

Good afternoon to the Madam Chairman Representative Axtman, and Mr. Vice Chairman Representative Richter, to the Members on the Committee on Education.

First and foremost, I extend my immense gratitude to Rep. Richter for becoming my bill sponsor in North Dakota, providing me the opportunity to testify, and partnering with me on this critical legislation. It is an honor to be seated before you today, bringing the fruition of years of social, educational, and legislative innovation before you, as a 19-year-old with the ambition to eradicate the insidious and rampant social pandemics of human and sex trafficking, engendering waves of knowledgeable upstanders, state by state, nation by nation.

My name is Ria Bahadur, and I am a sophomore at Stanford University and the author and proponent of HB 1569. I am testifying in **strong** support of this bill, because I believe that widespread intersectional, actionable, and accurate sex trafficking education is not only a necessity for future mitigation, but the most basic of human rights. I began this journey at eleven years old, and have since been working to combat the disinformation and stigma that viciously dominates the narrative, stifling the voices of survivors and advocates, disabling informed aid and protections for the victims that deserve justice.

Let me be clear - The numbers we're seeing across the nation and in the State of North Dakota are not just statistics. They tell a story of a crisis happening right here in our communities, in our schools, where our children should be safe. Right here in North Dakota, 9 out of 10 human trafficking cases involve sex trafficking. And what's even more troubling, Senators and Representatives, is that 30% of these cases involve our children – this community's future generation who should be focused on their dreams, seeding the skills to become future professionals and public servants, not fighting for their basic human dignity, avoiding irrevocable harm at every step.

Members of the committee, as parents and grandparents, I ask you to pause for a moment and think of your own children and grandchildren during their middle and high school years - that precious time of growth between 12 and 18 years old. These are precisely the ages that traffickers target most aggressively; the very same years when our children are discovering who they are, when they're dreaming about their lives, when they should feel most protected as they navigate agency, understanding, empathy, and intelligence in a brave new world are the years when they are most at risk. Every day across this state, predators are deliberately targeting children the same age as the young people you've raised, or are raising right now.

This horrifying precedent reverberates nationwide. 45% of sex trafficking victims are young people sitting in classrooms every single day. But these numbers, as shocking as they are, don't tell the whole story, don't represent the entirety. In our rural communities especially, we're only seeing the tip of the iceberg. And when we look at our Native American communities, we find an even deeper issue - what experts call the 'silent crisis' of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons, where trafficking and exploitation create and

exacerbate cycles of intergenerational trauma that ripple through the very foundations of a trust-based society, then trustworthy no longer.

Apathy, rooted in pervasive ignorance, distorts the meaning and scope of the term ‘sex trafficking’ to ensure the fear behind the word ‘sex’ emerges long before the truth of exploitation ever will. When nearly one-third of trafficking victims in our state are juveniles, we cannot treat this as just another policy issue. This is a moral imperative that cuts across party lines and jurisdictional boundaries. We must strengthen our educational systems to serve as the first line of defense, equipping our teachers and school staff appropriately with the tools to empower students to learn what sex trafficking truly is, understand that sex trafficking – the victim or the perpetrator, the system or the individual – does not discriminate, and identify warning signs to ensure their classrooms remain safe spaces for both our most vulnerable and upstanding students. Comprehensive trafficking prevention and identification education is not just an enhancement, but a vital foundation of verity, life, and liberty that generates young citizens empowered with civic duty, multiple perspectives, and love in face of power and control.

Members, I stand before not just as an advocate, but as proof that education makes a difference. At 17 years old, I authored and successfully defended the first version of this very bill, SB 5355, which passed unanimously in Washington state under Sen. Claire Wilson’s sponsorship. As part of my legislative initiative to foster a knowledgeable and safe generation of advocates nationwide, and eventually, worldwide, SB 5355’s impact has now reached beyond Washington’s borders, with modified versions advancing in Minnesota, Nevada – #1 in the U.S. for child sex trafficking – and other states across our nation.

And I can tell you that SB 5355’s impact on student safety and agency has not only been rewarding but reinforces the need for such education beyond one state’s confines, some of which I’ve authored, to exist within the realm of current instruction in all schools. We see a dramatic increase in implementation of sex trafficking awareness and prevention curriculum that is not only a measure but a mitigation, with students as young as the age I began taking action in classrooms and beyond, whether through friendship bracelets signaling trafficking, support groups, or infographics. I have seen firsthand students’ wide eyes when learning about the immense oppression of trafficking victims, their horror that they are not immune, and that sex trafficking follows no algorithm. And who can deny the right to truth to the students of North Dakota who attend tribal schools, who know Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons not as an alarming statistic but a lived experience?

I further wish to address the point of accessibility to this education. We love our teachers, I can tell you I am deeply indebted to mine, and as a grantee of a state educational department who has directly developed and implemented sex trafficking education, the last people I wish to bombard are the State Departments of Education, who commandeer our students’ knowledge and bright futures. That is why, beyond the Department’s role in “offering, reviewing, and approving”, that is, ensuring that trafficking education meets the outlined standards, they are not responsible for creating such instruction themselves. This

broadens sex trafficking education – as well as professional development resources - to any material accessible in third parties, nonprofits, or open-source, openly-licensed educational resources, allowing schools and school districts jurisdiction over the time and fiscal cost they allow.

However, do allow me to emphasize what I'm asking for today as part of the cost I just described; one hour. One single hour of classroom time that could mean the difference between vulnerability and vigilance. Just sixty minutes to change how our students see their world and protect themselves and save their lives or the lives of their peers and communities. That's all it takes - one lesson plan, one hour, one chance to equip our children with knowledge that fills the ignorance traffickers capitalize on. 1 hour, versus 20 years of a child's life; time they will never be able to reclaim.

Ultimately, members, I am not afraid of indignation, but I am afraid of rightful indignance not reaching the students who eventually will become the changemakers this legislation relies on, or god forbid, victims themselves. I know there are some folks out there who think trafficking isn't happening in their America. They want to believe this is somebody else's problem. But make no mistake - this occurs every single day, right here, in our backyard, here in North Dakota. And the fact that some would deny this reality only makes our responsibility to act that much greater.

The time for half-measures and divided efforts has passed. Our children - all of our children - deserve nothing less than our full commitment to their safety, their empowerment, their freedom, and their future.

Should the committee have any questions, I am more than willing to take them. Thank you very much for your time.