

February 28, 2021

Dear Members of the Education Finance and Policy Committee:

NAMI Minnesota appreciates the significant challenges that school districts face when seeking adequate funding for special education services. Many special education students live with a mental illness and require considerable support to succeed in the classroom. NAMI Minnesota supports efforts to increase funding for special education services, including SF 627 that would allow for intermediates and special education cooperatives to use safe school revenue to place mental health professionals in the classroom. However, we do have concerns with SF 728 and the pathway it creates for some school social workers to bill Medical Assistance.

If the legislature wants to move forward with allowing some school social workers to bill Medical Assistance, it is crucial that in-school programs be held to the same standards as providers in the community. An Individualized Education Program (IEP) is an important tool for students, families and teachers to identify the supports and strategies so the student can progress in the general curriculum. It is not a mental health diagnosis. While experts recognize the difference, many parents of special education students assume that when their child is identified as having an Emotional or Behavioral Disorder (EBD) that this constitutes a mental health diagnosis. This understandable confusion is made worse because Minnesota law defines a child's mental illness as an "emotional disturbance." If special education students receive services through a school-based Children's Therapeutic Supports Services (CTSS) program, under this bill, they will not be eligible for CTSS with a community agency because there is no diagnosis and it was based on an IEP. This will create challenges if the student and their family seek mental health treatment outside of the school or in the summer.

While NAMI Minnesota has concerns about using an IEP instead of a diagnostic assessment to bill Medical Assistance, we appreciate that SF 728 only allows school social workers who qualify as a mental health professional to bill Medical Assistance. Not all school social workers are mental health professionals, and some do not have the training and expertise to practice independently.

We support efforts to identify new funding streams for special education programs, but NAMI Minnesota believes that using an IEP to bill Medical Assistance will create continuity of care issues and increase confusion for parents. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Sue Abderholden, MPH
Executive Director

Sam Smith
Public Policy Coordinator