A BILL for an Act to create and enact chapter 15.1-39 of the North Dakota Century Code, relating to the establishment of an education empowerment program; and to provide an appropriation.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF NORTH DAKOTA:

SECTION 1. Chapter 15.1-39 of the North Dakota Century Code is created and enacted as follows:

15.1-39-01. Definitions. For purposes of this chapter, unless the context otherwise requires:

1. "Account" means an education empowerment account established under the program.

2. "Course documentation" means records from a qualified provider or school indicating course completion.

3. "Curriculum" means a complete course of study for a particular content area or grade level.

4. "Instructional material" means any supplemental materials required to administer a curriculum.

5. "Parent" means a resident of this state who is a parent, conservator, legal guardian, custodian, or other individual with legal authority to act on behalf of a program participant.

6. "Program" means the education empowerment program created under this chapter.

7. "Program participant" means a child participating in the program.

8. "Qualified provider" means an educational service provider or vendor, including a nonpublic school or a tutor, licensed or accredited by a state, regional, or national accrediting organization if applicable, which accepts education empowerment funds, from an approved vendor list as determined by the superintendent of public instruction.
15.1-39-02. Program and account establishment and management.

1. The superintendent of public instruction shall establish and administer the program to provide funds for qualified education expenses of program participants.

2. The superintendent of public instruction shall create and fund an account to pay qualified providers on behalf of a program participant who is eligible for the program.

3. For each year of program participation by a program participant enrolled in public or nonpublic school, the superintendent of public instruction shall disburse payments from the account as checks payable to the parents of an eligible student. The superintendent shall mail the checks to the qualifying school at which the eligible student is enrolled. The parent of the eligible student shall endorse the check before the check is deposited. The superintendent shall provide the parents with an amount up to:

   a. Fifty percent of the per-student payment rate reduced by the state average percentage of local revenue required to be subtracted to determine state aid payments under section 15.1-27-04.1 for the prior fiscal year; or

   b. Fifty percent of the per-student payment rate reduced by the state average percentage of local revenue required to be subtracted to determine state aid payments under section 15.1-27-04.1 for the prior fiscal year weighted to the state's funding formula, if the participant has an active individualized education plan.

4. A parent of a program participant under subsection 3 may choose any education method, including nonpublic school, private tutor, online learning, or other qualified provider, which best serves the needs of the program participant.

5. The superintendent of public instruction may contract with a third party to administer the program and manage accounts for the program. The superintendent of public instruction shall oversee and audit the contractor.

6. The superintendent of public instruction shall provide information regarding the program to the public, including through the superintendent of public instruction's website. The superintendent of public instruction shall ensure parents of children who have disabilities or educational disadvantages are aware of the program.
A child is eligible for the program if the child is eligible to attend kindergarten through grade five at a public school in this state.

1. Program funds may be used to pay the following qualified education expenses:
   a. Tuition, books, instructional materials, and fees at an accredited nonpublic school.
   b. Textbook purchases.
   c. Curriculum purchases.
   d. Computer and any other hardware purchases that may be approved by the program administrator every three years.
   e. Instructional material purchases.
   f. Professional fees of a private tutor or teaching services.
   g. Professional fees of a practitioner or provider of educational therapies or services.
   h. Fees for a nationally standardized, norm-referenced achievement test or examination.
   i. Educational services purchased from a public school, but which do not qualify the participant to be counted in daily attendance at the school.
2. Program funds may not be used for the purchase of food or child care provided before or after school hours or during holidays and vacations.
3. This section does not limit the ability of a program participant to pay a qualified provider with funds other than program funds for educational courses, materials, supplies, or services not covered by the program.

1. A parent may enroll an eligible child in the program for the next school year at any time during a calendar year.
2. The superintendent of public instruction shall use a standardized enrollment form to determine a child's eligibility for the program. The superintendent of public instruction shall make the enrollment form readily available through various sources, including the superintendent of public instruction's website, fax, and mail.
3. The superintendent of public instruction shall provide to each applicant and annually to each program participant information that describes the operation of the program, including the list of qualified education expenses; expense reporting requirements; a list of qualified providers, including nonpublic schools participating in the program; and a description of the responsibilities of program participants and the superintendent of public instruction.

