



TO: Judiciary Committee
FROM: Tom Venzor, Executive Director
Nebraska Catholic Conference
DATE: February 20, 2020
RE: LB766, LB991, LB1048, LB1210 (Sexual Misconduct with Students) (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 NCC offers its support for these legislative efforts to create criminal prohibitions and penalties for any school teacher or school employee who uses their position of trust and authority to manipulate children to engage in sexual misconduct. We also support additional avenues for communication between state and local government agencies to ensure that relevant agencies are notified about alleged child abuse and neglect.

Catholic schools across Nebraska serve nearly 29,000 students across 115 schools. The Catholic Church takes responsibility for the safety of all children in our schools and programs. Every one of these children—like all children in our public and home schools—is precious in the sight of God and has inviolable human dignity. Each child deserves every safeguard and protection against any form of child abuse, most especially sexual abuse, which harms their physical, psychological, intellectual, spiritual, and moral well-being.

While the Catholic Church across the world has had to reconcile with its past and the patterns of failure regarding child sexual abuse, we know that child sexual abuse can happen anywhere. It is a societal problem. And, most saddening, it can and does happen in our school systems.

These legislative bills, alongside of Sen. Lathrop's LB1080 requiring certain minimum school policies about sexual conduct between school personnel and students or former students which the NCC also supports, are an important step for creating safer environments for all children.

Especially in light of sexual abuse by clergy including those who have ascended to some of the highest ranks of the Church's hierarchy, the Church has experienced a call by those within the Church and society generally for higher standards of care for youth and vulnerable adults. This includes higher standards for reporting and investigating claims of sexual abuse. As a response to this call, the Church has enacted numerous reforms over the last 20 years. These reforms, which are always ongoing, give us more confidence today that the Church is not only responding appropriately to claims of child sexual abuse, but that we are also preventing child sexual abuse and the misconduct that leads up to these morally reprehensible actions.

This same call for higher standards as it relates to school teachers and school employees is necessary and will make Nebraska a better place for every child to thrive in a caring and safe environment.

We encourage the Judiciary Committee to advance some form of these various pieces of legislation and thank all those Senators who have brought these important bills to protect our children. We would also offer the work and experience of our diocesan Safe Environment Coordinators and Victim Assistance Coordinators, now and in the future, as this Legislature seeks to establish stronger public policies to protect children and vulnerable youth from sexual abuse.

Thank you for your time and consideration.