

Dear Senator Kunesh,

My name is Lisa Hoogheem. I am the parent to two boys who both experience mental health challenges. I am testifying in support of Senate File 1028 which would increase access to and reimbursement for behavioral health services provided by licensed school social workers for Minnesota students. My oldest son is on the autism spectrum and has been diagnosed with Bi-polar 2 and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorders. He lives with a baseline of suicidal ideation. When triggered he becomes extremely dysregulated and agitated, punches holes in walls and bangs his head. My son first verbalized his suicidal thoughts when he was in elementary school and threatened to throw himself over the 3rd floor balcony with the intent to harm himself. Unfortunately, my son didn't have a mental health diagnosis and hadn't yet qualified for special education so there was not the option to receive services from the school social worker. I alone had to navigate the very complicated and very broken mental health system of care for children and families.

Several inpatient and partial hospitalizations later, time in the juvenile detention center, and three different school placements, the school social worker remains a valued member of my son's "treatment" team. Through a comprehensive special education evaluation process, my son qualified for mental health and behavioral health services and his resulting IEP was developed to ensure access to a highly qualified school social worker to meet his needs. She knows what triggers my son, the behavioral antecedents to his actions, and how to intervene in a safe, yet un-intrusive manner to assist my son to become regulated again so that he can learn. She coordinates with his mental health therapist, his med provider and his county case manager using a systems approach to whole child wellness.

My son recently turned 18. This was a birthday I feared we might never see. My son is now thriving. He is in the finishing trades institute and will be starting transition programming very soon. The school social worker was instrumental in recommending this program for my son, in guiding me to obtain additional mental health services for my son, and in assisting us to put together a transition plan for him to work on independent living skills. Unfortunately, the child mental health system does not transfer to the adult system. All of the work I have done to get services for my child will no longer serve him because he is 18. The school social worker most recently assisted me with finding information on guardianship, social security, housing, and adult case management. She has been my guiding light in getting everything in place so that my son can graduate and one day live independently.

My youngest son also struggles with anxiety and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. He tends to internalize his feelings and not externalize. While he does not exhibit behavioral concerns and performs well in school he does not qualify for social work services at his school because he is not in special education. I, alone, was tasked with finding services outside of school for him without the guidance of a school social worker. We are doing a disservice to children who experience mental health challenges if they cannot access the expertise of a school social worker because they are not in special education. Two very different children, two very different experiences.

Every child deserves to attend a school that is safe and supportive. This means that they need a trusted adult to connect with, someone who has the education, training, knowledge and skills to appropriately intervene and that is the school social worker. Please show your support by removing barriers for districts to access Federal Medicaid dollars to support these vital services provided by licensed school social work professionals and practitioners. Our MN students' lives depend on it.

Sincerely,
Lisa Hoogheem