

Testimony House Bill 1019 - Department of Education and Environment House Appropriations

Representative Mike Nathe, Chairman

January 9, 2023

Chair Nathe and members of the House Appropriations Education and Environment Division, thank you for allowing the North Dakota Center for Distance Education (CDE) the opportunity to provide an overview of our services, our work over the 21-23 biennium, and our plans and fiscal request as we move into 23-25. For the record, my name is Dr. Alyssa Martin. I am the new director of CDE.

At CDE, we recently updated our mission statement, and I'm pleased to announce that you are the first to see our revisions. We have attempted to demonstrate our value-added benefit to the public, reflect our promise to our students, and articulate how we will execute these roles and their aspirational purpose. We aim not merely to support but to strengthen North Dakota's future through the delivery of virtual education, which complements the work of LEAs.

CDE offers virtual education asynchronously, meaning that while our courses contain a semester's worth of content, students can begin and complete them at any time, based on their schedules and personal pacing needs. Our teachers receive training in online educational delivery—a modality that is very different than in-person instruction and requires constant communication and one-on-one coaching to help learners stay engaged.

CDE offers a full K-12 curriculum year-round, a diploma program, CTE courses, SmartLabs, hosting for online driver's education courses, and dual credit in partnership with Mayville State University. We are approved by DPI as a K-12 school and accredited by Cognia and NCAA. We offer well over 350 courses, the majority foundational in nature. In addition, 45% of our courses are electives and career preparation courses in fields ranging from agriculture to technology. This variety of courses helps North Dakota students become Choice Ready.

A remarkable leadership team oversees the delivery of these services. I have provided you with an organizational chart including their titles, pictures, and responsibilities. Each of these talented individuals has served as part of the backbone of CDE, spearheading the day-to-day operations and many of them helping it evolve from a paper-based correspondence school to the online virtual academy that it is today.

On the screen, you'll see our fall enrollment trends from 2019 to the present. To give you a complete sense of the pandemic impact: in 2020-21, CDE had 11,354 enrollments, and in 2021-22, we had 10,948 enrollments. Throughout the 21-23 biennium, we project that we will have nearly 20,000 enrollments. With the return to our "new normal" in education across the state this year, CDE's enrollment is up over 20% from the 2018-19 school year.

At CDE, we report our numbers in enrollments, which often are duplicated headcounts. Besides our general fund appropriation, our revenue source is derived from tuition, and tuition is paid on a per course or a per enrollment basis rather than on a per pupil basis like a traditional school. Some learners come to us for one class; others take ten. Based on each enrollment, we determine the resources necessary to service a student's need, such as activating an adjunct to teach a course requested by one student or finding a teacher of record for an entire high school subject area while the LEA fills a vacancy. We base our biennial budget, teacher workloads, and curricular costs on enrollment rather than headcount.

While 70% of our budget is derived from the general fund, we also believe that it's essential for those using our services to pay a nominal fee to ensure buy-in and commitment to assist with student completion. The dollars raised through tuition are placed in our special spending authority budget line and are predominantly used to cover the cost of paying our adjunct instructors. You'll see that for 21-23 to date, we have raised \$2.7 million of the \$4.5 million requested in special spending authority during the emergency session. We anticipate raising another \$500,000 in the next six months and have \$670,000 in carryover from the last biennium. We have

been vigilantly monitoring our budget and will have the resources necessary to reach the end of this biennium with carryover anticipated. However, to meet our 23-25 budget needs, we will need to review this tuition schedule to determine the best way to balance educational access to CDE courses for all North Dakota students with our operational needs, likely increasing these rates across the board to raise the \$4.5 million in special spending authority that we're requesting.

Approximately three-quarters of our 23-25 budget will be used to pay employees. You'll see in my request that half of the money CDE will raise under its special spending authority will be used to increase our adjunct pay. While CDE has been fortunate to retain highly qualified adjunct teachers, its average adjunct pay is \$25.77 per hour. According to recent Bureau of Labor Statistics data, the average hourly wage for a combination of skilled and unskilled labor in Bismarck is \$26.00 per hour and \$25.52 in Fargo. CDE hopes to raise our base adjunct wage to a minimum of \$27 per hour and \$30 per hour for those holding master's degrees to ensure we retain and show our deep respect for these phenomenal educators.

