

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

2 Chairman Beard and members of the Senate Education Committee,

3 Good morning. For the record, my name is Beth Slette, and I am the Superintendent of West
4 Fargo Public Schools. I come before you to express my concerns regarding Senate Bill No. 2400,
5 which proposes the establishment of an education savings account (ESA) program in North
6 Dakota. While I support educational choice and the availability of diverse learning environments,
7 I have reservations about allocating public funds to private schools without ensuring fair access
8 and accountability.

9 I am a product of an elementary Catholic school and a current contributor to the Catholic school
10 system in Fargo through my weekly church contributions. I value the role private schools play in
11 our community, and I believe all schools are better when families have a choice. My support for
12 these institutions is a personal choice, reflecting my commitment to their missions and my faith.
13 However, I firmly believe that directing taxpayer dollars to private schools without stringent
14 accountability measures is not in the best interest of our state's educational system and its
15 students.

16 The proposed ESA program must, but does not currently, ensure that all learners, no matter their
17 background, disability, or socioeconomic status, have equal access to educational choice
18 opportunities. If private schools are going to receive public funds, they need to utilize a blind
19 admissions process to ensure all students who want to attend have an equal opportunity to do so
20 No learner should be turned away based on who they are or what challenges they face.

21 It is also critical that any private institution receiving taxpayer dollars is held to the same
22 accountability standards as public schools. That means participating in state assessments, holding
23 open meetings, and reporting financial expenditures and educational results to the state. Public

1 schools operate under strict transparency and oversight, and if private institutions are using
2 public money, they need be expected to do the same.

3 Public schools in North Dakota are required to follow numerous laws under the North Dakota
4 Century Code. These include reporting on countless academic success metrics, the cost of
5 education (including the public salaries of every educator), ensuring free and open education to
6 all children, and adhering to minimum instructional hours, curricular expectations and calendar
7 length. Right now, private schools are not held to these same laws. If they are going to receive
8 taxpayer dollars, regardless of amount, that must change. We cannot have two sets of rules when
9 it comes to educating our children. Public money comes with public responsibility.

10 Please consider the unintended consequences of SB 2400 as written. Without clear language
11 about universal access, the students whose academic results demand the most additional choice
12 will receive the least. This would result in diverting resources away from public schools, which
13 weakens the very foundation of education in our state and schools abilities to serve students who
14 are struggling the most and would not have access to additional school environments. Over time,
15 this could increase disparities between learners who already have multiple supports and
16 resources and those who do not. Other states have implemented similar ESA programs, and the
17 results have been concerning. Arizona's expansion of ESAs led to financial shortfalls and
18 oversight issues, and poor educational outcomes, as recently highlighted in last week's NAEP
19 report card. Several studies have shown that voucher programs in other states have widened
20 achievement gaps rather than closing them. We need to ask ourselves: what will this look like
21 five years from now? Will this bill create more opportunities for all, or will it ultimately harm
22 public schools and the learners who rely on them, and do nothing for the students struggling

1 most right now? Shouldn't we focus effort and dollars on ensuring all students have at least one
2 good educational option before we spend tax dollars ensuring some students have several?
3 While I support educational choice and the ability for families to make the best decision for their
4 children, public dollars must come with accountability and fairness for all. We must be
5 thoughtful about how we allocate resources, ensuring that all learners, no matter their
6 circumstances, have access to a quality education. We owe it to our communities to get this right.
7 I do want to commend the idea of public school students having access to an educational savings
8 account. Schools cannot do the work of supporting students alone- this innovative approach
9 would help empower parents with resources to support their students and supplement the
10 education they are receiving at their public school. We try but cannot be everything to every
11 student, we do not have the resources nor the expertise. An ESA for all helps supplemental
12 supports wrap-around a student to take some pressure off schools while empowering parents to
13 select the highest impact supports. The key is that all resources be available to all students to
14 ensure fair utilization of taxpayer dollars.
15 Thank you for your time. I will now stand for questions if there are any at this time.