

HB 1431
Chairman Delzer
House Appropriations Committee
February 1st, 2021

Good afternoon. Chairman Delzer and members of the House Appropriations Committee, for the record, my name is Steven Holen and I am superintendent of schools for the McKenzie County Public School District #1 in Watford City. I am here to testify in support of HB 1431, and in particular, Section 11 pertaining to the Department of Career and Technical Education Operating Fund.

The McKenzie County Public School District #1 testified in support of HB 1019 during the 2019 legislative session which promoted grants for school districts pursuing career academy or career and technical education (CTE) center programs. The school district has explored options for CTE expansion since 2017 including collaborations with industry and business partners as well as political subdivisions and post-secondary institutions in our region. Although the funding provided in HB 1019 did not pass, the school district continued to work toward goals of providing enhanced career and technical education to our students and opportunities for other regional school districts. During the interim, the McKenzie County Public School District #1 testified at Legacy Fund committee meetings in support of funding for career academies/career and technical education centers, as a proactive way to support K-12 education as well as facilitate long range workforce targets to maintain the revenue that has built the Legacy Fund to date and prepare local, stable workforce members for meaningful and necessary employment in our region.

The McKenzie County Public School District #1 has witnessed a trend in its high school graduates and post-secondary pursuits for the past several years. A significant number of students (approximately 35% in 2020) are electing to pursue employment or trade school options after high school graduation as well as two-year college training programs. The number of students pursuing four-year college degrees has decreased significantly over the past 10 years perhaps driven by the availability of high paying jobs in our geographic area as well as general trends across the country toward trade and certification programs. The school district identified a need for expansion of Career and Technical programs and curriculum to help address post-secondary readiness of our students and collaboration with our local Economic Development and Job Authority organizations to partner in developing programs to meet the needs of our students and community.

The Workforce Skills Initiative was formed through this process and has members that include county and city officials, school administration and teachers, business members, local universities such as the University of Mary and Williston State College, Train ND, and others to develop a plan to provide workforce skills training and resources to adolescent and adult learners. The goal of the initiative was to ultimately address a shortage of workforce in our area and to align and expand the K-12 educational experience with the resources available to promote a highly skilled and diverse

workforce. Communication and collaboration have been the cornerstones of this effort from the start of discussions and developing a common vision and mission.

As part of this process, the school district with assistance of our JDA formed a subcommittee of the Workforce Skills Initiative specifically with members of our energy industry to begin exploring partnerships and collaboration in developing and promoting workforce skills and career exploration at the middle and high school levels. Over the past 3.5 years; this committee has expanded to over 20 members with regular meetings to encourage discussion and collaboration in educating students on employment opportunities available and alignment of skills required to be successful in the diverse employment opportunities available in the energy sector. Major industry partners include: Whiting, ConocoPhillips, OneOk, Oasis, Hess, Equinor, MBI, and others. The goal of the Workforce Skills Initiative was to address a diversity of areas and opportunities for students, however, a focus on energy related employment is certainly a priority for our region and a significant factor in relevance provided to our students and families.

The vision is also to eliminate redundancy and promote efficiency of individual programs as well as communications with major industry and community partners. Successful programs such as the T-4 (Tools Trades Torque Tech) event held in Watford City for two consecutive years promotes “tomorrow’s innovative workforce s in our schools today” through hand-on opportunities for students and to inspire students to consider workforce options related to the T4 core vision. These opportunities, as well as other programs related to our regional high tech consortium, can be facilitated and provide a regional and efficient delivery model that is highly promoted by our businesses and industries as a central voice in working with K-12 and adult education programming. Despite our significant population and workforce skills needs at the epicenter of oil and gas development; post-secondary and employment training options are limited and this programming begins to bridge that gap and expand on training and certification options.

The school district has also worked with the NDPC to explore workforce needs in our region over the short and long run; presentations were planned for the Williston Basin Petroleum Conference regarding our Workforce Skills initiative and career academy concepts which was unfortunately cancelled with the pandemic. The school district has actively worked with the career academy and school district in Hobbs, NM to share ideas and common vision as the #1 (McKenzie County) and #2 (Lea County, NM) oil producing counties in the nation. The McKenzie County Public School District #1 funded a pilot program for the second semester of 2019-2020 to implement an energy curriculum (2-year cohort) that could be expanded into a larger program with additional resources and become replicable for other school districts in the region.

The career academy/CTE center concept has undergone a feasibility study through our JDA to quantify the need and value to our community and region of which the need and interest was substantiated and the process moves forward to develop phases and implementation strategies if funding is available. Stakeholders in our community and leadership have participated in site visits to the Bismarck Career Academy and

conference calls with other programs to research ideas and how to align programs that are scaled and fit our local and regional needs. The vision established, and initial curriculum already developed, provide specific career orientated objectives that are aligned with state curriculum and career and technical standards, however, implement elements of authentic career experiences, project based learning, and personalized learning geared to their post-secondary experience.

As the use of Legacy Funds are legislated and considered in current and future biennium, funding of the Department of Career and Technical Education Operating Fund provides a “legacy” by investing back into youth and adult workforce and education programs that uniquely fits the purpose of this fund through investments in long term returns and impacts on a varied demographic of families and workers. Why should Legacy Fund dollars be utilized to promote K-12 education programs and concepts such as career and technical education programs? The short answer is these efforts, while successful in the Bismarck project over 10 years ago without grant funds, are accelerated and provide opportunities for success in a shorter timeframe and allow the impacts and efforts to be addressed as needed in our communities at this time. The expansion of a successful model often requires additional resources to facilitate that expansion and reach more students and families in North Dakota.

While this current economic environment provides challenges in funding at all levels, the need for career and technical programs and adult retraining is at a premium at this time as workers elect to remain in our communities and expand their employment skills in areas still needed during an energy/economic slowdown. This provides for a diversification and stabilization as well as to retain workforce when the economy brings back activities to our area. It is difficult to reach consensus in K-12 topics, however, few will argue the need for career and technical programs and their value on our students and community. More opportunities in this area is well document to provide substantial benefits, including higher graduation rates and student engagement, and build communities by allowing generational and new families to establish roots in our communities with quality employment options after high school. This investment can certainly provide a legacy for future generations of North Dakota citizens.

Thank you for your time and consideration of support for HB 1431 and Section 11. I can answer any questions at this time.