

Dear Members of the House Education Committee,

Thank you for allowing me to address you today. My name is Sara Dudley, and I am the principal at St. Michael's Catholic School in Grand Forks. I am here to advocate for school choice and to dispel some common misconceptions regarding non-public schools.

1. Accessibility for All Families:

One of the most pervasive falsehoods is that non-public schools are only for the wealthy. At St. Michael's Catholic School, 28% of our student population is enrolled in the Free and Reduced Lunch Program. This statistic highlights that our school is accessible to families from various economic backgrounds. School choice allows families, regardless of their financial situation, to select an education that they believe will best serve their children. It is crucial that we continue to support policies that enable all families to access quality education and empower parents.

2. Serving Students with Disabilities:

Another misconception is that non-public schools do not serve students with disabilities. I want to clarify that at St. Michael's Catholic School, we take pride in our inclusive environment. Currently, we serve 17 students with various needs, representing 11% of our K-5 student population. These students face challenges such as dyslexia, ADHD, autism spectrum disorder, learning disabilities, speech and language needs, and emotional needs. However, we receive \$0 of the per pupil formula to support these students. With additional resources, we could serve even more students and strive to meet their diverse needs effectively.

We work in partnership with the public school system when serving students with identified special education needs, but the lack of funding limits our ability to provide comprehensive support because we depend on tuition and serve a population that receives scholarships so we cannot hire specialists or more interventionists.

Again, the reason that we are limited in our services for students with special needs is based upon available resources because we receive \$0 from the state to serve them and we keep our tuition rates low so families can access the education of their choice in Catholic schools.

3. High Standards of Accountability:

Another misconception is that non-public schools lack accountability. I want to assure you that we maintain high standards of accountability. Non-public schools are required to complete reports mandated by the Department of Public Instruction, along with undergoing the Cognia accreditation process, which evaluates our schools by the same standards as public schools. Additionally, we have a Board of Education elected by our school community, ensuring that our leadership is accountable to the families we serve and the parish that financially supports our school and families.

Furthermore, we are mandated to employ highly qualified educators who participate in required professional development mandated by the Department of Public Instruction and the Education Standards and Practices Board. Our curriculum aligns with state learning standards ensuring that we provide a rigorous educational experience for all students.

4. A Diverse Student Body:

It's also important to note that not all students who attend Catholic schools are Catholic. At St. Michael's Catholic School, approximately 12% of our student body comes from different faith backgrounds. These families choose our school because they seek an alternative to what public schools can offer—smaller class sizes, a focus on character development, and a values-based education, close relationships with teachers and administrators to create meaningful partnerships in their child's education. The choice of a school should not be limited to religious affiliation; it should be about finding the best fit for each child's unique needs.

5. The Importance of School Choice:

School choice is essential for fostering an educational landscape that is diverse, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of all students. It allows families to seek out educational environments that align with their values and meet their children's specific needs. By supporting school choice, we are advocating for equitable access to quality education for every student, regardless of their background or abilities.

6. A Call to Action:

I urge this committee to support policies that promote school choice, ensuring that all families have the opportunity to choose the educational path that best fits their children. Together, we can dismantle the falsehoods surrounding non-public schools and create a more inclusive educational system that truly serves all students.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I hope you will support policies that enhance school choice for all families. I will stand for any questions.

Sincerely,
Sara Dudley
sara.dudley@stmichaelsgf.com

515-231-8102

504 5th Ave. N.

Grand Forks, ND 58203