

Dear Chairman Heinert & Esteemed Members of the House Education Committee:

Thank you for accepting my testimony in support of SB 2400 related to the establishment of an Education Savings Account (ESA) program in North Dakota. My name is Marya Skaare, I am a resident of District 39, the mother of college- and school-age children, and the president of one of the non-profit, non-public school systems in Dickinson, ND. You may recall that during the last Legislative session, a school choice bill was passed for the first time ever in both the ND House and Senate, only to be vetoed when it hit the governor's desk with then Governor Burgum stating, "it falls short of meaningfully enhancing school choice." Your work this session has been encouraging, with the introduction of six school choice bills aimed to make those meaningful enhancements to school choice in our state. With the field now narrowed to two—one passed by each the House and the Senate—the important work of each chamber now hearing, studying, and considering the merits of their counterpart's bill begins. During his State of the State address, now governor Armstrong said, *"Our budget will support Education Savings Accounts – funding set aside for each student to direct toward services or tuition across our public, nonpublic or homeschool settings. The money follows the student, not the school, ensuring every student has the tools they need to prepare for college, a career or the military,"* giving nod to our readiness as a state for a meaningful school choice program. I am confident that of the two bills, the right solution...the meaningful solution...to school choice in North Dakota will emerge.

As you are aware, in January President Trump signed an executive order that aims to transform our nation's education system by promoting educational freedom through school choice. While the full impact of this order remains to be seen, since then Wyoming, Idaho and Tennessee have already enacted new school choice programs and a universal school choice bill in the Texas legislature passed the Senate and is being considered in their House. Currently, North Dakota is the only state without either public charter schools or a non-public school choice program. At the start of this legislative session, 68 choice programs operated in 33 states plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. It is my hope that North Dakota will join the list of states enacting meaningful school choice programs that are well-positioned in the educational freedom landscape.

It is important to note, passage of legislation supporting choice in education is not a taking from public schools, it is a demonstration of our State's financial commitment to ALL North Dakota students—regardless of school affiliation. Currently, non-public schools save the State of North Dakota approximately \$11,000 per student not educated in the public schools—this equates to a collective impact on the State of over \$88 million dollars in annual savings. This is an amount that the state would otherwise be obligated to provide if not for the existence of nonpublic school options. It is an amount that the state would need to be prepared to spend if our nonpublic schools closed their doors. I say this not because I believe school choice is about systems, but rather to emphasize that school choice is about students and our state's commitment to students—regardless of their system of choice. Reading SB 2400, you will see this bill is not about systems, it is about students. It is about expanding education opportunity for ALL North Dakota students. With broad eligibility and a range of qualifying education expenses, SB 2400's unique approach to an ESA program empowers parents to make important decisions about the education of their children by unlocking access to education opportunities with meaningful support from the state. Like Governor Armstrong said, *"funding set aside for each student to direct toward services or tuition across our public, nonpublic or homeschool settings. The money follows the student, not the school..."*

Representatives, I urge you to vote in favor of meaningful school choice with the passage of SB 2400, demonstrating to EVERY North Dakota student that our state values EVERY North Dakota student and that education opportunity is not reserved for one type of student.

Thank you for your service to the State of North Dakota and your time spent on HB 1540 and SB 2400 this session.