

TO: Education Committee  
FROM: Jeremy Ekeler, Associate Director of Education Policy  
Nebraska Catholic Conference  
DATE: March 13, 2023  
RE: (LB516) (School Safety & Reporting) (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.

On behalf of our 112 schools, 2500 educators, and 27,000 students the Conference supports LB516. Today I'd like to provide the evolution of this bill and the components.

In 2021 the Conference joined a coalition of public education groups in support LB322, Senator Matt Williams' Safe2Help Hotline<sup>1</sup>. During this process it became clear to me that the statewide supports concerning school safety were lacking. In my time as an educator I was part of multiple school emergency situations, including a shooting outside our school and an intruder in our building. I also helped create Emergency Response Teams and Trauma Response Teams at diocesan and school levels. This is all to say that school safety was already a passion when then-Commissioner Matt Blomstedt and Senator Lynn Walz asked me to join dozens of other educators following the Uvalde, Texas school shooting on May 24, 2022.

Those initial meetings progressed into a statewide school safety task force<sup>2</sup> of roughly 35 people. I represented nonpublic schools. Taskforce conversations continue to be fruitful, wide-ranging, and a model of how education can and should be focused on all students.

Officer Joe Wright facilitates these meetings. There are none better than Joe in school safety, as I knew from our time working together when I was a principal. Also, new State School Security Director, Mr. Jay Martin, is a member. Jay has incredible experience in the field and has been lifeline for our state's nonpublic schools.

This is all to say, a tremendous amount of experience and breadth of input went into what Senator Walz presents today in LB516.

First, LB516 commits state dollars to the Safe2Help Hotline.<sup>3</sup> The genesis for LB322 came from work being done successfully at Boys Town. The program is new and we hope more schools will take part because of its potential to save lives. I trust Jay Martin to get us up to speed so Safe2Help maximizes its potential.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://update.legislature.ne.gov/?p=29184>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.education.ne.gov/safety/school-safety-task-force/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.safe2helpne.org>

Section 3 creates a \$15 million grant program based on successful models used in Michigan<sup>4</sup> and Connecticut<sup>5</sup>. This grant program maintains local control by schools but also understands two important things about school safety: 1.) It's more like layering Swiss cheese than discovering the panacea, 2.) Best practices are always evolving.<sup>6</sup>

Section Four of the bill addresses an important layer of that Swiss cheese – the preventative portion of school safety. Our children were facing a mental health crisis prior to the pandemic; now, as the Washington Post<sup>7</sup> and New York Post note, the crisis is “much vaster than we realize.”<sup>8</sup> This portion of the bill provides grants to Health Departments or ESU regions to hire mental health professionals who would support all schools in that area.

The Catholic Church prioritizes taking care of the vulnerable in society<sup>9</sup>, and we must take seriously our duty to keep the children in all of our schools safe. The team around this bill certainly does, and I appreciate that Mr. Joe Wright, Mr. Jay Martin, Mr. John Skretta, former Commissioner Matt Blomstedt, and Senator Walz have included the Conference in conversations every step of the way.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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<sup>4</sup> Michigan Public Act 48 of 2021

<sup>5</sup> Passed and enacted after the Sandy Hook shooting on Dec. 14, 2012; <https://portal.ct.gov/DEMHS/Grants/School-Security-Competitive-Grant-Program-Overview>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.schoolsecurity.org/trends/best-practices-for-school-security-and-emergency-preparedness-planning/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://nypost.com/2023/02/13/teens-feel-hopeless-suicidal-more-than-ever-cdc-warns/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/12/05/crisis-student-mental-health-is-much-vaster-than-we-realize/>

<sup>9</sup> CCC Paragraph 2273