

TESTIMONY ON HB1013
OVERVIEW OF DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION
HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE
Thursday, Jan. 7, 2021
By: Kirsten Baesler, State Superintendent
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Chairman Delzer and members of the House Appropriations Committee:

For the record, my name is Kirsten Baesler. I am the superintendent of the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction. I am here to provide an overview of our agency and information about the Department's budget bill, House Bill 1013, and the department's optional budget requests.

The office of Superintendent of Public Instruction goes back to North Dakota's territorial days. Our Constitution says North Dakota must have a uniform system of free public schools throughout the state that are open to all children.

The responsibilities and authority of the superintendent of public instruction are outlined by the Legislature. The superintendent enforces the state and federal laws approved by the North Dakota Legislature and Congress relating to the establishment and maintenance of public schools and related programs. There is a complete list of the superintendent's duties in Chapter 15.1-02 of the North Dakota Century Code.

As members of the Appropriations Committee, one primary focus is our program of state aid to education. The Department of Public Instruction uses a formula written by the Legislature to distribute aid to local public school districts. Almost all our budget is allocated to local schools to fulfill our Constitution's mandate to provide a "a uniform system of free public schools throughout the state."

The Superintendent of Public Instruction is also responsible for the supervision of the North Dakota State Library, the North Dakota School for the Blind and Vision Services in Grand Forks, and the North Dakota School for the Deaf and Resource Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing in Devils Lake.

After my testimony you will hear from Mr. Jamie Mertz, who is the director of our Office of Fiscal Management, and Mr. Adam Tescher, who is the school finance officer within that office. They have important information about the department's budget proposal and our most recent school enrollment numbers. The pandemic and our uncertain energy economy in western North Dakota have affected the number of students enrolled in our public schools this past fall.

Since the last session of our Legislature adjourned, our North Dakota schools have faced some unprecedented challenges because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our teachers and administrators have had to provide quality education and manage the impact of a pandemic at the same time. This has put stress on everyone.

Last spring, our school buildings were closed from mid-March to the end of the school year. In most states, education stopped entirely and funding to those schools ceased. That was not the case in North Dakota. Even though our buildings were closed, education continued, and foundation aid payments continued. Our schools drafted plans to provide distance learning in a matter of days, because we have a long history of commitment to education in North Dakota.

We have been a national leader in continuing to provide education, and we have emphasized the importance of keeping our schools open.

As of yesterday (Wednesday, Jan. 7, 2021), 54 percent of our students were attending school in person, 33 percent were in a hybrid learning model, and 13 percent were engaged in all distance learning.

We believe the science supports the fact that the best way to manage all of the risks of the pandemic is to have our school buildings open.

The Department of Public Instruction has tried to act as an educational Red Cross. When there is a flood, tornado or some other natural disaster, the Red Cross is there to provide blankets and water and food. They support the locals to get them on their feet again. We have done this by providing technical assistance, academic support tools, and by the creation of a Healthy Return to Learning team in partnership with our North Dakota Department of Human Services and our Department of Health.

The Legislature and the federal government have been strong partners in helping our schools manage the pandemic.

- Last spring, Congress approved \$33.3 million in ESSER funds to assist North Dakota schools. ESSER stands for Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund. Schools have a great deal of leeway in using this money. It can be used for:
 - Cleaning supplies;
 - Transportation;
 - Food Services;
 - Distance learning technology;
 - Hiring additional staff;
 - Professional development for teachers and paraprofessionals; and
 - Supplemental learning tools.
- The Legislature set aside another \$30 million in federal money for an “Education Corps.” The money helps school districts cover extra staffing expenses, such as the cost of hiring additional staff, substitute teachers, and paraprofessionals.
- Another \$33.8 million was made available for “Resiliency Grants.” This assistance can be spent on all of the things I mentioned earlier, as well

as mental health supports, technology, internet connections, building ventilation improvements, and other pandemic-related needs.

Here is a quick thumbnail of those amounts and how much has been spent:

- **ESSER: \$33.3 million allocated, \$6.68 million spent**
- **Education Corps: \$30 million allocated, \$22.4 million spent**
- **Resiliency Grants: \$33.8 million allocated, \$25.6 million spent**

Our world has been upended and we've seen lots of change, but we know we can use this as a learning experience. We have been shoved off the diving board and we've learned to swim.

K-12 has devoted energy on encouraging innovation in education, and the pandemic has accelerated this trend. We know the possibilities of distance learning.

Our biggest challenge is to make sure the education advancement of our students continues. We have assessment data that tells us that the pandemic has caused a delay in learning among some students, especially students with disabilities, those living in poverty, and those who do not have strong family support systems. We need to make sure that educationally speaking, our students are where they need to be.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, this is a broad overview. We're here today to provide the budget and enrollment data.

I'll now turn it over to Mr. Mertz, director of NDDPI's Fiscal Management Office. He will provide testimony on the Department of Public Instruction's budget recommendation and administrative funding requests. Following him will be Mr. Adam Tescher, our school finance officer.

Thank you for your time, and I look forward to working with you during the session. Please do not hesitate to call upon me and the Department of Public Instruction as a resource to help your work.

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