

Amy Drinnon, Ed.S.

Regarding HB 2322, Revising the definition of “children with disabilities” for purposes of providing special education to replace emotional disturbance with emotional disability.

My name is Amy Drinnon and I am currently the Director of the School Psychology graduate program at Fort Hays State University, President Elect for the Kansas Association of School Psychologists, and a former practicing school psychologist throughout Kansas with 13 years of experience in K-12 public education. I am testifying in support of HB 2322, which would provide a change from the current special education label “emotional disturbance” to a more sensitive and inoffensive label of “emotional disability.”

When practicing as a school psychologist I experienced firsthand resistance to utilize the current term “emotional disturbance” from both parents and school staff due perceived, and likely experienced, stigma related to this label. Parents were often concerned and even upset at the idea of labeling their child as “disturbed” and questioned the impact that such a label would have on them throughout their life. Though a change in terminology alone will not change the stigma related to identification under this category, the change will hopefully allow the initial conversations between schools and families to be more focused on the needs of the child and less focused on the label itself. I hope that this would also assist in reducing the misuse of other categories such as “Other Health Impairment” as a catch all when parents and/or school staff are resistant to identification due to the label itself. Though this is a deviation from terminology utilized in IDEA, it is a change that has been supported by multiple states and to my knowledge would have no impact on federal special education funding to the state of Kansas.

Though I support this bill, I think it is also imperative to note that there are systemic issues related to mental health supports and services in the school setting that remain barriers to our children in Kansas. Shortages in mental health providers such as School Psychologists and average student to practitioner ratios well above the recommendations from the National Association of School Psychologists throughout the state of Kansas has a direct impact on the access of quality school based mental health services. Continued efforts in forms of advocacy to increase awareness related to mental health needs within the schools and legislative action to move toward equitable access to school psychological and mental health services throughout Kansas is of equal importance.

Sincere thanks to the Chair and Committee for reading my testimony. I look forward to continued collaboration and creative legislative solutions to support the social and emotional needs of the school aged children of Kansas.