15.1-39-06. Achievement testing.

1. A parent shall arrange for the program participant to be administered a nationally recognized norm-referenced achievement test each year unless the program participant is attending a nonpublic school and the school administers the program participant a national norm-referenced assessment.

2. The parent shall report the results of the assessment to an independent researcher selected by the superintendent of public instruction through procurement practices, including a request for proposals. The independent researcher shall aggregate the test scores for all program participants and produce an annual report containing the aggregated results. Each report of the independent researcher must document changes in assessment scores of program participants. The first report must be produced three years after the program commences.

3. The requirements of subsection 1 do not apply if the parent notifies the school district in which the program participant resides, and the independent researcher selected by the superintendent of public instruction, that the parent has a philosophical, moral, or religious objection to the use of norm-referenced achievement tests.


1. The superintendent of public instruction shall issue a request for proposals if the superintendent of public instruction chooses to hire a contractor to manage accounts under the program. The contractor shall establish an account as a qualified provider.

2. Any funds remaining in the account at the end of a school year revert to the state general fund.

15.1-39-08. Auditing of accounts.

To ensure compliance with applicable law and the requirements of the program, the superintendent of public instruction annually may audit a sufficient number of program
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accounts, as determined by the superintendent of public instruction. An audit may include
verification of account information and a review of student attendance records.

The superintendent of public instruction shall suspend payment for any program participant
who fails to comply with applicable law or the requirements of the program. The superintendent
of public instruction shall notify the program participant in writing the payment has been
suspended. The notification must specify the grounds for the suspension and state the program
participant has ten business days to respond and take any corrective action ordered by the
superintendent of public instruction. Following the expiration of the ten-day period, the
superintendent of public instruction shall:

1. Order permanent suspension of payment to the qualified provider for the participant
   ineligible for the program;
2. Order temporary reinstatement of the payment, conditioned on the performance of
   specified action by the program participant; or
3. Order full reinstatement of the payments.

A qualified provider may not:

1. Charge a program participant an amount greater than the standard rate charged to
   nonparticipants for the item or service provided.
2. Share with or refund, credit, or rebate to a parent or program participant, or any
   person on behalf of a parent or program participant, any program funds paid or owed
   by the program participant to the qualified provider.

If the superintendent of public instruction obtains evidence of any fraudulent use of
payments, the superintendent of public instruction shall refer the matter to the attorney general
for investigation and prosecution.

1. The program does not expand the regulatory authority of the superintendent of public
   instruction, or any school district to impose additional regulations on a qualified
   provider under the program beyond what is necessary by the superintendent of public
   instruction to enforce the financial and administrative requirements of the program.
The superintendent of public instruction and school districts may not regulate the educational program of a qualified provider under the program.  

2. A qualified provider may not be required to alter its creed, practices, admissions policy, or curriculum to accept a student whose parent pays tuition or fees from an education empowerment account or to participate as a qualified provider.  

Upon request, a school district a program participant otherwise would attend shall provide the parent or the participating nonpublic school the program participant attends a complete copy of the program participant’s school records. This section does not require or authorize the release of information except in conformity with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 [20 U.S.C. 1232g].  

The superintendent of public instruction annually may request a parent to complete a written survey that solicits the parent’s overall satisfaction with the program and opinion on specified topics and issues relevant to the effectiveness of the program.  

The superintendent of public instruction shall adopt rules, procedures, and forms necessary to implement the program.  

Funds must be available to program participants starting with the 2022-23 school year.  

SECTION 2. APPROPRIATION. There is appropriated out of any moneys in the general fund in the state treasury, not otherwise appropriated, the sum of $200,000, or so much of the sum as may be necessary, to the department of public instruction for the purpose of providing salaries for temporary administrators of the program under section 1 of this Act, for the biennium beginning July 1, 2021, and ending June 30, 2023.  

SECTION 3. APPROPRIATION. There is appropriated out of any moneys in the general fund in the state treasury, not otherwise appropriated, the sum of $5,000,000, or so much of the sum as may be necessary, to the department of public instruction for the purpose of funding program participants of the education empowerment program under subsection 4 of section 15.1-39-02, for the biennium beginning July 1, 2021, and ending June 30, 2023.