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March 14, 2023

Chairman Elkin and Members of the Senate Education Committee:

I am Sonia Meehl and I OPPOSE HB 1532. I am in my eleventh year as a member of the Oakes Public School board. I am also a member of the ND State Boards of Public School Education and Career and Technical Education. However, my testimony is my own and does not represent an official position of any of those boards.

I listened to most of the video testimony and read the submitted testimony when HB 1532 was heard in the house. Most of those that testified in favor of the bill were private school administrators or parents of children that attend private schools. It is easy to understand why they would support this bill because of its immediate and tangible benefits to them. Public school districts and thousands of public-school parents would also be impacted, but less obviously, so that's probably why not many of them testified.

Many of the parents testified of their desire for "choice" of education for their children. These parents all "chose" private school education knowing there was no support from the state and knowing the sacrifices they would have to make to pay tuition. Many parents stated that they chose the private school so their children would have a faith-based education. This is an admirable goal, and they have every right to pursue it, but it is something that public schools are not allowed to offer. I believe that many (or most) of these private schools do a wonderful job of education and that they are attended primarily (not exclusively) by students from stable, two-parent families that are already active in their faith community.

It is possible that some parents choose private schools for reasons that have nothing to do with faith-based education, such as perceived superior education or extra-curricular activities. Senators, when you choose how to vote on this bill, please consider whether it is appropriate for the state to subsidize parents that remove their children from a public school (thereby reducing the funding that the public school receives) so that their kids might be able to go on a music trip to Europe or have a better chance of being on a state championship sports team.

Driving by their campuses and visiting their websites, I've noticed that some of these private schools have pretty amazing sports and fine-arts facilities. They probably also have paid development staff raising funds for operations, facilities, activities, and scholarships. This is to be expected. These schools and their faith-based or other sponsors should support their schools financially to further the missions of the organizations.

One parent testified that they enrolled one of their children in public school for a year or so because of that child's need for special education services which were available in the public school. Evidently those services were NOT available in the private school. The parent later enrolled that child into private school, when presumably the special education services were no longer needed.

Unless parents choose to home-school, every child attending a private school would otherwise be enrolled in a state-funded public school. Public schools do not lose entire classrooms of third graders to private schools, eliminating the need for a single third-grade teacher. More likely, the public school loses several students scattered throughout their grade levels, so little, if any savings are realized by the public school, yet their state funding is reduced.

My school is located 60 to 100 miles from the nearest private schools. It is not geographically feasible for families in my district to choose private school. This bill would not provide any additional choice for parents in my district or other rural districts like mine. Further, none of the families in my district chose to have children with exceptional educational needs, yet each of these children are precious. Public schools are required to educate all of them; we cannot (and we would not) choose otherwise.

In my school district of fewer than 500 students, more than 9% of our state foundation aid payment goes directly to our Special Education Unit. In the past four school years, this amount has increased from \$395,000 to \$429,000, around \$800 to \$900 per student enrolled in my district. IN ADDITION to the amount that goes directly to the special education unit, my district pays excess costs to the unit each year from our general fund. These excess costs have increased from more than \$150,000 four years ago to over \$335,000 this school year (including PreK special education). My district's total annual special education expenditures now approach \$800,000, about 17% of our total state aid formula payment.

If the state has an additional \$24 million for education services, please choose to help close the special education funding gap that exists in public school districts like mine. With appreciation for your work in the legislature, I ask for you to choose DO NOT PASS on HB 1532.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Sonia Meehl". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Sonia Meehl