

Dear Senate Education Committee,

My name is Bethany Gehrtz, a resident of Devils Lake. I am a third grade teacher at Prairie View Elementary, but this is my personal testimony and I want to be very clear that I am not speaking on Devils Lake Public School's behalf.

I am going to strongly urge you to vote NO on HB 1540. Allocating money into an Education Savings Account for private school and home school students is not the right use for taxpayer dollars. Public money should not be used for private purposes.

As a parent, I absolutely believe that parents should have the right to choose what education system works best for their children and their family. If my husband and I make the choice to send our daughters to the local private school, we fully expect that we are on the hook for the entire bill because a free and appropriate education is provided through the taxes we, and the rest of the state, pay.

As a teacher, I see how underfunded the public school systems are. The proposed increase to the K-12 funding is significantly behind where it should be. The school system, like any institution, has challenges and things that could be better. There's a saying, "show me where you spend your money and I will show you your priorities." You have the opportunity to invest in families and students in this state to make it a place where people want to stay. Show the people of North Dakota that your priorities are in giving every single child a place where they can succeed and make the appropriate investment.

I have sat and listened in on committees and the comment has been made that voucher programs will not pull money from public education. I'll give you two scenarios that it absolutely pulls from public education.

1. If a parent pulls their child out of public school, the per pupil payment doesn't end up in the school system. That's not a huge deal when you have one or two, but with enough of them, you have enough money being pulled for a teacher's salary. Or a new curriculum. Or a lot of supplies for kids who don't show up with any. It also pulls any money that could be used to cover unpaid lunch bills at the end of the year since that account cannot be left negative.

People who support vouchers have long pointed out that private school families have a right to send their kids to public school at the taxpayer's expense but they don't. Providing them with a smaller amount of taxpayer money is a net cost savings for the public because less money is being spent on private education than public education. This logic is similar to arguing that the public should help pay for driver's gas because if they didn't drive, they may use public transportation instead, which would be a cost to taxpayers. That's not how this works. Right now zero public dollars are being spent on private students. Why would you add to that? Parents made that decision knowing the financial implications.

2. I have heard that the money for this program will come from the general fund. IF it is possible to pull money to cover private school vouchers, how can't that same amount of money be spent investing more into public education. That same money could have been used to fund the lunch

bills. You also need to be prepared that if the Department of Education is closed and the \$190 million dollars that comes from the federal government is no longer available, there needs to be money on standby to take care of the needs of our students. Just because the money is gone, doesn't mean the needs are gone. Our kids can't wait 2 more years for funding and our districts certainly can't afford to pick up the tab to continue services.

I want to leave you with one last thing to think about. The private school voucher scam is often referred to as "school choice," but it's not "school choice," it is "**the school's choice.**" You already know that by their very nature, private schools are selective of their clientele. They have no mandate to accept everyone and I have seen first hand kids with behavioral and severe learning needs being kicked out. Again, I am going to urge you to vote NO on HB 1540.

Thank you for your time and attention to this matter. Make the right choice for ALL of our kids and families.

Bethany Gehrtz,
Devils Lake, ND