

Chairman Heinert, Vice Chairman Schreiber-Beck, and Members of the House Education Committee:

Thank you for reading this testimony regarding SB 2340, relating to required school counselors. I am a high school counselor in western North Dakota. I would recommend a vote of DO NOT PASS, or at least an amendment to the wording of the bill.

As it is written, districts could hire other mental health professionals in lieu of a licensed school counselor provided they cannot fill open positions with a licensed school counselor. There is no denying that having a variety of mental health services in a school system is beneficial to students, including those provided by the professionals listed in this bill such as social workers and clinical mental health counselors. However, whenever possible there must be school counselors on staff. School counselors are trained to provide comprehensive services in three areas: academic, career, and social-emotional. In other words, we work with all students in a school to help meet a variety of school-based and other needs. Many of our students do not need intensive mental health supports provided by psychologists and clinical mental health counselors; instead, they need the broad, comprehensive supports provided by school counselors such as academic supports, college & career readiness programming, and school wide prevention activities.

Please consider rewording this so that North Dakota school districts will still make every effort to hire and keep school counselors. While it is true that there is a school counselor shortage and many districts cannot meet the 300 to 1 required ratio, other mental health professionals should be hired in addition to, not instead of, school counselors whenever possible. Perhaps it can be worded that other mental health professionals can be hired on one-year contracts, thus spurring school districts to continue to pursue licensed school counselors as a benefit to all students. Or perhaps there could be a time frame for that professional to take school counseling classes before their contract with the school expires. Otherwise, without school counselors on staff, many students are in danger of slipping through the cracks without the supports that they need to have a successful life and future.

Thank you for your consideration.

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