

*This opinion is nonprecedential except as provided by
Minn. R. Civ. App. P. 136.01, subd. 1(c).*

**STATE OF MINNESOTA
IN COURT OF APPEALS
A25-1405**

In Re the Custody of BJS:

Joseph Stanton, petitioner,
Respondent,

vs.

Amber Lee Finley,
Appellant,

County of Fillmore,
Respondent.

**Filed August 10, 2026
Affirmed
Connolly, Judge**

Fillmore County District Court
File No. 23-FA-24-68

Joseph Stanton, Zumbrota, Minnesota (pro se respondent)

Kenneth R. White, Law Office of Kenneth R. White, P.C., Mankato, Minnesota (for appellant)

Brett Corson, Fillmore County Attorney, Marla J. Stanton, Assistant County Attorney, Preston, Minnesota (for respondent county)

Considered and decided by Ede, Presiding Judge; Worke, Judge; and Connolly, Judge.

NONPRECEDENTIAL OPINION

CONNOLLY, Judge

On appeal from the decision awarding the parties joint physical custody and respondent-father sole legal custody, appellant-mother argues that (A) the district court failed to make findings of fact sufficient to allow appellate review; (B) neither the district court’s findings of fact nor the record support its decision regarding legal custody; (C) the district court’s best-interests analysis is not supported by the record; and (D) appellant should have been given additional parenting time. We affirm.

FACTS

During the long-term relationship between appellant Amber Lee Finley (mother) and pro se respondent Joseph Stanton (father), the parties had a child, born in July 2015. After the parties separated in the summer of 2023, father commenced this custody action. A two-day trial was then held at which the district court heard testimony from mother, father, father’s partner, father’s mother, the custody evaluator, and an older half-sibling of the child.

Following the trial, the district court found that the “parties’ separation was contentious,” and that nothing suggests that mother has “moved beyond her anger and resentment” towards father and his new partner. The district court also found that, although father is “far from perfect in this contentious separation,” mother “is disproportionately responsible for the inability of the parents to cooperate and communicate effectively.” And the district court found that the custody evaluator’s recommendation of temporary joint legal and physical custody is “unrealistic” given mother’s failure to demonstrate over the

past two years that “she would follow court orders,” place the child’s “well-being above her own jealousy and anger,” and could “respectfully co-parent [the child] with [f]ather.” The district court, therefore, awarded father sole legal custody and the parties joint physical custody, with the child residing primarily with father during the school year and with mother during the summer. Mother now appeals.

DECISION

Mother challenges the district court’s custody decision, arguing that the district court: (A) “failed to make sufficient factual findings to allow for effective appellate review”; (B) abused its discretion in awarding father sole legal custody; (C) abused its discretion in conducting its best-interests analysis; and (D) abused its discretion in establishing the parenting-time schedule.

“Appellate review of custody determinations is limited to whether the district court abused its discretion by making findings unsupported by the evidence or by improperly applying the law.” *Kremer v. Kremer*, 827 N.W.2d 454, 457 (Minn. App. 2013) (quotation omitted), *rev. denied* (Minn. Apr. 16, 2013). We review the district court’s factual findings for clear error, “giving deference to the district court’s opportunity to evaluate witness credibility and reversing only if we are left with the definite and firm conviction that a mistake has been made.” *Thornton v. Bosquez*, 933 N.W.2d 781, 790 (Minn. 2019) (quotations omitted). Under the clear-error standard of review, so long as the record reasonably supports the district court’s findings, we will not reverse, even if the record could also support contrary findings. *In re Civ. Commitment of Kenney*, 963 N.W.2d 214, 223 (Minn. 2021); *see also Ewald v. Nedrebo*, 999 N.W.2d 546, 552 (Minn. App.

2023) (citing *Kenney* in family law appeal), *rev. denied* (Minn. Feb. 28, 2024). When reviewing findings of fact for clear error, we “view the evidence in a light favorable to the findings,” do not “reweigh the evidence,” do not find facts, and do not “reconcile conflicting evidence.” *Kenney*, 963 N.W.2d at 221-22 (quotation omitted). Accordingly, we “need not go into an extended discussion of the evidence to prove or demonstrate the correctness of the findings of the [district] court.” *Id.* at 222 (quotation omitted); *see also Wilson v. Moline*, 47 N.W.2d 865, 870 (Minn. 1951) (stating that the function of an appellate court “does not require [it] to discuss and review in detail the evidence for the purpose of demonstrating that it supports the [district] court’s findings”); *Peterka v. Peterka*, 675 N.W.2d 353, 357-58 (Minn. App. 2004) (applying this aspect of *Wilson* in a family-law appeal).

