

# **ROBERT L. COWLES**

**Wisconsin State Senator, 2nd Senate District**

**STANDING COMMITTEES:**

Natural Resources & Energy, Chair  
Transportation & Local Government, Vice-Chair  
Economic Development & Technical Colleges

## **Testimony on 2023 Senate Bill 241**

**Senator Robert Cowles**

**Senate Committee on Universities and Revenue**

**August 23rd, 2023**

Thank you, Chair Hutton and Committee Members, for holding a hearing and allowing me to testify on 2023 Senate Bill 241. This bill creates a new program intended to keep mental health professionals in Wisconsin.

The mental health of teens and children has unfortunately dramatically declined in recent years. This is a nationwide trend, and Wisconsin is no exception. Driven by a multitude of factors, including but not limited to the Covid shutdowns of schools, the 2021 Youth Risk Behavior Survey of Wisconsin public school students showed that 52% of students surveyed reported significant problems with anxiety, 34% reported feeling sad or hopeless almost every day over the prior two weeks, and 18% reported serious consideration of a suicide attempt in the past twelve months. Studies have shown that students with untreated depression are 2x more likely to drop out of school than their peers, highlighting the need to address these concerns before it's too late.

Exacerbating this problem is the lack of access to youth mental health services. The Wisconsin Office of Children's Mental Health reports that 66 of our 72 counties have a psychiatrist shortage. When you factor in that some psychiatrists in private practice do not take minors as patients, and that many families cannot afford private psychiatry services, the importance of school psychologists becomes all the more apparent. Unfortunately, Wisconsin is also experiencing a shortage of school psychologists. According to the National Association of School Psychologists, they recommend a ratio of 1 school psychologist for every 500 students. According to 2021-2022 data, Wisconsin reports a ratio of 1 school psychologist for every 815 students.

Senate Bill 241, built to mimic a successful existing program at the Higher Educational Aids Board (HEAB) for certain teachers, could make loans of up to \$10,000 per year for up to three years to students who are studying school psychology at an institution in this state. Assuming the student maintains a GPA of at least 3.0, the student may have their \$30,000 loan forgiven if they work in a rural or urban district as a school psychologist for at least four years after graduation. If they do not meet the forgiveness requirements, they must simply pay back the loan with a modest interest rate. Senate Amendment 1 made a technical correction pointed out by the UW-System to address the fact that school psychology programs are typically housed in graduate, not undergrad schools.

Too many Wisconsin students are in need of mental health services, and not nearly enough are receiving the assistance they need. Creating a new School Psychologist Loan Forgiveness Program will not solve the problems Wisconsin's youth are facing, but it will help to get more qualified young adult professionals into more Wisconsin schools, helping to lessen the shortage of school psychologists in our state. For each new school psychologist we can produce and place, the impact on students served by the school psychologist could be immeasurable.

August 23, 2023

**Senate Committee on Universities and Revenue**

**Department of Public Instruction Testimony  
2023 Senate Bill 241**

I want to thank Chairman Hutton and members of the committee for the opportunity to provide testimony on Senate Bill 241 (SB 241). My name is Kevyn Radcliffe, Legislative Liaison for the Department of Public Instruction (DPI).

**DPI presents this testimony in support of SB 241 and recommends an amendment to the bill to include other professional pupil services staff to address school mental health staffing shortages.**

**Student Mental Health Challenges (2023-25 Budget DIN 6011 Background info)**

In our 2023-25 budget request, we noted that one in six U.S. youth aged 6-17 experience a mental health disorder each year, and half of all mental health conditions begin by age 14. Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), behavior problems, anxiety, and depression are the most diagnosed mental disorders in children. Yet, only about half of youth with mental health conditions received any kind of treatment in the past year.<sup>i</sup>

The lack of professional help and intervention for children and youth struggling with mental health issues is considered a significant factor to unsafe school environments. Youth are almost as likely to receive mental health services in an education setting as they are to receive treatment from a specialty mental health provider – in 2019, 15% of adolescents aged 12-17 reported receiving mental health services at school, compared to 17% who saw a specialty provider.<sup>ii</sup>

Wisconsin's adolescent suicide rate also exceeds the national rate. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) reports the adolescent suicide rate in Wisconsin was 14.43 per 100,000 in 2020. In the US, there was an increase in the suicide rate from 10.4 per 100,000 in 2012 to 13.5 per 100,000 in 2020.<sup>iii</sup> Stressors like academic achievement, violence in schools, poverty, and social media have contributed to increasing rates of mental health disorders among adolescents over the last decade. These disorders include major depression, suicidal thoughts, and psychological distress (APA 2019).

**School Based Mental Health Professionals Staff**

Pupil services staff—nurses, psychologists, social workers, and counselors—are regularly the first to identify students in need of assistance. And, often, they offer the only professional aid those students will receive. Of youth who receive mental health assistance, 70 to 80 percent receive

mental health services in their schools (ACLU, 2019). School counselors, psychologists, social workers, and nurses all provide essential services to students, including those related to mental health.

