



March 11, 2025

House Education Committee
Coteau AB
600 East Boulevard Avenue
Bismarck, ND 58505

Subject: In support of SB 2241

Chairman Heinert and House Education Committee Members,

My name is Catrin Wigfall, and I am a policy fellow at American Experiment North Dakota. I am writing today in support of SB 2241.

As a former public charter school teacher, I experienced first-hand the numerous academic, social-emotional, and extra-curricular opportunities my Title I charter school provided the students and families it served. A number of my students transferred from their neighborhood public schools to this charter school, recognizing that while the traditional public school setting worked for others it wasn't the right fit for their individual educational needs. Not only did they find a new learning environment that challenged them academically, but one that invested in guiding and shaping their growth as a whole person. They found new ways to excel, and I am so thankful they live in a state (Arizona) where their education journey was not confined by traditional norms.

North Dakota has the opportunity to join the majority of states providing families a variety of public school options from which they can actively shape their children's education.

Addressing Accountability Concerns

Under SB 2241, charter schools would be held accountable in a number of ways — by the superintendent of public instruction, by a governing board, by those who elect or select the members of the governing board, and by the parents who can withdraw their children if the school does not perform to their standards.

Charter schools are subject to the same public school approval requirements already required in North Dakota Century Code and are subject to federal laws related to education. There are also multiple layers of oversight within charter school application requirements, charter performance agreements, annual evaluations, and renewal decisions.



Perhaps most noteworthy is the fact that a charter agreement can be revoked for failure to “meet or make sufficient progress toward the performance expectations under the charter performance agreement” – how many traditional public schools are held to this same level of accountability?

Addressing Rural Concerns

While rural areas may currently have limited school options available, creating new learning environments expands the educational opportunities available to rural families without hurting existing options. There is simply no empirical evidence to support the fear that rural schools would be harmed under additional education options, and numerous states have had charter school laws in place for decades. Eight of the top 10 most rural states, as measured by the 2020 U.S. Census rural population share, also have charter school laws: Maine, West Virginia, Mississippi, Montana, Arkansas, Alabama, New Hampshire, and Kentucky. North Dakota at number 11 does not.

Providing More Flexibility

In exchange for a performance agreement with accountability measures and oversight, charter schools are granted more flexibility than traditional public schools, allowing them to tailor their programming, curriculum, academic focus, discipline policies, and other matters in a more decentralized way. One size cannot fit all, and we must not try to force that.

It is time for North Dakota to embrace individualized, decentralized learning models fit for today’s era, and creating a charter school law is one policy that evolves education from a one-dimensional path to a multi-faceted journey. I respectfully ask for a “Do Pass” on SB 2241.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Catrin Wigfall".

Catrin Wigfall
Policy Fellow
American Experiment North Dakota