



Thank you, Chairman and members of the committee, for this opportunity to speak today and to address this important topic. My name is Aaron Gillham, Policy and Advocacy Director at EdChoice. For those who may be less familiar, EdChoice was founded in 1996 by the free-market economist Milton Friedman and his wife Rose, as they believed competition and new ideas in the education space was vital to improving the outcomes of students in every type of community across the country. They also believed that parental choice was core to the principals of freedom.

As EdChoice has been working in the school choice space for almost 30 years, we have become known as a place for in-depth research, polling, and statistics on topics surrounding education freedom.

I come here today to share some of our analysis and findings, as we realize this important piece of legislation has the potential to change the lives of many families in the state of North Dakota. Presently, **34 states, plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico**, have enacted some kind of school choice program, many states with multiple different programs operating side by side. Last year we hit a milestone as a nation, with the number of students utilizing private school choice programs surpassing **1 million**. Furthermore, with the Tennessee legislature passing a universal ESA program during their January special session, as well as Idaho and Wyoming earlier this month, there will now be **16 states** with universal school choice programs on the books.

At EdChoice we believe that allowing all families to choose the type of education that best matches their values and their educational needs, is an important component that has been lacking when assigned schooling by address has been the model for many decades. And in the empirical, gold standard studies on the outcomes of school choice programs, the trajectory is clear. In fact, there have been a total of **188** individual studies to date on the effects of choice programs, examining everything from educational attainment, to civic values, to parent satisfaction, and, of course, the financial effects on a state. The overwhelming number, **84%** of these studies, show positive outcomes, with another **10%** indicating neutral results.



To address one of the most persistent concerns, fiscal effects of programs like the one being considered here, are certainly top of mind for lawmakers such as yourselves. Across various school choice programs that exist nationwide, the average K-12 spending per pupil is just over **\$6,000** while the average K-12 per pupil spending in district schools is just over **\$17,000**. According to the legislative fiscal note on H.B.1540, it appears that **\$4,082** would be the approximate ESA amount per student who would utilize this program, coming in under the national average. Furthermore, we found that spending on choice programs represents just **0.3%** of total state expenditures on all public services in states where choice programs exist. And Arizona, a state that has enacted some of the most open and robust education freedom initiatives anywhere in the country, also has many rural districts, like North Dakota. Last year, in addressing rumors that their budget had been ruined because of their ESA program, the Arizona Department of Education itself issued an official statement indicating that they were running at a **\$28** million surplus. And, just at the beginning of 2025, the state came out with an estimate that their entire budget will be operating at over **\$500** million in surplus. In short, Arizona, and states that have enacted robust school choice programs, have not seen a budget crisis because of these programs.

I appreciate the time allotted here today for comment as your committee considers **H.B. 1540**, an important piece of legislation we believe will bolster education opportunities for families across North Dakota. Because this legislation includes many approved uses, the flexibility in allowing nationally normed tests, the inclusion of a parental satisfaction survey, and treats all North Dakota families without distinction, we believe this is the strongest legislation for bringing school choice to the state. And that's what this is really about, giving families the ability to choose what's right for them and their children. We would also invite you to check out our website, edchoice.org, to see our research, as well as access to our publications for download.

Thank you very much.

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*"Advancing educational freedom and choice for all
as a pathway to successful lives and a stronger society."*