

Testimony in favor HB 1376

Chairman Heinert and members of the House Education Committee – for the record my name is Derek Gackle and I serve as the administrator for the Yellowstone School District serving East Fairview School and our newly created Yellowstone Virtual Academy. Thank you for your commitment to public service in our state.

Yellowstone School District is a small, unique K-8 graded elementary school district located on the ND/MT border in western McKenzie County. We currently serve 66 students at East Fairview, 30 students in Yellowstone Virtual Academy, and send another 33 high school students, with payment, across the border to attend high school at Fairview Schools.

As a small district we are always looking for ways to be innovative and provide new educational opportunities. For example, we were one of the first districts to switch to a four-day school week. When virtual schools became an option we initially thought that wouldn't work for us being so small and rural but we noticed that home school student numbers were on the rise, not only in ND but in the nation. We started to research online schools that would attract home school students to public education. We wanted to provide an online schooling option with a reputable third-party vendor focused on introducing home school students and families to public school scrutiny, oversight, and rigor. We found Tech Trep Academy.

We partnered with Tech Trep Academy to provide a virtual school that meets the unique needs of students around the state including our own students. These are students that need to do school from home or choose to do so, but need flexibility in scheduling & curriculum. Currently there are 30 students enrolled in our virtual school and we hope to see continued growth as it proves effective over the years. Our virtual school is providing much needed additional income to our district while enrolling students that typically were not previously enrolled in a public school. Our focus is to offer the increasing number of home school students an avenue back into the public-school system.

Our goal is that once they complete grade eight in our program students would enroll in the public school in their district of residence. We see this as a win for everyone since it will decrease home school student numbers while simultaneously increasing public school population without costing the district of residence any per pupil funds. Ultimately, the district of residence enrollment would also increase when these students enroll for high school, win-win.

We feel this partnership is on the cusp of the direction education could look years from now and are grateful for the resources and funding it is providing for our students. Yellowstone receives per pupil funding for each student enrolled in our virtual school. We then hire Tech Trep Academy to provide the educational programming. The portion of funding we keep for the students takes into account the staff we are providing on our side of things to enroll students, monitor performance, meet with TTA staff, provide special education services, etc.

We are proud of the accountability and support we are providing to many students who have never participated in public education prior to their enrollment. This is a choice program that families seem to really be gravitating to. We are grateful that our small district has access to the program to meet the students' needs that we may otherwise have struggled to staff or the families would have otherwise withdrawn from the system and been provided no accountability & support.

A current legislative concern of ours is that school districts throughout the state have the ability to deny students from enrolling in our virtual school even if the students were previously homeschooled and never set foot in their schools. For example, we have had almost 30 students denied enrollment this year because their district of residence refused to sign the cost-sharing agreement for zero dollars. Without a signed agreement we cannot educate the student. We feel our program is the best example of school choice and we want to continue to provide a public-school option that all students have access to.

HB 1376 has the full support of the Yellowstone School District.

Derek Gackle, Administrator

Doug Gullikson, Board Chair