



MANDAREE SCHOOL  
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March 14, 2023

House Education Committee Members:

Chairman and members of the Committee, my name is Carolyn Bluestone. I am the Superintendent of the Mandaree School District #36 in Mandaree, North Dakota. Mandaree is located on the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation, home of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara people. While we could have filled the room with teachers and administrators who are opposed to SB 2254 the day-to-day operations of the school require that they remain in the building to provide services to students.

The following is written testimony on behalf of our school district and community in opposition to Senate Bill 2254, a bill to add a new section to the ND Century Code relating to intervention by the superintendent of public instruction for a chronically low-performing school or school district and to provide a report.

The bill defines a chronically low performing district as one that shows a “consistent mishandling of processes, reporting, or funds, resulting in inadequate educational services for the school district’s students.” A chronically low performing schools is defined as a “school identified by the state for comprehensive or targeted support and improvement in accordance with the Every Student Succeeds Act for one or more cycles.” Inadequate education services is defined as a “lack of annual progress in academic achievement, student engagement, resource allocation, teacher effectiveness, chronic absenteeism, and persistent subgroup opportunity gaps.” The intervention by the superintendent of public instruction includes withholding of funds, annexation, consolidation, or closure, changes to curriculum, instruction, assessment or school calendar, and/or reassignment or hiring of school or school district staff. All of these interventions have been tried nationwide and research has shown most to be unsuccessful at best and downright detrimental to the students at its worst.

I have been a part of the Mandaree School District for 25+ years. I retired June 30, 2017 and due to challenges in retaining a superintendent I have returned on three (3) separate occasions to fill the position. The District had a total of eight (8) superintendents over the course of seven (7) years. During all of these years the challenges faced by this district have seemed insurmountable at times. Teacher and staff shortages have meant that personnel to address basic needs were at times limited. Teachers and staff have filled double and triple positions to meet student needs. This bill as one of its remedies has the “reassignment or hiring of school or school district staff to fill roles.” That will be quite a feat in this district which has experienced teacher turnover rates exceeding 50% in past years.



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The broad strokes of the bill imply that school districts on “the list” take their responsibilities lightly and are refusing to take action for the betterment of their respective students. I take offense to the language that even hints at the mishandling of processes, reporting, or funds. I worked far too many weeks at 50-60 hours a week with many dedicated professional staff that were in the trenches with me and I find that language unacceptable.

Yes, Mandaree Elementary School is identified as a CSI School. The instructional staff, teachers and paraprofessionals, are dedicated to providing quality education. The Department of Public Instruction has required numerous meetings with CSI schools and submission of very detailed plans to address the CSI designation. Strategy Maps, Driver Diagrams, Focus Goals are all created with input from teachers and paraprofessionals and APPROVED by DPI to guide the work we do with students. Any “strong recommendations” from DPI staff are taken to heart and implemented with time, personnel, and financial resources at the earliest possible time. The cycle of continuous school improvement is required by DPI and embraced by the Mandaree School District. The plans address and target those things that are under our control like curriculum and instruction, interventions, staffing and services. For the 2022-2023 school year alone the body of evidence for our school improvement plan is presented for review. It demonstrates the comprehensive nature of the continuous improvement cycle.

In Superintendent Kirsten’s Baesler’s testimony of February 6, 2023 she references 6-7 school that have “put forth plans but are seeing no progress,” “that she has been to these schools on multiple occasions,” and DPI staff have had “conversations to guide, lead, try to support, counsel, and advise on professional development.”

The Title I Office has and does provide feedback to Districts when they submit their Consolidated Application every year. The Title I personnel have every opportunity to support struggling schools because a district has to identify activities that are an allowable use of funds. The required financial reports ensure that districts are using funds in accordance to federal guidelines. The “consistent mishandling of funds” is not possible when DPI is providing the oversight required by federal law. When expenditures are deemed unallowable Districts are required to move them to other funding sources. The evaluation plans require data of where students are academically and what steps the District will take if student achievement is lackluster. The key point is if plans are not meeting DPI’s definition of success they have this mechanism to “guide, lead, support, counsel and advise” without SB 2254.

In response to my email request of who the 6-7 schools are, Amanda Peterson, DPI, responded that the schools were not specifically referenced in the bill. However, schools “on the list” had a



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gut and correct feeling of who would be identified. Strangely enough all seven (7) of the schools are schools located on Reservations serving students who struggle with generational poverty, historical trauma, drug, and alcohol addiction. These are the factors that the District has no influence or control over and impact our students greatly. I said “strangely enough” but it is no surprise to the hundreds of professionals who work tirelessly to try and provide the best possible education with limited personnel. The Superintendent of Public Instruction has the means to support these schools through the Title I Consolidated Application process.

The punitive steps identified in SB 2254 are reminiscent of the original No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act where the first fifteen (15) schools were all from predominantly American Indian descent reservation areas. Years of unintended abusive language that was received from DPI and the public over this identification was forced on Native Indian Schools and accepted until two (2) predominantly non-Indian schools made the list. At that point, the abusive language was removed and changed to, “how can we help you.” Eventually more non-Indian schools joined the list and there was a strong push by all to get rid of NCLB and “the list.” Now the first seven (7) identified schools to be targeted by SB 2254 are schools with mainly American Indian descent students and history is repeating itself. Unintended racism is still alive in North Dakota.

I would ask the committee to consider this futuristic newspaper headline and the optics that will surround SB 2254 if it is successful,

## **“Native Schools Targeted for Takeover by the State with Passage of Senate Bill 2254.”**

Senate Bill 2254 would be detrimental to our school district and we recommend a DO NOT PASS.

Respectfully submitted,

Carolyn Bluestone  
Superintendent  
Mandaree School #36