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HB 1540 testimony — IN SUPPORT
Senate Education Committee
Bob Otterson, President, Oak Grove Lutheran School

Chairman Beard and Senators:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testify in support of House Bill 1540, a measure to create education savings accounts that benefit North Dakota students and families.

I ask you to consider pragmatism in your deliberations: Oak Grove and partner nonpublic schools provide options for students and families.

I am a teachers' kid, and I have invested my career in education, including 24 years in public higher education. Some of you may remember a movement 20-plus years ago, the Roundtable on Higher Education. It was built on the premise that North Dakota needed to retain its young citizens; the education sector was charged with preparing today's students to fill tomorrow's workforce needs, to address economic opportunities and threats, to provide care and well-being for children and an aging population, and to grow into leadership positions.

Today, we talk about school choice, and I still think about that charge around helping the young people of today find their places tomorrow. Oak Grove and our partner schools expand options for families, and we expand the pathways toward student success. All educators know that some students manage large environments; others flourish in smaller groups. Some students prefer many co-curricular options and extracurricular activities. Some students, in competitive classes, may focus on one or two activities. Meanwhile, students in smaller schools grow from sharing their talents across several pursuits. The state's private schools provide the right fits for some students and their families. That spectrum of options provides more breadth and depth for today's learners ... and more promise for retaining North Dakota's people resources. House Bill 1540 facilitates learners finding the best environment for them.

Oak Grove and our partner nonpublic schools attract families. This state's economic strengths include agriculture, natural resources, financial services, engineering and medicine. As you know, that economic vitality requires the recruitment of people to fill key positions in certain industry sectors. Some of those recruited professionals and their families look for private schools because their children know private schools in other markets. House Bill 1540 could augment recruitment of families for North Dakota.

Opponents of school choice proposals may tell you that a new biennial appropriation only serves families in the state's population centers. And that's one reason why the bill is important. Nonpublic schools provide a local alternative to public schools with graduating classes of 300 or more students. And our schools provide those smaller-enrollment options with financial prudence.

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Patrick Wolf, Ph.D., an education policy researcher at the University of Arkansas, has found that education savings accounts have multiple positive effects on students' academic performances in states where similar programs have been implemented, including academic performance, higher high school graduation rates, and higher college completion rates. Further, Wolf has noted that school choice programs have a positive correlation to public school performance, based on his research. I encourage you to read his opinion piece published in February in *The Forum of Fargo-Moorhead* (<https://www.inforum.com/opinion/letters/letter-school-choice-would-benefit-north-dakota>).

To close, I reiterate that my colleagues emphasize the position of private schools as part of North Dakota's educational ecosystem, not as competitors with public schools. We appreciate your interest in recognizing that position and parents' voices in the educational process. We share with public schools the awesome adventure of preparing tomorrow's citizens for service and leadership.

I ask for your support of House Bill 1540.

Sincerely,



Bob Otterson
President