

My name is Jennifer Connell, and I currently have three children enrolled in Tech Trep Academy. I wanted to share with you a little bit about our family, and why we believe that educational choice is so important for families in North Dakota. Our break from the brick and mortar school system came about three years ago. When kids were sent home due to COVID, I recognized how much my middle child was struggling with her reading, reading comprehension and spelling. She was in third grade at the time. She had always gotten good report cards, and positive parent teacher reviews. She had been on an IEP for reading since mid-kindergarten, and was meeting with a reading specialist several times a week, but I was shocked at how far behind she was when I observed her learning in person. I immediately took her to an outside reading specialist, and she was diagnosed with dyslexia and dysgraphia. As I learned more and more about dyslexia, I recognized a lot of those same struggles in my older daughter, had her tested, and she was also diagnosed with dyslexia. We live in a smaller town, and it became very clear that our school just didn't have the resources or the knowledge to help my children. I began learning all I could about teaching dyslexic kids, enrolled them in private tutoring to help with their dyslexia, and decided that the next year I would not enroll her in our local public school.

This decision was also the best for my oldest daughter. Three years ago, my oldest daughter contracted an illness that caused her to miss nearly a year of school. She was experiencing severe neuropathic pain that began about a week before school was to start. She always did well in school, but experienced some bullying. It is a small school, and many of the kids in her grade were pretty awful to her. Her symptoms started mildly, but increased in severity until she was unable to walk. She endured exhaustive testing by nearly every pediatric specialist in North Dakota, and was seen at Mayo Clinic several times. No medication they gave her worked. Her illness baffled all of her doctors. Her case was submitted to the Pediatric Diagnostic Clinic at Mayo and was accepted by their team. It was eventually discovered that she was having an extreme stress response that was causing her to have physical pain and had to be put on nerve blockers for months in order to calm her symptoms down. Her anxiety about returning to school had triggered the response, and we knew at that point that sending her back to that environment would not be good for her.

While homeschooling was not a bad choice for us for the start of our journey, when I heard about Tech Trep Academy, I knew it was just what we needed. I have benefitted so much from having additional educational resources that were not available to me as a homeschooler. Having access to virtual courses, to curriculum advisors, and a homeroom teacher that provides guidance and feedback has been amazing for us. My oldest daughter is a few months away from catching up to being at grade level after missing almost a year of school. My middle daughter is reading and writing so much better than before, but more importantly we now have resources to help her in her growth. They participate in virtual clubs and enjoy that peer interaction. Not only have the additional resources and customized curriculum helped them in their core studies, it has allowed us to provide a customized education plan that supports their interests and talents. For example, my oldest daughter is a talented artist. Although

she is only in 7th grade, she is taking a high school art class where she is excelling, She has also started taking a digital art course, an animation course, and a coding course and is creating her own programs and games. She just turned 13. Her sister loves baking and has chosen a decorating class as her elective this semester, and they are both enrolled in a Young Entrepreneur Club where they are learning about starting their own businesses. I am so happy with the opportunities they have been given as we have been able to choose our own curriculum while still having access to resources. Being able to provide them with a curriculum that works with their dyslexia instead of them constantly having to fight against it has been a game changer.

This year my youngest daughter is kindergarten age. Since I learned dyslexia is hereditary, I decided to have her tested early. She had several dyslexia markers, and so I contacted the school to see if there could be accommodations made to start her reading journey with an Orton-Gillingham based method, that is proven to have the most success for dyslexic kids. I was told that they would not do that, and that if she struggled they would just hold her back and make her repeat kindergarten. This did not seem to be a great solution to me, so we decided to enroll her in Tech Trep as well, and I am so glad we did! She has had access to so many resources, fun virtual clubs geared towards her age group, and she is already reading after using an amazing curriculum recommended to us.

There were several points being debated previously that I would like to speak to. First was the usage of surplus funds by Yellowstone School District. I took the opportunity to speak to a member of their school board, and found out that the kitchen in their school has not been updated since the 1950's, and they have hopes to be able to bring their kitchen up to standard in order to better serve the children attending school there. Knowing that surplus funds will be used to benefit children in our state, as is surplus funds in every other school district that I am aware of, made me feel that this is a win/win situation for meeting the needs of children in North Dakota. There was also a concern brought up about using an out of state vendor such as Tech Trep Academy, and that it is essentially diverting funds to another state. If this is being used as an argument against vendors, then perhaps we should also require that textbooks, computers, desks, and any other vendor supplies only be purchased in North Dakota? It is my understanding that many if not most states use out of state vendors to provide distance learning opportunities, much like Tech Trep Academy.

I have loved Tech Trep so much that when the opportunity was presented to be a field trip coordinator for North Dakota, I jumped at the chance. I have had the opportunity to meet so many families from across the state that would love the opportunity to participate in a virtual school option, while still having the freedom to choose their own curriculum. We are so fortunate to live in a school district that was willing to sign our cost sharing agreement. We are hoping to be able to move closer to my husband's job, but are concerned that moving to another school district will limit our educational choices for our family. I believe that every family should be able to have a tuition free public education, but also have the freedom to school their child in a way that best

serves their personal circumstances. For us that includes having a choice in what curriculum we use.

Thank you for your time. I appreciate you being willing to promote educational choice in North Dakota!