

February 1st, 2025

RE: Testimony for SB 2400

Dear Legislators of North Dakota,

Greetings! My name is Shawna Helbling and I reside in Mandan, ND, where I have been a life-long resident. My husband and I have been married for almost 17 years and we have 3 children, ages 14, 12, and 9. All our children are currently enrolled at Saint Joseph Catholic Montessori School and School of The Holy Family in Mandan.

When I was young, my parents chose Catholic education for my brother and me. My husband went to public school. Catholic education has been something that has been especially important in my family. My grandmother and her siblings all attended St. Mary's High School. My parents both attended Catholic Schools. Many of our extended family have either worked or attended St. Mary's in Bismarck, Bishop Ryan in Minot, and Trinity in Dickinson. We are a big Catholic Family that have been formed and rooted in Catholic Education.

My grandmother was the school secretary at St. Joseph School in Mandan for 24 years. I was blessed to be able to have her in my school for the 7 years that I was there, and I know my brother feels the same way. My Catholic education instilled in me so much of who I am today. I had the best teachers, great opportunities, low classroom ratios, and most of all I had the opportunity to learn a deep love for Jesus and my Catholic faith. I know that it was a hardship for my parents to send us to a private school back in the 90's, but I know how important it was for my parents to at least give us the best start to our education and our faith life. They made it work with the resources that they had. Though I did not go to Catholic School after 6th grade, I am forever thankful to them for the education that I was given.

When it came time for our children to start school, there was a conversation that my husband and I had. We are a lower end middle class family and funds can be tight from time to time, especially raising 3 children, ensuring that can be provided for, and owning our own home. It was a tough conversation and I had to convince my husband that we needed to try to make it work for our family. He agreed on a temporary basis, because he was not sure how we would be able to afford it once it came to 2 more children. We are blessed to say that all our children have been attending Catholic School since they were 3 years old. It has never been easy to continue paying their tuition, but with great people around us, to support us, we have found a way to do so.

I honestly believe more people would choose private education if it were not for the tuition. It is a hard sell for many people. One thing we learned from our time in private schools is that not all children are created equal. Some students need a better environment to be in than a classroom that is overcrowded because schools are getting too big. Some children need more structured learning environments. Some need more one-on-one attention. Some need to feel more validated and the list goes on.

I would like to tell you about our daughter. Sarah is one of the most kind, heart of gold 14-year-olds you will ever meet. She is bubbly and knows no strangers, she gets that from her great grandpa. Our daughter has been riddled with much anxiety from an early age. She has seen specialists, been to counseling, taken to occupational therapy, and the list goes on. In 2019, our school could no longer afford a counselor, so they forwent that position in the school. We were devastated. How would she function? How would she survive? Would there be anyone at the school who would be willing to do what the counselor did? God knew there was a plan. In 2020, our school made a radical change to the Montessori Method of learning. I will tell you, even as a former employee and life-time supporter, I had my doubts. Should we pull her? Does she need more structure? How would she be able to handle this change? We started looking at public schools, more private schools, and anything education related to see what would fit her the best. Little did we know, it was right there in the school that she was going to thrive! The first 2 years, there were many growing pains, many doubts for us as parents, and it was all new to us as we were learning and understanding Montessori, right along with our children. Today, not only our daughter, but all our children have grown so much and are becoming the best that they can be. They are excelling in their schoolwork. They enjoy going to school. We have some of the BEST guides (teachers) you will ever meet, and they all care deeply about each student they encounter. Our pastor, Fr. Josh Waltz, is 110% vested in Catholic education, just listen to his homily from last weekend. Next year, my middle child gets to experience middle school in a whole new way. We now have the first Catholic High School in Mandan, and we have brought back our Catholic middle school, which has not existed in Mandan for many years.

Why did I feel like it was important to share my story with you? Catholic Education has profoundly changed my family for the better. It has not been without some hardships, but those hardships make us stronger and cling to our faith more. I know there are 100 more stories just like ours out there. We want more people to be able to experience what we have experienced. That is where you come in. Please, help pass this bill to ensure that more people can truly experience what my family has been able to experience. To get a quality education in an environment where children are treated as Individuals, and not as just "the next student" to come along. Help us to be able to give the proper salary to our teachers who labor tirelessly for the mission of Private Education! Catholic Schools is one of the very first institutions that formed the founders of this country and the world. Please help us continue to form the world and our community for the better. Give more families the opportunity for private education with the help from the State of North Dakota.

Thank you for your time and attention and reading this testimony. May God continue to bless you all.

Sincerely,

Shawna Helbling
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