

HB 1532 testimony
Senate Appropriations Committee, Education and Environment Division
Bob Otterson, President, Oak Grove Lutheran School
March 12, 2023

Chairman Sorvaag and senators:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 1532 and the acknowledgement from legislators that nonpublic schools make positive impacts to North Dakota life.

I serve more than 720 students from age 3 through grade 12 and their families as president of Oak Grove Lutheran School. Oak Grove has a special place in the history of education in North Dakota and along the Red River. It opened in the fall of 1906 as a high school for girls, 14 years before their mothers were eligible to vote in the United States. The humility of faithful Norwegians continues in the school's shared values — concepts such as character, courage and curiosity, faith and reason.

I ask you to consider four points in this brief written testimony:

- Oak Grove and partner nonpublic schools are part of the state's educational ecosystem.
- Oak Grove and partner nonpublic schools feed North Dakota's workforce needs.
- Oak Grove and partner nonpublic schools help attract families from other states to our respective communities.
- Oak Grove and partner nonpublic schools provide options for students and families.

Oak Grove students populate North Dakota's universities. Taking into account the last four graduating classes, 55% of domestic Oak Grove graduates enrolled at North Dakota colleges and universities. Many of those choosing out-of-state options enroll at Concordia College in Moorhead. Those students remain part of North Dakota's largest market, even from the east side of the Red River. Our schools help you keep North Dakota's colleges and universities relevant in today's world.

Oak Grove alumni continue to serve North Dakota. Almost one thousand graduated Grovers live in North Dakota today. Those Grovers comprise a larger population than 22 of the state's county seats. These are people engaged in a wide range of vocations — education, engineering, medicine and health care, social services, ministry and others.

Oak Grove and our partner nonpublic schools attract families and the key people needed to fill positions in certain industry sectors. And some of those recruited professionals and their families look for private schools because their children already know private schools in other markets. Lastly, Oak Grove and our partner schools expand options for families. We all live in public school districts that respond to community needs, and our colleagues in those K-12 districts must plan each year for enrollment swells and drops. All educators know that some students succeed in large environments; others flourish in smaller groups. Some students can process complex reading assignments; others grasp the material better from a guided lesson or a study group. Some students prefer a large swath of co-curricular options and extracurricular activities. Some students, in competitive classes, may focus on one or two activities. Meanwhile, students in smaller schools benefit from sharing their talents across several pursuits. The state's private

schools provide the right fits for some students and their families. That spectrum of options provides more breadth and depth for today's learners.

Opponents of this bill will tell you that a new biennial appropriation only serves families in the state's population centers. And that's one reason why the bill is important. Nonpublic schools provide a local alternative to public schools with graduating classes of 300 or more students. And our schools provide those smaller-enrollment options with financial prudence.

To close, I reiterate that my colleagues emphasize the position of private schools as additions to North Dakota's educational ecosystem, not as competitors with public schools. We appreciate your interest in recognizing that position and parents' voices in the educational process. We share with public schools the awesome adventure of preparing tomorrow's citizens for service and leadership.

I ask for your support of House Bill 1532, and I thank you for your time.