

TESTIMONY ON SB 2234
HOUSE EDUCATION COMMITTEE
March 5, 2025
By: Jim Upgren, Legislative Liaison
701-328-2244
North Dakota Department of Public Instruction

Chairman Heinert and Members of the Committee:

My name is Jim Upgren, Legislative Liaison for the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction (NDDPI). I am here on behalf of the department to speak in support of Senate Bill 2234.

Choice Ready is a key metric in the North Dakota accountability system and part of our statewide PK-12 strategic vision. This vision states, “All students will graduate Choice Ready with the knowledge, skills and disposition to be successful.” Choice Ready is designed to prepare students for success upon graduation and is intended to measure the growth a school has made in the number of 12th graders who graduate Choice Ready. Attached is a visual of the Choice Ready Framework.

When the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was passed in 2015, all states were required to develop and submit a State ESSA accountability plan to the U.S. Department of Education. The North Dakota educators and stakeholders serving on the statewide ESSA Planning Committee created the Choice Ready Framework to serve as the growth measure for high schools. In our elementary schools, we measure growth on the state assessment. As outlined on the Choice

Ready Framework, the Essential Skills category lists North Dakota's expectations for all graduates, such as learning about financial literacy and passing the ND Civics Test. The overarching Essential Skills section is designed to provide students with the skills needed for work and life and can be critical in helping them be successful in whatever they choose to do in their life.

The framework then outlines three pathways: Post-secondary Ready, Workforce Ready, and Military Ready. Ideally, students would graduate ready in all three pathways; however, the ESSA Planning Committee has determined that in order to graduate Choice Ready, students must meet the Essential Skills section and two of the three pathways.

Over the past three years, NDDPI has provided high schools, Career and Technical Education Centers, and Special Education Units with the opportunity to apply for Choice Ready grants using ESSER dollars. The grants' purpose was to provide students with experiences to help them graduate Choice Ready.

Every North Dakota high school student attending a public school has a Choice Ready report in the STARS EdPortal. Counselors or other adults work with all students in grades 9-12 to fill out their reports as they complete activities and work toward choice readiness. This is particularly important, as the ND State Scholarship is now aligned to Choice Ready, making it critical to complete the reports accurately.

All across the nation, educators are making it a priority to grow our workforce and prepare students to be successful upon graduation. On all levels- state, district, and schools- we are consistently encouraged to find programs that work, and then continue doing them. I've worked in education for 26 years, with 8 of those years being here at NDDPI, and I've never seen a program show such tremendous and consistent growth as Choice Ready has. Our Choice Ready rate when we started in 2016 was 21%, and as indicated on the graph I've shared, has consistently grown every year. Our Choice Ready rate for 2024 was 71%. Our goal is for our Choice Ready rate to match our graduation rate, which hovers around 90%. Continuation of the Choice Ready grants would provide critical resources to our high schools to help prepare students for a successful future.

NDDPI fully supports SB 2234 to provide grants to school districts so all students in ND can graduate Choice Ready. We request that the committee give SB 2234 a "Do Pass" recommendation.

Chairman Heinert and Members of the Committee, this concludes my prepared testimony, and I will stand for any question that you may have.