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Testimony Senate Bill 2269
House Education
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Chairman Owens and members of the Committee, my name is Kirsten Dvorak. I am the executive director of The Arc of North Dakota, which includes all six Arc chapters in North Dakota: Bismarck, Bowman, Dickinson, Fargo, Grand Forks, and Valley City. Our mission is to improve people's quality of life with intellectual and developmental disabilities and actively support their full inclusion and community participation.

Many students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are less likely to enroll in a post-secondary education despite intellectual capability. Only 41% of individuals with a disability, including ASD, graduate from college. My son Radek was not part of the 41% who graduated from college; he had to drop out in his second college semester. He did not have the supports in place for him to be successful.

The ASTEP program offers an inclusive education that supports students with disabilities to earn a degree or a certificate and gain employment skills throughout the two-year program. Students that attend ASTEP are engaged in employment opportunities through either a paid experience or an internship that helps build job skills, soft skills, and a sense of pride in a job well done.

Access to meaningful education and employment for people with disabilities continues to be an issue across the country. Many individuals with disabilities of working age are



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either unemployed or do not participate in the workforce to lack opportunity and insufficient education attainment levels. According to the 2019 census, only 37% of people with disabilities are in North Dakota's workforce. The average Supplemental Security Income is \$783 a month, which about 22% below the federal poverty level. Students who attend programs such as ASTEP are 15 times more likely to have a paid job finishing the ASTEP program.

ASTEP also has case managers and mentors to help with studying. ASTEP students learn to advocate for themselves in what they need to be successful in the classroom and on the job. Students learn how to show up on time for work, learn time management, and break down a project. All skills are needed to be successful and live independently in the community.