



North Dakota Small Organized Schools

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Testimony in Opposition to HB 1590

Chairman Heinert and members of House Education Committee

My name is Michael Heilman, I am the Executive Director of North Dakota Small Organized Schools. The 140+ schools that are members of NDSOS stand in opposition to HB 1590, which seeks to establish an Educational Savings Account (ESA) program for K-12 students attending non-public schools. While the bill is framed as an opportunity for school choice, it presents significant equity, oversight, and funding concerns that make it a poor fit for North Dakota.

One of the most pressing issues with HB 1590 is the lack of non-public school options in rural areas of North Dakota. The vast majority of students (116,598) in our state choose to attend public schools and those in rural areas have few if any options for attending a non-public school. The students (7904) that attend non-public schools are also there by choice. Allocating taxpayer dollars to an ESA program will primarily benefit urban families who have already made the choice to attend non-public schools, while leaving rural students with no comparable choices. Four metro areas representing six communities, Bismarck/Mandan, Fargo/West Fargo, Minot and Dickinson make up the vast majority of non-public school enrollments. This creates a disparity that unfairly favors one segment of the population over another. There are currently fewer than twenty communities in North Dakota with a non-public school option and less than half of those offer a high school option.

Additionally, non-public schools that would receive ESA funds are not subject to the same level of oversight and regulation as public schools. If the state is going to fund non-public education, NDSOS strongly believes that the education providers must comply with all regulations and rules that public schools are required to follow, including accepting of all students, open records laws, open board meetings, participation in TFFR and all other state laws, rules and regulations that apply to public schools. Public funds should only be allocated to educational institutions that are required to meet the rigorous accountability and transparency measures that are applied to public schools.

Rather than diverting funds away from public education, we should focus on investing in our public schools, which serve the vast majority of North Dakota's children. HB 1590 threatens to undermine our public education system by redirecting scarce resources to unregulated institutions, disproportionately benefiting urban and affluent families while leaving rural and lower-income students behind.

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The mission of NDSOS is to provide leadership for the small/rural schools in North Dakota and to support legislation favorable to their philosophy while opposing legislation that is harmful.

30 The ESA that would be established by HB 1590 does little to serve the students in rural areas, directs
31 funding to non-public schools without the same regulations of public schools and diverts critical funding
32 away from public schools. I respectfully urge you to oppose HB 1590 and prioritize policies that
33 strengthen our public schools for the benefit of all North Dakota students.

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