

Bills look to expand North Dakota student opportunities through savings accounts

by Michael Achterling
North Dakota Monitor

North Dakota lawmakers are weighing several proposals to establish Education Savings Accounts, but the eligibility, method of payment and amount students may receive differs.

Supporters say they want to give families more options but opponents object to using public dollars to pay for private school tuition.

Legislators have already demonstrated support for school choice, approving a bill in 2023 that would have provided \$10 million in state funding to offset the cost of private school tuition for students who met income requirements.

The bill was vetoed by then-Gov. Doug Burgum, who at the time said he supported the concept but didn't think the bill went far enough to promote competition or expand options in rural areas. He also called for more transparency and accountability.

"I can say confidently today that he (Burgum) was most definitely correct," said Sen. Michelle Axtman, R-Bismarck, during a hearing on February 5.

Axtman is the prime sponsor of Senate Bill 2400, which would provide a \$1,000 Educational Savings Account for every student, whether they attend public or private school or are homeschooled.

Students attending private schools could qualify for \$2,500 or \$4,000 per year if their households meet cer-

tain income thresholds.

"This bill isn't about one educational option over another," Axtman said. "This bill is about increasing educational opportunities for each and every North Dakota student."

The savings accounts can cover tuition, fees, textbooks, school meals, educational therapy and tutoring, among other educational items and services. Axtman added North Dakota would be the first state to cover student mental health services through the accounts.

Participating private schools would have to meet accountability requirements. For example, students who pay for school with a voucher would need to participate in statewide tests, with school results presented to a legislative committee. The state superintendent of public instruction would administer and audit the program.

A fiscal note estimating the cost of the program had not been prepared as of last week.

"Unless this is going to happen for free, the money is going to have to come from somewhere, and those are public dollars," said Nick Archuleta, president of North Dakota United, a union representing teachers and public sector employees.

Rick Diegel, superintendent of Kidder County Public Schools, used basic math during his testimony in opposition to Axtman's bill and said the total for

about 120,000 North Dakota students to receive at least \$1,000 would bring the cost to about \$120 million per school year.

In an interview, Axtman acknowledged \$120 million per year would be a conservative estimate. She added she doesn't expect every North Dakota student will use the entire amount in their savings account every year.

Alexandre Fall, a senior associate with Pew Charitable Trusts who has studied school choice programs, said Education Savings Accounts have increased in popularity since 2020. The costs can be difficult to estimate because budget analysts don't know how many students will use the programs or transition from public to private education or homeschooling, he said.

"Once these programs become more popular, we'll have a better understanding of the cost mechanisms and the shifts in enrollment," Fall said. "But it's a very new policy and it is surrounded by a lot of uncertainty."

Archuleta said siphoning of tax dollars to fund something that isn't for a public purpose, like private school tuition, means less money for public education, roads or anything else providing a public good for the state.

He said future Legislatures would need to continue funding the program, even in years with tight budgets.

In Gov. Kelly Armstrong's budget proposal,

he calls for a 2% annual increase to the K-12 funding formula, or an additional \$60 million, which would bring total K-12 education spending to \$3.12 billion for the 2025-27 biennium.

"We don't think it's enough," Archuleta said. "I think we can do better."

Armstrong's budget also included \$44.3 million for Education Savings Accounts.

Supporters of school choice, including Armstrong, have said the initiatives can be funded in addition to the traditional K-12 system.

Page Forrest, a senior associate with Pew Charitable Trusts, said education systems across the country have faced budget crunches, in part due to the expiration of federal pandemic aid.

"If budgets continue to tighten across the country, that means it may feel like public schools and nonpublic alternatives are competing for an increasingly smaller piece of the pie, even if they are being funded as separate entities," Forrest said.

Competing proposals

A separate proposal from Rep. Pat Heinert, R-Bismarck, takes a different approach. House Bill 1590 would establish what he calls education services accounts that would require matching dollars from families.

Families can deposit up to \$2,000 per child and the Bank of North Dakota would provide funds to match 50%.

The dollars could be spent on private school tuition, dual-credit courses,

vocational and technical courses, online courses and other approved programs.

Students could use the money in the accounts to pay for school meals, tutoring, mental health counseling and special needs programs, higher education entrance exams, other educational materials and education-related camps.

"Every student in the state of North Dakota is eligible to participate at whatever dollar amount they are comfortable putting into an account," Heinert said. "The idea of a match is not acceptable to many, but I think it makes the program go farther."

