

**An Education Savings Account Policy Would Benefit All Students,  
Including in Rural North Dakota  
Testimony before  
North Dakota Senate Education Committee**

**February 4, 2025**

**Dr. Matthew Ladner**

Senior Advisor, Center for Education Policy  
The Heritage Foundation

**Jason Bedrick, MPP**

Research Fellow, Center for Education Policy  
The Heritage Foundation

Our names are Matthew Ladner and Jason Bedrick. We are researchers at The Heritage Foundation's Center for Education Policy. The views we express in this testimony are our own and should not be construed as representing any institutional position of The Heritage Foundation or its Board of Trustees.

Senate Bill 2303 would give North Dakota families greater freedom to choose learning environments that align with their values and meet their children's individual learning needs.

As Gov. Kelly Armstrong recently observed in his State of the State Address, with an ESA, the "money follows the student, not the school, ensuring every student has the tools they need to prepare for college, a career or the military."

Education savings accounts, or ESAs, let families access state funds to pay for private school tuition, tutoring, textbooks, online courses, special needs therapy and numerous other educational expenses. Nineteen states have already adopted ESA or ESA-style policies, and several more are considering similar policies this year.

ESA opponents often make two claims: 1) that there are no schooling options in rural areas; and 2) that rural schools are imperiled because so many students will leave for those options. These claims are mutually exclusive. They cannot both be true simultaneously. But they can both be — and indeed are — false.

First, families in rural areas have access to

more education options than ever before. According to an analysis by the Brookings Institution, about seven in 10 rural families nationwide live within 10 miles of a private elementary school.<sup>1</sup> Rural areas are also seeing the rise of microschoools, a modern reimaging of the one-room schoolhouse.

Microschool networks like Acton Academy, Adamo Education, Great Hearts, Kai Pods and Prenda are teaching students in small groups, sometimes operating out of homes or church basements. Their approaches vary greatly — ranging from classical to Montessori — but all offer greater flexibility and more individualized attention than the traditional classroom environment.

Additionally, high-quality virtual schools are available to anyone with a decent internet connection, which is becoming increasingly available in rural America. A 2021 survey by the Pew Research Center found that 72 percent rural Americans said they have a broadband Internet connection at home, up nine percentage points since 2016.<sup>2</sup>

Second, as we detailed in a Heritage Foundation report, fears that the wide availability of education options would harm rural schools are entirely unfounded.<sup>3</sup> Arizona, for example, has consistently ranked among the top states for education freedom and choice over the past two decades. More students exercise their school-choice options in Arizona than in any other state. If choice policies harmed district schools, then Arizona's rural schools would be faring far worse

than the national average.

In fact, Arizona’s rural schools have fared *much better* than the national average. From 2007 to 2019, Arizona rural students’ fourth- and eighth-grade reading, math, and science scores on the National Assessment for Educational Progress increased by a combined 21 points, while scores in rural schools nationally decreased by two points. On the most recent NAEP, post-pandemic, Arizona’s rural students still show a stronger trend since 2007 on all six state-level exams than for rural students nationally.

Education choice policies like ESAs expand educational opportunity for rural families while spurring rural district schools to improve their performance. By embracing education choice policies, like the ESA policy proposed in Senate Bill 2303, North Dakota lawmakers can deliver on the promise of America’s education system and ensure that all children have access to the learning environment that best meets their individual needs and helps them to achieve their full God-given potential.

---

<sup>1</sup> Matthew M. Chingos and Kristin Blagg, “Who could benefit from school choice? Mapping access to public and private schools,” Brookings Institution, March 31, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/who-could-benefit-from-school-choice-mapping-access-to-public-and-private-schools/>.

<sup>2</sup> Kim Parker et al., “What Unites and Divides Urban, Suburban and Rural Communities,” Pew Research Center, May 22, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2018/05/22/what-unites-and-divides-urban-suburban-and-rural-communities/>

<sup>3</sup> Jason Bedrick and Matthew Ladner, “Rustic Renaissance: Education Choice in Rural America,” The Heritage Foundation, January 9, 2023, <https://www.heritage.org/education/report/rustic-renaissance-education-choice-rural-america/>.