



Kidder County Public School District#1

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Oppositional Testimony on Senate Bill 2400: Education Savings Accounts (ESAs)

My name is Rick Diegel and I am the superintendent of schools at the Kidder County School District in Steele, North Dakota. This is my 38th year in education, and my 25 year as a superintendent. This testimony is to voice my strong opposition to Senate Bill 2400, which proposes establishing Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) in North Dakota.

As a school leader, I see firsthand how every dollar impacts our students, teachers, and community. While the idea of giving families more educational choices might sound appealing, the reality is that this bill threatens the quality and stability of our public schools—especially in rural areas like Kidder County.

Though this bill would provide to both public and private school students, the greatest benefit will be realized by families paying tuition to a private school, especially with the amount increasing from \$500 to possibly \$3500 for private school payment, though that amount can never increase for a public-school student.

Public schools are held to high standards. We're accountable to the community, the state, and most importantly, to our students. We follow strict guidelines for curriculum, teacher certification, and student performance. Through various laws this body has created, we live in a world where transparency occurs every day. However, SB 2400 only requires that students participate in the state assessment. Though these are important tests, that alone does not provide the transparency that our public expects. These schools still are not required to have open records, open meetings, public audits or accept all students. Public school also participate in the state assessment, along with following all other transparency rules.

In reading the bill, it lists 13 allowable way spend this government subsidy. However, in my 38-year career, I don't know that I've had any patrons tell me that the school should pay for their children's therapist bills, tutoring bills, mental health assistance, medical appointments or educational camps or tuition to attend nonpublic schools. However, what they have told me more times than I can count is that their taxes are too high. However, here we are debating SB 2400 that has a fiscal note of \$61 million, while not providing any property tax relief for Ag land and farmers.

\$61 million additional money in the foundation aid formula would equal about 1½% increase to the per pupil aide payment. A 1 ½ % increase would equal nearly 3 mills that I could lower my local levy. If the legislature isn't going to provide rural farmers with property tax relief, than put this \$61 million in the funding formula and let me give them some property tax relief.

Someone is going to have to explain to me how we can consider providing \$61 million in ESA's and not property tax relief to our farmers, because that simply doesn't make sense to me.

Please do the right thing and vote give SB 2400 a do not pass recommendation. Thank you and I will stand for any questions.