



# **TURTLE MOUNTAIN COMMUNITY SCHOOL BELCOURT SCHOOL DISTRICT NO. 7**

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March 15, 2021

Senator Don Schaible,  
Senate Education Committee  
600 East Boulevard Avenue  
Bismarck ND, 58505-0001

**Subject: Testimony on North Dakota Education Funding Formula – HB1388  
By Dr. Michelle Thomas, Superintendent, Belcourt School District #7**

Greetings Senator Don Schaible and Education Committee Members,

Please let me introduce myself. My name is Dr. Michelle Thomas. I am the Superintendent of the Belcourt School District, which is located on the Turtle Mountain Reservation. I am an enrolled member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa. I am a proud Anishinaabe woman who truly wants to be part of achieving an educational system that provides best education opportunities for the students we all serve.

In my culture, a great honor is to serve, protect and educate our children. At Turtle Mountain, we find it essential we all work together on the Federal, State and Tribal government levels to continuously help improve the lives of Native American students with quality educational opportunities. Education is the foundation of success in life for our Native American children. Our very existence as a Tribe depends on education.

Today as North Dakotans, we need to think about our continuous effort to elevate our educational system to meet the needs of Native American students and provide resources to achieve this undertaking. High levels of socio-economic conditions our students are subject to when living on or near Native American reservations create obstacles to educational success.

Our students heavily rely on our schools for more than teaching. Our teachers and staff must develop an understanding of the student's family life dynamics and our tribal culture to optimize student learning. So, our Districts must attract and retain quality dedicated teachers who possess empathy. To attract and retain quality educators, we must offer competitive compensation and fringe benefits.

My testimony today is on House Bill 1388 which relates to the North Dakota Education funding formula. My testimony will specifically support language of an "add-on" funding component which reduces the Transition Maximum Adjustment by 15% as provided in the current draft of HB1388. Transition Maximum primarily pertains to school districts receiving less funding than calculated by the funding formula.

Transition Maximum was established in the North Dakota Education funding formula back in the 2013 biennium as a funding formula mechanism to allow school districts that were "under formula", based on actual formula calculation, to "get on formula" at a reasonable pace; which was anticipated then to be no more than 6 - 8 years.

In the 2013 biennium, there were 41 Districts that were affected by Transition Maximum. As of the 2020-21 school year, there are 11 Transition Maximum Districts remaining, of which 10 primarily serve a high Native American population. As a Tribal leader, these figures immediately caught my attention.

The draft language by the Interim Education Funding Formula Review Committee in HB1388 is to continue to maintain current baseline funding rates and to continue to increase the (transition) maximum percentage by only 5% as understandable due to declining State tax revenues caused in part by the corona virus pandemic.

The Interim Education Funding Formula Review committee recognized the length of time it is taking to get the Transition Maximum Districts on formula as being longer than originally thought in 2013 as in HB1388 there is draft language to include a revenue add-on calculation component which reduces the transition maximum deduction by 15%.

In closing, I want convey that I support the “add-on” revenue language as it reduces the adverse effect of transition maximum in formula for my and other school’s revenue allocations by decreasing the transition maximum adjustment (deduction) by 15%. We are moving in the right direction with this language.

In addition, I would like to mention HB 1388 was adjusted in the House of Representatives prior to “crossover”; in the adjustment, HB1388 is to have no increase in the per pupil payment. I ask for consideration that the original form of the bill, which included a 1% increase on the per pupil payment be reinstated. The increase is necessary for school districts to be able to negotiate with teachers in offering sustainable salary and benefits.

I thank you for your time and consideration on this important matter.

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Dr. Michelle Thomas, Superintendent  
Belcourt School District #7