

Opposition to House Bill 1540

3/17/2025

Dear Chairman and Members of the Senate Education Committee,

I am writing to express my **strong opposition to House Bill 1540**, which proposes an Education Savings Account (ESA) program that would drain millions of taxpayer dollars from North Dakota's public schools and give them to private institutions.

This bill would strip \$40 million from the state's general fund in the next biennium, shifting resources away from public schools, which serve over 90% of North Dakota's children. Under the bill, every student who leaves public school for a private school would take 50% of their per-student funding with them. That money should be used to improve public education for everyone, not handed over to private schools that get to pick and choose their students.

Public schools do not operate like a business, where losing a few "customers" means cutting back on expenses. Schools have fixed costs: teachers' salaries, transportation, building maintenance, heating bills in our long winters. These don't go away just because a handful of students transfer to private institutions. When public schools lose funding, the students left behind suffer. They face larger class sizes, fewer extracurricular opportunities, and cuts to vital programs that rural communities especially cannot afford to lose.

North Dakota parents already have the right to send their children to private schools. **But private school vouchers do not offer real choice.** Why? Because while parents may want to send their child to a private school, private schools get to choose which students they accept.

Private schools in North Dakota openly reject students with vouchers for a variety of reasons:

- A child has a disability and needs additional accommodations.
- A family is low-income and cannot afford tuition beyond what the voucher covers.
- A student doesn't meet the school's religious or academic requirements.
- A child has behavioral challenges or needs extra support.

This bill would give private schools the freedom to cherry-pick students while leaving the public school system to educate everyone else, including those with special needs, those facing poverty, and those struggling academically. This is not real school choice. It's private school choice.

Even with vouchers, most North Dakota families still cannot afford the full cost of private school tuition. Between tuition, books, uniforms, transportation, and fees, private schooling is simply out of reach for most working families. The majority of these funds will go to families with students currently enrolled in private schooling and able to pay the tuition in full.

Supporters of this bill like to argue that the parents of private school students are paying for education twice: through private school tuition and through taxes that fund public schools. This, of course, is their **choice**. North Dakota law guarantees free public education, not free or even subsidized private education. Many tax-payers do not have children enrolled at a public school, including those with children too young to attend school, those with grown children,

and those who do not have children at all. Should they also have a portion of their taxes returned to them? Of course not. We all know that's not how taxes and public funding works. It's not for our personal benefit – it's for the benefit of our society as a whole. **Private school families are no more entitled to public education funds than any other person without kids in public school.**

Public education serves every child, no matter their background, ability level, or family income. If North Dakota has extra funds to invest in education, those dollars should go toward strengthening public school by improving teacher pay, updating classrooms, expanding student support services.

For these reasons, I urge you to vote DO NOT PASS on House Bill 1540. Our public schools are worth fighting for. Our kids deserve better. Let's invest in a future where every North Dakota student has access to a strong, fully funded public education.

Sincerely,

Kara Geiger
Mandan