

TO: Education Committee
FROM: Jeremy Ekeler, Associate Director of Education Policy
Nebraska Catholic Conference
DATE: February 28, 2023
RE: LB528 (Option Enrollment Tuition Accounts) (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.

The Option Enrollment program is often the focus of legislative bills. A spectrum of ideas have been introduced, including bills to open option enrollment up completely and bills to completely end the practice. This year LB528 is the third bill brought forward on this topic. It is clear that many see issues with our current program.

The Catholic Conference has not engaged heavily on this issue because of the limited impact on our Catholic schools. However, we were excited when Senator Hansen brought forth the idea of LB528 because Catholic education could help remedy some option enrollment issues for families. In essence, the bill provides parents a new option when Option Enrollment doesn't work. Rather than simply returning to the district that isn't meeting their child's needs, or attempting an appeal process, parents could visit with local nonpublic schools to find the right fit.

In full transparency, we understand issues of "capacity". The 112 Nebraska Catholic schools and the roughly 215 total nonpublic schools¹ receive no funding from federal, state, or local funds.² Our work in behavior, mental health, and special education is funded on a school-by-school basis. We do our best to take every child and family who chooses us, and we often impress with the variety and impact of services our schools provide. The Conference also believes the generally smaller class sizes in Catholic schools are of benefit to many students, and you will see a letter from Roncalli's Mr. TJ Orr about this.

However, like the public schools, there will be kids who are not a match for every nonpublic school. That's the reality of education and it necessitates that we change our lens from "every school for every kid" (which is impossible) to "each kid finds the right school for them." A dynamic universe of learners demands a plurality of schools and LB528 provides an array of possibilities for families and children to find their fit.

Speaking of fits, this approach fits our Catholic social teaching: parents are the primary educator of their children and have a fundamental right to choose a school for them which corresponds to

¹ NDE Reporting

² We receive services through what is called "equitable services" due to the Federal Laws in place around special education. Those services vary from district to district and school to school.

their needs and beliefs.³ In the case of option enrollment and LB528, Catholic schools are open to being a possible solution for families who find us to be the appropriate partner in their educational journey.

In closing, during the research for this bill and testimony the Conference was surprised by two things. First, the number of students now in nonpublic schools who gave up on the option enrollment process. Secondly, that the state does not keep records of option enrollment denials. We find the former an indication that this program will be beneficial, and the latter a significant accountability issue.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

³ Catholic Catechism of the Church – paragraph 2229