

Chairman Heinert and Members of the Education Committee, my name is Dr. Christy Oliver. I am the founder and director of Step Out Summit, an organization that helps people start homeschools and microschools. In addition, I founded a microschool in the state of Virginia where I taught disadvantaged and special needs children in a multi-grade classroom for eleven years. I'm going to address what have been considered the more controversial aspects of this bill.

HB 1472 places the responsibility for the safety, well-being, and education of children where it belongs - on the parents. The state does not require parents to seek a background check when they hire a babysitter, a piano teacher, or a personal tutor for their child. While it is certainly prudent for a parent to do so before hiring a stranger, it would seem superfluous when the teacher is already well-known to the family, such as an aunt, an older sibling, or a close friend. HB 1472 neither requires nor prohibits a parent from demanding a background check from a prospective instructor. Parents should have the authority to choose their child's teacher without state interference or mandates.

The vast majority of parents want what is best for their child. They have a vested interest in their child's safety and success, far more than the state does. The state already has laws that protect children from criminal neglect and abuse. The bad actions of a few parents must not be the justification for the infringement of the rights of all parents.

In addition, the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution guarantees the right to peaceably assemble. There is not an exception for education or for school zoning restrictions. Homes, churches, office spaces, and store fronts are safe places where people regularly assemble for many purposes. A child is not endangered by assembling in the same place for educational purposes. Additional school zoning restrictions place burdens on microschools that could regulate them out of existence, limiting the educational choices of parents and the educational opportunities of young North Dakotans. These codes often put microschools back in the box from which their innovative models are trying to break free. A farmhouse could be an ideal location for a school with an agricultural emphasis. A home kitchen is a great place to combine a cooking class with math or an understanding of the science behind culinary pursuits. Current school codes could prevent such schools from operating. One of the beauties of microschools is their accessibility to families in rural areas and inner cities; the school operates where the students are. HB 1472 upholds the Constitutional rights of parents to choose the place where their children peaceably assemble for education.

HB 1472 removes the teacher certification requirements for microschool teachers. In non-public schools, neither teacher certification nor a bachelor's degree have been shown to ensure better student outcomes or test scores. Out of 50 states, only six require all private schools to have certified teachers. Another eleven have limited certification requirements. When comparing average SAT scores of private school students in states that require certification for all schools versus those that require none, the averages are virtually the same, with the states requiring no certification one point higher, (1232 vs 1231 out of 1600).

Among home schoolers, when matched for parent education level, students whose parents had never been certified teachers had a small, but statistically significant, increase in test scores over those who had a parent who had been a certified teacher (Ray, 2010).

In addition, in Amish and Mennonite schools where teachers have completed no more than an 8th or 10th grade education, students score well above the median national percentile (50), with total battery scores of around the 80th percentile on average (Catforms, LLC, info@catforms.com).

HB 1472 allows parents the Constitutional right to direct the upbringing and education of their children, including choosing microschools and their children's teachers. It brings North Dakota law in line with the First and Fourteenth Amendments to the Constitution and with multiple Supreme Court decisions on parental rights over educational decisions.

According to a recent survey by Populace, Inc., Americans want entirely different schools, not just better ones. Americans want practical skills to be the goal of K-12 education, including managing finances, preparing a meal, making an appointment, and the academic basics of reading, writing, arithmetic. The majority of Americans want individualized education, not one-size-fits-all standardization. Mastery and individualized support and pacing are more important to them than standardized curriculum and testing. In addition, different ethnicities have different education priorities.

Microschools are uniquely able to meet these educational goals. With the people closest to the students (parents and teachers) making the educational and curricular decisions, instruction can conform nimbly to a student's needs. In these unconventional learning environments, students, who previously struggled in traditional schools, now thrive and love learning. Parents want educational options for their children that are different from what "standard" public and private schools offer. HB 1472 allows "edupreneurs" to break out of the box to provide what parents are seeking.

In just the past few days I have talked to four North Dakotans who have considered starting a microschool. Currently, North Dakota Century Code for nonpublic schools makes this very difficult. For the sake of the children of North Dakota, I urge a DO PASS on HB 1472.