



North Dakota House of Representatives

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Senate Workforce Development Committee:

For the record, I am Rep. Zac Ista from District 43 (Grand Forks). Today I bring you HB 1329, which passed the House by a vote of 87-6 on February 2, 2023. I was thrilled that HB 1329 was referred to the Workforce Development Committee, because in addition to saving teachers money and cutting unnecessary red tape, this bill will help retain talented educators in our state's classrooms by making them eligible for a lifetime teaching license after they have been licensed professionals in our state for 20 years.

Since 2001, North Dakota's K-12 teachers have been eligible for a lifetime teaching license after 30 years in the profession. During that time, nearly 2,800 North Dakota educators (an average of about 150 per year) have earned their lifetime teaching license. The program remains popular, with the number of lifetime licenses sought increasing yearly.

Under current licensure requirements, educators must first receive an initial two-year license, followed by an initial five-year license. After that, they must renew their license every five years at a fee of \$130 for each renewal. By the time a teacher obtains a 30-year lifetime license under current law, he or she may have paid over \$1,000 in licensure fees alone. Additionally, teachers must complete six semester hours of re-education within each five-year license period. To do this, educators take college-level courses in the summer, on weekends or evenings, or online when they have time. The courses must be approved by a college and are offered both through colleges and other educational groups. This coursework is time-intensive, with each credit hour requiring multiple actual hours of work to complete. Educators may spend upwards of 180 actual hours completing their required courses for each license renewal period. And as we know, teachers' time is already in short supply, and this required coursework is one more obligation they must jam into their busy schedules. You also probably won't be surprised to learn that teachers usually pay for these courses out of their own pockets. A typical cost is \$50 per credit hour, plus additional course fees. That amounts to an additional \$300 in course costs (plus even more in course fees) during each license renewal period—or a total of at least \$1,500 in course

costs before an educator is eligible for a lifetime license under current law. All-in, a teacher faces expenses of over \$2,500 before obtaining his or her 30-year lifetime license.

HB 1329 seeks to lessen this financial burden by making one simple change to our existing lifetime licensure framework: allowing teachers to qualify for this license after 20 years as licensed professionals. The red tape that HB 1329 cuts would save teachers significant money and time. By eliminating two license renewal cycles, we could save teachers \$260 in license fees, hundreds of hours of coursework, and over \$600 in credit costs and course fees alone. In doing so, we would incentivize more teachers to stay working in the classroom for longer after they earn that lifetime license, as evidenced by the testimony submitted from numerous current educators about the positive impact this bill would have on teacher morale and retention. In this era of serious workforce challenges, especially in education, even modest gains in retention can make a big difference.

Some may argue, though, that the extra two license renewal cycles are essential for making sure our educators keep up with the latest trends and model the lifetime of learning we hope to instill in our students. I strongly agree with that goal, as I know everyone in the Legislature does. But the fact of that matter is our teachers already engage in career development distinct from formal licensure requirements. Every teacher must engage in yearly professional development that is mandated both by Century Code and in their contracts with their local districts. None of that would change with this bill. Nor would local districts be prohibited from requiring or incentivizing additional coursework above and beyond that which would be required for obtaining a lifetime license. Indeed, many districts already condition compensation increases on an educator obtaining an advanced degree or hitting a certain amount of credit hours of higher education coursework. Beyond that, of course, we know our educators will continue to pursue career development opportunities because they are passionate about their careers and about being the best teachers they can be for their students—which is exactly what we see from educators now who already hold their lifetime licenses.

In the House, we heard concerns about the proposal from the Education Standards and Practices Board (ESPB). I am very grateful to Dr. Pitkin for the open dialogue we have had regarding this bill and her unwavering willingness to answer my questions about teacher licensure procedures. But while I understand ESPB's concerns, I respectfully continue to support the bill now before you. Primarily, the Board has expressed concerns about the number of self-reported offenses discovered during each teacher license renewal cycle. Under current licensure practices, teachers are required to self-report any potential misconduct or violations of their professional code of conduct each time they apply to renew their license, *i.e.* every five years. These violations could be anything from a criminal offense to adverse employment or license actions in other states. Most of these board cases result in only minor remediation, like the teacher having to take a required ethics course, rather than license revocation or non-renewal. While the overall number of such cases is low, some of these cases surely would fall within the 20–30 year license renewal periods that would no longer be required under this bill.

However, changing the lifetime license threshold to 20 years does not create a substantial risk of bad conduct going undiscovered or bad actors being allowed to stay in classrooms with impunity. Current ESPB practices already require self-reporting only every five years—and never again after 30 years—rather than requiring continuous and contemporaneous self-reporting from licensed professionals. If there are concerns about monitoring professional misconduct more frequently, ESPB could promulgate new rules (or request new statutory authorization to do so) to engage in more frequent monitoring of potential violations separate and apart from the licensure application process. Moreover, if this bill were to pass, teachers would remain subject to the state’s Code of Professional Conduct, a violation of which “constitutes grounds for disciplinary action which includes the issuance of a warning or reprimand or both, suspension or revocation of the license of the affected educator, or other appropriate disciplinary action.” The most egregious violations (like serious criminal conduct) can be and are discovered through media and community reports, and local districts separately may require educators to report any professional misconduct more frequently. Likewise, anyone at any time may make an “Request for Inquiry” into a licensed educator for suspected violations of Century Code or the Code of Ethics by filing out a form available through the ESBP’s website. Nothing in this bill would diminish these guardrails that provide substantial protection against any misconduct.

Indeed, if I thought this proposal diminished educators’ professionalism in any way, risked a lower quality of teachers in our classrooms, or gave educators a free pass to engage in professional misconduct, I wouldn’t be supporting it. But it doesn’t do that. By this point in their careers, educators have been teaching for two decades, have undergone 20+ years of professional development, completed at least five licensure applications/renewals, and completed at least 18 credit hours (and hundreds of actual hours) of college-level coursework to obtain those license renewals. Many have completed a master’s degree, with others earning a variety of professional certifications and other accolades. They have demonstrated to their peers, their students, their administrators, and the parents in their districts that they are highly qualified and dedicated educators. That’s why I believe they have earned the right to qualify for a lifetime license after proving their capabilities for 20 years.

In sum, HB 1329 is a commonsense way for us to support our current and future teachers and to help boost morale in a field that has had substantial challenges these last few years. This bill gives us a chance to save teachers money, time, and the burden of red tape, all of which will encourage even more of them to stay working in their classrooms. As we focus on what we can do to move our workforce trends in a positive direction, this bill is one way to move the needle the right way. That’s why I urge a **do pass** recommendation for HB 1329, and I stand ready to answer your questions.