Legislative Council estimates the program would cost \$41.2 million.

Heinert's bill is a pilot program that would run through the 2026-27 school year.

"We've got two years to look at this," he said. "We've never done this before in North Dakota. We've tried. We've never got it accomplished. It's time though."

Two similar proposals would provide state funding to be used toward private school tuition or homeschool expenses.

Senate Bill 2303, sponsored by Sen. Mike Wobbe, R-Valley City, and House Bill 1540, sponsored by Rep. Ben Koppelman, R-West Fargo, would deposit 80% of the amount allocated to public school students, or more than \$8,800, into an Education Savings Account. Another 20% would

be transferred to the student's home public school district. The dollars could be used for education-related expenses, but the participating student must be counted in their home school district to provide accurate state aid payments.

The proposals don't have any income requirements. The Bank of North Dakota would administer the accounts.

The estimated cost for each bill is \$243 million for 2025-2027 based on the current enrollment of private and homeschooled students.

House Bill 1607, sponsored by Rep. Matthew Heilman, R-Bismarck, would provide state dollars for private school students. His proposal would provide the full per-pupil state aid payment, or about \$11,000, for each student to be used on eligible education expenses. The families would receive the dollars on a debit card. The estimated cost is \$179 million for 2025-2027. The proposal does not have income requirements.

In all cases, the actual cost of the school choice programs would depend on how many people participate.

SB 2400 was amended by the Senate Education Committee on February 11 and received a do pass recommendation. It will now go to the Senate Appropriations Committee.

HB 1590 received a do not pass recommendation from the House Education Committee on February 10 with a vote of 9-4-1.

Public Notice

MINUTES OF REGULAR MEETING NEW ROCKFORD CITY COMMISSION NEW ROCKFORD, NORTH DAKOTA NEW ROCKFORD CITY HALL FEBRUARY 3, 2025

President Richter called the meeting to order at 9:00 a.m. at City Hall with Fleming, Dauenhauer and Belquist (via phone) present. Also present was City Attorney Peterson and Public Works Superintendent Hirschert.

Fleming made a motion to approve the agenda with the addition of CD Rates and Audit. Dauenhauer seconded the motion. All in favor. Motion carried.

Dauenhauer made a motion to approve the January 6, 2025, regular meeting minutes, January 21, 2025, special meeting minutes. Richter seconded the motion. All in favor. Motion carried.

Dauenhauer made a motion to approve the financials as presented. Belquist seconded the motion. All in favor. Motion carried.

Richter made a motion to approve the January bills. Fleming seconded the motion. In a roll call vote, Richter, Fleming, Dauenhauer, and Belquist voted "aye". No nay votes. Motion carried.

4th Corporation	100.00
Aqua-Pure	1,289.70
Butler Machinery	979.33
Cash & Carry Lumber	945.45
CenDak Cooperative.....	2,958.97
Central Plains Water Dist....	33.50
CCU	1,263.41
Dakota Dust-Tex.....	31.75
Dave Gehrtz.....	150.00
Duchscherer Supply	239.74
Eddy Co. Auditor	18,772.88
Ferguson Waterworks	258.19
Grand Forks Utility.....	52.00
Hawkins	20.00
Insure Forward	60.00
Kim Johnson	125.00
Meehan Machine	32.68
Mick's 281 Service	847.05
Miller's Fresh Foods	89.51
ND League of Cities	1,495.00
NR NAPA	219.56
ND One Call.....	3.00
NDTC	506.29
Northern Plains Electric.....	47.58
NRABC	476.90
Share Corporation.....	1,281.52
ND Chemistry Lab	894.19
Transcript Publishing.....	1,731.04
Warren Implement	1,335.00
NR Park District.....	7,609.32
NRABC	10,344.75
US Postmaster	350.00
US Postmaster	240.00
Otter Tail Power Co	5,760.23
ND Tap.....	63.00
AT&T	287.49
BCBS.....	11,911.91
MDU	2,485.53
Waste Management ...	17,416.56
Susie Sharp	1,886.68
EFTPS	4,605.56
NDPERS	3,402.58
Bruce Hirschert	3,793.00
Jason Munson	2,865.21
Ian Coenen	2,324.27
Bank Forward	43.80
Bank Forward	5.00

Public Works Superintendent presented his report. The new Bobcat and John Deere tractor will be coming in May. Electric Pump was out at the water plant and installed a new pump in the sludge pit, and Water Plant staff cleaned the RO's. Fleming made a motion to approve the report.

