

Opposing Testimony Against Senate Bill No. 2400: Public Funds for Private Schools

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As a parent and a strong advocate for public education in North Dakota, I stand in firm opposition to Senate Bill No. 2400. This bill proposes diverting public funds to private schools through an Education Savings Account (ESA) program. While proponents argue that this increases school choice, the reality is that it undermines the foundational principles of public education, disproportionately benefits higher-income families, and fails to ensure accountability for taxpayer dollars.

Public Funds Should Prioritize Public Schools

The proposed bill allocates \$3 million from the general fund for the biennium to subsidize private school tuition and related educational expenses. However, this funding would be better spent improving the 91% of North Dakota students who attend public schools. Public schools serve every child, including those with disabilities, behavioral challenges, and economic hardships, unlike private schools, which can selectively admit and expel students.

North Dakota public schools have been struggling with underfunding, teacher shortages, and infrastructure needs. A redirection of funds to private schools only exacerbates these challenges. Instead of shifting resources away, the legislature should focus on fully funding public education to ensure every student has access to quality teachers, updated technology, and necessary support services.

Private School Funding Benefits the Privileged, Not the Neediest

One of the most misleading aspects of this bill is the claim that it will help low-income families. However, the bill provides up to \$4,000 per student for households earning 300% of the federal poverty level and \$2,500 for those earning up to 500%. That means a family of four earning \$150,000 per year would still qualify for assistance—hardly a low-income bracket.

Meanwhile, the average private school tuition in North Dakota is between \$7,000 and \$10,000 per year. Even with an ESA, low-income families would still struggle to afford tuition, transportation, and additional fees. This bill disproportionately benefits middle- and upper-income families who already have the means to send their children to private schools while failing to provide real solutions for struggling students in underfunded public schools.

Lack of Accountability for Taxpayer Dollars

Public schools are held to rigorous academic and financial accountability standards, including standardized testing, teacher certification, and financial transparency. Private schools, however, are not subject to the same oversight.

The bill allows private schools to receive public funds but does not require them to meet state curriculum standards.

Private schools are not required to accept all students, meaning students with disabilities, behavioral challenges, or lower academic performance may be turned away.

Unlike public schools, private schools are not required to publicly report how they spend taxpayer dollars.

This lack of accountability creates opportunities for waste, fraud, and misuse of funds, diverting money away from the students who need it most.

Negative Impact on Rural Communities

North Dakota is a rural state, and the majority of students do not have access to a private school within reasonable distance. Redirecting funds to private education primarily benefits families in urban areas, leaving rural students behind. Public schools are the heart of rural communities, and pulling resources away from them could lead to further school closures and declining opportunities for local students.

Conclusion: Strengthen Public Schools Instead

Instead of diverting taxpayer dollars to unaccountable private institutions, we should:

Fully fund public education to ensure every child, regardless of location or background, has access to quality education.

Invest in teacher retention and recruitment to address ongoing shortages.

Expand support services for special education, mental health, and career-readiness programs.

Improve rural school funding to ensure that students in small communities have the same opportunities as those in larger cities.

For these reasons, I strongly urge the opposition of Senate Bill No. 2400 and instead focus on policies that strengthen, rather than weaken, North Dakota's public education system.

Thank you.

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