



TO: Education Committee
FROM: Jeremy Ekeler, Associate Director of Education Policy
Nebraska Catholic Conference
DATE: January 30, 2023
RE: LB324 (Special Education Reimbursements) (Support)

Chairman Murman and Members of the Education Committee,
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.

We appreciate Senator Wishart bringing LB324 to fund special education more appropriately in Nebraska. The Conference supports this bill because of its moral importance, the work of the Church in serving those with disabilities, and the engagement of Catholic schools in serving students with disabilities.

The Catholic Church and our government rightly align in the belief that, “All children, in virtue of their dignity as human persons, have an inalienable right to education adapted to their ability.”¹ Nebraskans should rally around supporting children with disabilities and the educators who serve them. I’d like to give some context for how Nebraska Catholic schools engage and why LB324 is important.

As early as 1870 Nebraska Catholic schools embraced serving children with disabilities.² Prior to and during the time public schools were building their programs, school districts contracted with Catholic schools to provide the best care possible for children with disabilities.³ As an important aside, this history continues today⁴ as a handful of Nebraska public school districts contract or work with Catholic schools for their children with needs.⁵

Fast-forward to 1975 and we hit the pivotal passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (renamed the “Individuals with Disabilities Education Act” in 1990). This act committed special education funding to public schools. This was done as a commitment by the government to serve all children with disabilities regardless of their educational setting. And in many ways we have seen tremendous growth as a result: Since 1975 the US has progressed from excluding nearly 1.8 million children with disabilities from public schools (which was the space

¹ Gravissimum Educationis, Pope Paul VI, 1965

² Saint James Orphanage: A History of a Home for Children

³ Whitepaper: “A Catholic History of Special Education in Nebraska” – joint diocesan effort

⁴ <https://www.boystown.org/OneBoysTown/Pages/Services.aspx>

⁵ <https://madonnaschool.org/programs/>

various Catholic and Christian entities worked in) to providing services for more than 7.5 million total children with disabilities.⁶

To summarize: Catholic schools have a long history of serving children with disabilities and continue to do so – typically in partnership with local public schools. But Catholic schools, whose special education population is 12%, cannot receive direct funding from the government – not IDEA, not Title I, and not state funding. As a result, Catholic schools fund their own special education programs and work in conjunction with local public schools who are legally obligated to serve these children.⁷

This is what makes LB324 and LB583 vital: Reimbursing at an 80% rate has an immediate impact for public schools, which is a common benefit we should all rally around. And by extension, LB324 will also help kids in Nebraska’s 112 Catholic schools receive services through the partnership between their Catholic school and public school district.

Regarding these services, as former principal of a Catholic school I loved our partnerships with public school educators and they loved being in our school. This is a common refrain I hear from many of our schools when I visit. However, I also hear how the special educators employed in Catholic schools and in school districts are stretched beyond reason. I know this on a personal level too because my wife is an early childhood educator and three of our children require special education services – the need is outpacing the resources and staffing.

I have sat on every side of the special education table, including representing nonpublic schools on the Nebraska Special Education Advisory Committee. The two consistent realities are that we must commit to appropriate funding and we must serve these children together.

The Conference thanks Senator Wishart for bringing LB324. Providing adequate reimbursement is a vital step as we strive to serve these incredible children.

Thank you for your time and consideration!

⁶ <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/IDEA-History>

⁷ <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/idea-files/questions-and-answers-on-serving-children-with-disabilities-placed-by-their-parents-in-private-schools/>