

Dear Chairman Heinert, Chairman Beard and Members of the Education Committee,

As a dedicated educator with over two decades of experience in the classroom, I am writing in opposition to HB1540 that would divert public funds to private and religious schools. While I support families having educational choices, I believe that public tax dollars should remain within the public school system, where they serve all students equitably and transparently.

Voucher programs present several serious concerns. As you know, public schools are already underfunded, and vouchers only make the problem worse by redirecting taxpayer dollars away from the students who need them most. When funding is siphoned from public schools, it leads to larger class sizes, fewer resources, and the elimination of crucial programs that benefit all children, especially those in rural and high-need communities. How equitable would it be for the students that live far away from a private school?

Vouchers often do not cover the full cost of private school tuition, meaning they primarily benefit families who can already afford private education. This leaves behind many low-income students who rely on strong public schools to receive a quality education. I once heard vouchers called “welfare for the wealthy” and I couldn't agree more. Instead of funding private schools, we should focus on improving and strengthening public schools for **all** students, no matter what their tax bracket is.

Lastly, public schools are required by law to provide services and accommodations to students with disabilities under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Private schools, however, can deny admission to students with special needs or fail to provide necessary services, leaving some of our most vulnerable students without adequate support. I have MANY students every year that I know would not be accepted into a private school and/or would be asked to leave after a very short duration. Public schools don't have that luxury of hand selecting their students even though we are often not equipped with the resources needed to help them either. As a former special education teacher, I can tell you that the burn out rate is already extremely high in this particular position (our district currently has almost 20 paraprofessional openings that are not filled and those classrooms are working everyday short staffed). Can you imagine what it would be like if there were even less resources?

Every day, I see firsthand the impact of these policy decisions on our children's futures. If we truly value education, we must invest in our public schools rather than weaken them. I urge you to do what's right for public education by voting **NO** on HB1540.

I appreciate your time and consideration on this important issue. I look forward to your response and hope to see your commitment to strengthening public education.

Sincerely,

Kristi Reinke; 2021 North Dakota Teacher of the Year