

Testimony of Nick Lee

Principal, St. Catherine School, Valley City

Chairperson and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Nick Lee, and I am the principal of St. Catherine School in Valley City. I am here today to share how our school serves a diverse range of students and why preserving school choice is essential for families seeking the best educational fit for their children.

At St. Catherine, we provide a learning environment that meets the needs of students with vastly different academic abilities and challenges—even within the same family. One of the families we serve has three children, each requiring a unique approach to learning. The first child, who in a public school setting would be placed in a resource room, benefits from a specialized curriculum in both reading and math. He also has behavioral needs, and through our partnership with the local special education unit, we are able to provide the majority of his services while receiving crucial oversight and support through Equitable Services. The second child struggles with reading and receives targeted, pull-out tiered intervention. Meanwhile, their third sibling is excelling academically and is challenged with instruction above grade level.

This is the reality of our school—we serve students of all abilities, backgrounds, and learning needs, ensuring each child receives the education they deserve.

I'd also like to share the story of another family who drives **34 miles one way** each day, across county lines, to send their children to St. Catherine. Their commitment reflects the reality that for many families, the best educational option for their children may not be available in their immediate community. Without school choice, parents in rural areas, where private school options may be limited or nonexistent, would have no alternatives beyond the local public school—regardless of whether it meets their needs.

Both of these families receive help—either from a family member or from our school tuition assistance fund—to make their children's education at St. Catherine possible. Our actual cost of education is over \$12,000 per pupil. Our actual tuition, however, is significantly lower—\$3,329 for a non-parish child and \$2,219 for a parish child, with additional discounts for families with multiple children. We work extremely hard to keep things affordable. And yet, the only reason I have ever turned a family away as principal is because of money—whether a real financial limitation or the perception that they could not afford it.

No one would bat an eye if every student currently attending St. Catherine decided to leave next year to attend public school. In that case, each of them would be fully funded at the per-pupil rate according to the state's aid formula. Why, then, is it controversial to suggest that these same children and their taxpaying parents should have at least a portion of that aid follow them to the school of their choice?

Furthermore, all students in our state—regardless of where they live—deserve access to the best educational options available. Students in cities like Fargo, Grand Forks, Minot, Bismarck, and Williston deserve the right to choose, just as students in rural communities such as Rugby,

Valley City, Langdon, and Belcourt benefit from private school options. The availability of school choice should not be dictated by geography.

Creating a reality where parents can seek the best possible education for their children—without the burden of financial hurdles—is not just a policy issue, it is the right thing to do. No family should be forced to make an educational decision based solely on financial limitations, especially when they are taxpayers contributing to the education system.

Are there solutions that would provide a nonpublic school option in every county in our state? I don't know. But what I do know is that there is a far greater likelihood of parental choice being exercised when there is choice to be had. Restricting or limiting access to school choice in some areas does not improve education—it simply eliminates opportunity for those who have it.

Every child deserves access to an education that fits their unique needs, and every parent deserves the ability to make that choice. Thank you for your time, and I welcome any questions you may have.