

February 11, 2025

Chairperson and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak in support of a legislative study on special education in North Dakota. My name is Teresa Olafson, and I live in Fargo. I speak today as both a parent and an informed citizen, deeply impacted by this issue. I often refer to myself as a "human becoming"—a lifelong learner who believes in the power of knowledge. Just ask my children; they'll confirm it.

North Dakota values self-reliance and recognizes education as a fundamental right. Yet, we must ensure our commitment to providing a uniform, equitable, and adequate education extends to all students, including those requiring special services. That is why I am here—to urge a study that examines whether we are upholding our constitutional mandate.

Parents rarely have a seat at the table in these discussions, yet so many of us share the same struggles. My child had a speech impairment at age three and early signs of dyslexia. Despite being an involved parent and my child receiving an IEP since age three, they left third grade with a reading proficiency of less than 0.1% and a math proficiency of only 2%. No amount of advocacy, evaluations, or interventions changed that outcome. These numbers represent more than statistics—they reflect a painful, unnecessary struggle that no family should endure.

North Dakota once had a strong history of high educational standards, yet student outcomes have declined dramatically. In 2012, students with disabilities had reading and math proficiency rates above 50%. By 2022, those rates plummeted to just 12.3% and 9.05%, respectively. Despite increased spending on special education, resources are not translating into improved outcomes. A study is essential to understanding why.

I discovered firsthand how educational funding can be diverted away from actual instruction. My child was placed in a costly program that prioritized revenue capture over education—offering only minimal speech services and no academic instruction at a staggering \$76,000 per year. No parent or taxpayer would consider that a fair or equitable education.

North Dakota must shift resources toward early interventions that yield better outcomes. Our greatest educational asset is not money but people—teachers and support staff. Leadership and institutional culture significantly impact student success. Without a comprehensive study, we cannot identify systemic failures or implement targeted reforms.

This is not about asking for more funding; it is about ensuring North Dakota meets its constitutional duty to educate all children adequately and equality . A legislative study will allow us to address deficiencies, realign resources, and restore North Dakota's educational excellence.

I urge the committee to support this study to uphold our commitment to every child in North Dakota.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Teresa Olafson

Fargo, ND