

Dear Esteemed Members of the Senate Education Committee:

Thank you for accepting my testimony in support of HB 1540 related to the establishment of an Education Savings Account (ESA) program in North Dakota. My name is Marya Skaare, I am a resident of District 39, the mother of college- and school-age children, and the president of one of the non-profit, non-public school systems in Dickinson, ND. You may recall that during the last Legislative session, a school choice bill was passed for the first time ever in both the ND House and Senate, only to be vetoed when it hit the governor's desk with then Governor Burgum stating, "it falls short of meaningfully enhancing school choice." Your work this session has been encouraging, with the introduction of six school choice bills aimed to make those meaningful enhancements to school choice in our state. With the field narrowed to two—one passed by each the House and the Senate—the important work of each chamber now hearing, studying, and considering the merits of their counterpart's bill begins.

As you are aware, in January President Trump signed an executive order that aims to transform our nation's education system by promoting educational freedom through school choice. While the full impact of this order remains to be seen, the Tennessee General Assembly passed their own Education Freedom Act and a universal school choice bill in the Texas legislature passed the Senate and is now being considered in the House. Currently, North Dakota is the only state without either public charter schools or a non-public school choice program. Across the country, 68 choice programs operate in 33 states plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. It is my hope that North Dakota will be the 34th state to enact a meaningful school choice program that is well-positioned in the educational freedom landscape.

Currently, non-public schools save the State of North Dakota at least \$11,000/student not educated in the public schools—this equates to a collective impact on the State of over \$88 million dollars in annual savings. This is an amount that the state would otherwise be obligated to provide if not for the existence of nonpublic school options. It is important to note, passage of legislation supporting choice in education is not a taking from public schools, it is a demonstration of the State's financial commitment to its constitutional responsibility to educate ALL North Dakota students. HB 1540 is not about systems, it is about students. ESAs empower parents to make important decisions about the education of their children by providing access to education funding that they contribute to as taxpayers in our state. One can easily argue that it is unjust for nonpublic school families to subsidize the cost of public schools with their tax dollars, while fully funding the cost of educating their own school-age children with zero help from the state. HB 1540 provides for a reasonable percentage of the current per pupil reimbursement rate to be available for students not using our public education system to help with their education expense.

I urge you to vote in favor of HB 1540, demonstrating to EVERY North Dakota student that our state values EVERY North Dakota student.

Thank you for your service to the State of North Dakota and your time spent on HB 1540 and SB 2400.