

TESTIMONY
HOUSE EDUCATION COMMITTEE
1-18-2021
by John Porter, Special Education Director
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South Valley and Rural Cass Special Education Units

Chairman and members of the committee:

My name is John Porter and I am the Special Education Director for the South Valley and Rural Cass Special Education Units in southeast North Dakota. I am here to provide testimony in support of House Bill 1188.

Currently, in our state there is a critical shortage of teachers in the area of special education. This is a problem across the state, affecting all special education units regardless of geographic location or population. All special education units and school districts have experienced their challenges in the past several years trying to hire highly qualified special education teachers. These shortages are felt the most by special education teachers who are trying to balance multiple services for multiple students. There are many amazing paraeducators working in schools across the state. These paraeducators are many times local people who have grown up or are committed long term residents of our communities across North Dakota. These individuals are filling the paraeducator role and providing educational supports to many of our most challenging students. For multiple reasons these paraeducators have chosen not to obtain the coursework and degrees necessary to obtain their special education teacher certification. The introduction of House Bill 1188 allows school districts another option to provide the opportunity for these paraeducators to advance their training and education to reach a higher level of certification and likely a higher pay grade.

The creation of a certification for a special education technician included in House Bill 1188 directly mirrors a certification process for speech language paraprofessional (SLPP) certification that was created by the North Dakota legislative process many years ago. SLPPs are effectively used across North Dakota to support the speech needs in our schools. The shortage of Speech Language Pathologists led to the creation of SLPP certification. Although we continue to have shortages in Speech Language Pathologists, the SLPP certification puts another tool in the school district administrator's tool-box to address a critical staffing need. The South Valley Special Education Unit has employed two SLPPs over the last 15 years.

The passing of House Bill 1188 will create a pathway for district administrators to work with local individuals to advance their level of training and education to receive a higher certification and more work responsibilities. The addition of special education technician certification will be one more strategy to address the critical shortage of special education teachers North Dakota districts and special education units are currently experiencing.

I offer my testimony in support of House Bill 1188 and offer the attached changes as suggestions to help create greater flexibility for local districts.