

January 14th, 2025

Re: HB 1105; Support

Members of the Education Committee:

The forthcoming dialogue is a response in support of HB 1105. My name is Steve Madler and I am currently the Principal at Century High School within the Bismarck Public School district. The rationale behind my testimony is founded in the experiences I have had with students accessing virtual instruction through NDCDE prior to the passing of HB 1376 from the 68th legislative assembly and thereafter.

Prior to August of 2023, a number of students in our building enrolled in NDCDE courses. In a typical year, we would have roughly 90 students take 130 courses. In most of these instances, students were accessing these courses to provide greater flexibility in their personalized 4-year plan. Although underlying reasons for enrollment varied amongst students, one thing was absolute in that these plans were founded in having an academic purpose and successful completion was almost guaranteed. I wish I could stand in front of you today and share that the same purpose and outcomes have withstood implementation of HB 1376, but, unfortunately, that is not the case.

When schools received guidance for implementation in August of 2023, there was essentially one requirement/restriction that schools could put in place. We could require the student to engage in their virtual class while being in attendance to a monitored classroom in the building. As a building leader, this became quite the dilemma. I anticipated an increase in participation due to the shift from self-pay to district responsible at the same time the fiscal year budget was finalized and all my current staff had full responsibilities for in-person services. Subsequently, we relied on the learning coaches (parents in most instances) to become the supporting collaborator for student participation and success.

Needless to say, even if we had additional funds to host a room, the increase experienced became greater than a room would hold. For the first semester in calendar year 23-24, we ended up with 118 students taking 191 courses and for the second semester we had 185 students taking 268 courses. Within this 4 x's increase, we experienced several situations where the academic purpose was lacking, academic integrity was compromised and successful completion was grossly inferior to our historical in-person student performance. I want the record to be very clear that this is not and should not be construed to say the NDCDE product nor work of their teachers was inferior. I say this to underscore the notion that guidelines which provide limited judgment and influence from the local team perpetuates unintended consequences.

In relation to unintended consequences, we found very quickly that a large number of students were not engaging for long periods of time in their online environment. Subsequently, we started collecting performance and participation data. When you have 459 unique enrollments, you start to see some trends while outliers limit the influence to your data. In example, we had 444 course completions in calendar year 23-24(15 withdrawals/drops). 356 of these enrollments resulted in a passing grade. The average number of days these students actively engaged in the 140 day enrollment window was 29 days. In other words, they logged on and engaged in the virtual environment. If we look at the 88 failing grades, the average engagement was half as much being around 15 days. Even more granular is to look at the total accumulated hours of participation. Those who received a passing completion spent an average of 24.4 hours on their coursework whereas those who failed spent an average of 11.2 hours. I share this only to offer a snapshot of insight into the performance of students engaging in virtual

instruction against students not participating in virtual instruction. The 5-year average of failure rates at Century High School is 3%. The failure rate of NDCDE courses in 23-24 for CHS was as stark difference at 21%. Within the 88 failures, greater than 85% of these enrollments were tagged as 'not school endorsed'. To iterate, in relationship to 'endorsed or not', we did not have the ability to restrict enrollment for these students or courses. The tag 'not school endorsed' only indicates that the school team did not feel the course or the notion of enrolling in a virtual environment was in the best academic interest of the student.

At the risk of losing the room due to number pontification, I want to close my testimony with the benefit the proposed amendments will have on local districts. In relationship to page 1, line 19 bullet 'a', I don't have concern with the language of that statement but only offer that the 'rules' be developed as a collaborative agreement between a representative group from the field, NDCDE, and DPI. Same page, Line 20 and 21 (bullet 'b') has positive implications for schools and NDCDE staff and probably requires added clarity on the term 'open enrollment'. Whether intended or not, open enrollment became synonymous with a student can decide when they want to enroll in an NDCDE class and the local district cannot deny. Subsequently, we had many enrollments (60%) which came more than a week after the student began the school year with no initial plan for virtual learning. The reasons were wide and varied but resulted in several occurrences where a student dropped an in-person class to enroll virtual because they didn't like their grade or course expectations several weeks into the term or as way to avoid Tier II and III interventions. Another complication which manifested had to deal with NDCDE classes being 20 weeks in length and our terms being 18 weeks. Not a big deal mid-year if the student is passing the course, but if they are an October add and result in a failure in March, we have no viable way to respond to the student who is now credit deficient. Lastly, we have varying graduation timelines in the spring semester so the ability to put a restrictive timeline to align with our graduation ceremonies is imperative. I firmly believe this also provides a benefit to the NDCDE instructors as they would not experience the revolving door of adds to the class cohorts they are working with. Likewise, bullet 'c' on page 1, lines 22 and 23 provides benefit to the local district and NDCDE instructors as well as our taxpayers. As mentioned before, the local team has insights into the skills and behaviors students exhibit which lend themselves to be successful in a virtual environment. When students are not employing the skills yet have unlimited access to this environment, it creates system strain on the local district and the NDCDE teachers. To restate, we experienced years of high success where pursuits were founded on academic purpose and fit for one's academic pathway. When we as adults know this is not going to be a good fit and can predict with a high level of accuracy an unsuccessful outcome, the fiscally sound practice would be to limit the blanket eligibility practice. I see Bullet 'd' on page 2 lines 1 and 2 as a means to incentivize engagement and performance. Given the numbers shared in the prior paragraph, this would have saved our building roughly \$25,000 last year if we received 100% compliance in reimbursement. I state it this way because getting reimbursement after the fact is not always successful. The reverse of that, self pay and get reimbursed by the district for successful completion would be far preferable from a district perspective. The last bullet 'e' on page 2 lines 3-6 has significant implications for districts. The first part of this is very straightforward that a district is responsible for the cost of the course if they do not offer that course. We support that language. The conjunctive part of that sentence (obtaining the course credit would contribute to the student meeting high school graduation requirements in time to graduate within the usual time frame) deserves to have some examples for context. As it stands now, a student could be in their senior year, take 3 classes in person (needed for graduation) and 2 elective classes through NDCDE. The 2 elective classes are not needed to graduate but fulfill a local requirement to be a fulltime student and could very well be credits above the 24 minimum requirement in BPS. This begs the question of should a district/taxpayers be funding coursework which is not needed for graduation while giving students autonomy to be done with

a fulltime day by 11:00 am? As an educator, parent, and taxpayer, I have a believe and stance on the answer and it is safe to say it is why I am supportive of the way it is written.

In closing, virtual learning has and will continue to be a mode of offering in our district and those around the state. The primary reason for support of this bill is to return the efficacy of decisions to local teams which support students in their pursuit of success. Doing so will produce more successful outcomes while being financially prudent.

Steve Madler
Principal – Century High School