

February 3, 2025

My name is Derrick Nagel and I am submitting my testimony in support of educational choice.

I am currently the Head of School at Christ the King Montessori School in Mandan, ND, where I have been for the past 8 years. I am also a parent to 5 children, 3 of whom currently attend Christ the King, a non-public school. Therefore, I am submitting my testimony from the perspective of a Bismarck, ND resident and parent, as well as an administrator in education.

As a parent, it is my primary goal to help my children thrive and ultimately be successful in life. There is no secret that having the ability to choose an educational model that best fits a child's or family's unique needs is one of the ways parents accomplish that very important mission. A diverse education selection in a community offers the best chances for meeting a communities diverse needs as well. Giving more choice to families in North Dakota is good for North Dakota.

As principal of a school with an education model very different from most in the region, I've encountered countless parents looking to transfer their children to Christ the King due to their children not "fitting in" in one way or another. I hear from parents worried about their students with low academic ability looking for a change in mode of education, something that might engage their senses through hands-on work or increase engagement through independence and small group lessons. Adversely, I often hear from parents looking to challenge their children academically, that their students are bored and looking to be filled with content at their own, quick pace. I hear from parents whose children are being picked on and looking for a closer social community that their child can plug into and learn to develop their emotional maturity. Finally, there are many families who choose CTK due to the lack of emphasis on technology.

The educational philosophy of Maria Montessori promotes the freedom of the child. Children are encouraged to do as much as possible for themselves and for their community as appropriate to their stage of development, promoting the child's confidence and self-esteem. Children are invited to learn through encounters with their environment that address all their senses. Embodied learning has many advantages from an academic perspective, but most importantly, living this way promotes mental health and a feeling of being at home in the world. Montessori education also values community. "How ought we to live together?" is just as important a question in the Montessori setting as "Can you name all the continents?" Finally, Children learn to experience their own inner life in Montessori. They learn to give their sustained attention, are given opportunities to be quiet, alone with their thoughts, leading to emotional maturity. It is widely understood that early exposure to technology, whether for entertainment or educational purposes, affects the neurological development of children and renders them less able to name their emotions, give voice to the scripts that run through their heads, or regulate their emotions. While technology has its place within the Montessori environment, it is never the primary mode of learning or interacting with reality. This is very different from many of the mainstream educational models available to ND families. At Christ the King, not only do we take pride in the academic formation we are giving our students who will one day be leaders in our community, we also especially see the extreme importance of educating the whole person.

Though we are a Catholic School, almost half of our enrollment is non-Catholic. Additionally, while located in Mandan, half of our enrollment comes from Bismarck. Others are from Lincoln, Center, St. Anthony, and beyond, with some families traveling over 45 minutes one way to get to our school. To have the option to send my own children to a Montessori School is invaluable to me, and this bill would help many more families

like my own, choose an educational model that might better fit their children. CTK is home to many families that send some or even most of their children to another school, but have one child who they describe as “not fitting the mold”.

Though we do our best at Christ the King to offer additional services to children in need, there are indeed times that we do not have the funds to offer the best solution. Many times, parents choose to send their children anyway, as they feel the Montessori Method has so much to offer and decide to choose to forego the potential extra help they might receive elsewhere. It is commonplace to hear from other Montessori Schools around the United States that their school has become home to a high number of neurodivergent children. Parents do not choose if, or how, their children were created to think, behave, etc. regardless of their income and ability to pay tuition. Having the ability to choose the best fit school, public or nonpublic is something North Dakota needs to support.

I have many friends who are administrators and teachers in the public schools, or who went through the ND public school system themselves and I continue to think we have good public schools. However, one size does not fit all and so though our public school partners might be a safe haven for many students, there are many families who have found a home in nonpublic schools. With educational support in ND, there would be so many more families able to best support their own children by giving more options than just the public school down the block. Giving students what they need will only better our state in the long run, as our children now will be our leaders tomorrow. Are you able to say you helped ALL children reach their full potential? Giving our diverse learners diverse educational options is a guaranteed way to bring about success in our community and state from ALL of our residents.

The number one concern I hear from prospective parents, and a top most frequently visited page on our website is regarding financial assistance. I know there are many families interested in Montessori education that do not have the freedom to pursue it based on their financial state in life. Many other states have already or are progressively seeking change to assist families and students. It is my right as the parent of my children, and as a ND citizen to educate my children how I see best fit.

Please support school choice in ND. Thank you.

Mr. Derrick Nagel
Head of School
Christ the King Catholic Montessori School
Mandan, ND