



North Dakota Small Organized Schools

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Testimony in Opposition to HB 1358

Chairman Heinert and members of the House Education Committee,

My name is Michael Heilman, Executive Director of the North Dakota Small Organized Schools. I represent the 140+ member schools of NDSOS and stand for them in opposition to the funding and establishment of public charter schools in North Dakota. The comprehensive schools that currently serve our large and small communities will only suffer with the addition of public charter schools. While charter schools may serve certain communities effectively, they are ill-suited to North Dakota and especially the rural regions and would have significant negative impacts.

Financial implications

One of the most pressing concerns is the financial strain charter schools impose on traditional public schools, especially in rural areas. In rural districts, public schools are already operating on tight budgets. When funding is diverted to charter schools, public schools face even greater challenges in providing adequate resources, hiring qualified teachers, and maintaining essential programs. With our school funding directly tied to students, the loss of even a few students can have devastating impact on small schools. For example, in North Carolina, a 2021 study found that the opening of charter schools in rural districts led to reduced per-pupil spending in traditional public schools, forcing cuts to extracurricular programs and specialized services. This funding loss undermines the quality of education for the majority of students who remain in traditional schools.

Limited Student Populations

Rural areas typically have small, dispersed populations. This demographic reality makes it difficult for charter schools to enroll enough students to remain viable without adversely affecting the local public school system. When charter schools draw students away, the public schools lose critical enrollment-based funding, but their operational costs, such as transportation and facilities maintenance, remain unchanged. This creates an unsustainable financial model for both the charter and public schools. In Maine, for instance, the opening of rural charter schools led to the closure of small, local public schools due to declining enrollment, forcing students to travel long distances for their education.

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The mission of NDSOS is to provide leadership for the small/rural schools in North Dakota and to support legislation favorable to their philosophy while opposing legislation that is harmful.

29 **Lack Professional Resources**

30 We currently face a serious shortage of highly qualified individuals to serve as teachers, para's, support
31 staff and administrators. In rural areas, these resources are already stretched thin. I work with school
32 districts to assist them with their superintendent searches. The pool of candidates for these positions is
33 so small that districts are having a difficult time attracting a single applicant. Many districts are
34 considering hiring an interim superintendent for the 2025/26 school term. The hard truth is that
35 potential candidates see the increased regulations and demands placed on educators simply is not
36 worth the compensation. More competition for limited resources seems counterproductive.

37 **Community Fragmentation**

38 Public schools are often the heart of rural communities, serving as centers for education, social
39 connection, and local pride. The establishment of charter schools can divide communities, pitting
40 neighbors against each other as families are forced to choose sides. This fragmentation weakens the
41 collective investment in public education and erodes community cohesion.

42 **Conclusion**

43 In conclusion, public charter schools in rural areas do not serve the best interests of students, families,
44 or communities. They divert critical funding from traditional public schools, struggle to achieve viability
45 due to limited student populations, and often fail to provide equitable and comprehensive education.
46 There are multiple reports from several states that indicated mixed results at best, when charter schools
47 are introduced in rural areas. Instead of funding charter schools, we should focus on strengthening
48 existing public schools in rural areas to ensure that all students receive a high-quality education.

49 I urge you to oppose the funding and establishment of public charter schools in North Dakota. It simply
50 is not a good fit for our state. Instead, I encourage you to prioritize investments in our traditional public
51 schools, which remain the cornerstone of education and community life in these areas.

52 Thank you,

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