

# House Education Committee

## House Bill 1536

Andrew Alexis Varvel

Written Testimony

February 11, 2025

10:30AM

Chairman Heinert & Members of the Committee:

My name is Andrew Alexis Varvel. I live in Bismarck.

My opposition to HB 1527, HB 1536, and HB 1569 comes from the same place. This is a defense of local control, aversion to legislative micromanagement, and a principle that teachers should have considerable latitude to interpret statewide educational guidelines.

I am passionate about the history of this region, and this includes the history of this region before the Homestead Act and subsequent settlement. I want the history of the tribes of North Dakota to be told – tribal history both before and after settlement.

My problem with this bill is that it politicizes the curriculum of Native American history. One thing we need to understand about tribes is that they are, more than anything else, political entities. And fundamentally political entities. These tribes are nations.

Let's turn it around. Should educators in North Dakota teach Mexican history as developed by representatives of Mexico and Mexican political leaders?

Should educators teach German history as developed by representatives of Germany and German political leaders?

Hopefully not. This legislation calls for curriculum development – first and foremost – by representatives of federally recognized tribes in North Dakota. It mandates a Native American curriculum advisory committee consisting foremost of tribal leaders. And it is unclear from this bill's language if the cultural experts and educators must be tribal members as well. *As if nobody who is not a tribal member has anything to contribute to the curriculum.*

The language in this bill is very prescriptive and very political.

I will put it this way – I don't want Ward Churchill's falsehoods about “smallpox blankets” to be part of this curriculum. I don't want the fictional speech attributed to Four Bears by the notoriously racist historian Annie Heloise Abel to be part of this curriculum.

On the other hand, I have carefully documented how the federal government withheld smallpox vaccine from the Mandan and Arikara peoples. There are hints from the historical record that people up here knew they were getting deprived of vaccine too.

What the people of North Dakota don't need is a unified standard curriculum that says, “This is our story and we are telling it to you.”

*I do not feel that this bill is about mutual respect.*

I know very well that some people will get mad at me for taking this stand, claiming I am somehow opposed to teaching Indian history.

Four years ago, I opposed the original language of Senate Bill 2304 and then I supported it once the language got cleaned up.

Once that bill got to the House side, I spoke in favor of that bill in interlinear Lakota and English. Afterwards, I got falsely accused to ***opposing*** that bill in Lakota. That nearly cost me a friendship.

Some Indians seem to be outraged that I learn local languages at all.

But remember this – when I oppose this legislation, I am being sincere. I am not going to be a false friend and falsely claim to support something when I don't. I will be open and honest, and explain to you ***why*** I am expressing my opposition. I am not hiding.

It breaks my heart that this bill's language is something I cannot in all honesty support. I wish the language could have been better.

If this bill is truly important enough to salvage, then by all means, send it to a subcommittee so this bill can be salvaged.

But otherwise, please give this legislation a **DO NOT PASS**.

Thank you.