

February 10, 2021

Re: HF 348

To the Honorable Judiciary Finance and Civil Law Committee:

25 million families in the U.S. have experienced alienation of a child from a parent following high conflict divorce or separation according to Erasing Family⁴.

Research shows that the adverse effects of divorce on kids as they grow into their teens and adulthood (anxiety, depression, stress, anger, poor academic performance, substance abuse, relationship issues, violence) has to do with the duration and intensity of their parents' conflict¹. Sadly in Minnesota, our family court system fuels conflict.

Contested custody cases cost Minnesota families on average \$50,000-\$100,000 per case and get stuck in the courts for 5-10 years. Funding community education & support, and focusing on PREVENTING high conflict cases could provide tremendous tax savings by addressing this backlog in our family courts.

There's NO follow-up from our Minnesota courts for divorced or separated families that are struggling with day to day conflicts unless someone files a motion that lands them back in court. This is a very COSTLY way to deal with social problems.

Without a NEW cultural norm of Shared Parenting, what we are asking is nearly impossible. A couple who has just ended their intimate relationship because they cannot get along is asked to do exactly the opposite – 'to get along' for the sake of their kids.

Countries that have embraced this new norm, like the Czech Republic, provide community support and education for parents to be successful at co-parenting. They have funding through their municipalities for transformative mediation (so parents don't have to pay out of pocket) and they focus on child inclusive solutions post-separation².

Our schools are a great place to promote Shared Parenting because they are already responsible for making sure that BOTH parents are included in updates on academic progress and schedules of school activities through MN statute 518.17 subd 3a. We can build on **what's already working** and have larger metro districts PARTNER with rural districts so all divorced or separated parents have access to resources to support Shared Parenting.

I offer co-parenting classes through St Paul Public schools community education, and other east and south metro school districts (6 week group classes via Zoom – 12 hours for \$89, financial assistance is available for families in need). I use a curriculum provided by Active Parenting Publishers (Marietta, GA) which is approved by the Georgia courts¹. This curriculum focuses solely on parenting skills – communication, cooperation, conflict resolution, and managing stress. It also increases awareness to recognize alienating behaviors (when one parent tries to turn the kids against the other parent) and demonstrates ways to 'course correct' to more appropriate behaviors³.

For HR 348, I would suggest 158.157 subd 1b be revised to "chief judge refers parents to local school districts" that have expertise and already provide parent education on early childhood, school age children and parenting teens. Subd 3d REMOVE "before initial case management conference" and

replace with “REGISTER for co-parenting course within 30 days of first filing and complete within 120 days”, and keep the wording that says “opportunity to participate at all phases of pending and post decree proceedings”.

For article f), “notify parties that they can use mediation”, EXPAND to “facilitative or transformative”. In transformative mediation, facilitators create a safe space where people can express their deepest fears, recognize the humanness of their child’s other parent and the importance of their continued relationships in the life of their child, and work TOGETHER to create a parenting plan that will meet the needs of their child(ren)².

Our kids are precious. They didn’t ask for their parents to split up. And they deserve to have BOTH of their fit and loving parents in their lives. By providing skills in communication and conflict resolution, we enable divorced or separated parents to defuse conflict and focus on their SHARED goal of raising whole, healthy, happy children. #doit4MNkids

Sincerely,

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REFERENCES

- 1) Active Parenting Publishers - <https://activeparenting.com/product-category/for-leaders/parenting-curriculums-for-leaders/>
- 2) Dan Simon – Transformative Mediation <https://transformativemediation.com/marriage-family/>
- 3) Dr Jennifer Harman, author of *Parent Acting Badly* <http://www.parentsactingbadly.com/>
- 4) Erasing Family – film documentary - <https://erasingfamily.org/>