



WESTERN DAKOTA ENERGY ASSOCIATION

February 10, 2025

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Testimony of:

Geoff Simon, Lobbyist #144

in support of HB 1604 – School construction grants
House Education Committee

Chairman Heinert and members of the House Education Committee:

On behalf of the city, county and school district members of the Western Dakota Energy Association (WDEA), we wish to express our support for HB 1604, which would establish a school construction grant program, a process for determining eligibility of districts, and for minimizing costs of school facility construction.

Rep. Murphy's bill carries a hefty price tag, but some North Dakota school districts have a serious problem that only direct state financial assistance can address. WDEA was part of an ad hoc school construction coalition during the 2023-24 interim. At the outset of the coalition's formation, we were aware that there were at least a handful of public school districts in aging, obsolete facilities, that lacked financial resources to fix the problem. The coalition conducted a survey of all public school districts which revealed, not surprisingly, that many districts operate in substandard facilities with significant deferred maintenance issues. Respondents to the survey also indicated their district lacked the financial means to address their substantial construction needs.

The coalition's mission is to ensure that all students in North Dakota have access to adequate and equitable school facilities, irrespective of their school district, demographic background, or geographical location. This belief is driven by the understanding that quality school facilities are directly linked to the quality of education. Properly maintained and well-designed schools support and strengthen the learning process, whereas inadequate facilities can negatively impact both student and teacher performance, health and safety.

Currently, North Dakota does not have minimum facility adequacy standards for school facilities. HB 1604 begins to address this issue by enabling DPI to work with a qualified architectural firm to develop "scalable, cost-effective, and flexible designs for an elementary school, middle school, high school, and K-12 facilities."

The \$600 million general fund appropriation in this legislation is a big ask, but the lack of adequate educational facilities in many North Dakota school districts is a serious problem that has been neglected far too long. We have K-12 students in North Dakota who are not receiving an equitable shot at a 21st Century education because they are being taught in a poor learning environment. HB 1604 provides a remedy for the problem.

Geoff Simon
Executive Director

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