

Testimony to the North Dakota Legislature

In Support of SB 2241

March 11, 2025

Introduction

Dear Chairman Heinert and Members of the House Education Committee, my name is Jacob Francom, and I am the founding principal of North Idaho Classical Academy, a public charter school in Bonners Ferry, Idaho. I have been an administrator for twenty years the last ten of which I was a district superintendent and also have had the honor of being Montana's High School Principal of the Year. I have visited schools as a lead accreditor throughout the United States and in more than a dozen countries. It is an honor to speak with you today about the tremendous potential and proven benefits of charter schools, and how schools like North Idaho Classical Academy are transforming education and communities.

I'm here today in support of Senate Bill 2241.

I'd like to talk a little about North Idaho Classical Academy in Bonners Ferry, the very top of the state.

- North Idaho Classical Academy's approach to education is rooted in timeless principles and is not a new concept. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 affirmed that, "*Morality and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.*" Reflecting this vision, our school's mission is to shape good citizens by fostering both knowledge and virtue. This approach has proven to resonate deeply with families in rural areas and across the nation.
- The school will be the first public charter school in the county located in the rural community of Bonners Ferry, set to open in 2026.
- The school is a candidate member of the Hillsdale K-12 School Initiative.
- Approximately 40% of students will qualify for Title I services.
- More than 20% are expected to use special education services.
- The local district provides 100% free breakfast and lunch, and our charter school expects to do the same.
- The school will serve students from the local Native American tribe.
- Over 60% of expected enrollees are currently homeschooled.
- The school will generate an estimated \$5 million in annual economic benefits for the local community.

- The school has been awarded a \$2 million federal Charter School Program grant and a \$1.54 million grant from the J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Family Foundation to get the school up and running.

Benefits of Charter Schools that we will use in the North Idaho Classical School

- Charter schools allow communities to design schools that meet their unique needs while maintaining the high standards of public education.
- Charter schools empower parents to choose the best fit for their children's education. This is particularly important in rural areas, where families often have limited educational options.
- Charter schools are held to rigorous accountability standards by both state authorizers and the communities they serve. In Idaho, we've seen charter schools consistently outperform statewide averages in academic achievement, particularly in math and reading.
- Charter schools bring more than education to a community—they bring opportunities. North Idaho Classical Academy is located in a small town, yet it will become a hub of activity and collaboration. We will partner with local businesses, we will partner with the local school district, we will partner with local private schools, we will provide community access to our facilities, we will continue to partner with community leaders and organizations and serve as a catalyst for development in our area. Charter schools like ours strengthen communities, economically and socially.

Closing

Fears that charter schools in rural areas won't work are baseless, because if parents and community members don't want a school, it simply won't happen. Public charter schools are community driven, like our school.

North Idaho Classical Academy exists because families wanted more for their children—a place where their values and aspirations are reflected in the education they receive. Charter schools have the unique ability to meet those needs while remaining accountable to their communities and to the state.

I encourage you to embrace the potential of charter schools in North Dakota, recognizing that every child deserves access to an excellent education, and that parents should have a meaningful choice in how their children are educated.