

**Testimony of Dr. Cory Steiner  
Northern Cass Superintendent  
HB 1431: Support of Funding for Department of Career & Technical  
Education  
Wednesday, March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2021**

Good afternoon Chairman Bell and members of Finance and Taxation committee. It is my privilege to testify in support of a HB 1431 and funding for Career Workforce Academies. My name is Dr. Cory J. Steiner and I'm the Superintendent of Schools at Northern Cass School District in Hunter, North Dakota. Northern Cass is a PK-12 district with 660 learners located 25 miles northwest of Fargo. We are an innovative school district which is in the midst of a transformation to personalized, competency-based learning.

The issues in education are profound, but more importantly, they are urgent. The structure and function of our schools today must change to meet the needs of a world which is changing at an exponential rate. Every system is designed to get the results it gets. Our system is getting the results it is supposed to get. Unfortunately, what is being asked of schools has changed dramatically since the design of the system. In schools, we have been tasked to prepare learners to be productive members of society. We have been asked to prepare learners for college, career, and military. We are asked to prepare learners of today for jobs that don't exist while also making sure learners have the skills for jobs in the workplace now. We must develop academic, social, and emotional skills while developing long-lasting relationships in a safe environment. In other words, we must prepare learners to be choice ready for the future. The list of important things to do and accomplish is never-ending. However, now is the time to transform our system of education in order to better meet the needs of our society. It must be our mission moving forward.

I testify today in support of funding for Career Workforce Academies. The Career Workforce Academy concept will allow us to accomplish the goals of creating choice ready learners. The Career Workforce Academy will challenge us to think differently and reframe the abilities learners need while also changing the roles learners play in our society. It is my belief we have the most gifted generation of learners in the history of our great state. It is why we must act with a sense of urgency and cannot afford to let this opportunity pass. By not supporting funding for Career Workforce Academies, our state will miss out on an opportunity to take advantage of our learners and allow them to impact the future of our state.

Today, I would like to share with you five advantages of the academy concept. First, it expands opportunities for learners. At Northern Cass, we have an agriculture, marketing, and FACS program which provide Career and Technical Education options for our learners. We are fortunate to have a supportive board, strong financial standing, and highly qualified and effective educators in our district for these areas. Many districts in our state don't have the ability to offer a variety of options for CTE on-site. An academy will reduce this barrier for rural learners while increasing the opportunities for them to engage in passion areas before they graduate from high school. It is essential we provide opportunities for all learners so they can enter the workforce with a well-rounded skill set.

The academy model will be a collaborative approach enhancing everyone's effectiveness and efficiencies. In Cass County, we have been engaging in this work for the past four years. This includes collaborative discussions and planning among the districts of Central Cass, Northern Cass, Fargo, and West Fargo. The conversations have also included North Dakota State College of Science (NDSOS), the Fargo-Moorhead Chamber of Commerce, and many businesses in the metro area. With a commitment of funding and human capital from local school districts, local government agencies, and the private sector, our academy will be public-private funded and support not only K-12 education but also the business community as a whole. For the academies to become a reality, both private and public interests must have a stake.

The third reason the academy model is important is it will provide a workforce development solution. Throughout the state of North Dakota, we have issues with lack of qualified applicants for job openings. Each region of our state has their own workforce issues which require a different approach and solution. The academy model is proven to address these concerns by being flexible enough to meet the specific needs of the various regions throughout our state. It will allow for multiple career clusters to be established regionally which will meet diverse needs. Although I represent PK-12 education, the academy model will also provide training for those already in the workforce. This will provide opportunities for adults to develop new skills that can better serve our changing workforce needs. There is also the potential to work with our immigrant and refugee population as well as adults who are incarcerated. The possibilities are limitless.

The next reason to support funding for academies is to increase career exploration and skill development. Learners in our districts are exposed to career exploration and skill development. However, it is not done with fidelity across our state due to a lack of resources. Through the expertise of those involved in the academy,

districts will be able to develop a career program which begins with career awareness at the primary levels followed by purposeful career exploration at the middle level which leads to career preparation through job shadows, internships, and career training at the secondary level. Through a partnership with the private sector, the academies will make sure every learner (especially in our rural communities), no matter the school they attend, will have the opportunity to be exposed to authentic career exploration at all levels.

Finally, the academy is a proven model that has been utilized not only across the country but right here in Bismarck. The Bismarck Career Academy and Technical Center is a model for other academies in our state. This model has been implemented throughout the country from Sioux Falls, SD to Alexandria, MN to Nashville, TN. Each model has elements necessary to meet the unique conditions of their region. However, the common theme is the model works. It benefits communities, schools, and the workforce.

Let me share a short story with you to reiterate why the academy is so important. A learner in our district wanted to be an architect and had wanted this since they could remember. They attended a job shadow. They spent three hours in this experience and realized this was not the career path they wanted. What if they never had that experience? What if they could have taken a course in architecture at an academy? Think of the money saved for the learner and the potential benefit. All of this would be possible if we can implement the academy model throughout our state. This is one story, but it is far too common in our schools. The academy model will provide authentic experiences to prepare learners to make informed choices about their future.

Our schools and higher education produce a high-quality product due to the dedicated and passionate leaders, educators, parents, and learners throughout our state. I'm proud of our state, our educational system, and our learners, but I worry about our future. We have boards, administrators, businesses, and colleges ready to change the model into one which promotes learning through authentic experiences. I understand the financial commitment for this aspect of the bill is significant. However, I believe the negative impact by not doing this is far greater. By supporting funding for career and technical workforce academies, the legislature will make a statement it stands in support of doing what must be done for the state's future success. You have the power to create a different version of tomorrow by supporting this funding. You have an opportunity to change our future and allow us to do it together through a collaborative effort which will make

North Dakota the educational and economic leader in our great nation. I ask for a 'do pass' on HB 1431 and thank you for your time and consideration.