



TO: Education Committee
FROM: Jeremy Ekeler, Associate Director of Education
Nebraska Catholic Conference
DATE: February 23, 2021
RE: LB396 (Farm to School Act) (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 Catholic Conference supports LB396, the Farm to School Act, because the program supports local community connections, involves an educational component related to taking care of our environment, and allows schools to opt in (as opposed to be mandated).

Regarding community connections, Nebraska Catholic schools have a tradition of local support. This is one reason for Nebraska Catholic schools' unique standing: the 17th largest Catholic school enrollment in a state that ranks 37th in total population.¹ Community relationships, built upon a bedrock of local control and family engagement, support this enrollment anomaly and organically create associations like those LB396 promotes. Whether it's local farmers donating sides of beef and vegetables, setting up for the Friday Fish Fry, or volunteering to help young readers, the concept of local connections are part and parcel of our community schools. They are also the spirit of the LB396, which connects local food producers with Nebraska schools.

In his encyclical *Laudatio Si*, Pope Francis said, "Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home. Young people demand change. They wonder how anyone can claim to be building a better future without thinking of the environmental crisis and the sufferings of the excluded."² As such, section 4 Subsection 3 of LB396 is of particular interest to our schools. The education component related to food production, gardening, composting, and nutrition is an important one as we prepare the next generation to address climate and environmental issues.

Lastly, while Catholic schools are opposed to mandates (and especially those that include financial and staffing requirements), LB396 offers the *opportunity* for schools to take part. This inviting approach matches the spirit of community and collaboration invoked by the Farm to School Act. It is one our Catholic schools appreciate, and we thank Senator Brandt for considering all schools in the creation of this bill.

Thank you for your time and consideration!

¹ National Catholic Educators Association Data Journal, 2019-2020

² http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2015/images/06/18/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si_en.pdf