

Testimony of Chanda Arneson in support of HB 1490

February 7th 2025

Representatives Vigesaa, Brandenburg, Headland, Pyle, Senators Paulson, Lemm, Wanzek and members of the Committee.

My name is Chanda Arneson. I am a former school board member, a city auditor for a rural community and a mother of three young children. I am writing in support of HB1490. My 9 years of experience on a rural school board has prompted my interest in supporting this bill.

School counselors are an important and pivotal asset to our school districts. Their passion and expertise are necessary, especially in this day of age where we are, more than ever, aware of the importance of mental health. No matter how many degrees a person holds or what sort of education they pursued, we are still all humans. This bill would ensure added support for the psychological load these individuals have to carry and give tools in situations that may occur when even a highly trained and educated person deeply immersed might not recognize in themselves. The goal is to offer added support, not penalize people for following their passion and calling.

In reading through the opposition of this bill it is evident that it struck a chord with counselors across our state. Yes, this bill was sparked off the back of a very volatile situation in one of our public school districts. In this specific situation the counselor had very well-known mental health issues and was still granted access to the most vulnerable children over an almost 20-year period of time. Had the professionals he was seeing at the time expressed the gravity of his mental state, the trajectory of the lives of all of these victims would be completely different today. If this man had been supported and guided in a better way, these perverted incidents would not have occurred, at least not to the extent they were allowed to happen. As a board member in this district it took two years of my complaints before this incident was taken seriously. After the situation was finally addressed, we realized just how long his perversions took place and how absolutely devastating the time he spent in our district really was. Because of his intense training, he was able to manipulate everyone around him, parents, co-workers and worst of all vulnerable students who needed someone to talk to. He had documented mental health issues with suicidal tendencies and was still granted access to our most precious assets. Something needs to change. If this has happened once, it can and probably is happening still today. This bill is a great start in making the fact known that a person with severe mental instability can and does have access to the minds of our children in their most formative years. This bill is not intended to cause hardship but to offer additional support to one of the most important positions in our school systems.

In closing, I urge you to support this bill in favor of biannual evaluations of school counselors. Our children deserve any measure of protection we can offer, and our school staff deserve to be supported in the best ways possible.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Chanda Arneson

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