

Testimony in favor HB 1376

Chairman Elkin and members of the Senate 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 public-school and DPI approved, 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 virtual education opportunities that would attract home school students to public education. We wanted to provide a virtual schooling option partnered 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 have done our due diligence with complete transparency during this process. We spent countless hours communicating with Mr. Kolosky and Mr. Tescher at DPI to make sure they understood our mission and vision for our virtual school. I also communicated with Dr. Copas at a summer golf event to ensure she was aware of our plan and provide any guidance. At the time, she was supportive of the idea. All of this led to our virtual academy gaining approval from DPI.

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. Our teachers are ND certified and living in ND, one in Mayville and one in Bismarck. The portion of funding we keep for the students takes into account the staff we provide 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 a program that meets 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.

We believe we have been excellent stewards of our tax payer dollars. Yellowstone School District is currently debt-free while keeping our levies at the lowest limit allowed by law. Our constituents have shown they are happy with how we manage their money by recently approving a new construction project at 83%. The funds we generate through our virtual school are used to pay for programming, curriculum, staff, and support no different than the funds we use for our brick and mortar school. The hiring of Tech Trep is similar to hiring an instructional coach or strategist to help us provide the best education possible. We use many online vendors in our brick and mortar building that we must pay for with tax payer dollars. Partnering with Tech Trep provides many opportunities, expertise, coaching, and support that will ensure our virtual school is top of the line!

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.

Yellowstone School District asks for a Do Pass recommendation.

Derek Gackle, Administrator

Doug Gullikson, Board Chair