

Testimony of Dr. Cory Steiner
Northern Cass Superintendent
Support of SB 2196
Tuesday, January 26th, 2021

Good morning Chairman Schaible and members of the Senate Education Committee. It is my privilege to testify in support of SB 2196. My name is Dr. Cory J. Steiner and I'm the Superintendent of Schools at Northern Cass School District in Hunter, North Dakota. We are a PK-12 district with 660 learners located 25 miles northwest of Fargo. We are an innovative school district which is in the midst of a transformation to personalized, competency-based learning.

The issues in education are profound, but more importantly, they are urgent. The structure and function of our schools must transform to meet the ever-changing demands of society. We continue to operate within an industrial model of education. It is important to understand every system is perfectly designed to get the results it gets. Our system is getting the results it is supposed to get. Unfortunately, what is being asked of schools has changed since the design of the system. In schools, we have been tasked to prepare learners to be productive members of society. We have been asked to prepare learners for college, career, and military. We are asked to develop 'soft' skills such as collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking. We must develop academic, social, and emotional skills while making sure to develop long-lasting relationships in a safe environment. In other words, we must prepare learners to be choice ready for a future which is constantly changing. The expectations on schools continue to grow and the list of 'to do's' is never-ending. Administrators, teachers, and board members are willing to do more and be the linchpin for societal change but cannot accomplish this work with the current barriers in century code. We are faced with a moral imperative to transform our system.

To accomplish this challenging work, we must begin to remove the barriers which have traditionally been held in high regard in K-12 education. One of these barriers is traditional graduation requirements. Our graduation requirements continue to be built for a society which values formal postsecondary education above all else. We are fully supportive of learners attending postsecondary schooling, but that has proven to no longer be necessary for success after high school. If success is no longer linked to postsecondary attendance, the requirements of graduating high school must change to recognize the values of our current society. Our current educational system is based on reaction. If a learner struggles, we react as best we can, but this should not be how we operate. Our current system sees learners as interchangeable instead of as individuals. For example, the optional curriculum diploma was added to provide an alternative for learners who have significant failure in high school. This was appreciated but didn't address the inequity in our system. An educational system must be built to be proactive. We know there is a better system and when we know, we have an obligation to act. SB 2196 is intended to offer flexibility in how learners choose to access and engage in learning as well as ensuring they

demonstrate mastery according to a set of competencies. A North Dakota learning continuum will serve as the foundation for the competency-based system, which will in essence, create high and achievable expectations for all learners. The establishment and certification of a North Dakota competency framework will allow districts to personalize graduation requirements for their learners. The work on the learning continuum is already scheduled for this summer. Twenty-six districts have been invited. The twenty-six districts were selected because of their previous work on North Dakota priority standards and the Personalized Learning Competency-Based work with KnowledgeWorks. A learning continuum with competencies will be written for Math, ELA, Social Studies, and Science. North Dakota educators will do the work in collaboration with KnowledgeWorks. In the summer of 2020, a large group worked with Battelle for Kids to create a Portrait of a Graduate which could be used as the foundation for this framework. A group of representatives from education, the business and religious community, higher education, K-12 learners, and legislators met. Over the course of multiple meetings that included significant collaboration, the group identified adaptability, collaboration, communication, critical thinking, empathy, learner's mindset, and perseverance. These attributes could become the foundation for the development of North Dakota competencies.

Although this work is transformative, it is not new. The states of Maine, Arizona, New York, Colorado, Rhode Island, Vermont, Wisconsin, Washington, and Virginia have passed legislation allowing for some form of competency-based graduation requirement. These laws have included, but are not limited to, eliminating seat time requirements, allowing for a Portrait of a Graduate to be the foundation for competencies, allowing work-based learning to articulate for credit, and the use of portfolios to demonstrate mastery. Northern Cass is currently working with Mastery Transcript Consortium to do this work. This 'transcript' opens up opportunity for every learner from all backgrounds, locations, and schools to have their unique abilities, interests, strengths, and histories fostered and celebrated.

Today, I ask you to support a recommendation of 'do pass' for SB 2196 allowing for the establishment of a competency-based framework as an additional pathway for graduation requirements. As a leader of an innovative school district, one of the biggest concerns shared with me by parents and learners is our learners not having the same opportunities as those who attend a more traditional system. This bill is a step in the right direction to recognize education can and will look different across the state of North Dakota. Your support for this bill will indicate your commitment to local control, innovation, and doing what is in the best interest of all learners throughout the state of North Dakota. We have boards, administrators, and educators ready to change the model into one which promotes authenticity through a personalized approach. I visit with many of my colleagues who can only see the barriers that exist to change. By passing this legislation, we will remove barriers and allow the greatest group of educators in our country to begin to redefine our system. Over the past few sessions, the legislature has been an advocate for education by reducing barriers to implementing change. You have supported innovation. This bill is a logical next step in moving our state. I don't speak to you today asking

for funding, but simply making sure our system is equitable. I ask all members of this committee to recommend a 'Do Pass' and do so knowing it will begin the further transformation of our education system which will become the model for our great country. With the passing of this legislation, schools throughout our great state will be able to achieve the true purpose of education. We must help young people grow and develop into honest, kind, and compassionate citizens. Thank you for time and consideration.

