



1 **Testimony in Opposition to House Bill 1540**

2 Chairperson and Members of the Committee...Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.
3 We come in opposition to this bill due to its violation of our state's foundational commitment to
4 public education, its detrimental impact on rural communities, and its misalignment with public
5 sentiment regarding education funding priorities.

6 **Our Founders' Commitment to Public Education**

7 The framers of North Dakota's Constitution made a clear and deliberate choice to prioritize
8 public education as the foundation of our state's future. They obligated us to **fund and**
9 **strengthen public schools**—not to subsidize private education. Our state's education funds were
10 never intended to support private choices but rather to build a strong, **uniform system of free**
11 **public education** for every child, in every community.

12 This principle was deeply rooted in the experiences of many early settlers, who had immigrated
13 to the United States seeking refuge from **religious persecution and sectarian conflicts** in
14 Europe. Yesterday we heard one of the representatives from Bishop Ryan talk about this – he
15 was right – there was a LOT of religious disagreement at the beginning of our state. Much might
16 still exist. Our forefathers understood firsthand the dangers of entangling government with
17 religious institutions and sought to establish an education system that was **free, fair, and**
18 **accessible to all**, regardless of religious background. The decision to exclusively fund public
19 schools was not merely a financial one—it was a deliberate commitment to **unity, equal**
20 **opportunity, and the separation of church and state** to ensure education remained a **public**
21 **good** rather than a tool for division. The decision of whether it is constitutional or not in North
22 Dakota has not yet been debated at our supreme court, however, for years and years, and dozens
23 of votes by your predecessors to keep our educational investment to what our forefathers stated
24 was constitutionally required.

25 House Bill 1540 disregards this constitutional commitment and sets a dangerous precedent that
26 could erode the very principles upon which our public education system was built.

27 **Preserving Rural Communities and Our Agricultural Leadership**

28 I've been working with the legislature since 2011 when I was at the NDUS office. Every session
29 there have been attempts at funding private schools and every session the body has voted no.
30 Why? I believe there are multiple reasons, but one big one is because public schools are the
31 heart of **North Dakota's rural communities**. They are not just places of learning but serve as
32 hubs of civic engagement, economic stability, and community growth. Our **agricultural sector**,
33 which plays a **leading role on the world stage**, depends on strong rural schools to educate the
34 next generation of farmers, agribusiness leaders, and skilled workers. Diverting public funds
35 away from these schools weakens the backbone of our **rural economy** and undermines our
36 position as a global agricultural leader.



1 Rural school districts already face financial challenges, including declining enrollments and high
2 operational costs. House Bill 1540 would only **exacerbate these struggles. Every state that**
3 **has gone down this route has eventually seen a decline in public school funding. I'd hate to**
4 **see this force** rural schools to cut critical programs, consolidate schools, or even close their
5 doors—leaving communities without essential educational services.

6 **Public Sentiment: Prioritizing Property Tax Relief and Free Meals Over Private** 7 **School Subsidies**

8 North Dakotans have spoken clearly in recent validated non-partisan surveys: the **top funding**
9 **priorities** should be **property tax relief** and ensuring **free meals for students**, not subsidizing
10 private education. There was strong approval for ESA's but not for having an allowance for
11 private school tuition. Parents and taxpayers alike have expressed strong support for public
12 education and other services funded by tax dollars, yet this bill diverts resources away from those
13 initiatives to **primarily benefit families who are already enrolled in private schools.**

14 **Accountability?**

15 **Public schools are accountable for every penny.** All the way down to running to
16 Walmart to buy poster board to hang in the classroom. I question if our ND patrons
17 are really ok with spending \$243M without that same accountability? I'd venture to
18 say satisfaction would be higher to have that go toward property tax relief or meals for
19 all students. Please consider that popular choice that brings us together rather than
20 what divides us.

21 **Conclusion**

22 House Bill 1540 represents a **fundamental shift away** from our state's constitutional and
23 historical commitment to public education. It threatens our **rural communities, diverts funds**
24 **from our agricultural workforce**, and ignores **public priorities** that call for investment in
25 **property tax relief and free student meals**—not private education subsidies.

26 For these reasons, I strongly urge the committee to **reject** this bill and instead focus on **fully**
27 **funding and strengthening North Dakota's public education system**, as our **founders**
28 **intended and as our citizen's demand.**

29 Thank you for your time and consideration. I welcome any questions the committee may have.

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