

TESTIMONY

Human Services Committee

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Department of Public Instruction

Chairman Hogan and members of the Human Services Committee –

I am Robin Lang, Assistant Director of Teacher and School Effectiveness for the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction (NDDPI). I have been in this position for approximately 18 hours. I hold a Master's Degree in Counseling and have been a practicing elementary counselor for the last 20 years. I am here to provide information regarding the role of the elementary counselor, including behavioral and mental health challenges in our schools.

Elementary school counselors are Mastered Level professionals with a mental health perspective who understand and respond to the behavioral and emotional challenges presented in our schools today. Through a comprehensive developmental school counseling program, school counselors work collaboratively with the school staff, parents and community to develop the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary for children to become healthy, competent and confident learners. By providing education, prevention strategies, and early identification and intervention, school counselors can help all children achieve success.

Students are often defined by the behaviors they externally exhibit. These behaviors are a direct result of internal conflict from situations beyond their control. What is the most important part, and perhaps the hardest part, is the reason for the behavior and the function of the behavior.

Emotional and behavioral concerns can and do interfere with a child's academic progress. Life circumstances impact all of us but often they take a deeper and longer toll on young children who are just developing their emotional and coping skill sets.

Imagine The Student....

- who found his mom had overdosed and called 911. The next morning he is in the classroom worried he forgot his homework, he is tired, frustrated and angry.
- whose house burnt down last night. He lost everything and he doesn't want to come to school.
- who is aware he can't read at the same level as his peers and he has to give a report that day to the class. He is so anxious but it comes out in anger and he yells for everyone to leave him alone.
- who is crying outside the gym door refusing to go in. We find out his new shoes were stolen from the shelter last night and he is mad he won't be able to play.
- who is withdrawn all day and doesn't complete any school work. Mom was hospitalized as a result of domestic violence that the child witnessed.
- who slept in the car last night because the shelter was full.
- who hit another student who bumped him in the hall. We know this student has been in foster care for findings of being abused. He felt it was on purpose; he can't tell the difference.

These are just some of the situations our students cope with daily and part of what a typical day for an Elementary Counselor might look like as we respond and try to support the students, families and schools. Students deal with so much more than we are aware of and their reaction to a situation may surface days, weeks or months after a traumatic event. The impacts are significant, both academically and socially, for all children involved, not just those who experience trauma.

Consider that the majority of a student's week is spent at school, this needs to be where the foundation for mental health awareness, empathy and social skill training, and behavior strategies begin. We must look beyond the exhibited behaviors and create a system that allows us to educate and support the whole child.

Thank you for your time and support in children's behavioral and mental health. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.