

Testimony in Opposition to Senate Bill 2400

Chairperson and members of the committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to present my testimony today. I am here to express my strong opposition to Senate Bill 2400, which seeks to establish an Education Savings Account (ESA) program in North Dakota.

While I recognize the desire to offer more educational choices for families, I have several concerns regarding the potential negative impacts this bill could have on North Dakota's public education system and the broader educational landscape in our state. The creation of this new program would have far-reaching consequences that need to be carefully considered.

1. Diverting Funds from Public Schools:

One of my primary concerns with Senate Bill 2400 is the potential diversion of funds from public schools to private education savings accounts. Public schools serve the vast majority of North Dakota students, with approximately 93% of our student population enrolled in public education. Diverting public dollars into an ESA program would reduce the funding available to public schools that are already underfunded and facing numerous challenges. These schools serve students from all backgrounds, including those with disabilities, English learners, and those from low-income families. Reducing the funding for public schools could lead to increased class sizes, fewer resources, and a diminished quality of education for the majority of students who rely on public schools.

2. Lack of Accountability and Oversight:

Another significant concern is the lack of oversight and accountability in how ESA funds would be used. Senate Bill 2400 allows for the transfer of public funds into private accounts, but it does not establish sufficient measures to ensure these funds are used exclusively for educational purposes. Without clear and rigorous oversight, there is a risk that these funds could be misused or diverted toward non-educational expenses, which would undermine the intent of the program. Additionally, without proper accountability, there could be a lack of transparency in how taxpayer dollars are being spent, which raises concerns about public trust in the management of educational funds.

3. Potential Inequities for Low-Income Families:

While the bill is designed to offer greater educational choices, in practice, it could disproportionately benefit wealthier families who have the means to supplement ESA funds for private school tuition, tutoring, or other educational services. For lower-income families, the amount available through the ESA program may not be sufficient to cover private school tuition or other educational expenses. As a result, this program could exacerbate existing inequities in our education system, benefiting those who are already financially advantaged while leaving behind those who are most in need of additional support.

4. Negative Impact on Students with Disabilities:

The bill also raises concerns for students with disabilities. Public schools are required to provide services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), ensuring that students with special needs receive the appropriate support and services they need to succeed. However, the ESA

program, as proposed in Senate Bill 2400, could lead to these students being placed in private schools or alternative educational settings that may not be equipped to provide the same level of specialized support required by federal law. This could result in the unintended consequence of undermining the educational rights of students with disabilities, particularly if private institutions or homeschooling options are not bound by the same regulations and standards as public schools.

5. No Proven Guarantee of Better Educational Outcomes:

Advocates for the ESA program often argue that it will lead to better educational outcomes by providing more choice. However, research on similar programs in other states has yielded mixed results. While some families may benefit from increased educational options, there is no conclusive evidence to suggest that ESAs as a whole lead to improved academic performance. In fact, some studies have shown that ESAs do not lead to significantly better outcomes for students, and the diversion of funds away from public schools could create greater disparities within the education system.

6. Focus on Strengthening Public Education:

Instead of diverting resources away from public schools, we should focus on strengthening and equitably funding our public education system. Public schools play a crucial role in ensuring that all students, regardless of their background, have access to a high-quality education. By improving resources, supporting teachers, and ensuring equal opportunities for all students, we can better meet the needs of all North Dakota students, rather than creating a system that benefits only a select few.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, Senate Bill 2400 poses significant risks to the future of public education in North Dakota. Diverting funds from public schools to private education savings accounts could exacerbate inequalities, weaken public education, and undermine the rights of students with disabilities. The bill lacks sufficient accountability and oversight to ensure that taxpayer dollars are being used effectively, and there is no solid evidence to support that ESAs will lead to better educational outcomes.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge the committee to reconsider Senate Bill 2400 and explore alternative ways to improve education in North Dakota without undermining the vital role of public schools.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Shelby Hildenbrand

1072 Lindsey Ln

Grand Forks, ND 58201

701-833-0429

shelby.hildenbrand@gmail.com