

1 HB1532– Voucher Bill

2 Mandan Public Schools – Mike Bitz, Superintendent

3 Good morning Chairman Elkin and members of the Senate
4 Education Committee. For the record, my name is Mike Bitz. I
5 am fortunate to serve as the superintendent for Mandan Public
6 Schools. I am here today to oppose HB1532. I will be brief.

7 ND has great private schools and no one is arguing that parents
8 should not be able to send their children to these great schools.
9 However, the choice argument is a false narrative. People often
10 confuse school choice with parent choice. There is a huge
11 difference. Does the parent get to make the final choice or does
12 the school? In Mandan, because we take public dollars, we enroll
13 all students who wish to enroll. It is the PARENT’S CHOICE.
14 Currently if a student wants to enroll in private school, the parent
15 does not get the final say. It is the SCHOOL’S CHOICE. I find
16 it confusing that this committee is also pushing a parent’s rights
17 bill, that in its current form will not apply to private schools, even
18 if they take public dollars. If state money goes to private schools
19 shouldn’t we expect private schools to open their board meetings
20 and welcome parents to attend, and have the ability to address the
21 private school board? Should parents really need to forfeit their
22 rights as parents if the private school chooses to admit their child?

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24 You’ve heard testimony about an Attorney General’s Opinion
25 issued in Nov. of 2022 that stated it was allowable for public
26 dollars to go to private schools. Actually, this opinion said

1 teachers enrolled in the teacher mentoring program administered
2 by ESPB can participate in the state mentoring program. It is
3 important to note that with this program, no state money went to
4 a private school, rather it went to ND citizens employed by a
5 private school. More importantly, all recipients of these state
6 dollars (both public and private school teachers) were required to
7 meet the same accountability requirements to receive the money.
8 Nowhere in this opinion does it imply that private schools can
9 receive public dollars, nor does it imply that a different set of rules
10 apply to private schools.

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12 Last week I testified before this committee on HB1185. This bill
13 would have allowed 4 ND school districts (West Fargo, Minot,
14 Mandan, & Rugby with a total of 25,000 students), to apply for a
15 \$5M loan at 1% interest. – This committee gave a 5-1 Do Not
16 Pass recommendation to the full Senate. While visiting with
17 several of you, it was explained to me that this was a carve out for
18 4 districts and that this committee could not support a carve out.
19 I respect that conviction, and would argue that this bill, HB 1532,
20 should be viewed with the same distinction. It gives away more
21 money to fewer students with zero accountability or transparency.
22 It also excludes anyone with special needs, behavior issues, or
23 who lives in rural ND from participating. This legislation has
24 cherry picked the recipients of the \$24M being appropriated. If
25 this isn't a carve out, I don't know what is?

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1 Last month in the House Education Committee, during testimony
2 on a bill calling for a study of the ND High School Activities
3 Association, Todd Porter, my friend and my District 34
4 Representative and a private school parent, told the committee
5 that once an entity takes public dollars, they are subject
6 accountably and transparency rules, like open records, and open
7 meeting laws. This means all emails are open to the public. It
8 means finances are subject to open records requests. It means
9 board meetings are open to the public.

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11 Mandan competes with St. Mary's in many extra-curricular
12 activities. A few weeks ago, we played basketball in the St.
13 Mary's gym, both boys' and girls' basketball games were played.
14 We won one game, and lost the other, but the rules were the same
15 for both teams. Mandan is willing to compete with St. Mary when
16 it comes to public dollars for education as well, but the rules need
17 to be the same. If you are going to allow private schools to accept
18 a public money, and not be required to submit an audit, not be
19 subject to open records and open meetings laws and if you are
20 going to allow them to pick and choose which students' they are
21 willing to serve, please sign all public schools up for all these
22 rules too.

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24 Public schools will gladly compete with private schools for public
25 dollars, but common sense and fairness will tell you that the rules
26 need to be the same. If the rules are important, then we all need

1 to follow them, if they are not important, then remove the
2 accountability rules for public schools.

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4 As a popular Staples commercial says, you have an EASY
5 BUTTON here. Give the \$24M to private schools but require
6 private schools to be transparent and accountable for the public
7 dollars they are receiving. Ensure that private school parents have
8 the same rights as public school parents. Doing this makes
9 everyone happy; private schools get their money, taxpayers get
10 accountability, and private school parents have rights. - - - If you
11 don't want to push that easy button, let the voters in each district
12 decide if they want to have their tax dollars go to support public
13 schools.

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15 I urge you to push the easy button on HB 1532 and I am willing
16 to stand for any questions you may have.

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