efforts.

HB 1449 introduces a pragmatic and necessary solution. By allowing school districts to meet the requirement through documented efforts to recruit and hire counselors, explore alternative methods such as shared services, contracted counseling, or virtual counseling options, and maintain records of these actions, the bill balances the need for student support with the reality of the hiring difficulties schools encounter. This approach ensures that school districts are held accountable for prioritizing student mental health while also providing them the flexibility needed to meet the law's intent in a manner that is practical and feasible.

This bill is not about diminishing the importance of school counselors—it is about ensuring that every district has a pathway to provide essential student support, even when a full-time hire is not immediately possible. By recognizing alternative methods and shared services, HB 1449 allows schools to be innovative in meeting student needs while maintaining transparency and accountability.

I urge this committee to support HB 1449 to help school districts navigate the ongoing challenges of filling school counselor positions while continuing to prioritize the well-being and success of North Dakota students.

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