

March 18, 2021

Dear Committee Members:

I am writing this letter in support of House Bill 1013 Section 18, which addresses school counseling ratios at the elementary level and appropriate counselor duties at all grade levels. I have worked in education for 12 years, six of which have been as a licensed school counselor. I have experience in both Class A and Class B schools, and across all grade levels. Presently, I am employed as a counselor at Century High School, where I have about 320 students on my caseload. I also coordinate Advanced Placement and PSAT exams, among other assigned duties.

I am compelled to advocate for the passing of this amendment for several reasons. For one, it is an ethical obligation to work toward equitable access to academic, socioemotional, and career support for all students. The American School Counselor Association, or ASCA, has ethical standards that state it is the counselor's responsibility to "provide students with a comprehensive school counseling program" and to "advocate for a school counseling program free of non-school-counseling assignments". With higher-than-recommended ratios and responsibilities like exam coordination, it becomes difficult to adequately meet the needs of *all* students. Instead, the focus shifts to triaging students by highest need, leaving many others to fall through the cracks. I simply cannot accept this for our students.

Second, I--and many counselors like me--would argue that too much time is spent on non-counseling tasks, effectively taking us away from the real needs of students. I estimate that I spend around 150-200 hours throughout a school year on exam administration duties alone. That amounts to roughly one month that I am unavailable to students in need of support. This is not simply an issue of choosing preferred over non-preferred job duties. ASCA argues that "coordinating cognitive, aptitude and achievement testing programs" is an "inappropriate" use of school counselors' time. The tasks involved in exam administration do not require a master's degree, nor do they require any training or background in mental health. The tasks are in fact mostly clerical in nature: Securing classrooms for testing, requisitioning proctors, proctoring exams, and so on. From a financial standpoint, utilizing masters-level professionals as exam administrators is not an effective use of funds, nor is it necessary for the integrity of the exams. It would be prudent for both legislators and school districts to take a closer look at how the role of the school counselor has evolved over the years to look much different than the "guidance counselors" of the past.

And finally, we must prepare ourselves to deal with the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. We've already seen increases in anxiety and depression rates in the past year, and many speculate that the effects of that will trickle down for years to come. The United Nations reported in its May 2020 policy brief that in addition to its physical toll, this pandemic "has the seeds of a major mental health crisis as well, if action is not taken." I believe we must do just that. We must

take action now to ensure that adequate mental health services are readily available to *all* students.

In closing, I want us to consider what it would look like for students to attend schools where comprehensive school counseling programs are effectively implemented. Too often, students do not get to reap the full benefits of strong counseling programs due to high student-to-counselor ratios and the underutilization of masters-level mental health professionals in schools. I cannot help but wonder what would be different if we were given the opportunity to work in alignment with our intended roles. Could we take steps to ensure that every student has at least one safe and supportive adult at school? Could we strengthen our ties with parents and guardians, and in turn increase protective factors for students? Could we make progress toward closing the achievement gap for historically marginalized groups of students? I believe that we can do all of this and more. We just need to remove the barriers that get in the way of doing this work.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Courtney Sailer". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Courtney Sailer, M.S.  
Professional School Counselor  
Century High School  
Bismarck, ND