The district court’s “guiding principle” and “paramount commitment” when making child-custody and parenting-time decisions is the best interests of the child. *Thornton*, 933 N.W.2d at 789 (quotations omitted). “In considering the child’s best interests, a district court must consider and evaluate all relevant factors, including 12 factors set forth by statute.” *Id.* (quotation omitted); *see* Minn. Stat. § 518.17, subd. 1(a) (2024) (listing the 12 factors). For each of the statutory best-interests factors, the district court must provide “detailed findings . . . and explain how each factor led to [the district court’s] conclusions and to the determination of custody and parenting time.” Minn. Stat. § 518.17, subd. 1(b)(1) (2024).

A. The district court’s findings are sufficient to allow for appellate review.

Mother argues that the “district court failed to provide sufficiently particularized findings to allow for effective appellate review.” We disagree.

For meaningful appellate review, “it is especially important that the basis for the [district] court’s decision be set forth with a high degree of particularity.” *Wallin v. Wallin*, 187 N.W.2d 627, 631 (Minn. 1971). The district court must explain both its decision and why it made its decision to “(1) assure consideration of the statutory factors by the family court; (2) facilitate appellate review of the family court’s custody decision; and (3) satisfy the parties that this important decision was carefully and fairly considered by the family court.” *Rosenfeld v. Rosenfeld*, 249 N.W.2d 168, 171 (Minn. 1976).

Here, the district court made specific and detailed findings related to each of the 12 best-interests factors. Based on these findings, the district court determined that most of the factors favored father. But the district court also determined that some of the factors weighed in mother’s favor, and some were neutral or not applicable. The district court then balanced the best-interests factors and determined that father should be awarded sole legal custody with mother and father being awarded joint physical custody. As father points out, the district court’s “analysis is exactly what appellate courts require.” The district court’s findings as a whole demonstrate that the court thoroughly analyzed the best-interests factors, carefully explained the decision, and explained why the decision was made. As such, the district court’s findings are sufficient to allow for effective appellate review.

B. The district court did not clearly err in finding that the parties cannot cooperate regarding their child.

Mother argues that the district court clearly erred in finding that the parties cannot cooperate regarding their child. There is a presumption in Minnesota that joint legal custody is in the best interests of the child. Minn. Stat. § 518.17, subd. 1(b)(9) (2024). But this presumption is rebuttable. *Id.* The presumption is rebutted when the parties cannot cooperate in raising their children. *Rosenfeld v. Rosenfeld*, 529 N.W.2d 724, 726 (Minn. App. 1995) (“[J]oint legal custody should be granted only where the parents can cooperatively deal with parenting decisions.” (quotation omitted)).

Here, as mother concedes, the district court “acknowledged the existence of the statutory presumption” in favor of joint legal custody. But the district court concluded that:

The evidence demonstrated that the parents lack the ability to cooperate and communicate effectively on major decisions like education, medical care and religious upbringing. Unfortunately, [m]other is disproportionately responsible for the inability of the parents to cooperate and communicate effectively. Under these circumstances, it is in [the child’s] best interests for one parent to have decision-making authority over [the child’s] upbringing and [f]ather, while far from perfect in this contentious separation, is the obvious choice based on the evidence presented.

Mother argues that the district court’s determination is flawed because the “factual findings fail to support” that the parties “cannot cooperate with decision[s] like ‘education, medical care and religious upbringing.’” We are not persuaded. Although the district court found that “[b]oth parents support [the child’s] religion,” the district court’s concern revolved around the parties’ general inability “to cooperate and communicate effectively” on major issues involving the child. This finding is supported by the record. There was

ample testimony provided at trial related to the contentiousness of this separation and how it affected the parties' ability to communicate and cooperate.

Moreover, despite mother's argument to the contrary, mother failed to communicate effectively with father related to issues involving the child's medical care. Specifically, the district court found that mother "withheld information from [f]ather regarding [the child's] surgery" and "failed to sign up and utilize Our Family Wizard in good faith." These findings are supported by testimony that, despite inquiries by father, mother withheld information about the child's surgery when the child's "eardrum had burst." And the record reflects that mother ignored the court order with respect to Our Family Wizard, and once she finally signed up, it took her months to begin using it. As such, the record supports the district court's finding that mother failed to communicate effectively regarding issues related to the child's medical care.

Finally, the district court found that the parties "cannot agree on which school [the child] will attend if joint legal custody is awarded" and that a major factor in the dispute involves mother's inability to "move past her anger and bitterness" over the separation. Again, these findings are supported by the record. There was a plethora of exhibits admitted into evidence depicting the contentiousness of the parties' relationship and their inability to agree on most issues, including where the child should attend school. These exhibits include text-message threads, social media posts, and recorded video game communications between father and the child.

