



TO: Education Committee
FROM: Jeremy Ekeler, Associate Director of Education Policy
Nebraska Catholic Conference
DATE: February 14, 2023
RE: LB647 (Updates to Textbook Loan) (Support)

The Nebraska Catholic Conference advocates for the public policy interests of the Catholic Church and advances the Gospel of Life through engaging, educating, and empowering public officials, Catholic laity, and the general public.

I am here today representing the parents and families who choose to send their children to Catholic Schools in Nebraska.

The “Textbook Loan Program” is a long-established program that, as Senator McDonnell mentioned, was created to provide some degree of equity to parents who choose nonpublic schools in Nebraska. Catholic schools serve nearly 27,000 students in 112 schools from Saint Agnes in Scottsbluff to Saint Augustine’s on the Winnebago Reservation. Our schools are rural, suburban, and urban. Some are over 100 years old. I provide this context for two reasons. First, nonpublic education in Nebraska is important to our state’s families. Secondly, Textbook Loan is a program that needs to be as dynamic as the nonpublic schools parents choose. However, its mechanics have not been updated since its inception in the 1980’s.

LB647 is presented to modernize the current Textbook Loan program to meet this need.

There are several variations of Textbook Loan across the country. We studied these systems and talked to those experiencing them. This helped us determine how to best serve Nebraska families, nonpublic schools, public schools, and the Department of Education. We also spoke with nonpublic schools of all kinds and public school groups here in Nebraska. This groundwork accounts for the broad support you’ll see for LB647 today.

Archdiocesan Superintendent Vickie Kauffold will get “into the weeds” of Textbook Loan in her testimony. I do not want to belabor the points that will be made but do want to express my experience with the program as a former teacher and principal, and from my current position.

As an educator, the term “Textbook Loan” created groans in the school building. The process can take up to three months as lists of district materials are sent and revised multiple times before the November 15 deadline. Then the work of securing signatures of parents begins, and the process is currently 100% paper based. This creates a substantial burden for parents, nonpublic schools, and public schools trying to administer the program. Later you will hear testimony from the NDE’s Lane Carr, who will present some of those documents and processes.

What I didn't realize as an educator, that I see clearly now in my policy role, is the inconsistency of Textbook Loan from district to district. Mrs. Kauffold will also dig into this issue more, but the variety of textbook loan interpretations across school districts is problematic. LB647 addresses this by centralizing the process, creating both an economy of scale and overdue consistency.

A note about expanding eligible materials. Currently, Textbook Loan limits students to materials used in the nonpublic school's local public school district. Yet Omaha Roncalli, for instance, resides in OPS boundaries but receives students from 27 zip codes across the Omaha area. Grand Island Central Catholic has students from seven public school districts. Furthermore, education has evolved greatly since the 1980's and now includes digital, online, and other dynamic resources. In short, district boundaries have become arbitrary for this program's operation.

To close, the Conference is happy to see the broad range of support for LB647, which would take the best practices studied in other states and apply them to the needs of Nebraska's program.

Thank you for your time and consideration.