

Testimony Before the House Education Committee

HB 1530

February 11, 2024

Chairman Heinert and members of the Committee, I am Amber Haskell, and I am a field consultant with North Dakota United. I rise today in support of HB 1530 and encourage the House Education Committee to issue a **do pass** recommendation for this proposed legislation.

About two years ago, ND United recognized the unique circumstances that special educators face and in response organized members through ND United's Special Education Collective. Part of my job duties, in partnership with field consultant Matt Liebel, include organizing this Collective. As a licensed special educator who spent 10 years as a special education teacher and two years as a paraprofessional, I am well aware of the daily plight facing special educators.

We recognize that special educators are responsible for providing specialized and individualized instruction for students with disabilities, in addition to being responsible for complying with state and federal mandates through IDEA. On top of that, many are tasked with supervising, training, and evaluating the paraprofessionals who work with the students they serve. They are solvers of unique problems and fierce advocates, who go above and beyond the definitions in their job descriptions to meet the needs of their students.

ND United recently surveyed members working in special education. We received 297 respondents from 26 of the 31 special education units statewide. These respondents included K-12 special education teachers, paraprofessionals, early childhood special education teachers, speech language pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, and school psychologists.

Highlights from ND United's Special Educator Survey

- 71% report their workload has increased since they began working in special education
- 86% report they currently feel overwhelmed by their special education workload
- 44% report they are considering leaving special education
- 56% report their mental health is adversely affected by their current role in special education
- 63% of respondents who are responsible for supervising and training paraprofessionals report that they do not have the time or tools to adequately do so
- 78% report that the shortage of paraprofessionals adds stress to their jobs
- 59% report they are unable to take their duty-free lunch 3 or more days a week due to time spent providing direct services to students, responding to crisis, completing due process paperwork, completing observations, meetings, lack of paraprofessional support, or other required duties.
- 74% report they are unable to utilize their scheduled prep time 3 or more days a week for the reasons listed above
- 85% report they know colleagues who have left special education
- 83% report their district is having difficulty filling special education positions
- 81% report that caseloads are a significant factor in the shortage of special education teachers

Our special educators overwhelmingly report their passion for teaching. They consistently point to relationships with students and families, and watching students thrive, grow, and achieve their goals as reasons for them to continue their work in special education. The services they provide benefit not only the students and families they serve, but the school and community as a whole.

Why This Study Matters

By approving HB 1530, this legislature has the opportunity to take a proactive approach in addressing the challenges within special education. The shortage of special educators currently in the field has reached a crisis

level, negatively impacting districts' ability to comply with the requirements under IDEA and special educators' ability to provide the services their students need.

Supporting this study is an investment in our students, educators, and the future of education in North Dakota. The results should inform policies that enhance the profession and ensure students with disabilities receive the high-quality education they deserve.

Chairman Heinert and members of this Committee, I urge a **do pass** recommendation for HB 1530.