Pupil Service	Recommended Ratio	2021-22 Ratios <i>(2022-23 Ratios are not available yet)</i>	Additional FTE needed
School Psychologists	500:1	826:1	655
School Counselors	250:1	381:1	1,141
School Social Workers	250:1 for general ed, 50:1 for students with intensive needs	1,136:1	2,587

Most school nurses do not have DPI licenses. We must rely on the numbers reported to us by schools/districts. There are 560.61 reported total number of school nurse FTEs and the student to school nurse ratio is 1244:1.<sup>iv</sup>

Attending to the mental health of our youth has become increasingly more critical as depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues have increased significantly over the last several years. The bill authors seek to address this concern by incentivizing more individuals to seek careers in school psychology and to remain in Wisconsin after they receive their degree.

While DPI is in support of this bill, we acknowledge the growing number of students experiencing mental health challenges and the corresponding need for other pupil service mental health professionals in shortage areas. We recommend including school social workers, counselors, and nurses in the loan program.

We would be pleased to work with members of the committee to draft an amendment expanding the scope of the bill to include school social workers, counselors, and nurses in the loan program.

If you have questions or would like additional information, please contact Kevyn Radcliffe, Legislative Liaison, at [kevyn.radcliffe@dpi.wi.gov](mailto:kevyn.radcliffe@dpi.wi.gov) or (608) 264-6716.

<sup>i</sup> Mental Health In Schools, National Alliance on Mental Health (NAMI), 2019, Mental Health in Schools | NAMI.

<sup>ii</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2020). Key substance use and mental health indicators in the United States: Results from the 2019 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (HHS Publication No. PEP20-07-01-001, NSDUH Series H-55).

<sup>iii</sup> Source: Centers for Disease Control MMWR, April 1, 2022.

<sup>iv</sup> It is the position of the National Association of School Nurses (NASN) that access to a registered professional nurse all day, every day, can improve students' health, safety, and educational achievement (NASN, 2020).



University of Wisconsin  
**Whitewater**

DATE: August 23, 2023

TO: Members of the Senate Committee on Universities and Revenue

FROM: Lana Collet-Klingenberg, Interim Dean of the College of Education and Professional Studies,  
University of Wisconsin-Whitewater

RE: Written Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 241

Thank you, Chair Hutton and committee members, for providing this opportunity to submit testimony in support of Senate Bill 241. This legislation creates a school psychologist loan forgiveness program, administered by the Higher Educational Aids Board (HEAB) providing loans upon entrance to graduate school in the area of School Psychology, and opportunity for loan forgiveness at the back end for individuals employed in urban or rural settings in Wisconsin. This legislation also provides UW-System (UWS) the ability to maximize opportunities for graduate students in School Counseling and School Social Work, to gain critical knowledge and skills to re-enter the workforce as providers of school mental health services without accruing high financial debt.

Now, more than ever, school counselors, psychologists, and social workers play a critical role in recognizing and responding to student mental health. In urban and rural areas, these school professionals are often the only professional mental health services available to students and their families. As a college of education that serves both urban and rural school districts, we regularly field phone calls from local districts about open positions in their schools.

At UW-Whitewater, we have three graduate programs that lead to licensure in these critical mental health areas. While our enrollment numbers have held relatively steady in our longer standing programs, school counseling and school psychology, and have been increasing for our newest program, school social work, we know that we are not meeting the need in terms of the number of licensed professionals needed in schools.

Our programs run near capacity and our faculty/staff are constantly looking for creative new ways to meet the needs of working professionals. Two recent examples are a School Social Work Certificate program in the last three years that has had over 60 students participate; and a new post-master's program in school counseling for educators seeking a career change to become licensed school counselors.

The barriers that potential future school mental health professionals cite for not returning to school to earn a graduate degree is the cost of attendance, lower salaries that schools offer, and their own families' financial obligations amidst the general increased cost of living in our society.

The need for school mental health professionals is increasing. For example, the School Social Work Association of America recommends the general ratio of school social workers to students as 1:250, with a lower ratio of 1:50 for students in schools with more intensive needs (e.g., high poverty, high crime). The percentage of Wisconsin school districts in 2021-2022 that have at least one social worker is only 32%, with only 785 school social workers in the entire state. Demand for school psychologists is likewise high. Wisconsin has eight excellent training programs – ensuring these programs are fully enrolled is essential to meeting this shortage. Reducing the cost of education would not only help eliminate a barrier to enrollment but would also incentivize graduates to remain in the state.

This legislation will have a significant, positive impact for my campus, as well as others providing this critical training in our state. It will allow us to maintain and expand programs and will allow graduates of our programs the opportunity to provide critical supports to students in our P-12 schools. Furthermore, this legislation is a way for the legislature to support our campuses and P-12 schools to the betterment of all.