Dauenhauer seconded the motion. All were in favor. Motion carried.

City Auditor Presnell presented his report. End of year reports including W-2's, 1099's, and quarterly reports are completed. Lead and Copper results have been sent out to test sites. Work is continuing on security grants. Richter made a motion to approve the report. Dauenhauer seconded the motion. All were in favor. Motion carried.

OLD BUSINESS:

The building at 117 9th Street South has been boarded up and closed off to outside elements.

Discussion was held on water rate increases. Commissioners decided to use the 3% increase in expenditures figure to have Auditor Presnell to give specific numbers to the commission at the March meeting.

NEW BUSINESS:

Fleming made a motion to approve the housing incentive for Carson Hurn. Dauenhauer seconded the motion. All were in favor. Motion carried.

Belquist made a motion to approve gaming permits for 4th Corporation, New Rockford Community Foundation, and the Central North Dakota Steam Threshers. Fleming seconded the motion. All were in favor. Motion carried.

Fleming made a motion to approve the building permits for Central Pharmacy and Jamie Risovi. Dauenhauer seconded the motion. All were in favor. Motion carried.

Dauenhauer made a motion to approve the special event permit for the New Rockford Eagles Aerie #2923. Belquist seconded the motion. All were in favor. Motion carried.

Richter made a motion to approve the pledges of securities. Fleming seconded the motion. All were in favor. Motion carried.

Belquist asked Auditor Presnell if the city is on the schedule to have the audit done for the City of New Rockford. Presnell informed the commission that he has not gotten a date from the auditor's but should be completed in August of this year, based on past audits.

CD rates were discussed as 2 CDs are coming due in February. Richter made a motion to renew CD 106492 at the Community Credit Union into a 6-month CD at a rate of 4.10% and renew CD 1028624383 at Bank Forward into a 1 year CD at a rate of 3.85% if possible. Dauenhauer seconded the motion. All were in favor. Motion carried.

With no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 9:23 a.m.

The next regular meeting will be March 3, 2025, at 9:00 a.m. at City Hall.

"MEETING MINUTES ARE SUBJECT TO APPROVAL AT THE NEXT REGULAR MEETING"

Stuart Richter, President
Andrew Presnell, Auditor

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MINUTES OF EDDY COUNTY COMMISSIONERS EDDY COUNTY COURTHOUSE

January 7, 2025, 8:30 A.M.

The meeting was called to order at 8:30 a.m. by Glenda Collier, Chairperson. Also present were Commissioners Dave Gehrtz, James Allmaras, and State's Attorney Ashley Lies.

Eddy County Commissioner and Chairperson Glenda Collier read and signed her Oath of Office for new term as Commissioner. Following the Oath of Office affirmation, Collier led the Pledge of Allegiance.

Dave Gehrtz made a motion to approve the agenda as presented. James Allmaras seconded the motion, all were in favor. Motion carried.

Dave Gehrtz made a motion to approve the December 3, 2024 Regular Meeting Minutes, as presented. James Allmaras seconded the motion, all were in favor. Motion carried.

After review of the financials and expenditure and revenue budgets for the month of December 2024, a motion was made by Dave Gehrtz to approve both the financials and budgets. The motion was seconded by James Allmaras. All were in favor, motion carried.

Dave Gehrtz made a motion to approve the following bills, it was seconded by James Allmaras. Roll call vote: Glenda Collier, James Allmaras, and Dave Gehrtz voted aye. The motion carried. Alan's Furnace Service..... 6,439.15

Kathy Anderson	32.48
Cash & Carry Lumber	463.30
Central City H2O	80.50
CenDak Cooperative.....	11,396.63
CK Construction	46,647.84
CNA Surety	50.00
Cole Papers.....	503.20
City of Shyenenne	110.10
Dauenhauer Diesel	299.13
Zach Fleming	823.20
Michelle Gilley	845.21
Info. Tech. Dept	1,115.30
Insure Forward	277.00
Bruce Kjelgaard	477.70
LRLEC	3,780.00
Leaf	256.04
Lexipol.....	559.17
City Gas Equipment.....	92.95
Cory Longnecker	40.00
Melinda Martin	621.50
Meehan Machine	2,109.69
NDAA	105.00
NDaa4 Hwy	100.00
ND Dept. of Trust Lands.....	250.00
NDTC	982.51
NR Chamber	4,850.00
Napa Auto Parts	222.66
NR Utility Services.....	325.47
Northern Plains Electric.....	326.00
Office of Attorney Gen.....	60.00
Otter Tail Power Co	112.12
Linderman Const.....	2,100.00
Pfau Bros Auto Body	135.00
Pharmchem	31.95
Quill Corporation	270.96
Rockin Fitness	500.00
Mike Schaefer	40.00
Jerry Schuster	40.00
Bill Smith	40.00
State Board of Law Examiners...	373.30
Lisa Thompson	60.30
Transcript Publishing	1,525.30
Todd Weber	2,070.00
NDPERS	26,880.20
Debra Belquist	20.00
Butler Machinery	91,016.99
Preston Meier	20.00