In general funds, CDE has requested an 8% increase. These dollars also will be directed to salaries to pay three additional FTEs. This is only an 8% increase despite our anticipated sustained enrollment growth of 20% into the new biennium. During the pandemic, CDE added a full K-5 curriculum and hired an FTT teacher and several adjuncts to support it. Ms. Emily Schaefer, though classified as a full-time, temporary employee, continues to serve as our primary elementary teacher and is assisting CDE in other remarkable ways, currently designing a course that will teach elementary students coding and app development. Though the pandemic has subsided, CDE's elementary enrollment remains strong enough to support an FTE, and Ms. Schaefer deserves a permanent place with CDE.

Our second FTE will support our growth in high school enrollment while assisting our administrative team with increasing the quality of online teaching overall. This position will teach part-time and oversee professional development for our entire teaching workforce, which ranges from 100 to over 125 throughout the year, based on enrollment trends.

Our final FTE will be used to support our technology team. Our technology director plans to retire this year. He has been with our organization for 29 years, building several of our systems and shepherding CDE into the modern age. Unlike traditional bricks and mortar schools, the majority of CDE's infrastructure is technology-based, and John Struchynski has built an entire ecosystem, often performing the work of two or more employees. John's position could easily be broken into a technology leadership role and a business system analyst position, overseeing the technology that runs our online store, billing system, and enrollment process. I will consequently use the third position that I am requesting to divide Mr. Struchynski's job into two.

CDE's fiscal requests align with our goals for the 23-25 biennium. To increase course quality, CDE needs an educator dedicated to designing and delivering professional development to our teachers, especially in standards-based learning, since CDE aims to move its entire curriculum to this model. This change will also require a full-time, permanent elementary teacher. CDE has a long-term vision for its elementary program—to provide instructional support services to young students in LEAs who have experienced pandemic learning loss. CDE must also seek avenues to grow enrollment to help support the growth of the \$4.5 million it intends to use to raise adjunct pay. We see dual credit and expanding course offerings in areas that LEAs cannot fill, like languages and driver's education, as areas where we can easily grow with minimum investments. To support this growth, we recognize that our technology infrastructure must keep pace with our expansions in learning. As a result, our request for an additional technology position will help ensure that we have the leadership and daily management of our core infrastructure to help us progress into the future.

With your support of our fiscal request, our refined mission, and our long-term goals, CDE will be positioned to continue to meet the needs of schools and North Dakota students. With an exceptional team of employees and plans to enhance the quality of our services, CDE will also be prepared to help usher North Dakota through the educational challenges ahead. We thank the North Dakota legislature for its investment in the work of CDE, a legacy started in 1935. We look forward to sharing with you how CDE will continue to play an integral role in strengthening North Dakota's future in the years ahead.

Written Testimony from NDCDE Students

CDE high school parent:

My name is Nicole Nordhougen, I have had two children attend classes at NDCDE. Alaina Nordhougen is a Junior at Fargo Davies High School and Neeva Nordhougen is a Freshman at Fargo Davies.

We learned about NDCDE when Alaina was a freshmen and looking to take some more academically challenging electives than what her high school offered. She was able to take AP Environmental Science and will eventually get college credit from the course she took at NDCDE. After her freshman year she knew she would have more than enough credits to graduate early, but would need to take English through NDCDE. She has since taken two years' worth of English and multiple other classes through NDCDE. Her sister saw how much Alaina enjoyed it and the ability it gave her to choose additional courses in alternative environments and has also taken additional through NDCDE.

Both children have had amazing experiences with NDCDE, and I as a parent have had nothing but great things to say about the whole set up. Alaina and Neeve are able to tailor their education in a way that works for and excites them and has set them up for advantages in their future in college. The teachers are engaging and there any time my children have questions or need assistance, but they also have the freedom to learn on their own and work at their own pace.

