

**Testimony to the House Education Committee on HB 1604**  
**Monday, February 10, 2025**

Chairman Heinert and the members of the House Education Committee, for the record, my name is Josh Johnson, superintendent of Valley City Public Schools. I'm testifying this morning in support of House Bill 1604 on behalf of my school district and the School Construction Coalition. The School Construction Coalition was created by a group of educators in North Dakota as a grassroots effort to propose legislative action addressing facility needs in our k-12 public school districts. We believe this bill addresses at least two of our four recommendations that were presented by the coalition in the interim to the School Funding Task Force.

Education, as we know, is a cornerstone of our state's foundation. Throughout the past two years, the school construction coalition has conducted surveys and research related to school facilities and state funding. We have identified a significant and growing facility problem in many public schools across North Dakota. Regardless of school size, small to big, rural to urban, a majority of our 166 school districts are currently faced with critical facility needs. From aging and deteriorating school buildings to others bursting at the seams due to rapid enrollment increases, all school districts (and more than 110,000 students) would benefit from the proposals in House Bill 1604.

In the past few years, many school districts have unsuccessfully proposed facility solutions to their communities or have had an actual failed school construction referendum. A majority of these failures can be attributed to the rising cost of construction, inflationary impacts on voters, debt limits, or just simply the significant tax impacts of a successful referendum on our taxpayers. Could state funding for school construction become a new form of property tax relief in North Dakota? In the next few months, Valley City Public Schools will likely be calling for a \$40 million-dollar referendum vote in our school district. This proposal will seek to replace our 1919 high school which has additions from the 40's, 50's, and 70's. The old building is not only showing its age but more importantly its inability to meet our student needs in 2025. The anticipated problem we are facing and not unlike those faced in other school districts in North Dakota is the significant tax impact that will burden our voters. A successful vote of \$40 million will create an estimated tax increase of \$300 per year on a \$100,000 residential property. In recent failed referendums, voters have told school districts this is just simply too much money to ask from taxpayers. Please consider House Bill 1604 as a new form of property tax relief for the taxpayers and voters of North Dakota and also a means to improve the critical infrastructure of our k-12 school districts.

On behalf of Valley City Public Schools and our School Construction Coalition, please consider a do pass recommendation for House Bill 1604. The time is now for the state of North Dakota to provide state funding for school facilities and ensure that these critical cornerstones of education are reinforced through renovation or added new for both the current and future generations of k-12 public school students in North Dakota.

Thank you for hearing this bill and considering a do pass recommendation on HB 1604. I will stand for questions from the committee.

Sincerely,

Josh Johnson  
Superintendent Valley City Public Schools  
School Construction Coalition Executive Team Member