

**Testimony on House Bill 1540  
February 5, 2025; 2:30 PM  
House Education Committee  
Rep. Patrick Heinert, Chairman**

**Marya J. Skaare, President, Trinity Catholic Schools**

**Affirmative Support of HB 1540**

Greetings Chairman Heinert and House Education Committee Members!

My name is Marya Skaare, and I reside in District 39. I am the current President of Trinity Catholic Schools in Dickinson and more importantly, I am a parent, so this bill is of great interest to me and the many families seeking education choice in ND. Thank you for the opportunity to share my support of HB 1540 with you. Born, raised and educated in North Dakota, I am a product of our State's strong system of public schools from a small community where, like the majority of North Dakota, there was not a non-public school option available. Even today, less than 7% of school-age students in ND attend a non-public school. Even with the modest number of non-public options, my children have been fortunate enough to attend both public and non-public schools with the latter simply being the right fit for our family, and ultimately, where I would be called to serve in my career. I share this with you today because I simply want to take a moment to reinforce the fact that HB 1540 is not intended to be an indictment of public schools, just as it should not be used as an indictment of non-public schools. This bill is about students. Plain and simple. It allows for EVERY North Dakota student to receive some level of support from the State to assist in their cost of education.

Ever since the Supreme Court ruled Blaine Amendments unconstitutional, conservative states like North Dakota have been responding enthusiastically to the decades-long demand for parent choice in education with bills like HB 1540. Misinformation opposition attempts to create confusion about who HB 1540 supports. Make no mistake—this bill supports students. No, HB 1540 is not about pitting school systems against one another and it is not about a new funding mechanism for private school systems to the detriment of public school systems. In fact, upon reviewing the proposed bill, I was pleased that it makes very clear that the intent is to expand our State's commitment to student success by implementing a savings program for families for qualified education expenses, including cost to attend nonpublic schools—a category of schools recognized by NDDPI that includes more than just Catholic, Lutheran, and other faith-based schools, but also schools like the Anne Carlsen Center and Full Circle Academy; as well as tribal schools, innovation academies and schools for at-risk students. Even so, HB 1540 is clearly not about State support of nonpublic school systems, it is about State support of STUDENTS in these systems—support for EVERY North Dakota school-age student regardless of the type of school with which they affiliate; and as a parent, that is incredibly encouraging and makes me so proud of who we are as North Dakotans. Our willingness to blaze trails, aspire to greatness and always prioritize our people, is exactly why this bill is worthy of a do-pass recommendation.

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The collective nonpublic schools in ND save the State millions of dollars each year with the help of our stakeholders, which include tuition-paying families, we operate schools that not only save the State the per pupil rate for each of the 7900+ nonpublic school students, but also contribute to our local economies and produce ND graduates who go on to attend ND colleges and universities and work in our communities. Nonpublic schools are essential to offering a diverse education landscape in our state and actually help to attract new families to our North Dakota home. When I worked in workforce recruiting in the energy industry, one of the first questions our HR department was asked was about our schools—not just pertaining to public school quality, but are there private, charter and Montessori schools available? For new North Dakotans, education choice matters.

In Dickinson alone, if we closed our doors, our local school district would struggle to accommodate the influx of students with already strained capacity, and the State would be responsible for the full per pupil payment for each student now in public school. This bill is requesting funds based on the current per pupil rate be made available via education savings accounts to help the education cost for students whose families choose nonpublic education. Public schools are well-funded and will continue to get the per pupil rate per student enrolled in their schools. This bill does not reduce the amount paid per pupil to public schools and is not a taking of money from ND students. On the contrary, this bill actually expands the state's commitment to North Dakota students by supporting ALL students, regardless of school affiliation.

Detractors continue to try and make this about the differences between nonpublic and public schools—but that is just a distraction. The State has determined the guidelines to become a qualified nonpublic school operating in the State of ND and they have established standards, reporting guidelines, etc., with which we must comply. Your nonpublic schools follow these guidelines, are recognized as qualified schools and are compliant with all State requirements. We are doing what we are being asked to do according to the rules created for us by the State. That being said, this is a distraction because this legislation is not about how nonpublic schools behave, it is about helping the families who choose nonpublic education opportunities. These are tax-paying, North Dakota families who could use the help provided with HB 1540. With the rising cost of education, nonpublic schools are constantly trying to keep up with our well-funded, public school neighbors. We strive to pay 80% of what public schools pay, but that continues to be a struggle as public school wages increase and retirement benefits outpace what we are able to provide; and we are all keenly aware that no one is immune from the impacts of inflation. The meaningful point here is that these are costs that get passed on to our tax-paying,

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nonpublic school families. They are the ones who bear the burden of helping our nonpublic schools to cover the rising costs to educate with their tuition dollars—costs that are heavily influenced by our public schools as they are the market drivers in the education sector. As the cost to educate increases, their tuition costs increase. HB 1540 will provide needed support to families who choose nonpublic schools and unlock access for families who have felt like they had no choice in education due to financial limitations.

Chairman Heinert and esteemed representatives, please accept my enthusiastic and sincere encouragement for your support of HB 1540. Your support of 1540 is support of ND students and their success. Your support of 1540 is your support of unlocking funds for ND families to choose the educational setting that is right for their children. Your support of 1540 is an investment in our future by investing in our people. Your support of 1540 begins today, with a do-pass.