

Chairman Beard and members of the Senate Education Committee,

I am sharing written testimony in opposition to House Bill 1540. In his landmark work *History of North Dakota*, Elwyn Robinson highlighted the important role that public education has played throughout the state's history, stating that "by every measure... schools were the state's most important cultural activity." Difficult though this task was (and continues to be) in a state with many sparsely populated areas, a strong system of public education is vital to providing opportunities that may not otherwise be available to the state's residents. I take great pride in the fact that I am the product of North Dakota's strong commitment to public education. From my time as a student at Valley City Public School to my undergraduate (and now graduate) work at the state's Land Grant institution, many of the opportunities I have had are the result of free public schools and affordable universities.

Long before North Dakota's public schools began opening doors for me though, they paved the way for the success of generations of this state's residents. All four of my grandparents graduated from rural high schools between 1950 and 1960, a time when everyone earning a high school diploma was not taken for granted. After they had completed eighth grade in country schools close to the farms where they grew up (schools that existed because of North Dakota's strong commitment to accessible public schools, especially in rural areas), my grandparents' families went to great lengths to ensure they could take advantage of the public high schools available in the nearest towns. This education was an invaluable part of their preparation for successful careers in production agriculture, rural telecommunications, and (coming full circle) rural education.

I share all of this to emphasize how valuable public schools have been (and continue to be) to the state of North Dakota (especially its more rural areas), and why House Bill 1540 gives me such great concern. I know that the proposed appropriation for educational savings accounts is currently independent of public school funding. Despite this, any state resources allocated for this purpose are resources not available for the many other functions the state funds, including foundation aid for public schools. Although I have no opposition to private schools or other services that would qualify for education savings account spending, I believe any entity using taxpayer funds needs to have a mission that serves the entire public. Additionally, public schools (both rural and urban) in North Dakota are faced with a host of challenges (teacher recruitment and retention, rising operating costs, aging building infrastructure, to name a few), and meeting these challenges requires strong financial support from the state. I urge the legislature to keep public dollars with the public institutions that need them most.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this important issue.

Sincerely,

Erik Johnson
Killdeer