

Dear Legislators,

I would like to offer you my personal testimony in support of HB 1532. My husband and I are parents of two children with special education needs. We are also both teachers – one in the public school system the other in a private school. Our children have attended both public and private schools. They are now grown, and if the saying hindsight is 20/20 is true, then I would like to share the wisdom I have gained over the last 30 years with you so that you can make the best decision for families living in our state.

I knew before my children were one that they were going to need extra help. They struggled with learning to speak, regulating emotions, making friends, processing sensory information, and as they grew the needed help learning to read, spell and understand abstract concepts. Both our boys have moderate to severe autism spectrum disorder. I am a special education teacher with access to both medical and educational professionals, and believe me; I sought help from whomever I could. My husband and I assumed that our boys would have to go to public schools because they needed extra support. But beginning in preschool, their only option was to be placed in a segregated classroom with other children who had disabilities, many who could not speak. Yes, they had 4 highly educated teachers in a classroom of 10 children, but there were no typical peer models to learn from. I wanted my sons to talk, learn and behave as other children did. So I enrolled them in a preschool with typical children and provided support to the staff, and sought outside services so they could learn. When it was time for elementary school, they could talk so the school said they were no longer eligible for support services despite the fact that they struggled academically, behaviorally, and socially. They were included in the classroom, but denied access to recess, gym, field trips and anything ‘unstructured’. I was told to medicate them. Many of the meds cause serious side-effects, but the pediatrician warned me that if they weren’t medicated, they would be in a residential facility or jail by the time they were teens.

This was unacceptable to us. These were our boys, and we knew they just needed ‘something’ more. We pulled them from public school and put them in a private school despite the financial burden it placed on us. These teachers had no resources, so we again had to provide support and outside services. It was a major struggle. I did not know if either they or I could meet their needs. We contemplated the unthinkable, a residential facility that our pediatrician predicted. Now many of you may not know this – we sure didn’t – but putting your child in a residential facility doesn’t just mean they won’t live with you, but in order to afford the whooping \$16,000/month per child tuition fees, I would have to relinquish my parental rights, and have them become wards of the state. Luckily, for them and us, our support systems and the school pressed on and worked hard to help my boys accessing that ‘something’ that no one else was able to provide – an education based in virtue and faith. This was life-changing for them. We worked with teachers and coaches helping our boys understand that they were beloved children of God with great purpose. Together we painstakingly taught them lessons in how to live a virtuous life in accord with their peers regardless of their disability. Behaviors improved

allowing them to learn fully in the classroom with their peers, and even participate with their peers in sports.

Sports became an avenue in which they could not only release a lot of energy and emotion, but they could truly shine and be a part of a team – a small community working toward common goals and making a difference – preparing them to be citizens in the community. Our oldest son went on to play college football and earn a degree in Psychology. He now is a productive member of society owning his own home, making more money than I do and receiving multiple awards in his government job helping airmen and their families at the MAFB. Additionally, he helps educate teachers on what students with autism need, and he tutors and mentors young people who are on the spectrum. Our youngest son went to state in both golf and baseball and is now full-time as a mechanic as he trains to be a Master mechanic at a local dealership – again, making more money than me. And it is a good thing. Do you know that that average cost of raising a child with autism spectrum disorder is 1.4 million dollars – and we had two of them! How would have HB 1532 helped me if it were in effect back then? Even though the financial benefit would have been small - essentially about \$700/year which would have covered school lunches or gas to their therapy appointments, it still would have been something helping us to make decision not based on cost, but what was best for our children. What if we had left them in the public schools or turned over our rights to place them in a residential facility letting the state foot the bill? I wonder how much that would have cost the state of North Dakota.

In the end, HB 1532 is not about public vs. private schools. It is about supporting families in raising their children in the way they feel is best. It is also not about giving money to the rich. As a teacher in the private school system, I make 40% less than my public school counterparts, and no percentage of support provided by this bill could ever come close to the costs we incurred in raising our children. It is clear to me that HB 1532 not only helps parents to raise their children, but at a fraction of the cost it would be for the state to do so. Additionally, I shudder to think where my sons would be now – still in a residential facility, or in the correctional system, instead of serving their community – if it were not for a private school option? Please let the parents of North Dakota know that you support them in raising their children. A vote in favor of HB 1532 is a vote of confidence in parents knowing what is best for their children.

Thank you for taking the time to fully consider the impact of HB 1532.

Sincerely,

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