

March 7, 2023

Dear Members of the House Education Committee:

I am writing this letter to share my opposition to SB 2340 which allows other disciplines to be hired to act in the capacity of a school counselor when a district is unable to meet the student to counselor ratio. North Dakota has been a leader in following the American School Counselor recommended ratios for a number of years and I have been proud in sharing this fact when talking with counselors in other states. Having appropriate ratios allows counselors the opportunities to meet the needs of their students providing services in all school counseling areas – academic, career, and social emotional learning.

Although I sympathize with those schools and districts that have had difficulty in recruiting qualified counselors, hiring from other disciplines is not the answer. There are several reasons for this. First, school counselors have specific training. This training includes education on working with children at various developmental stages K-12. This training also includes coursework specific to academic and career counseling not received in other counseling disciplines. Without this training, these counselors have gaps in two of the three areas that school counselors are trained to address.

In addition to being a school counselor, I also have the unique perspective of being a licensed addiction counselor and licensed professional counselor. Although many of the core counseling classes are the same, each counseling track has unique courses with specific training in core competencies. In addition to these additional courses specific to school counseling, school counselors have completed internships in the school setting. These school courses and internship completed provide the tools and skills needed to work with students in a K-12 setting. This is not experience I received in my addiction or clinical training, therefore, without these courses I would have been unprepared as a school counselor.

Some of the disciplines listed in this bill are bachelor's level prepared. School counselors must have a master's degree for licensure. As stated, master's level clinicians such as licensed professional counselors don't have the school specific and often the age-specific training. A professional with only a bachelor's degree is even less prepared for work as a school counselor.

Currently school counselors that are not certified teachers need to take additional coursework in classroom management. Not only would clinicians in other disciplines not have the school counseling coursework, they would not have the classroom management courses. As a result, these clinicians would have additional gaps in the skills needed to run a comprehensive school counseling program.

Lastly, there is a shortage of workers not just in school counselors, but also in school psychologists and addiction counselors. By allowing other disciplines to be considered

for school counseling positions, this may result in “robbing Peter to pay Paul.” With the increase in number of persons struggling with mental health and addiction issues in North Dakota, we certainly don’t want to risk taking away from other necessary community services such as addiction treatment facilities.

If other disciplines were to be considered, there are definitely certain parameters that need to be put in place. These other disciplines should be allowed only a provisional license that would be subject to annual renewal. This annual renewal would be dependent upon completion of additional coursework helping to prepare these professionals to be fully licensed as a school counselor. If these criteria are not met, the provisional license should not be continued. While working under a provisional license, licensed school counselors should be utilized to provide mentoring and supervision to assure appropriateness of services provided. School districts should continue to search for and hire qualified counselors. With three universities in the state of North Dakota that have graduate programs specific to school counseling, efforts should be made to recruit and retain qualified candidates from these programs rather than taking away from the professional credentials and training required for this specialty.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Vanessa Boehm".

Vanessa Boehm, LMAC, LPCC
Professional K-12 School Counselor