

Good morning, Chairman Heinert and members of the House Education Committee. My name is Brenda Wiesner. I am a registered nurse, a U.S. Air Force Veteran, and a mother to a dynamic 8-year-old with special needs. I appreciate the opportunity to speak in support of SB 2400. I would also like to thank Senator Axtman for sharing a copy of this important legislation with me.

SB 2400 establishes an education savings account (ESA) for K-12 students in North Dakota. Eligible students could utilize these funds for qualified educational expenses to expand their educational opportunities no matter where they choose to learn. I rise today to share how ESAs could benefit families of children and youth with disabilities. Education is important for the future of our state. It drives economic growth, enhances community well-being, and prepares future generations for success. School choice initiatives such as SB 2400 can help bridge gaps in access to educational supports and interventions, particularly for students whose behavioral and academic requirements surpass available resources.

My daughter, Quinn, is a complex child diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Since the age of three, she has required extensive support, including speech therapy, occupational therapy, and applied behavior analysis (ABA) therapy. She completed preschool and first grade in the West Fargo School District. Midway through second grade, we had exhausted accommodations in less restrictive environments, and Quinn was assigned to a specialized learning center (SLC). Despite the more controlled environment, Quinn was unable to make measurable academic gains, and her problem behavior continued to escalate, creating a risk to herself and others.

Our family began to explore alternative educational options. We enrolled Quinn in Full Circle Academy (FCA) in August 2023. A nonprofit 501(c)(3), FCA is a private school recognized by the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction. Founded in 2020, FCA serves K-5 special needs children who require individualized support for their behavioral and academic needs. In addition to academic ABA, Quinn receives behavior rehabilitation services, skilled occupational therapy, and speech therapy. Quinn's special education teacher (SPED-T) and her Board-Certified Behavioral Analyst (BCBA) work together to conduct functional behavior assessments to identify the underlying causes of Quinn's problem behaviors. Together, they create an individualized behavior intervention plan (BIP) that outlines strategies and techniques to address and reduce problem behaviors, promote positive behavior, and enhance learning outcomes.

The differences in behavioral and academic support in public versus private settings may appear subtle, but they have profoundly impacted our family. We have seen a significant reduction in problem behaviors, and Quinn is demonstrating measurable academic gains. We are optimistic that Quinn will be able to reintegrate into public education.

SB 2400 provides families with additional funds to help them access important services and support for their learners with special needs. It improves access to services for learners in highly rural areas, expanding educational opportunities across the state while providing accountability through a controlled online marketplace.

In full transparency, as presented, this Bill would not make a significant financial difference for our family due to the means-testing component. The ESA funding would cover less than 7% of our annual FCA tuition expenses. I urge the Committee to consider means-testing exemptions in future legislation for families of special needs children. Senate Bill No. 2400 may not be a perfect solution, but it represents a vital step forward for special needs students across our state. I urge you to consider supporting this bill.

Thank you for your time. I welcome any questions you may have.

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