

To the Representatives of the House Education Committee,

My name is Ashley Gaschk, and I'm a North Dakota resident and public middle school teacher. Last month, I observed as this committee heard testimony on higher education issues, after which you graciously took time to meet with other educators and state employees. As you consider **SB 2400, I urge a 'Do Not Pass'** due to its lack of accountability, limited access to quality services, and redundancy of resources.

### **Lack of accountability**

During my visit last month, several representatives emphasized that ESA funding “comes from the General fund, not the Education fund.” The distinction is important, but at the end of the day, the general fund is made of public dollars, which should not be used to pay for “tuition and fees at a nonpublic school” or a “nonpublic online education program.” North Dakotans’ tax dollars should not fund schools that can hand-pick their student body, do not follow DPI standards, and that avoid transparency in their budgets and board meetings. The idea that this chamber, which voted 88-2 to create our own ND DOGE, would approve a bill without oversight of how public dollars are spent is baffling.

### **Limited access to quality services**

Another issue is that the vast majority of North Dakota’s families don’t live close enough to a private school for it to be a realistic option. For them, ESAs could theoretically be used for tutoring, educational therapy, or mental health assistance... but North Dakota doesn’t have a surplus of underemployed tutors, therapists, or counselors. Instead, we’re likely to see out-of-state companies flood the ESA marketplace with unregulated services. I hope you will consider the 'efficiency' of spending over \$11 million per year subsidizing vendors who will flock to the marketplace once they see how much public money is up for grabs.

I respect Senator Axtman’s dedication to creating a ‘universal’ ESA program that benefits both private- and public-school students, but I cannot overstate my fear that the public-school students who could benefit the most from extra educational services will be the least likely to receive them. Working at a Title I school, I know firsthand that for some families, getting their child to school every day, with clean clothes and a full stomach, is a victory. These are not people who have the time, resources, or connections to navigate an ESA marketplace, research providers, and determine the best services for their child, especially when benefits for public-school students run out at the \$500 mark. Families with the most time and know-how will have the easiest path to these funds, while those who need them most will be left behind.

### **Redundancy of Resources**

Public schools already provide nearly all the services ESAs claim to cover, including educational therapy, mental health assistance, tutoring, textbooks, career and technical education, vocational and life skill courses, special education services, standardized tests, and subsidized meals—often at no cost to families. Many private-school students rely on public districts when their own schools lack special ed resources, or when those students are no longer welcome because their needs exceed what their former school was willing to support.

Today, North Dakota's public schools educate more than 90% of our state's students—yet this bill directs millions of public dollars to private institutions with little oversight. If the 69th Legislative Assembly is truly willing to invest in our students' education, I urge you to do so in a way that ensures accountability, equity, and efficiency.