



February 3, 2025

SB 2303 — In support of

North Dakota Senate
Education Committee

Dear Chairman Beard and Members of the Senate Education Committee,

My name is Catrin Wigfall, and I am the education policy fellow for American Experiment North Dakota, a state-based public policy organization. I am writing today in support of SB 2303, which allows for the creation of an education savings account (ESA) program in North Dakota.

Throughout my career in education research, I have studied school choice policies and programs across the country to understand the various models and learning environments that make up our country's education ecosystem. I am excited at the opportunity North Dakota has to join neighboring states and states across the country that are creating new and expanding existing educational opportunities available to our students and families.

Throughout my K-12 journey, I had the opportunity to experience a variety of learning environments — private schools, a microschool, home education, a traditional public school, and a virtual school. I attended a four-year liberal arts college for my bachelor's degree and a two-year community college for my teaching license. I taught at a traditional public school and at a public charter school. Each of these education settings brings something parents value within education.

In fact, survey after survey shows that parents care about a lot of different aspects of education, and very few schools can excel at all of them, despite efforts to do so. For some families, a quality education is measured by standardized test scores and teacher credentials. Some families prefer a project-based program or self-directed learning. Perhaps extracurriculars are important.

Giving parents the power to choose regardless of socioeconomic status has brought important diversity to the modern education movement and is encouraging innovative schools and spaces that include a variety of people, perspectives, and pedagogies, all with a united commitment to a more customized approach to education.

With SB 2303, North Dakota families would be able to customize their child's education and specialize it in a way that best sets him or her up for future success. It provides parents a menu of options, pre-approved educational services, to choose from, and encourages partnerships between educational service providers. Educators benefit as well, as families can use the ESA to pay for tutoring outside of school hours or special education therapies and services. A national poll of educators conducted by Morning Consult in October 2024 found that the majority of teachers, including district school teachers, support ESAs.

North Dakotans also support ESAs. An October 2023 survey conducted by Arc Insights found overwhelming support for an ESA program in North Dakota 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 expressed support for an ESA program.

SB 2303 also removes financial barriers that currently prevent students most in need of new opportunities from accessing an alternative learning environment. For education to truly be the great equalizer, access to a quality education should not just be for the wealthy.

Under SB 2303, a portion of the state funds allocated for a student to be educated in their home district would follow the child to a nonpublic learning environment and/or be available for other pre-approved education expenses. Even though the public school would no longer be responsible for educating the student, and is relieved of the costs associated with educating the student, 20 percent of the allocated dollars for that student would remain at the public school.

The public school would also still receive local dollars for fixed overhead costs. A study by the Friedman Foundation found that even when accounting for public schools' fixed costs, savings from a policy like an ESA get plugged back into a state's education budget and spent on students still in public schools.

An overwhelming number of empirical studies (69 out of 75, or 75 percent) on school choice policies similar to SB 2303 across the country have found positive fiscal effects on taxpayers and public schools.

Allowing public dollars to follow an individual to a private institution is not a new concept. Consider, for example, how this plays out in higher education. Through Pell Grants, qualifying students across the country are allowed to use federal taxpayer funds to help pay for tuition at private institutions. Through the GI Bill, military undergraduate and graduate students can use the bill's benefits to help pay for a private college or university, graduate school, or training programs. These students are using taxpayer funds to attend private schools in higher ed. These two programs operate very similar to K-12 school choice programs. Even outside the education space, public dollars can be used at private institutions: consider food stamps programs, Medicaid, Section 8 Housing.

Nine of the top 10 most rural states, as measured by the 2020 U.S. Census rural population share, have publicly-created private school choice programs: Vermont, Maine, West Virginia, Mississippi, Montana, Arkansas, South Dakota, Alabama, and New Hampshire. Kentucky at number 10 and North Dakota at number 11 do not. Rural areas are also seeing a rise in learning environments that become available following the implementation of a school choice policy.

For example, a study of Florida by The Heritage Foundation found that following the state's enactment of a school choice policy 20 years ago, the number of private schools in Florida's 30 most rural counties has nearly doubled. Rural areas are also seeing the rise of microschools and high-quality virtual schools. Arizona is another example of a state where its education choice

policies spurred the creation of new learning environments and expanded existing options, including in rural areas.

In conclusion, SB 2303 is not an “either/or” proposal — either support one type of learning environment/system or support alternatives — but a “both/and” approach. Ninety percent of empirical studies have found positive effects of a school choice program on the test scores of public school students who don’t participate.

SB 2303 provides families with new opportunities while taking no existing options away, and I respectfully ask for a Do Pass.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of SB 2303.

Best,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Catrin Wigfall". The signature is written in a cursive style and is centered within a light blue rectangular background.

Catrin Wigfall
Policy Fellow
American Experiment North Dakota