

Education Committee Members,

Good morning, my name is Marie Franks of Aftyn Twp. adjacent to Minot on the south side. I would like to give you a brief background on who I am and what brings me to ask that you support HB 1540 and SB 2303.

I am a transplant to the beautiful state of ND and have been living here now for over 17 years. Before ND, I lived in PA with my husband where I studied for and obtained my master's in human resources administration. Prior to PA, I was born and raised in Sault Ste. Marie, ON Canada where I worked as a police officer for 10 years before moving to the United States to pursue my education and then marry my husband.

My husband and I have 2 children, our daughter is a junior at the University of Mary, studying biology and our son is a freshman at Bishop Ryan Catholic School. I am here to speak about the benefits of supporting educational freedom or school choice which is related to an educational savings account program or other bills that fund the same idea.

While there are several benefits to educational freedom, I would like to speak to 3 of them. Firstly, evidence shows that school voucher programs "have a positive effect on public students' scores and other metrics of student wellbeing" (Education Freedom Benefits All Student-Even Public-School Students, Cato Institute Blog, March 22, 2021). In reading several articles, blogs and online reports, a common thread among the information was that competition for students creates innovation and accountability for student academic achievement as well as giving parents choices that help them find educational opportunities that best suite the needs of students. The public schools just cannot do everything well for all kids.

The impact of school choice programs for students and families is significant in that data reveal advancements in student participation rates, academic outcomes, and parental satisfaction. As schools strive to meet families' expectations and demonstrate quality education outcomes, they attract and retain students. This is true for public school students as well as private schools or charter schools (which we do not have in ND). Parental satisfaction is an essential metric but one that is limited here because of the stronghold the state has on the educational options available, namely, the government run public schools or the out-of-pocket private schools and homeschools.

There is growing support for school choice, a concept that promises to improve education by allowing parents to choose between public and private schools using government (taxpayer) money. Now, this is a hot button topic! Using government money to fund educational choice (especially when a parent would choose a religious affiliated school). Some would argue that it is not allowed because of the separation between church and state. However, there is Supreme Court precedent that ruled that education funding following a student is not a violation because the primary beneficiaries are the families and their students, and they have a choice in the matter.

For too long, the only special interest groups in K-12 education that were being heard were the employee unions, teacher and administrator unions. Now there's a new special interest group and it is the parents, and we are not going away anytime soon. Parents felt powerless in 2020 during the Covid shutdowns and the years following as they caught glimpses of what was happening in their

kids' classrooms via zoom or not happening, depending on where your child was being educated. For many parents, it was as awakening to how few options were available to parents here in ND and how responsive our schools were to the needs of parents, a child's primary educator and how difficult it was to affect change. Many parents felt powerless and many still do and this has given rise to the need for better options for educational choices in our state.

The argument that school choice is going to defund public schools or that there is no accountability is just plain false. Public schools that continue to fail their students defund themselves when they do not provide a solid educational product, similarly, a private school would cease to exist if it did not provide a great educational product. In fact, when I first moved to Minot, I was appointed to the Minot Catholic Schools school board and the projection numbers for long-term viability were bleak. After a major internal assessment and with the input from many stakeholders and new leadership, new curriculum and hard work, Bishop Ryan has turned the tide and is thriving. Low performing public schools coupled with few educational options is a major disservice to our families and to our state as a whole.

In ND, that average cost to educate a child in the public schools is estimated at \$17, 689 in the latest research year 2024-25 in Public School Review. While the average cost to taxpayers for students in school choice programs is approximately \$6000, about 1/3 the cost.

As a parent that pays taxes to the school district I live in and to which I get no benefit from that school and in addition we pay tuition to send my child to Bishop Ryan, the costs really seem unjust.

I truly believe that money for educating a child should follow the child. While critics argue that choice programs will dismantle or defund public education by shifting large number of students, the data tells a different story. Expanding choice programs does not harm public schools but rather serves to help them rise because they will have smaller class sizes making it easier to spend more time with students who need help, perhaps helping those in rural areas that are severely restricted by options, giving them opportunities that cannot exist in the system as it currently is.

As the primary educators of our children, we must be given the opportunities to select the educational product that will best suit our kids and should not be penalized or restricted to the only choice being public, government funded school. Having a monopoly on education in this state is not serving our students, their families or large employers with recruitment and retention issues (like healthcare and other industry). Without educational freedom options that enhance and empower parents to help their kids attain the best possible education outcomes, we place yet one more hurdle to becoming the best state to live in, work, play and learn in. Attracting new people to North Dakota means opening our minds to unrestricted education freedom to establish an atmosphere in which individuals can realize their best academic outcomes.

Please vote yes on HB 1540 , SB 2303 or any other bill that speaks to the same issue.

Thank you!