I am a school psychologist. I am contacting you to ask for your support of House Bill 1377 which focuses on improving students’ mental health by enhancing the nonacademic professional services of school counselors, school psychologists, and school social workers. HB 1377 has the potential to be life-changing for the students I serve, for several reasons. It more accurately defines the role of all three of these professional groups in school settings and provides collaboration time to address topics such as recognizing signs of emotional or behavioral distress, appropriate universal screening (a critical preventative measure), accessing current resources, and making appropriate referrals. HB 1377 also begins to address the barriers for school employed mental health professionals in providing these services by attending to staffing ratios and training in their preparation programs.

There is a lack of awareness in schools regarding the knowledge and competencies of school psychologists, school counselors, and school social workers. Administrators, teachers, and parents are often unclear of the services we can provide for all students, including direct services and individualized interventions. HB 1377 clarifies the services these professionals can provide in schools, helping to expand student access to school mental health prevention and intervention services.

With the current staffing ratios in the state of Washington, school psychologists, school counselors, and school social workers are often not able or available to participate in problem-solving teams, or contribute to prevention and intervention services. HB 1377 helps to further address staffing needs and collaboration among these important school-based mental health professionals.

House Bill 1377 addresses the problematic staffing ratios in schools, recognizing the recommendations of the national associations of their professional organizations. School counselors and social workers are recommended to have a ratio of 1 specialist to every 250 students. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) recommends a ratio of 1 school psychologist to every 500-700 students, depending on other factors and needs in the schools. Very few school psychologists in Washington State are employed in situations with such favorable ratios; many have ratios of 1 school psychologist to 1,000 students or higher. Currently, the prototypical school funding model lists all of these professionals at dismally poor ratios, with less than one percent of school psychologist and school social worker time included in the model. This must be changed if we are to positively impact student outcomes. School psychologists have the skills and capacity to do much more if we are provided with the time to do so.

School psychologists and other school mental health professionals often lack the time and opportunity for consultation with community based service providers and require appropriate continued professional development opportunities to meet the complex needs of students. As well as providing collaboration time between these professionals to better address student mental health needs, HB 1377 also creates a task force, including members of these professions, to address the projected need of school districts for school counselors, school psychologists, and school social workers and the current capacity of the state for meeting this need. This task force would also address preparation programs to help ensure professionals completing these programs have the proper preparation to respond to the mental health and safety needs of students, and to provide students with necessary social and emotional supports. It is important that we have access to high quality professional development that is relevant to these comprehensive and expanded roles, and to improve and maintain our knowledge and skills related to mental health services and supports in schools.

Thank you for your time.