In addition, testimony at trial demonstrated the parties' inability to communicate effectively, including father's testimony that mother consistently interfered with his ability

to talk to the child. And to the extent that mother disputes the parties' inability to communicate effectively on parenting matters such as education and medical care, the issue involves the credibility of the witnesses and the weight to be given the evidence. Weighing evidence and assessing credibility are the exclusive province of the district court. *See Kenney*, 963 N.W.2d at 222. The district court here weighed the evidence and assessed the credibility of the witnesses and determined that, in this contentious relationship, the parties simply "lack the ability to cooperate and communicate effectively on major decisions like education, medical care and religious upbringing." In light of the deference afforded the district court in making credibility determinations and weighing the evidence, the record supports the district court's findings that these parties cannot cooperate regarding their child. Accordingly, the district court did not abuse its discretion in rejecting the preference for joint legal custody.

C. The district court did not abuse its discretion in conducting its best-interests analysis.

Mother further argues that, "[i]f this Co[u]rt determines that the findings are sufficient for effective review," the district court's best-interests analysis "lacks support in the record." This argument is unavailing.

"The guiding principle in all custody cases is the best interest of the child," *Pikula v. Pikula*, 374 N.W.2d 705, 711 (Minn. 1985), and a court's "paramount commitment" is to that best interest. *Olson v. Olson*, 534 N.W.2d 547, 549 (Minn. 1995). Again, "[i]n considering the child's best interests, a district court must consider and evaluate all relevant factors, including 12 factors set forth by statute." *Thornton*, 933 N.W.2d at 789 (quotation

omitted). A district court has wide discretion in balancing the best-interests considerations, which appellate courts rarely question. *Ewald*, 999 N.W.2d at 551 (“Caselaw leaves scant if any room for an appellate court to question the [district] court’s balancing of best-interests considerations.” (quotation omitted)).

In challenging the district court’s best-interests analysis, mother argues that the following “three themes form the basis” for the court’s analysis: (1) “[m]other interfered with [f]ather’s parenting time with [the child]”; (2) [m]other suffered mental health issues . . . that manifested in inappropriate behavior requiring therapy to correct”; and (3) “[n]o comparison to [f]ather’s behavior need be made in undertaking the best interests analysis.” Mother claims that the “fatal flaws in the [district court’s] best interests analysis” is that “each [theme] is lacking support in the record.” We are not persuaded. Mother is asking us to reweigh the evidence and reassess the district court’s credibility determinations, which we cannot do. *See Kenney*, 963 N.W.2d at 221-22. The district court made detailed findings on each of the best-interests factors and those findings are supported by the record. The district court then weighed each of these factors, some of which favored mother and joint legal custody, but ultimately determined that the factors weighed in favor of father being granted sole legal custody. In light of the broad discretion afforded the district court in balancing the best-interests considerations, mother has not shown that the district court abused its discretion in conducting this analysis.

D. The district court did not abuse its discretion in establishing the parenting-time schedule.

Finally, mother challenges the district court's parenting-time schedule, arguing that it lacks a "factual basis," and failed to satisfy the "best interests of the child [while] ensuring a healthy relationship with both parents." We disagree.

When determining parenting-time issues, the district court must consider the children's best interests. *See Thornton*, 933 N.W.2d at 789. We review parenting-time determinations for an abuse of discretion. *See Dahl v. Dahl*, 765 N.W.2d 118, 123 (Minn. App. 2009) (reviewing parenting-time determination for abuse of discretion).

Here, the district court ordered that "[f]ather is [the child's] primary residence during school; [m]other is [the child's] primary residence during summer." The district court also ordered that mother shall have parenting time every other weekend during the school year and father shall have parenting time every other weekend during the summer. And the district court's parenting-time schedule allotted time for each party for vacations and holidays. The factual basis for this schedule is clear: father was awarded sole legal custody, meaning the child would attend school in the town where father resides, and mother was determined to be "disproportionately responsible for the inability of the parents to cooperate and communicate effectively."

Moreover, the district court's parenting-time schedule was established after the district court thoroughly analyzed the best-interests factors and determined that it is in the child's best interests for father to have sole legal custody and for the child's primary residence to be with father. The parenting-time schedule also awards mother ample

parenting-time with the child, particularly during the summer months when the child is not in school. Although the child will spend more overnights with father than mother, such is the nature of the circumstances when the schedule is based primarily upon where the child attends school and the parents live in different towns that “are approximately a 45-minute drive apart.” Under these circumstances, mother has not shown that the district court abused its discretion in establishing the parenting-time schedule.

Affirmed.