

House Bill 1532

Senate Appropriation Committee

Tuesday, March 28, 2023

Good morning Chairman Sorvaag and members of the Senate Appropriations Committee.

My name is Katie Kost and my children are in 2nd and 4th grade at Bismarck's Shiloh Christian School.

I am in favor of House Bill 1532 that would appropriate money from the state treasury general fund to the department of public instruction in order to establish an educational reimbursement program for non-public school families.

Support for this bill is support for parent choice, support for having options with education. Just as consumers have options for almost every service - we get to choose our doctors, our mechanics, which grocery store we go to - having a choice in our children's education is important. It may be one of the most important decisions we make in our children's lives.

Our story of how we chose non-public education may be a little different. Our daughter was in the Bismarck Public School system for kindergarten and first grade. Our son was set to start kindergarten in a public school in the fall of 2020.

However, in the spring of 2020, as we were all trying to navigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic - we found out our transfer request, to keep our kids at the school we had been attending the past 2 years, was denied.

We knew as transfer students, there would always be the possibility of having to move schools at some point. What we could not have predicted was that it would happen in the middle of an incredibly uncertain time.

Given the situation, we began looking into other options. Fortunately, we were able to consider a private school and the benefits of smaller class sizes were very appealing when quarantining was a very real thing.

We made the switch and our kids started at Shiloh in the fall of 2020. I knew it was the right decision for us at the time and I was incredibly grateful it was an option for us. What I did not know at the time, is how much our kids would thrive at Shiloh.

Fast forward, 2.5 years and we are still there. While this testimony could quickly turn into an advertisement for Shiloh - as I could list all the things that make our school wonderful, I want to focus on the idea of school choice.

Bismarck/Mandan, and I'm sure most of our state, has an amazing public school system and a strong public school system contributes to a strong community.

When I was present for the testimony of this bill when it was in the House Education Committee, there was a lot of discussion about how North Dakota is a state with open enrollment- that I am able to send my kids to a school that is not our assigned school. That I, as the parent, have a choice in my child's education.

It sure didn't feel that way to us in May of 2020.

Just as we didn't feel like we had much of a choice as we were forced to switch schools, many families don't feel like they have a choice to consider non-public schools due to financial reasons.

Up to this point and for our family, we've been incredibly fortunate to be able to make tuition a priority. But each spring as we look towards the next school year, we have to have the conversation about how we will continue to make this work. Private education tuition is a huge financial commitment that comes at the sacrifice of something else.

HB 1532 would help lessen that sacrifice when exercising your school choice options; and it provides an opportunity.

For our family, the opportunity to have a choice meant we discovered a school that better supported our daughter's reserved personality. She has absolutely thrived in the smaller class settings. Prior to our transition to Shiloh, school was a source of anxiety for her.

It was finding a support system - not just a school - that aligned with our family's values. It's been incredible to watch our kids navigate challenges and situations where their faith gets to be a part of the conversation.

I know our kids would be successful in any school they attend - they are resilient and strong learners. However, I am not sure they would thrive at another school like they do at Shiloh.

Again, it comes down to having the option and giving parents the opportunity to explore what is best for their children.

While public school isn't necessarily the best option for some, neither is private school; but cost shouldn't be the determining factor.

A reimbursement program would support school choice. It would help make non-public education accessible to families in our community. It strengthens parent choice in education. It keeps our communities viable and attractive to families. This is why I support House Bill 1532.

Thank you for allowing all of us the opportunity to share our experiences and our position on this bill.