

What if I don't have a choice?

Hello Chairman Beard and committee members. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in opposition of HB 1540. My name is Sheila Peterson, I am a physical education teacher at Wachter Middle School in Bismarck, the 2024 North Dakota State Teacher of the Year, and **the parent of a child who didn't have a choice.**

In 2013, when my daughter was 2.5 years old, she got kicked out of three daycares in a month. The last one happened to be the same day I was accepting my Wachter Middle School Teacher of the Year award. On that day I got a call to come pick her up at 2:30. When I arrived, my daughter was standing on top of a table in tears, the workers circled her also in tears, one said to me, "Something is wrong with her, she cannot come back here." At this point, I took my daughter to my award ceremony, stood in front of my colleagues with a 60-pound baby giant asleep in my arms, as she had been exhausted by the stress of her day. You may wonder, what did I say in my acceptance speech? The speech was a simple tearful three words, "I NEED HELP." I said, "I apologize, I can no longer deliver a speech today, I thank you all for this amazing honor, but I need new daycare tomorrow."

As I searched for a new place for my daughter, I thought Montessori and private school might be the best option for her pre-schooling. I called and left three very detailed messages at the local private schools that offered early childhood and did not even receive a response. I did get one Montessori to call me back and let us in. I paid the deposit and the first two months tuition in advance because I knew she was going to be a challenging student. By noon of her first day, I received a call stating I needed to pick her up, it wasn't going to work out because the parents who send their kids there have high expectations, and my daughter was not going to work with her other clientele. She said she couldn't have parents calling and upset. My daughter was kicked out of her pre-school, and it wasn't up to us. In other words, **we did not have a choice.**

Thankfully, I also reached out to our public education system, who took my phone call and directed me to early intervention screening. My daughter was given the opportunity to attend her elementary school in the early childhood classroom. Each day, I waited for the dreaded phone call telling me she "no longer worked with their clientele," but it never came. My daughter was given her Autism diagnosis at the age of 2.5, at her school she was given access to 2 instructional aides at times, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and speech therapy. When she received this diagnosis, I remember worrying about a million things. I asked myself the following questions:

"Will she ever learn to tie her shoes?" She would learn.

"Would she ever learn her letters of the alphabet and their sounds?" She would learn.

"Would she ever learn to read?" She would learn.

"Would she ever go a day without having a meltdown?" She would be taught self-regulation, and she would learn. Not only that, she would win one of four school citizenship awards.

"Would she ever not have to be followed around by an aide all day?" She would become independent.

"Would she ever understand her math and not need remedial math?" She would take Algebra 1 in high school.

"Would she ever be on the honor roll?" She is.

"Would she ever win a Varsity letter?" She has 2.

"Would she ever get her permit?" She has.

"Would she ever compete at state?" She has. The list goes on and on.

This list is here because of the public educators and education support professionals that never gave up on my child. You see, in the beginning she never had a choice, **public school gave her that choice.**

What I'm getting at is this: **are we truly proposing choice for every child in North Dakota? My family didn't have a choice.** I cannot help but wonder how the money being proposed to fund private school tuition could instead be used to benefit every child in North Dakota, children like my daughter. How much more successful would North Dakota's students be if every child had the opportunity to receive a quality early childhood public education, not just the kids private schools are willing to accept. Imagine if the 90% of North Dakota students that attend public schools entered kindergarten ready to learn on day one. As a parent and an educator, I think there are plenty of ways we can improve education in North Dakota. But this isn't it.

For these reasons, I am asking for a DO NOT PASS recommendation on HB 1540. I thank you all for your service to the citizens of this great state that I have been so proud to represent this past year, and I'm happy to answer any questions you might have.