

Testimony in favor of Senate Bill 2303 - Education Savings Accounts (ESAs)

Chairman and Members of the Senate Education Committee,

Thank you for reviewing my testimony in support of SB2303. Having worked since 2019 to provide my children with the best private education possible, I believe the establishment of Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) would correctly help families meet the educational needs of their children.

According to the ND Department of Public Instruction's own statewide data published on <https://insights.nd.gov/>, no more than 45% of students are proficient or above in English Language Arts, no more than 40% are proficient or above in Math, and no more than 45% are proficient or above in Science. Also, data shows that student academic progress in these and related areas is trending downward, away from long-term goals set by the NDDPI. Furthermore, statewide data shows that ACT scores across all categories have declined for three consecutive years.

It is important for this committee to recognize that underperforming public schools have been documented prior to the establishment of ESAs. Therefore, it is factually accurate to say the root cause of underperforming public schools is unrelated to ESAs in any way. Consequently, it is misleading for those in opposition of SB2303 to claim that funding ESAs would negatively impact public schools because such a conclusion would require us to believe that solving the root cause of their underperformance would be as simple as throwing more money at the problem. Make no mistake, underperforming public schools and how to improve them is a larger, separate discussion that needs to happen elsewhere.

Fortunately, through this bill the focused discussion about establishing ESAs can proceed, and the documented underperformance of the public schools is, by the very nature and definition of the issue, direct evidence in support of establishing ESAs. For instance, if the goal is to do what is best for the child, but the public school is unable to meet their needs and help the child become the best they can be, then there is empirical merit and moral justification for utilizing ESAs to provide families with alternative educational opportunities. It can be as simple as that.

As we have done here, reviewing statewide data as part of a larger, conceptual overview is beneficial. However, it can be even more helpful to go through the same information by using specific real-world examples. My family resides in the Northern Cass School District, and our first-hand experience can provide this committee with such examples.

At the onset of the 2019 school year the school district implemented an experimental Personalized Learning program. As part of their sweeping changes, school administrators promised innovation and greatness for all students. But what I witnessed was my children being subjected to an increased amount of outsourced and impersonal online curriculum, the abolishment of letter grades in the name of equity, systemic removal of incentives for students to excel as individuals, an undisciplined philosophy that allowed students to redo

assignments and retake exams without consequences, and the adoption of a progressive culture focused less on academics and more on social issues.

There quickly came a point when I knew the school was failing my kids and we needed to make a change. That point came when my kids would come home and not be able to tell me or my wife anything they learned at school, at the same time the school would tell us everything was great, all while my eyes watched the school lay the foundation for bad habits, mediocrity, and moral ambiguity. At that point, even without the benefit of ESAs at that time, we decided what was best for our children was to enroll them in Park Christian School and drop them off there every day on my way to work.

Since then, our oldest has graduated from high school with honors, currently attends college, has a job, and volunteers as a teacher at our church. She has become a remarkable young woman. Similarly, our two youngest have consistently achieved excellent grades as they move towards high school, they excel in band, they've developed intangible skills that will continue to grow and stay with them their entire lives, and while they haven't outgrown the shenanigans just yet, they have acquired many of the character traits of God-fearing, honorable young men.

My observations may not be popular in some circles, but it is not my job to only share popular opinions. It is my job to speak the truth, as challenging as the facts may be at times. The bottom line is there is a need for quality education in North Dakota. Underperforming public schools help create demand for access to private schools. Public schools that subvert the authority of parents help drive more demand for access to private schools. Private schools remain in demand because private schools get exceedingly positive results and help nurture children into productive adults. Private schools better meet the educational needs that some families seek.

My family's story and the success of our three children is proof of what can be accomplished through alternatives to public schools. Our story illustrates exactly where ESAs fit into the equation. We live on a farm with a modest, single income to our household, and by the grace of God we have somehow managed to pay out-of-pocket for private education. We are exactly the type of family who would benefit from the establishment of ESAs, and are representative of other families across the state who feel a private education is out of reach for their children. Financial hurdles are the biggest obstacles families face, and ESAs can be tool for families to overcome them.

In a world where ulterior motives influence policy and inaction protects the status quo, Education Savings Accounts represent an opportunity to empower families, to ease financial burdens and to provide children with an education that could leave a multi-generational, life-changing impact. This is a common sense, data driven approach that produces real results. For all these reasons I encourage you to support and pass Senate Bill 2303.

In Christ Alone,

Brian Holte