



Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, thank you for this opportunity to speak today about educational choice. My name is Aaron Gillham, Policy and Advocacy Director at EdChoice. For those less familiar, EdChoice was founded in 1996 by the free-market economist Milton Friedman and his wife Rose because they believed competition in the education space was vital to improving the outcomes of students in every type of community across the country. They also believed that parental choice was core to the principle of ensuring that outcome.

EdChoice has been working in the school choice space for almost 30 years, and we are nationally known for our in-depth research, polling, and statistics on topics surrounding education freedom.

I come here today to share some of our analysis on school choice in North Dakota, as we realize this important piece of legislation has the potential to change the lives of many families in the Peace Garden State.

Currently, **34 states, plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico**, have enacted some kind of school choice program, and many states like Ohio, Florida and Arizona have enacted multiple different programs operating side by side. Last year we hit a milestone as a nation, with the number of students utilizing private school choice programs surpassing **1.2 million**. Furthermore, with the Tennessee legislature passing a universal ESA program during their January special session, as well as Idaho and Wyoming earlier this month, there will now be **16 states** with school choice programs on the books that offer universal eligibility.

At EdChoice, we believe that allowing all families to choose the type of education that best matches their values and their educational needs is a critical component that has been lacking in American k-12 education. Families, especially hard working North Dakota families, shouldn't have to pay twice, once in taxes and once in tuition, just to access an education that works best for their children.

Moreover, the results of the empirical, gold standard studies on the outcomes of school choice programs are clear. There have been a total of **188** individual studies to date on the effects of choice programs, examining everything from educational attainment, to civic values, to parent satisfaction, and, of course, the financial effects on a state. The overwhelming number, **84%** of these studies, show positive outcomes, with another **10%** indicating neutral results. That's 94% of the studies showing a positive or neutral result. Last time I checked, 94% was an A, bordering on an A+.



Regarding **S.B. 2400**, which is specifically being considered today, we applaud many of the bill's features, including the wide array of approved expenses and the universal eligibility for non-public students. And, while we appreciate the Senate's willingness to fund families directly, we believe it is important that the amount provided by an Education Savings Account be large enough to have a transformative impact for students.

Across the various school choice programs that exist nationwide, the average choice program spending per pupil is just over **\$6,000** while the average K-12 per pupil spending in district schools is just over **\$17,000**. This is far above the structure of **S.B. 2400** which only allows some students to receive **\$500** annually at the low end. Of course, any help for families is important, but it is critical that school choice programs offer meaningful amounts so that families can access as many options as possible. Reducing or removing the financial barriers to allow families to seek out those options is key to these programs and their success.

Additionally, different students thrive in different types of educational environments, which means a one-size-fits all system doesn't work for all children. This is definitely the case when it comes to testing and accountability. States that have enacted ESAs across America recognize this need to be flexible. Only 2 out of the 15 states with ESA programs require state testing, while eight states allow for nationally norm-referenced testing and five states require no testing. That means the vast majority of states allow for testing flexibility, and while we understand the importance of knowing how kids are doing, mandating a state test for the ESA in North Dakota would be out of sync with the rest of the country. Parents, after all, are the ultimate arbiters of accountability, and Education Savings Accounts allow them the ability to make the choices that are best for their children.

And that's what this is really all about, giving families the ability to choose what's right for them and their children.



To learn about ESA programs, we would invite you to check out our website, edchoice.org, to see our research, as well as access to our publications for download.

Thank you very much for the time to comment today on this important legislation.

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*“Advancing educational freedom and choice for all
as a pathway to successful lives and a stronger society.”*