

North Dakota House Education Committee:

Thank you for taking the time to read and hear the testimony regarding Engrossed Senate Bill No. 2340 related to school counselors. My name is Courtney Quist, and I am a licensed professional school counselor at a large public high school. I have concerns that should this bill pass, there will be unintended negative consequences for students in North Dakota. I would recommend a vote of DO NOT PASS, or at least an amendment to the wording of the bill.

School counselors are highly educated, professionally certified individuals who help students succeed in school and plan their career. An integral part of the total education system, school counselors help students form healthy goals, mindsets and behaviors. With the aid of a school counselor, students learn to develop effective collaboration and cooperation skills, to practice perseverance, to develop time management and study skills, and to learn self-motivation and self-direction habits.

The American School Counseling Association recommends a 250:1 ratio of students to school counselors. Several studies have noted that smaller ratios support increases in attendance, GPA, graduation rates, as well as decreased disciplinary issues. Additionally, studies have shown that lower ratios increase the likelihood of students having conversations with their school counselor regarding post-secondary plans. The ratio that has been established in North Dakota demonstrates that ALL students deserve and need access to the services that school counselors are *uniquely* trained to do.

According to the current language of SB 2340, schools will be required to attempt to fill the 300:1 school counselor mandate with licensed & credentialed school counselors. However, if unable to find and hire a school counselor, schools would be able to fill open positions by contracting in for mental health services. Allowing this puts our state at risk of reducing counseling support for the majority of students in our state. At a time when student mental health is in crisis, we need to continue working to provide both school counseling and mental health services to our students to help meet the unique needs of *every* North Dakota student.

North Dakota School Counselors understand the intent of this bill to help meet students' needs until school counselors can be trained and hired for open positions. Mental health counselors, social workers, school psychologists, and other mental health professionals are integral to supporting student needs on the tier 3 (intensive needs) level. These other professionals are incredibly valuable, and all provide critical support to our schools, students, families, and communities that we serve. However, if they are hired to cover the School Counseling mandate of 300:1, the majority of students in those schools will not have access to counseling support unless they have intensive needs. Additionally, preventative instruction will be lost, and college and career readiness will suffer.

I recommend that for districts who are not currently able to hire enough school counselors to meet student needs through the recommended ratio, that a 1-year contract be utilized when hiring a non-school counseling professional. This continues to give schools and districts more time and flexibility to recruit and retain school counselors. I would recommend that the Department of Public Instruction be given time and resources to evaluate the reasons that schools may be struggling to hire a school counselor and create action steps to address this issue. This bill would

represent a significant step backward for the school counseling profession in North Dakota, and I urge you to recommend a vote of DO NOT PASS.

Thank you for your time.