

Testimony in Support of House Bill 1530
Presented to the Senate Education Committee
North Dakota Legislative Assembly

Chair Beard, Members of the Senate Education Committee,

My name is Alexis Rasset, and I am here today to voice my strong support for House Bill 1530, which calls for a legislative management study on the circumstances and needs of special education teachers and the ongoing special education teacher shortage in North Dakota.

I am a special education teacher at Mandan High School. This year is my 8th year of teaching, prior to my current role I was a special education paraprofessional for 3 1/2 years. 2 years ago, I was part of a group of specialists working with North Dakota United that formed our current NDU SPED Collective. Through our collective we have discussed our daily struggles and challenges which include overwhelming caseloads, excessive paperwork/deadlines, lack of support/training, safety concerns for both students and staff, along with difficulty maintaining a work-life balance.

This bill is not just necessary, it is crucial for the future of our children with special needs. The special education teacher shortage is a crisis impacting our state and our ability to provide these students with the free and appropriate public education they deserve. We are losing dedicated professionals at an alarming rate, and we are struggling to recruit qualified individuals to fill the vacancies. This situation has devastating consequences:

- **Students are losing critical support:** When special education teachers are stretched thin or classrooms are staffed with substitutes or unqualified personnel, students with disabilities are not receiving the individualized instruction and specialized services they need to thrive. This can lead to academic regression, behavioral challenges, and a diminished quality of life.
- **Existing teachers are burning out:** The overwhelming workload, lack of adequate resources, and the emotional toll of supporting students with complex needs are driving special education teachers out of the profession. They are dedicated individuals who are being asked to do more with less, and they are reaching their breaking point.
- **Our schools are struggling:** The shortage creates a ripple effect throughout the entire school system. Administrators struggle to fill positions, general education teachers are asked to take on additional responsibilities without adequate training or support, and the overall learning environment suffers.

This legislative management study is a vital first step toward addressing this crisis. It will allow us to:

- **Gather data:** We need a comprehensive understanding of the root causes of the shortage. This study can investigate factors such as salary, benefits, working conditions, administrative support, professional development opportunities, and the unique challenges faced by special education teachers in our state.

- **Identify needs:** The study should identify the specific needs of special education teachers, including the resources and support they require to be successful. This could include things like smaller class sizes, dedicated paraprofessionals, access to technology and specialized materials, and ongoing professional development.
- **Develop solutions:** Armed with this data, the legislature can develop evidence-based solutions to address the shortage. This could include strategies to improve recruitment and retention, such as competitive salaries, loan forgiveness programs, mentorship opportunities, and streamlined certification processes.

This is not just about numbers and statistics; it's about the future of our children. Every student, regardless of their abilities, deserves access to a high-quality education. By supporting this study, you are investing in our children, our schools, and our state. You are demonstrating a commitment to ensuring that students with special needs have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

I urge you to support this bill and take action to address the critical special education teacher retention and recoupment crisis. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully submitted,

Alexis Rasset
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