

Good Morning, Chairman Sorvaag and Senate Committee Members.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak with you about HB 1532.

My name is Kimberly Efta and I reside in Grand Forks, specifically in District 42. I am a full-time Realtor and my husband, Deven, is a farmer. We are so grateful to be living in North Dakota. We have three kids, ages 7, 6, and 4. I grew up on a family farm near Petersburg, ND, and attended Lutheran Church my entire life. My husband and I were both public-school educated and had wonderful experiences.

I believe this bill is about a generational change, so I would like to give a little background of my education growing up. In 1993, when I was in 2nd grade at Unity Elementary School in Petersburg, my parents fought for open enrollment in North Dakota. For my older sisters to qualify for extra-curricular activities my parents made the decision to move the entire family to Larimore, more than 20 miles away. My parents told me how they had to remove all of our beds from our farmhouse during the harvest season because the Department of Public Instruction threatened to come to the house to do checks and make sure no one was staying there. Even though I was young I remember my parents were certainly concerned about our education. They traveled to Bismarck 19 times during the 1993 legislative session in support of open enrollment. Fast forward 30 years to today we find ourselves with another generational change bill: HB 1532.

Eight years ago, when my husband and I moved to Grand Forks to start our careers, it took us months of searching to find a home where we could raise a family. During our home search the number one item on our list was proximity to an elementary school. We found the perfect home. It's located adjacent to an elementary school near the UND campus. Our backyard gate opens to the school playground. We didn't even purchase a swing set for our yard because the school playground was so close. Attending public school was our first choice in our kids' education. When my oldest was old enough to attend public school, we registered her for Grand Forks Public Schools. She was so excited to be going to school right next door. In August 2021 she attended a month-long Intro to Kindergarten class at that school. The convenience of walking her to the school from our house was so nice and I think she told the entire teaching staff where our home was located.

However, due to the worldwide pandemic, the world had begun to shift. Seemingly everything turned political: from social issues, masking, American history, to our cherished American traditions. It was during this very heated political climate in our world that my husband and I had a long discussion about where she would begin her educational journey. We knew we had a parental duty and choice to see our kids raised in an environment that shared our beliefs and philosophies. That is when I reached out to St. Michael's, only five days before the start of our oldest child's kindergarten year.

Several people have asked me why I switched to a non-public school five days before the start of the school year? This is why. Our local school board held three different votes over 11 days to require masking of our children. They finally got the majority to mandate masking on the third vote, five days before the start of the school year.

These were all the meetings held in August of 2021.

Monday, August 9, 2021 at 6:32 PM - REGULAR MEETING at the Mark Sanford Education Center - Motion was passed to recommend but not require students to wear masks while inside/on school property. **Passed 6-2 with one absent.** Several parents spoke about parental choice in masking.

Monday, August 16, 2021 at 8:39 PM - SPECIAL MEETING in Grand Forks City Council Chambers - Motion to have universal masking through October 20, 2021 unless a different recommendation is brought by the Smart Restart Committee sooner, failed on roll call votes. **Failed with a 4-4 vote with one absent. No public comment.**

Friday, August 20, 2021 at 12:00 PM - SPECIAL MEETING at the Mark Sanford Education Center - Motion was passed and amended to require masks be worn by all individuals age 2 or older while inside of Grand Forks Public School facilities or Grand Forks Public Schools leased facilities effective Monday, August 23, 2021. The amendment that if any one of the three indicators is triggered [risk level, CDC transmission level, Smart Restart Committee recommendation], it should come back to the board for discussion. **Passed with a 8-1. No public comment.**

Monday, August 23, 2021 - REGULAR MEETING at Hilton Garden Inn - No discussion of Smart Restart. After the meeting the board had a private retreat and the public was told to leave. A police officer was guarding the door during the retreat.

What changed in the four days in August between the two special meetings? Why were these special meetings held late at night and during a work day? Why five days before the start of the school year? Why were parents not allowed to speak at these special meetings? Why didn't the masking vote happen during the regular school board meeting on August 23, 2021?

I am a Lutheran and choose to send my kids to a non-public Catholic school. This certainly was not an easy decision. My husband and I had many discussions about finances, transportation to and from school, and after school care. We are paying for our children's education with financial assistance from St. Michael's, their grandparents and personal finances. I know there are parents and caregivers who cannot afford non-public schools. Supporting HB 1532 would provide them the opportunity to choose where their children are educated.

Passing HB 1532 would be very helpful for many parents. There are people that cannot afford to have CHOICE. Currently our community has a vote coming down for a \$79 million referendum. The state of North Dakota has given property tax relief to homeowners but everyone's taxes keep going up in our city. Our school board has maxed out their mills. I'm paying taxes and private education to fund both public and non-public schools. Certainly education is an important item in our state and communities, otherwise we wouldn't be here today.

One of the most important things we have learned about raising children? It is impossible to go back to square one and restart their educational journey. You get one chance to raise your kids – that's it – one chance. We are making the choice to get them a solid foundation in their Christian faith. Now that our middle child was old enough to start school this year, we had the same discussion as when we sent our oldest to St. Michael's. It was an easier decision for us since watching our oldest child flourish at St. Michael's.

Over spring break a few weeks ago, my oldest children asked me "what does liberty mean?" It might be because the new Paw Patrol character is named, Liberty but mostly it's because they state the Pledge of Allegiance every morning at St. Michael's. I told them it means freedom.

I looked it up the other day. Liberty means "the state of being free within society from oppressive restrictions imposed by authority on one's way of life, behavior, or political views."

During August 2021 the Grand Forks public school board voted 3 times regarding the mask mandate before the start of the 2021-2022 school year. The mandatory mask mandate on our children vote finally passed in the 2nd special meeting at 12 PM on a Friday - 5 days before the start of the year. As a new parent in the school district I quickly learned how special school board meetings work - there's no public comment.

Life. Liberty. And the pursuit of happiness. My decision to send my children to St. Michael's was reassured when a school board of one of the largest school districts in the state voted to remove the pledge of allegiance from their meetings. It's unfortunate our beloved state and country is at this crossroad.

Parental choice is needed in our state with LIBERTY and justice for all.

It has been 30 years now since the open enrollment bill was passed; a much-needed change in the education system. Now it's time for parental choice in our kids' education. On behalf of so many families who support school choice, we would deeply appreciate your support for HB 1532.

Thank you for your time and consideration.