



1 **Testimony in Opposition to House Bill 2400**

2 Chairperson and Members of the Committee...Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.
3 We come in opposition to this bill due to its violation of our state's foundational commitment to
4 public education, its detrimental impact on rural communities, and its misalignment with public
5 sentiment regarding education funding priorities. While I do support the concept of an EQUAL
6 ESA for all ND students to support families with extended services, when that includes non-
7 public tuition as a reimbursable item, it steps outside of what we believe our forefathers
8 intended. **We could support this bill for the most part with the removal the non-public**
9 **tuition reimbursement as one of the options.** Think of how great that would be – take that one
10 reimbursable item off the table and the tension ends. Everyone gets relief, we aren't in a
11 constitutional struggle...I wonder meeting in the middle is a piece of the legislative process that
12 we've lost in recent years – I hope this committee considers it again.

13 **Our Founders' Commitment to Public Education**

14 The framers of North Dakota's Constitution made a clear and deliberate choice to prioritize
15 public education as the foundation of our state's future. They obligated us to **fund and**
16 **strengthen public schools**—not to subsidize private education. Our state's education funds were
17 never intended to support private choices but rather to build a strong, **uniform system of free**
18 **public education** for every child, in every community.

19 This principle was deeply rooted in the experiences of many early settlers, who had immigrated
20 to the United States seeking refuge from **religious persecution and sectarian conflicts** in
21 Europe. Yesterday we heard one of the representatives from Bishop Ryan talk about this – he
22 was right – there was a LOT of religious disagreement at the beginning of our state. Much might
23 still exist. Our forefathers understood firsthand the dangers of entangling government with
24 religious institutions and sought to establish an education system that was **free, fair, and**
25 **accessible to all**, regardless of religious background. The decision to exclusively fund public
26 schools was not merely a financial one—it was a deliberate commitment to **unity, equal**
27 **opportunity, and the separation of church and state** to ensure education remained a **public**
28 **good** rather than a tool for division. The decision of whether it is constitutional or not in North
29 Dakota has not yet been debated at our supreme court, however, for years and years, and dozens
30 of votes by your predecessors to keep our educational investment to what our forefathers stated
31 was constitutionally required.

32 SB2400 disregards this constitutional commitment and sets a dangerous precedent that could
33 erode the very principles upon which our public education system was built.

34 **Preserving Rural Communities and Our Agricultural Leadership**

35 I've been working with the legislature since 2011 when I was at the NDUS office. Every session
36 there have been attempts at funding private schools and every session the body has voted no.
37 Why? I believe there are multiple reasons, but one big one is because public schools are the



1 heart of **North Dakota’s rural communities**. They are not just places of learning but serve as
2 hubs of civic engagement, economic stability, and community growth. Our **agricultural sector**,
3 which plays a **leading role on the world stage**, depends on strong rural schools to educate the
4 next generation of farmers, agribusiness leaders, and skilled workers. Diverting public funds
5 away from these schools weakens the backbone of our **rural economy** and undermines our
6 position as a global agricultural leader.

7 Rural school districts already face financial challenges, including declining enrollments and high
8 operational costs. SB2400 would only **exacerbate these struggles**. **Every state that has gone**
9 **down this route has eventually seen a decline in public school funding**. I’d hate to see this
10 **force** rural schools to cut critical programs, consolidate schools, or even close their doors—
11 leaving communities without essential educational services.

12 **Public Sentiment: Prioritizing Property Tax Relief and Free Meals Over Private** 13 **School Subsidies**

14 North Dakotans have spoken clearly in recent validated non-partisan surveys: the **top funding**
15 **priorities** should be **property tax relief** and ensuring **free meals for students**, not subsidizing
16 private education. There was strong approval for ESA’s but not for having an allowance for
17 private school tuition. Parents and taxpayers alike have expressed strong support for public
18 education and other services funded by tax dollars, yet this bill diverts resources away from those
19 initiatives to **primarily benefit families who are already enrolled in private schools**.

20 **Accountability?**

21 **Public schools are accountable for every penny.** All the way down to running to
22 Walmart to buy poster board to hang in the classroom. I question if our ND patrons
23 are really ok with spending likely well over \$120M + without that same
24 accountability? I’d venture to say satisfaction would be higher to have that go toward
25 property tax relief or meals for all students. Please consider that popular choice that
26 brings us together rather than what divides us.

27 **Conclusion**

28 SB 2400 represents a **fundamental shift away** from our state’s constitutional and historical
29 commitment to public education. It threatens our **rural communities**, **diverts funds from our**
30 **agricultural workforce**, and ignores **public priorities** that call for investment in **property tax**
31 **relief and free student meals**—not private education subsidies. For these reasons, I strongly
32 urge the committee to **reject** this bill and instead focus on **fully funding and strengthening**
33 **North Dakota’s public education system**, as our **founders intended and as our citizen’s**
34 **demand**.

35 Thank you for your time and consideration. I welcome any questions the committee may have.

