

Testimony in Opposition to Senate Bill 2295

Chairman Beard and Members of the Committee,

My name is Mike McNeff, and I serve as Superintendent for Rugby Public School District. I appreciate the opportunity to testify in opposition to Senate Bill 2295, which proposes redirecting public education dollars to private schools and home education with no meaningful oversight or accountability.

As a fiscally responsible, conservative state, North Dakota must ensure that taxpayer dollars are spent in a transparent, equitable, and accountable manner. SB 2295 fails to meet that standard. The bill mandates that school districts forward 75% of the per-student cost to private schools and 50% to homeschool families while still counting these students in public school enrollment for state funding calculations. This diverts public dollars away from the schools that serve the vast majority of North Dakota's students and instead subsidizes private education without requiring accountability, financial transparency, or adherence to state education standards.

This bill also undermines public education funding stability. Public schools must serve all students, regardless of background, ability, or financial status. They must adhere to state curriculum requirements, standardized assessments, and financial reporting mandates. Meanwhile, SB 2295 allows public money to flow into private institutions and homeschools with no assurance that students are receiving an adequate education. There are no required performance measures, no mandated reporting on student outcomes, and no protection against fraud or misuse of funds.

Additionally, this bill disproportionately benefits urban areas at the expense of rural communities. The majority of North Dakota's 170 school districts are in rural areas where private school alternatives do not exist. By allocating funding to private schools, this bill creates an incentive for urban families to benefit while leaving rural students with no comparable options. We should not enact policies that favor urban areas while weakening rural public schools. If the goal is fairness, then any state aid program should provide equal funding to all 127,500 students in North Dakota, regardless of whether they attend public, private, or home school. SB 2295, however, funnels money to a select group of students while reducing resources for public education.

Furthermore, SB 2295 raises serious constitutional concerns. North Dakota's Article VIII, Section 5, and Article X, Section 18 explicitly prohibit the use of public funds for sectarian schools. This bill attempts to bypass those protections by allocating public dollars directly to private schools, many of which are religious institutions. This creates a clear legal risk for the state and could invite costly legal challenges.

Lastly, this bill weakens financial transparency and accountability. Public school budgets and expenditures are subject to strict audits, reporting requirements, and taxpayer oversight. Under SB 2295, there is no clear financial accountability for how private schools and homeschool

families spend public money. The bill does not specify auditing procedures or how to ensure funds are used appropriately. Without clear financial safeguards, taxpayer dollars could be misused without recourse.

If North Dakota is going to invest in education, those funds must be distributed fairly and with full accountability. SB 2295 fails to meet that standard. Instead of diverting public school funds to private education without oversight, we should be working to strengthen public schools and ensure that every student in North Dakota has access to a quality education.

I urge you to oppose SB 2295 and any legislation that redirects public school funding to private education without accountability, transparency, or fairness.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions.