



January 14, 2025

Subject: Letter of Support for the Change from “Emotional Disturbance” to “Emotional Disability”

Dear Representatives,

The North Dakota Association of School Psychologists (NDASP) is writing to express our full support for the proposed change from “Emotional Disturbance” to “Emotional Disability” as a recognized disability category (for special education) in North Dakota. NDASP also fully supports the proposed label change from “Hearing Impairment, including Deafness” to “Deaf or Hard of Hearing.” As professionals deeply committed to the well-being and success of students with emotional challenges, we believe this change is essential for ensuring accurate representation, reducing stigma, and providing more effective support to the students and families we serve.

## Rationale for Change

The term “Emotional Disturbance” has negative connotations that can inadvertently lead to stigma and misunderstanding. The word “disturbance” suggests disruption and carries implications that may impact students’ self-esteem and identity. Changing this terminology to “Emotional Disability” would foster a more respectful and supportive environment that acknowledges emotional needs without labeling students in a way that could hinder their growth and self-concept.

It is crucial to highlight that this change is a *label change only and does not alter the criteria for qualification*. Federal regulations dictate the services to be provided, not the label, ensuring continuity in support for students with these needs.

## Stakeholder Engagement

Our organization gathered information on the impact of this language change and reviewed label changes in other states (33 states are now using a label other than Emotional Disturbance, the most common alternative label being “Emotional Disability” in 19 states). We engaged a wide range of stakeholders, including the Department of Public Instruction (DPI), special education directors, school psychologists, special education teachers, Protection & Advocacy (P&A), parent groups, and students. Two initial surveys were conducted to gather stakeholders’ positions regarding a language change:

- **Survey #1** (112 responses): 83% in favor, 0% opposed.
- **Survey #2** (120 responses, wider audience): 77% in favor, 19% maybe, 4% opposed.



The feedback highlighted reasons for support, such as the negative connotation of the current term, the associated stigma, the need to reflect a future-oriented mindset, the refusal of services due to the label, and limitations on career options.

## Collaboration and Information Sharing

Responses were shared with other organizations, educators, students, and families. We shared this information with North Dakota special education directors and the North Dakota Special Education Consortium. Additionally, we collaborated with the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community to include a similar change for their terminology, ensuring a unified approach.

A student and family presentation was also completed. The student and family survey revealed that 91% of respondents favored the change. This overwhelming support from those directly impacted further emphasizes the need for this terminology update.

## Benefits of the Proposed Change

- **Promotes Inclusivity and Respect:** Referring to these challenges as an “Emotional Disability” instead of a “Disturbance” aligns with person-centered language that respects each student’s experience and individuality.
- **Encourages Greater Understanding:** The proposed terminology would clarify for educators, families, and community members that emotional challenges are disabilities requiring thoughtful support and resources, similar to other disability categories.
- **Supports Positive Self-Identity:** This change can help students view themselves in a more positive light, as “disability” is a recognized term that denotes a condition rather than a behavior, helping students and families engage more comfortably with supportive services.

## Conclusion

For these reasons, we respectfully urge all stakeholders to consider the importance of this terminology change and to support its adoption. Together, we can build a more inclusive, respectful, and supportive educational environment that truly values every student’s potential.

Thank you for considering this perspective. We are available for any further discussion on this matter and are fully committed to supporting this step toward positive change.

Sincerely,

Rebecca Campbell, President

On behalf of North Dakota Association of School Psychologists