

Members of the House Education Committee,

I write to express my strong **opposition** to House Bill 1540. As a lifelong North Dakotan and dedicated public school librarian who has served in our state's education system for a decade, I am deeply concerned that this bill will undermine our public schools by diverting essential funding away from them and directing it toward private and nonpublic education options.

House Bill 1540 is, in essence, a voucher program that reallocates taxpayer dollars from public schools to private institutions. By allowing families to use state education funds for private school tuition, homeschooling materials, online learning programs, and other nonpublic educational expenses, this bill reduces the financial resources available to our public schools. Public education is the cornerstone of our democracy, and the redirection of funds through an ESA program weakens our ability to provide quality education to every child, regardless of their socioeconomic status.

The bill stipulates that 80% of the per-pupil state aid for a student enrolled in the ESA program would be transferred from their public school district to a private or alternative educational provider. While the remaining 20% remains with the public school district, this reduction in funding does not correlate with a proportional decrease in costs. Public schools must still maintain facilities, transportation, support services, and qualified staff, all while serving the vast majority of North Dakota's students. This financial strain disproportionately affects rural and lower-income districts, where public schools are often the only viable educational option for families.

Furthermore, private schools and other nonpublic education providers participating in the ESA program are not subject to the same level of oversight, transparency, and accountability as public schools. House Bill 1540 explicitly states that participating private schools and education service providers will remain autonomous, exempt from state regulations beyond those outlined in the bill. This lack of accountability raises serious concerns about the use of public funds, the quality of education provided, and the equitable treatment of students, particularly those with disabilities and special needs.

The bill also fails to guarantee that ESA funds will benefit all students equitably. Families with greater financial means are more likely to supplement ESA funds to cover the full cost of private tuition, while lower-income families may find the funds insufficient to access high-quality alternatives. This creates a system where public money disproportionately benefits those who already have greater access to educational opportunities, rather than supporting the vast majority of students who rely on public education.

Instead of diverting funds to an ESA program, we should focus on strengthening our public schools by increasing investments in teacher salaries, classroom resources, technology, mental health services, and student support programs. North Dakota's public schools serve as a vital foundation for our communities, and any policy that redirects public funds to private institutions undermines this foundation.

For these reasons, I urge you to **oppose** House Bill 1540 and reaffirm your commitment to fully funding and supporting North Dakota's public schools. Our state's children

deserve a strong, well-resourced public education system that serves all students equitably, not a program that siphons funds away to benefit a select few.

Respectfully,

Jessica Smette

North Dakota School Librarian