



# North Dakota Small Organized Schools

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HB 1532 – Testimony in Opposition  
Senate Education Committee  
Senator Elkin– Chairman  
March 14, 2023

Senator Elkin and members of the Senate Education Committee, my name is Michael Heilman. I am the Executive Director of the North Dakota Small Organized Schools (NDSOS). I represent 150-member school districts of the North Dakota Small Organized Schools. NDSOS is in strong opposition to HB 1532.

HB 1532 clearly diverts public funds to private schools under the guise of educational choice. The problem is not with choice. The problem is asking the public to pay for this choice. Particularly when this choice is for a small percentage of families, about 7% who happen to live in one of the 5 or maybe 6 major population centers, then you may have a choice. However, for the vast majority of the rural areas of the state there is no choice. Furthermore it is only choice if you will be accepted into the private school and make no mistake, not all are included at our private schools. I was an administrator for a private school and denied enrollments to families and students. I not saying that is a bad thing to be denied private school enrollment and I would defend the private schools’ right to decide who enrolls. It was the likely the best choice for the student to attend the public school that provided the services they needed, but denied they were.

HB 1532 is about choice, but not parental or student choice. In the end the private schools get to decide who can attends. The taxpayers that live in areas with no choice whatsoever get the privilege of paying for someone’s choice when they themselves have no choice. Perhaps this will cause an increase in private education attendance, I doubt it will be significant. That means that HB1532 simply provides a subsidy to those that have made this choice and for the most part have the means to afford it.

I must acknowledge that the private schools I am familiar with do a great job providing education and work hard to help those that struggle with the cost to attend. Donations from the church community, alumni, private donations, corporate sponsors, and other sources all help fund private education, and all are a matter of personal choice. Passage of HB 1532 to provide state taxpayer dollars is not choice, unless the taxpayers of each district are allowed to decide if they wish to fund private education. If the

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**The mission of NDSOS is to provide leadership for the small/rural schools in North Dakota and to support legislation favorable to their philosophy while opposing legislation that is harmful.**

taxpayers of each school district with a private school want to fund the private schools, let them decide by passing a mil levy to support private schools in their districts.

We have been told that this will not impact public school funding. Perhaps not this session, but we are kidding ourselves if we think this is the final request for funding. The dollar amount will grow, the request will become larger and when funding is tight, make no mistake, it will impact the funding of public education. The \$24 million in this bill would go a long way toward restoring the reimbursement rates for transportation that has dwindled from 70% to under 40% in recent years. The largest private schools at a rate of \$1500 per student would receive more aid than nearly 70 public schools.

Finally, if it is the choice of this body that private schools are going to be funded with public dollars there must be accountability and all publicly funded schools held accountable to the same rules. It seems only fair. If publicly funded then the same rules need to apply, for example open meetings and records laws, state mandated testing, required professional development and curriculum and private school parents must have the same rights as public school parents. No child can be turned away regardless of disability or behavioral issues. Private or public it's a choice. Choose one or the other, but not both!

North Dakota Small Organized Schools urges a do not pass recommendation from the Senate Education Committee.

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