

Chair Heinert & Members of the House Education Committee,

I am writing in opposition of House Bill 1490, which would require school counselors to undergo psychological evaluations every 2 years in order to work individually with students. This bill insinuates that school counselors are more likely than other school professionals (teachers, principals, coaches, etc.) to abuse the students that we serve. This is a very misguided and inequitable assumption that would have negative ramifications for our education system and our North Dakota students.

As a school counselor of 15 years, I am bound by the ethical standards of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), which include strict guidelines on professional competency, confidentiality, and ethical decision-making. These standards ensure that I, along with all my school counselor colleagues, act in the best interests of students while maintaining the highest level of professional conduct. School counselors enter this profession because they want to make a positive impact on the lives of students; it is a rare few who utilize their professional position as a school counselor to abuse or mistreat the students that are entrusted to them. Requiring psychological evaluations because of these rare cases unfairly questions the ability of all school counselors to adhere to the ethical obligations by which they are bound and creates a dangerous precedent of mistrust.

The main purpose of the school counseling role and comprehensive counseling programs is to identify and remove barriers for students that can negatively impact their academic, personal and future success. The confidential relationship between a student and their school counselor is a cornerstone of effective counseling. This bill could create unnecessary barriers, deterring students from seeking support at times that they may need it most. At a time when mental health needs in schools are rising, we should be strengthening the student-counselor relationship, not undermining it; we should be removing barriers, not creating them.

Finally, the financial burden of these evaluations—whether placed on the counselor or the district—raises serious concerns. Many school districts, especially those in rural areas, are already struggling with limited resources. Forcing districts, or individual counselors, to cover the cost of psychological assessments could discourage qualified professionals from entering or remaining in the profession. I can assure you that the school counselor shortage we are currently working to address will only grow if this bill passes. Many school counselors already feel a lack of understanding, respect and appreciation for the work that they do and a bill like this one certainly does not help, in fact, it only serves to validate such feelings. If our goal is to recruit and retain school counselors, it is imperative that we stop bringing forward legislation that seems to portray them as incompetent and replaceable and begin recognizing the important and unique work they do in our schools.

For these reasons, I urge a DO NOT PASS on House Bill 1490. Instead of imposing unnecessary and discriminatory barriers, we should be working to support and retain the dedicated school counselors who provide critical services to our students.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,
April Foth
K-12 School Counselor