

March 2025 Testimony
HB 1540
March 17, 2025 at 2:30pm

Hello Senator Beard and Senators.

My name is Sara Dudley and I am the principal of St. Michael's Catholic School in Grand Forks. I have served in that role for 11 years. I am here to address the realities of St. Michael's Catholic School and how they counter some of the falsehoods and misrepresentations shared by the opposition to school choice.

St. Michael's Catholic School serves students with special needs. We serve students when we have the resources and staff to accommodate their needs. We would love to serve all students but the reality is that we receive \$0 from the government to do that. The public schools receive money to serve those students so how is it right for them to accuse non-public schools over and over again of discrimination when we are unable to serve those students because we don't have the financial resources to serve them. Instead, we show kindness and love to families to point them in the direction where their needs would be best met because public schools have the financial resources to meet their needs. If we received the funding that they receive, our student profile and demographics would look very different because we'd have the resources to serve more students with special needs. We do the best we can to serve students who have autism spectrum disorder, speech and language disorders, dyslexia, learning disabilities, epilepsy, mood disorders, visual impairment, and hearing impairments without any financial resources from the state. I reject the over simplification of the idea that non-public schools do not serve students with special needs and I ask that you reject it too when considering this bill.

St. Michael's and other non-public schools demonstrate accountability in every way that is asked of them by the Department of Public Instruction. From yearly reports to professional development requirements to highly qualified licensed teachers, non-public schools comply and participate in those accountability measures. Beyond that, non-public schools are accredited by the same accrediting institution that public schools are accredited by, Cognia. We have boards that represent our school's and hold administrators accountable for the mission of our schools that include fiscal responsibility. Most importantly, we are accountable to our parents who choose our schools. This should not be discounted because that parent choice and parent voice is the backbone of school choice. I reject the falsehood that non-public schools are not accountable and I ask that you reject that falsehood too when considering this bill. We are accountable in many of the same ways public schools are accountable, but demonstrate accountability in different ways too.

Lastly, I want to address the falsehood that non-public schools serve the wealthy. At St. Michael's Catholic School, 28% of our student population is on free and reduced lunch and 41% of our students receive scholarships to attend our school. This demonstrates the commitment that parents have to make sacrifices to make the choice that best meets their family's educational needs.

School choice is fundamentally about empowering parents by giving them a voice and the freedom to choose the best educational path for their children, accompanied by the necessary resources and support to make informed decisions. It recognizes that parents are best positioned to understand their children's unique needs and aspirations, and it ensures they have the tools and opportunities to secure an education that aligns with their values and goals.

Thank you for your time and please vote in favor of school choice and parent empowerment for North Dakota. I will stand for questions from the committee.