



TO: Nebraska Legislature Education Committee  
FROM: Jeremy Ekeler, Associate Director of Education Policy  
Nebraska Catholic Conference  
DATE: January 28, 2021  
RE: LB364 (Scholarship Tax Credits) (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 on behalf of the Nebraska Catholic Conference in support of LB364.

I have worked in Catholic schools for 18 years, a career that has thus far spanned work in Catholic early childhood education, elementary school, junior high school, high school, and higher education. The past six years I served as principal of a PK-8<sup>th</sup> grade school of 400 children here in Lincoln.

But this is my first opportunity to testify in a high profile hearing. I'm new to this stage, even though I've been in education my entire career.

The focus of my testimony will be something that is pretty boring, but has bothered me for years: the falsehoods around the Accountability of Nebraska nonpublic schools.

As I've listened to arguments for and against a parent's inherent right to choose the best school for their child, I am bewildered by claims that our private schools are somehow inferior, lacking accountability, or not receiving proper oversight. For years I've heard these false claims from people who have spent little to no time in private schools. But I've spent nearly two decades in them and feel qualified to talk on the matter.

This is not an exciting or emotional testimony, but it is a necessary one.

First it is important to define Approved and Accredited Schools.

- *Approved* schools meet the requirements for operation according to the NDE's Rule 14. Approval status is a way to respect the autonomy and unique nature of a nonpublic school while still providing oversight.
- *Accredited* schools are those meeting additional requirements according to the standards of NDE Rule 10. Under this rule, "school system" refers to both public and nonpublic schools unless the rule prescribes different standards for "school districts," which refers only to public schools.

Though Approval status is the right fit for some Catholic Schools in Nebraska, in general Catholic schools are fully Accredited by the NDE. As a matter of fact, the Archdiocese of

Omaha is the state's third largest education system – all of its schools are accredited. In short, with 110 Nebraska Catholic schools focused on local control with the help of supporting central offices, the difference between Approval and Accreditation is about type, not quality.

Please look at the checklists provided in your packet. These checklists provide a good look at the amount and types of regulations both public and nonpublic schools work with. For instance, at the school I was just principal at, the annual binder to complete this work is quite large, and we devoted at least a half-time position just to completing this work.

Please turn to the document titled “Private Schools & State Accountability”. This is a breakdown of the rules and regulations private schools must follow to operate in Nebraska. Scanning through it will assure you that all of our accountability bases are covered.

All of what we discussed today is one type of accountability – it's accountability to a system for both public and nonpublic schools. That's important, but it's not the most important type of accountability. The most important type is to the families and students. There are nearly 40,000 students in nonpublic schools in Nebraska, and there are at least 300-500 on scholarship waitlists each year that we know about. Again, those are just the ones we know about. The former are families proud to be in our faith-based schools and communities. The latter hope to enter but are currently left in the cold.

At its heart LB364 is a simple concept: It's a tax credit for donations that help low-income students enter a fully accountable nonpublic school in Nebraska. Falsehoods about the quality and accountability of our schools should not prevent this bill from making it out of committee for a full debate on the floor.