

Hello! My name is Stefanie Keidel, and I am a wife, mom, and special education teacher from Mandan.

Currently, I am an elementary special education teacher for K-5 students with a variety of disabilities: Autism, Other Health Impairments, Intellectual Disabilities, and more. Previously, I have spent one year at the high school, also teaching special education. This is my 10th year at Fort Lincoln Elementary.

I live on a farm south of town with my husband, and we have an 8-year-old daughter and a 6-year old son that attend the same school I work at.

I am writing to you in support of HB1530.

As a human being in our world right now, I can attest that there are simply too many things to do with too little time; get groceries, clean the house, feed the dog, help with homework, drive to activities, RAISE GOOD HUMANS, etc. - you get the point. All while battling internal and external factors. In this chapter of life, my focus is on my kids. As a teacher, 'my kids' also includes my students. If you are not an educator, I do not expect you to understand that sentiment; however, as an educator - I can tell you, without a doubt, I care for my students as I do my personal children.

As a teacher, I am often considered with curriculum, assessments, projects, meetings, paperwork, etc. However, the wellbeing of my students comes above all else. My hope as a teacher is to help support young people as they learn and grow to become (hopefully) happy and successful members of our community. I mean: the students who have a disability who I am lucky enough to case manage, the peers of these students in their general education classrooms, and the other peers in our building who I hope grow to be inclusive and respectful of all.

I wish I could tell you how easy and great it is to be a public educator. I will say: I am lucky enough to work in a district that, I believe, is in support of teachers.

However, there are daily battles, as a special education teacher, that need to be addressed if recruiting and retaining effective special educators is a priority.

1. STAFF: Quite frankly - I cannot do my job alone. My job relies heavily on the paraprofessionals that work with me. Recruiting and retaining strong, caring individuals have been the most difficult aspects of my job. Simply put, I do not get to show up to work, do my best, and expect great outcomes. When I go to work, the influence and difference I make in a day relies on how many of my staff members are also at school. If we are short a staff member or two (which we are - almost every month in my classroom alone), I cannot do my job. My job then shifts to covering for others and adjusting schedules and filling in where needed. As certified educators, we have a teachers' union in place to be a part of, if we choose. The union helps us band together to advocate for our needs.

Wholeheartedly, I 'go to bat' for my staff. They are the heart and soul of my classroom. However, simply put - the paraprofessionals are not paid a livable wage (including benefits) that make it possible or plausible for them to stay.

2. TIME: Whether I like it or not, a huge part of my job is doing paperwork. Writing Individualized Education Plans, facilitating many (MANY!) meetings, participating in and completing individualized assessments (which require profile meetings, assessment plans, and written assessment reports), and continually communicating with other educators means there is less time to be spent working with and teaching students. I spend a great deal of time planning for my paraprofessionals to spend time with students - while I complete the paperwork and the other work done behind the scenes.
3. SAFETY: I am not sure why I left this reason for 3rd - maybe because it is the hardest for me to talk about. As a special education teacher, a staff trained in Nonviolent Crisis Intervention, and a member of our building team that responds to 'response calls' when a student is struggling, I have been injured many times in the past 10 years. I would love to give you a number - a specific amount of times I have been hurt (or a student has had the intent of causing me harm). On average, I would say I am hit, kicked, bit, hit by an object flying across the room, etc. around 2-3 times per week. Sometimes, it's a mild injury; other times, it requires a visit to the Occupational Health center. For all times, it requires documentation, communication, and a great deal of thought. What was the student communicating? (ALL behavior is communication) What could we (as staff) have done differently? Who else could we involve to help prevent these situations in the future? What can we do if we are out of resources? How can we keep our coworkers and our students safe next time?

The fact is, I don't have a lot of answers to the questions I have posed. I firmly believe this bill is important for gathering information that can help education in the future.

For the past 10 years, I have worked at the same elementary school in the same home town in which I grew up. I married my high school sweetheart, a farmer and plant-worker, and we are here to stay. We plan to raise our kids here. In the elementary school in which I work, there are two special education positions in which I have described: I hold one of them. In 10 years, I have had five teaching partners. That position has changed hands 5 times. Something isn't working. The paperwork, the caseloads, the lack of paraprofessional support, the lack of curriculum resources, the increase in unsafe behaviors, the incredible incline of disrespectful behaviors - we're running out of people that are willing to put their well-being on the line in the hopes of helping children.

I just quickly want to share a personal story: My son, Harrison, is six years old. He is in kindergarten in the same building I work in. I also happen to have a student on my caseload who is in kindergarten; however, she does not come to school at our building. She is a homebound student due to complex medical needs. At the beginning of this school year, I thought a lot of this student. I also thought a lot about my youngest child starting elementary

school. I compared the two experiences. I compared the experience of this child's parents with our experience. I immediately knew I wanted this child to be put into a kindergarten classroom in our school (in order for the child to have a general education teacher and peers). After visiting with our special education director and the superintendent, while navigating some behind-the-scenes issues (due to a student who is homebound being listed in a school-based classroom, and the funding issues that come into play - I won't pretend that I know all of these things), we 'unofficially' placed her in a classroom. It happened to work out that my son is in this classroom as well. This has been such an incredible experience to watch. The kindergarten class is kept up to date on what the homebound child is up to, how she is completing various 'kindergarten' tasks, and the like (shout out to the rockstar kinder teacher). This child is also updated frequently - with recorded messages, cards, and gifts from the kindergarten class. With support from her family, she was even able to come to the school building for school pictures this fall. And every single kindergarten student wore a mask, without complaint, to keep her healthy in order to meet her (from a distance). It was beautiful. My son frequently comes home telling me all about the update he heard about this student during the day. Just this week, he was planning his valentine's, and he was sure to include non-edible treats - since this child is unable to eat food. I know many of his peers have had similar experiences.

I share all of this for one reason: special education matters. Education matters. Public education matters. Forming these relationships between kindergarten students (who attend school in separate settings) matter. My job is getting harder every year. I won't sugar coat it - I almost threw in the towel last year. My husband and I candidly visited with our financial advisor to see if we could afford the retirement we hope for without my teaching retirement. Spoiler alert: we cannot. I chose to stick it out at least one more year (and hopefully more to come). I am here for my students and my children. It sounds so cliché, but I want the world to be a better place. Especially as a mom and a teacher - I want the world to be better for my children.

I have watched my friends walk away from this profession, and I can not blame them at all. Something has to change. There isn't a perfect answer as to what the 'something' is - but I am hoping this bill will help to pinpoint some of those reasons.

My husband and I have always told our children they can do whatever they want in life: become a welder, go to college, start a job right after high school, become a plumber, fly to the moon - you name it. As hard as it is for me to write this - I have very clearly told my daughter (and I have prayed hard many nights) - please choose a different profession. Teaching, as it is now, especially in special education, is not a safe or happy place to be.

I hope this bill provides some clarity for ways in which we can better the future of education, for all.

Thank you for your time.

Stefanie Keidel
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