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March 17, 2025

Senate Education Committee  
State Capitol Room 216  
600 East Boulevard Avenue  
Bismarck, ND 58505

Subject: In support of HB 1540

Chairman Beard and Senate Education Committee Members,

My name is Catrin Wigfall, and I am a policy fellow at American Experiment North Dakota writing today in support of HB 1540, which establishes an Education Savings Account (ESA) program in the state of North Dakota.

As a policy researcher, former public school teacher, and a former student who attended nearly every type of school learning environment, I have experienced first-hand the variety of learning environments that make up our country's education ecosystem. Each of these education settings brings something parents value within education. In fact, survey after survey shows that parents value a lot of different aspects of education, and very few schools can excel at all of them, despite efforts to do so.

Students' educational needs vary, and a centralized system is not equipped to individualize to each student's unique learning styles. Perhaps a student thrives under a self-directed program. Perhaps a Montessori-inspired model or a classical education approach is a better fit for the student and is something parents value. Perhaps families measure a quality education by standardized test scores, or teacher credentials. Perhaps extracurriculars are important.

With HB 1540, North Dakota families currently unable to access an individualized, decentralized learning model would have access to the same learning environments as their wealthier peers. A quality education should not just be for the wealthy, and HB 1540 provides families access to nonpublic options while taking no existing options away.

**Fiscally responsible**

Opposition to investing in our students, regardless of where they are educated, claims that a program like HB 1540 "diverts" money away from public schools. First, no money allocated for North Dakota public schools is used for this program. Second, only 50 percent of the state funds that are allocated



for a child's education would be available for use at a nonpublic learning environment and/or for other pre-approved education expenses. The local public school would still receive local dollars for fixed overhead costs even for students it is not responsible for educating.

A November 2024 study by EdChoice's Fiscal Research and Education Center analyzed 48 school choice programs in 25 states and the District of Columbia and found they saved taxpayers between \$20 billion and \$45 billion since the programs began, or between \$3,300 to \$7,800 *per participating student*.

The current fiscal note attached to HB 1540 estimates expenditures at just under \$37 million, which includes \$3.5 million for a vendor/marketing service program for Year 1, putting it well within Gov. Armstrong's budget recommendation of \$44.3 million for ESAs, making it the most fiscally responsible ESA bill before the Legislature. This fiscal note also assumes a 100% take-up rate (meaning, 100% of eligible students would participate in the program in Year 1), which has not happened in the history of the modern school choice movement, and likely overestimates the cost of the program.

### **Individualized, specialized services for neurodiverse students**

Students in need of individualized and specialized services don't always have their needs met in a one-size-fits-all system. While there are many parents of students with disabilities who are completely satisfied with their local public school, their IEP team, and the services their child is receiving, there are also families seeking something different, and school choice policies like HB 1540 have helped them access schools, therapies, and tutoring that don't require them to battle for evaluations, services, and compliance. For example, Full Circle Academy in Fargo is a fully accredited private school that services only students with special needs, has a waiting list, and is an example of the need for more options to meet demand.

Florida passed the first statewide voucher program in 1999 specifically for students with disabilities, and today its program and the number of other school choice programs across the country that also specifically serve students with disabilities/an IEP have benefited thousands of students by helping families cover tuition, therapies, tutoring, and other expenses.

### **North Dakotans support school choice**

A February/March 2025 poll commissioned by the North Dakota News Cooperative found that a sizable majority (64%) support giving "parents the right to use tax dollars designated for their child's education to send their child to the public or private school that best serves their needs."

An October 2023 survey conducted by Arc Insights that asked North Dakotans specifically about ESAs also found overwhelming support for such a program in the state across the political and geographic



spectra — 72 percent of K-12 parents, 66 percent of Republicans, 64 percent of independents, 62 percent of Democrats, 67 percent of respondents in urban areas, 64 percent in rural areas, and 62 percent in suburban areas.

In conclusion, HB 1540 is not an “either/or” proposal — either support one type of learning environment/system or support another — but a “both/and” approach. For the foreseeable future, the majority of North Dakota students will be educated through the state’s public school system. Ninety percent of empirical studies — studies that use the gold standard in social science — on the effects of school choice programs similar to HB 1540 have found positive effects of the program on the test scores of public school students who don’t participate. HB 1540 does not reduce funding for our public schools, there is overwhelming empirical evidence to show it benefits the academic performance of public school students, and it tells North Dakota students that no matter where they are educated, they matter to the state and are worth investing in.

I respectfully ask for a Do Pass.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Catrin Wigfall".

Catrin Wigfall  
Policy Fellow  
American Experiment North Dakota