

March 17, 2025

Representative Pat Heinert, Chairman
Members of the North Dakota House Education Committee

Subject: Testimonial Support of Amendment to Senate Bill 2400 to include Tribal Schools

My name is Jackie Thompson. I am the Superintendent of the Tate Topa Tribal School, located in Fort Totten, North Dakota. I provide this testimony to that there be consideration to amend language in SB 2400 to clearly assure qualification of tribal grant schools like Tate Topa as participating schools. This amendment is critical for the continued growth and independence of our educational institution, while aligning with the values of self-determination and sovereignty that are foundational to our tribe.

Tate Topa Tribal School, a non-public school, has long served as a place of learning that respects and reflects our culture, language, and values. As a tribal school receiving funding from the U.S. Department of the Interior, rather than the U.S. Department of Education, our funding structure is rooted in the trust responsibility that the U.S. government holds toward tribes. This trust acknowledges our inherent right to self-governance, which includes the right to operate our educational institutions.

Our tribe has chosen to manage its own education system, developing a curriculum that not only meets educational standards but also preserves and promotes our cultural heritage. This decision aligns with the principle of self-determination, which allows tribes administer their own educational systems. We recognize the need for standards and regulations, and we adhere to those requirements as part of our commitment to maintaining a high-quality education while exercising our sovereignty.

Under the current wording of Senate Bill 2400, we understand Tate Topa Tribal School would be classified as a "participating school" due to its status as a non-public institution. However, we consider it is essential for the bill to explicitly include tribal grant schools such as ours, particularly for those tribal schools wishing to remain independent of the state's Century Code laws. Our school does not wish to operate as or in conjunction with a public school at this time. We are committed to serve the unique needs of our students while guided by our tribal values and governed under our tribe's leadership.

Assuring tribal schools as participating schools in the Education Savings Account (ESA) program would allow us opportunity to participate, should we choose, without compromising our autonomy or undermining the principles of tribal sovereignty. We envision access to resources and opportunities otherwise unavailable to us, ensuring that our students receive the best possible education for their needs.

We urge the North Dakota State House Education Committee to amend Senate Bill 2400 to clearly include tribal grant schools like Tate Topa, so we can continue to fulfill our mission on our terms in providing an education that honors our heritage and prepares our students for the future.

Thank you for your time and consideration. We are confident that the passage of SB 2400 with the clarity that tribal schools qualify in this important bill will contribute to the continued success and self-determination of the Spirit Lake Nation – Mni Wakan Oyate.

Jackie Thompson, Superintendent
Tate Topa Tribal School
Ft. Totten, North Dakota