NDSU	45.00
Rockford Plg & Htg.....	5,522.87
Payroll	70,715.46
Elec. Fed Tax Sys	23,123.01
Aflac	145.21
NDPERS	1,989.00
NDPERS	15,846.08
Colonial Life	461.25
Ameritas Life Ins.....	244.51
NDPERS	1,209.56
Gates Township.....	500.00
Aflac	338.84
Jesse Anderson.....	131.36
AT&T	582.87
Bank Forward	27.60
Butler Machinery	1,593.47
Elan Financial Services.....	238.75
Cash & Carry Lumber	886.35
Central City H2O	169.00
Central Plains Water Dist....	59.98
Cenex Fleetcard	429.54
Cole Papers	266.17
Correlogic Tax Service.....	125.59
City of Shyenenne	11,116.54
City of NR	225,721.31
NR City Park District.....	21,648.66
Dakota Dust-Tex.....	162.25
Do It Best.....	317.46
Eddy Co. Council on Aging
MDU	11,932.51
Eddy Co. Treasurer.....	4,638.00
Election Sys. & Software	735.50
Tolna Fire District.....	1,665.14
Warwick Fire District.....	605.59
NR Fire District	13,086.59
Garrison Div. Cons.....	6,738.95
Golden West Ind. Supply.....
.....	234.39
Governsoft.....	16,424.00
Historical Society.....	3,991.56
Husky Marketing Supply.....
.....	13,149.44
Info. Tech. Dept	1,105.15
Interstate Engineering	5,254.00
Kim Johnson	150.00
LRDHU	19,715.25
LRLEC	71,728.00
Leaf	256.04
Linde Gas Equipment.....	423.42
Meehan Machine	287.84
.....	2,136.81
ND Assoc. of Co.....	5,215.00
ND Co. Comm. Assoc.....	1,085.00
NDACO Res. Group	19,080.00
ND Co. Auditors Assoc	400.00
NDPERS	26,908.04
NDPIO	100.00
NR Utility Services.....	327.12
NoDak Electric Coop.....	61.44
North Central Planning	8,484.00
ND One Call.....	3.00
Office of Attorney Gen.....	290.00
Otter Tail Power Co	1,335.89
Quill Corporation	57.22
RDO Equipment	5,948.26
Rockford Plg & Htg.....	90.00
Rough Rider Industries.....	312.78
Dak. Prairie School.....	22,566.44
NR-S School.....	429,335.77
Nidkota School	71,837.81
Warwick School	19,520.00
Carrington School	728.69
The Sidwell Co	3,680.00
Soil Conservation	18,502.87
State Treasurer	5,950.78
Tao Interactive	599.95
Taverna Electric	12,660.36
Transcript Publishing	455.70
Allen Troy	30.00
Paradise Township	5,073.44
Cherry Lake Township.....	4,003.03
Columbia Township	4,822.54
Pleasant Prairie Twp	4,849.20
Superior Township	21,384.91
Rosefield Township	6,616.48
Colvin Township	4,112.70
Lake Washington Twp	4,262.14
Tiffany Township	5,296.98
Sheldon Township	2,554.28
NR Township	7,405.70
Munster Township	3,333.24
Freeborn Township	3,101.74

Eddy Township	945.18
Hillsdale Township.....	2,384.70
Bush Township	2,859.58
Gates Township.....	4,742.15
Grandfield Township.....	8,472.58
Tyler Technologies	4,701.14
Water Resource.....	11,770.69

At 9:10 A.M. Roger Langley addressed the Commission on the drainage issue on County Road #4. Langley expressed concerns with the position of the culvert. Langley reiterated that he would pay for a 48" culvert if the County would put it in, and if Eddy County wasn't going to move forward with a stream crossing study, SA Lies reminded Langley that Eddy County cannot replace the culvert without a Stream Crossing Study. Langley was confident that Eddy County could request a Stream Crossing Study at no cost to Eddy County. Mike May with Interstate Engineering had given an estimate cost of a study typically being between \$5,000 - \$15,000. SA Lies will contract the State Engineer to find out what the cost would be to Eddy County to clear the confusion.

