

HB 1532 testimony
Education Committee
Bob Otterson, President, Oak Grove Lutheran School
Feb. 1, 2023

Mr. Chairman ... thank you for the opportunity to provide commentary in support of House Bill 1532 and the acknowledgement from legislators that nonpublic schools make positive impacts to North Dakota life.

I am Bob Otterson. I serve more than 720 students from age 3 through grade 12 and their families as president of Oak Grove Lutheran School. Few people know that Oak Grove has a special place in the history of education in North Dakota and along the Red River. Oak Grove opened in the fall of 1906 as a high school for girls, 14 years before their mothers were eligible to vote in the United States. The humility of faithful Norwegians continues in the school's shared values — concepts such as character, courage and curiosity, faith and reason.

Oak Grove and partner nonpublic schools are part of the state's educational ecosystem. Oak Grove and partner nonpublic schools feed North Dakota's workforce needs. Oak Grove and partner nonpublic schools help attract families from other states to our respective communities. And Oak Grove and partner nonpublic schools provide options for students and families.

Oak Grove students populate North Dakota's universities. Taking into account the last four graduating classes, 55% of domestic Oak Grove graduates enrolled at North Dakota colleges and universities. Many of those choosing out-of-state options enroll at Concordia College in Moorhead. Even from the east side of the Red River, those students remain part of North Dakota's largest market. I'm certain our colleagues in higher education have talked to you about the importance of retaining young professionals through educational opportunities in state. Again, our schools are helping you keep North Dakota's colleges and universities relevant in today's world.

Oak Grove alumni continue to serve North Dakota. Almost one thousand graduated Grovers live in North Dakota today. Those Grovers comprise a larger population than 22 of the state's county seats. These are people engaged in a wide range of vocations — education, engineering, medicine and health care, social services, ministry and others.

Oak Grove and our partner nonpublic schools attract families. This state's economic strengths include agriculture, natural resources, financial services, engineering and medicine. As you know, that economic vitality requires the recruitment of people to fill key positions in some industry sectors. And some of those families look for private schools because their children already know private schools in other markets.

Lastly, Oak Grove and our partner schools expand options for families. We all live in public school districts that respond to community needs, and our colleagues in those K-12 districts must plan each year for enrollment swells and drops. All educators know that some students succeed in large environments; others flourish in smaller groups. Some students can process complex reading assignments; others grasp the material better from a guided lesson or a study group.

Some students prefer a large swath of co-curricular options and extracurricular activities. Some students, in competitive classes, may focus on one or two activities. Meanwhile, students in smaller schools benefit from sharing their talents across several pursuits. The state's private schools provide the right fits for some students and their families. That spectrum of options provides more breadth and depth for today's learners.

To close, I reiterate that my colleagues emphasize the position of private schools as additions to North Dakota's educational ecosystem, not as competitors with public schools. We appreciate your interest in recognizing that position and parents' voices in the educational process. We share with public schools the awesome adventure of preparing tomorrow's citizens for service and leadership.

I ask for your support of House Bill 1532, and I thank you for your time.