

4/13/17

House Committee on Health Care
Regarding HB 2408

Chair Greenlick, Vice Chair Nosse, Vice Chair Hayden and all members of the House Committee on Health Care:

I am writing in strong opposition to HB 2408. Our students need increased access to social workers and mental health professionals, but the use of tax payer money for the expansion of school-based health centers proposed in this bill is not a judicious or effective use of funds to address the vast mental health needs in our schools.

The pilot program proposed by Section 3 of HB 2408 will focus on decreasing the rates of school absenteeism through hiring social workers for school-based health centers. While students have access to these health centers, those employed by the health centers do not have access to the students and cannot come into the school to meet their needs, additionally they do not have access to student information. School-based health centers operate as standalone medical clinics. It is against the law for school staff including counselors, social workers, and nurses to share the type of confidential student information needed for this pilot program.

For a social worker to be effective in decreasing absenteeism they must be able to access a student's attendance information. For them to be effective they need to be able to participate in the multi-disciplinary team of counselors, teachers, administrator, and school nurses who work to meet all the needs of that student. A social worker employed by the school district is better able to address not only absenteeism, but all of the students emotional, mental, and physical needs.

If these funds are instead appropriated to ODE to provide schools with much needed counselors and social workers then we have invested in providing our students' access to professionals who are available throughout the day. Counselors and social workers hired by the district are able to access the information necessary to identify those who are in need and to build the relationships that are critical to helping them.

Children need their emotional, mental, and physical needs are met so that they are safe and prepared to learn. Having a school counselor is not mandated, and as school districts across our state face budget shortfalls, staff reductions in these areas will directly impact the availability of mental health care in our schools.

All children in Oregon deserve access to counselors and social workers and HB 2408 is not an effective or prudent step towards this goal. Please consider appropriating these funds to the Oregon Department of Education so that these professionals can be hired to directly by school districts to serve our children.

Jessie Carter, BSN RN
Oregon School Nurses Association Board Member
Cascade School District Nurse