

HB 1369 – Weighted Average Daily Membership, Dr. Marcus Lewton, Superintendent, Dickinson Public Schools.

Members of the House Education Committee,

My name is Marcus Lewton, and I am the Superintendent of Dickinson Public Schools. I am here today to testify in favor of support of HB 1369. In addition, I would like the committee to consider increasing the weighted funding measure for English Learner (EL) students. The need for enhanced support is critical as our district, along with many others in the state, have experienced a significant increase in the number of students requiring EL services.

In the fall of 2023, Dickinson Public Schools had 160 EL students. That number has now more than doubled to 329 EL students. Currently, we receive approximately \$360,000 in weighted funding from the state for EL students. However, our hard costs for EL services this year exceed \$900,000. If we were able to hire the necessary EL instructors & support staff to meet the recommendations of the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction (DPI), our costs would approach \$2 million. The gap between funding and actual needs is placing immense strain on our resources.

Our growing EL population is closely tied to our local economy. A quick survey of our Adult Education EL students revealed that many families have moved to Dickinson due to employment in the oil and construction industries. Their children, however, often face immense challenges. Many of our recently arrived EL students are classified as Level One on the state WIDA assessment. These students frequently come from backgrounds with little or no formal education. Some middle and high school students do not know how to read or write in their native language, which compounds the difficulty of teaching them English.

To illustrate the challenges, I want to share two stories from our schools. In October, I spoke with a secondary teacher who was celebrating a small but meaningful success with one of her EL students. The student was beginning to understand key English words and could complete two-digit addition and subtraction. However, the teacher explained how difficult it was to use translation devices with this student because the student's native dialect was not supported. When I suggested having the student type their questions in their own language, the teacher reminded me, "Marcus, this child doesn't know how to read or write in their own language."

Last month, I stepped in as a principal at one of our elementary schools and worked with an older elementary student who had recently been suspected of being trafficked by local law enforcement. This young girl had faced significant trauma and adverse childhood experiences. She struggled socially and academically, and when I sat down with her, it was clear she was already more than five years behind her peers. We spent time together working on basic numbers and letters. While this was a small step forward, her situation underscores the immense challenges faced by many of our EL students.

Despite these obstacles, our EL students and their families are some of the hardest-working members of our community. They take jobs that our local employers can't fill and are willing work long and hard hours. They support their teachers and want what is academically best for

their children. The high cost of providing adequate education for these students, however, is straining our district's budget. We are being forced to divert funds from other students to meet the requirements of the law.

Currently, Dickinson Public Schools has 329 EL students. Of those, 126 are identified as level One, of which 70 are newcomers. These are students who have little or no use of the English Language. As I mentioned earlier, some of them have no formal education experience. We also have 38 level Two, and 80 level three EL students, according to last years numbers. These three levels are students with the greatest need and support to help master the English language.

I'm here today to ask you to consider increasing the weighted funding factor for EL students. Please consider increasing the formula for level two and three students to the same weight at Level 1, which is .40. Doing so would provide districts like ours with the resources needed to adequately support these students and ensure their success.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Dr. Marcus Lewton
Superintendent
Dickinson Public Schools