

Testimony in Support of House Bill 1530
Presented to the House Education Committee
North Dakota Legislative Assembly

Committee Chair and Members of the Committee,

My name is Alicia Weiland. I am a 26-year-old who was born and raised in Mandan. Currently, I am a special education strategist at the high school level for Mandan Public Schools. Throughout the day, I work with a variety of different disabilities and ages. This is my third-year teaching.

I am writing in support of HB 1530. This bill is greatly needed to provide information into understanding the high needs of special education teachers and the teacher shortage we are facing in our North Dakota schools.

In today's world, everyone seems to have endless to-do lists. But when I look at my professional to-do list, each time I can cross one thing off, I am frequently met with the addition of 10 more items each a day. Grading papers, scheduling meetings, entering grades to each student's portal, calling parents to update a plan or discuss a strategy, reporting concerns, documenting student goals, finalizing multiple special education documents, truthfully, the list goes on and on.

Along with the daily responsibilities listed above, I am also expected to manage five paraprofessionals. I couldn't do my job without these incredibly selfless human beings, and yet, I wasn't given any training on how to manage them. I had to create my own rules, boundaries, and establish how to communicate with them as a team. Additional tasks that come with managing paraprofessionals include creating schedules, helping manage accommodations/modifications for my students, rescheduling my responsibilities when one of them is absent, managing employee grievances, and being a line of communication between general education teachers, student/paraprofessional, and myself.

As a special education teacher, I teach six out of seven periods during the day - which is 288 minutes or 4 hours and 48 minutes. Outside of that, I have one preparatory period that lasts 48 minutes as well as professional learning communities every day for 25 minutes. In one preparation period, I need to complete all special education paperwork, lesson plans, documentation, reports, communication with other educators, and make private phone calls to parents daily.

On top of all the responsibilities in special education, I take great pride in being up to date on safety recommendations. Because of this, I am NCI (Nonviolent Crisis Intervention) certified. This is an optional course that you are able to receive a stipend for, but is one more thing to do outside of contracted hours. Even though my staff is also certified, I tell them every time there is a behavior, "I would rather step in front and take the behavior over you. You get paid less than you deserve. I would rather get hurt and you come back to work, than you get hurt and leave this field due to behaviors."

The fact that I feel the need to think that, in hope of retaining staff due to safety concerns, is a huge issue in my eyes. I've personally been hit, kicked, bit, spit at, and scratched. I have had

staplers, scissors, three-hole punches, and chairs thrown at me regularly. My classroom has been physically torn apart - desks flipped upside down, papers thrown everywhere, and trash cans emptied - just to name a few. I know that behaviors are communication, but that doesn't mean as educators we should have to navigate behaviors alone. NCI is not enough to handle high school aged students physically or emotionally. NCI could be the baseline for all educators to provide everyone with de-escalation strategies at the least. This should not and cannot be a special education teacher's only line of defense. After being attacked, I've realized there isn't a protocol on what to do with the educator who just saw a student destroy their classroom and become a different person. I simply have had to take a breath and continue on with my day, even though my head is replaying the incident over and over on what I should have done differently. Only to go home and lose sleep over the incident and come back the next day and pretend that everything is back to normal with that student. This continually has impacted me emotionally - causing me to lose sleep, second guess myself, and feel unprotected. This has impacted me physically - with small scars up my arm from students scratching me and multiple bruises from hits, kicks, and grabs.

I believe this study could truly make or break the amount of time a special education teacher chooses to stay in this field. After I graduated, I was blessed with an incredible position, in an amazing district. I knew the tolls physically and mentally in the room would be challenging. I told myself originally 10-15 years in the field, I could do that. After year one of teaching, I told myself that I could make it to eight years. Now in my third year, I just hope I make it another day.

I come back each day for my students and care about their well-being deeply. However, as you look back into my testimony, how many of my responsibilities are solely time spent with the student? We are so focused and driven by data collection, paperwork, grades, and deadlines - the actual student gets lost. Right now, it feels like the system is all paperwork. When are we going to change and challenge our mindset, to bring the focus back to the student and their needs? As a special education teacher, I am overworked with my many responsibilities and often, items get added to my to-do list each day with little pay to compensate for my time. I hope with this bill, we develop a deeper understanding of special education and that we are better trained, educated, and compensated for our time. Something needs to change, before it's too late. We deserve better and our students deserve even more time being devoted to them, not to due dates and deadlines.

I graciously ask that you support this bill and help take action to address what is happening in the special education world. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,

Alicia Weiland
Special Education Strategist
Mandan Public Schools