OLD BUSINESS:

Dave Gehrtz spoke with Robert Hanson, Mayor of the City of Shyenenne, to see if the City of Shyenenne would be willing to pay for the utilities on the old Shyenenne Shop, if they were able to utilize the additional space. It was discussed that a lease would need to be put together by SA Lies, renting the space for \$1.00 per year, plus the cost of utilities and renter's insurance for a 5-year term. The lease will also include the provision that Eddy County is still able to store equipment in shop. SA Lies will compile a lease for Dave Gehrtz to bring to the next City of Shyenenne Regular Meeting.

NEW BUSINESS:

Glenda made a motion to reappoint Mike Tweed to the Water Board for a 3-year term. Dave Gehrtz seconded the motion. All were in favor. Motion carried.

An employee-based wellness program offered through the North Dakota Public Employees Retirement System was discussed. Eddy County can join program at no cost, and can receive 1% on insurance premiums by participating.

James Allmaras made a motion to sign the commitment agreement, committing Eddy County to support, promote and implement a worksite wellness program, with Becki Schumacher as the Wellness Coordinator. Dave Gehrtz seconded the motion. All were in favor. Motion carried.

A CD held that Community Credit Bank in New Rockford, was discussed and options were reviewed. Dave Gehrtz made a motion to move the CD funds in the amount of \$323,992.16 to Bank Forward on January 13, 2025 for 13 months contingent on the rate remaining at or near 4%. James Allmaras seconded the motion. All were in favor. Motion carried.

Dave Gehrtz made a motion to reappoint Glenda Collier to the Central Plains Human Service Zone for a three-year term. James Allmaras seconded the motion. All were in favor. Motion

carried.

A Pledgee's Certification of Deposits made with Pledgor was reviewed from Treasurer, Kathy Anderson. Dave Gehrtz made a motion to approve the Pledge of Securities as presented. James Allmaras seconded the motion, all were in favor. Motion carried.

The Eddy County Courthouse surpassed a milestone of 125 years in 2024. A celebration of sorts was discussed. Through discussion, it was agreed to plan for a 4th of July float in the parade and tours available the day before.

The end of year budgets adjustments were reviewed line by line for 2024. James Allmaras made a motion to approve the adjustments as presented. Dave Gehrtz seconded the motion. All were in favor, motion carried.

Courthouse closure on January 9, 2025 for the funeral of James Carter, the 39th President was discussed. SA Lies reviewed Eddy County's Handbook and advised Commission that the handbook does not require the Courthouse to close, referencing the Executive Order given by President Biden. James Allmaras made a motion to keep the Courthouse open on January 9, 2025. Dave Gehrtz seconded the motion, all were in favor. Motion carried.

The end of year Eddy County Transfer from General to County Agent was discussed and reviewed. Dave Gehrtz made a motion to approve the transfer of \$6,748.93 from the General Fund to County Agent. James Allmaras seconded the motion. All were in favor, motion carried.

Auditor Becki Schumacher reviewed the journal entries for close of 2024. Moving \$721.79 from SA Office Expense 1000-4105-311 to Office Supplies 1000-4105-311 where funds were budgeted. There was no budget line for Office Expense. Moved \$4,355.67 from Sheriff 1000-4211-212 to SA Assistant 1000-4105-212 as Tia Davis worked part time for SA Office in last 4 months of year. Moved \$1,409.00 from Sheriff Salary 1000-4211-212 to Back the Blue 1000-4118-102 for Tristin Peltier Salary during training. Moved \$295.39 from Fed Fish and Wildlife 8302-2923-000 to Misc 8302-2911-000, error in allocation. Moved \$3,750 from E911 1000-4122-101 to Co Road Equipment 2110-4101-327, error in allocation. Moved \$8,783 from Tax 1000-4107-211 to Deputy Auditor 1000-4102-212 as Kristy O'Connor added Fridays to work as Deputy Auditor for part of 2024.

Dave Gehrtz made a motion to approve all journal entries as presented. James Allmaras seconded the motion. All were in favor, motion carried