As a parent I can see how NDCDE offers so many options to parents and student in all sorts of situations. We have used it to graduate early, to take courses that weren't offered at their school, earn future college credits, and as kids with medical issues take gym classes in a guided effective way in a home environment. Alaina was extremely ill and hospitalized much of her 7th and 8th grades while we lived in TX. I can only imagine how wonderful and helpful it would have been to have the NDCDE setup while she was going through all of that. I also cannot talk about how much I like the NDCDE set up without talking about how wonderful my experience with the teachers and administrative staff has been. I have had children in multiple schools, in multiple districts, and in multiple states, and I have to say I truly believe the interaction, engagement, ease of communication, and sense of caring for what is best for my children has been second to none. I find this truly remarkable and contradictory to what most people may think given the remote nature of the classes. We are so thankful for having been able to take classes through NDCDE and plan to continue taking classes in the future.

CDE high school student:

Hi! My name is Lacle May. I am a homeschooled senior student in West Fargo, ND. I would like to say how grateful I am for the opportunity to testify on behalf CDE and thank you for your time in listening to my story. I learned of CDE through a friend of my mom who is a teacher there. Since 2019, I have been taking classes with NDCDE because I had found that the public high school was too overwhelming for me and if the teachers had taught anything worth remembering, they taught to fast. The main reason I started taking homeschooled classes was to work at my own pace so being overwhelmed didn't discourage me from getting my diploma and going to college one day.

The classes overall have been truly a blessing for me. The material is well covered and most of it is explained in detail which is also great! Most classes go through a lesson, you recap the lesson, go through an assignment or two to make sure you can clearly understand the material and then take a quiz. I am a very communicative person. I think touching base with my teachers is more important especially when I don't get to see them face-to-face every day. If I am taking a class like English, science, math or history, I typically reach out to my teacher every day or every other day even if it is for clarification on an assignment. Some of the assignments are difficult especially when there are several parts to them, but I am also a person that gets discouraged easily so I typically reach out to a teacher and ask if they can walk through it with me, and then I get an A on it.

CDE has truly saved my future in general. In 2019, I moved to ND from a small town in MN where the school had pre-K through senior high and a total of 1,000 students, maybe a little more. The public school in West

Fargo had more than 1,000 kids in one grade. It was too overwhelming, and I felt the teachers didn't know how to teach the material they were given so I went from being a straight A student with a 4.0 GPA to failing in one week. My mom didn't want me to fail out of school, so she reached out to her friend who is a homeschool teacher and asked her to talk with me about my options. I have been enrolled with CDE since 2019 and have a 3.7 GPA with a dream of going to law school after this year. I didn't have a future before I became homeschooled. I thought I was going to be a high school dropout. Not only did my grades improve and I gained my future back, I found hope in myself and became a better person because of this school! I will forever be grateful!

CDE elementary student (submitted by his parent):

My name is Benjamin Jones. I am in third grade, and I live in Fargo. I am a part of the West Fargo School District. West Fargo School District offered students the option to take classes through the Center for Distance Education because of the pandemic.

When the pandemic started, I was in kindergarten at Osgood Elementary School. School shut down and I finished the year doing virtual school. I also completed 1st grade through Osgood's virtual school. For 2nd grade, I was able to attend CDE and took Language Arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies. I am currently completing the same 4 classes for 3rd grade.

I love all of my classes I take through CDE. I get to do fun activities in each lesson on the computer and I also get to do worksheets. I meet with my teacher once a week and also have class meetings with other students. I get to read for my teacher and tell her about my week.

My classes through CDE have taught me so much. Language Arts has made me a better writer because we write different paragraphs every week. It has made me a better reader because we read every day. In math, I have learned multiplication, division, and fractions. In science, I learn about nature, animals, and interesting things like the water cycle. Social studies has been teaching me fun things; I even did research on how our state government works!

Doing these classes has made me feel independent because I am responsible for getting my work done on time. I know when my teacher meetings are and make sure I get to the meeting when I am supposed to be there. It makes me be a hard worker because I know when I finish my classes, I can have time to go play more or do other things like taking piano lessons and taking a class about coding. I used to not like going to school in kindergarten because it was such a long day, but now I am excited for school every day because I like learning the way online school helps me learn.

Thank you for your time,

Benjamin Jones