

TESTIMONY ON HB 1466
Human Services Committee
3/10/2021
Kirsten Baesler, State Superintendent of Schools
701-328-3545
North Dakota Department of Public Instruction

Chairwoman Lee and Members of the Committee:

My name is Kirsten Baesler, State Superintendent of Schools with the Department of Public Instruction. I am here to speak in support of House Bill 1466, which provides authority and funding to support a high-quality 4-year-old program.

You have heard NDDPI team member Amanda Peterson speak of the need to invest in our youngest of learners. I am here today to affirm that need for investment and to provide some additional information; provide background on the funding available for this 4 year-old program, and commit NDDPI's ongoing support of this work.

NDDPI continues to be committed to building a high-quality B-5 early care and education system that enables all children, particularly our most vulnerable, to have a strong foundation for kindergarten. This bill advances that effort. DPI and DHS have long partnered on many programs, including Child Nutrition, Educational Neglect and Behavioral Health. This bill continues that partnership and is all about making sure children are **ready to learn** when they enter kindergarten classrooms.

As you know, behavioral health challenges have been increasing in our schools across the state. As vice principal in an elementary school in Bismarck prior to my election to this position I saw this firsthand. In addition, West Fargo Public schools has been doing their own, local analysis of “room clear” data. “Room clears” are defined as times when a location, such as a classroom, library, lunchroom, or a hallway, needs to be cleared when a student is having an emotional outburst to maintain the safety of all other students. These outbursts are traumatic for all involved and often very destructive. West Fargo data shows over 133 hours of instructional time was lost from September 2019 to February 2020 because of room clears. What is often most surprising to those who do not work in K12 education is that the grade levels most impacted by these room clears - by very wide margins are kindergarten and first grade! This exemplifies the need to invest upstream to ensure our children – and their families -have the support they need in early childhood to enter kindergarten socially and emotionally ready to learn. K12 educators will then have the time they need to focus on the teaching and learning all students deserve.

The funding for HB 1466 will be partially provided through the existing \$1.5 million in the Department of Commerce that will be transferred to the DHS budget. Additionally, the Department of Public Instructions will commit \$3.5 million from the Elementary Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) federal funding

provided to NDDPI for Covid 19. HB 1466 has a sunset of 2025. This sunset will allow our state to analyze the impact the program has had and make future determinations about its funding.

Chairwoman Lee and Members of the Committee, on behalf of the Department of Public Instruction, I recommend HB 1466 receive a do pass recommendation as written. Thank you for your time and I will do my best to answer any questions you may have.