

Good morning, Chairperson Bell and members of the Senate Finance and Tax Committee. My name is Beth Slette and I am the superintendent for West Fargo Public Schools (WFPS). I am speaking in support of the original version of HB 1431 which included funding to build Career Workforce Academies to serve students across the great state of North Dakota, including Cass County.

The Career Workforce Academy (CWA) model has been a three-pronged collaborative conversation for several years between K-12 education, post-secondary, and industry, resulting in a collaborative vision, strategic plan, programming, and operational framework, and WFPS is in full support of this project. Our district has committed \$1 million in sustained funding towards the operations of this building. North Dakota School of Science (NDSCS), Northern Cass, Central Cass, Fargo Public Schools, as well as many private donors, recognize the needs and benefits of a CWA in our metro community.

No Child Left Behind (2001-2014) was a time of high stakes testing and so called 'high accountability' with naming and shaming; as a result districts spent their energy and resources on preparing students to pass tests and prepare for college. The model created many problems for our students and their communities. Students were encouraged to attend four-year institutions and they incurred a great deal of college debt. Some earned a diploma, but many did not. The result? Young adults had some post-secondary schooling, but they lacked the skills and dispositions necessary to gain anything more than an entry level job with low pay. Meanwhile, our businesses and industries were, and still are, screaming for a skilled labor force. According to the 1-2-7 ratio, there will be 7 technical jobs, for every 2 requiring a four degree, and 1 requiring a masters or more.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 requires states to do so much more than give tests. North Dakota stakeholders have adopted the framework of Choice Ready as an indicator to measure school growth in high schools. A student who graduates Choice Ready has met the criteria in two of three areas: post-secondary ready, career ready, and/or military ready. This concept focuses on the accumulation of academic growth and gains, in combination with specific indicators of school success for postsecondary, workforce, and military readiness. The Choice Ready framework is inclusive of all students, and helps students identify career clusters and related skills which prepare and enhance success in multiple areas beyond high school.

It is important to know that this shift has created a great need for authentic learning experiences and skills training for our students. Right now, we are meeting the needs, but we do have constraints in specialized lab spaces such as construction labs, diesel, and aviation. We also have a significant need in agriculture education with zero programs in Fargo and West Fargo. We must go beyond our current programming to create better options for students to learn high-tech skills and transition to meaningful college course programs. Training beyond high school is necessary for success in today's economy.

The Career Academy model advances CTE experiences by aligning secondary and post-secondary learning experiences in high-tech learning spaces, centralized business partnerships, and skilled instructors. The CWA also increases adult learning and retraining options in the region it supports.

The state's K-12 mission statement is: "All students will graduate choice ready with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to be successful." With that as our end goal, our entire state needs to pull together. Ultimately, the CWA is about the future of ND. Trained workers lead to successful business attraction, thriving economies, and increase revenues for the state of North Dakota.

Big challenges require big collaboration. To make these centers a reality in more than a single district, it will take a coordinated effort: districts committing local dollars to ensure sustainable operations, private sector leaders supporting capital construction and providing direction on the needs of our 21st century workforce, and state investment that both improves the educational experience of thousands of North Dakota students while intentionally addressing the workforce challenges that existed before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. I respectfully ask that you preserve funding for Career Academies in HB 1431 with a DUE PASS recommendation to support the innovative ideas ready and waiting for the learners and businesses of North Dakota.