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To: House Education Committee
From: David Tamisiea, Executive Director
Subject: House Bill 1607 - Educational Empowerment Accounts
Date: February 5, 2025

The North Dakota Catholic Conference supports House Bill 1607.

HB 1607 seeks to improve the way education is provided in North Dakota by respecting a child's right to a quality education and a parent's right to choose the education best suited to their child.

A Principled Approach to Education That Respects the Rights of Parents and Children

Every child has a right to a state-supported education. This right is rooted in the immeasurable dignity of each child, and the obligation of the political community to provide concrete assistance for the education of all children so that they can achieve their potential.

Parents are the primary educators of their children. This is because they are ultimately responsible for their children's growth, formation, and development. As the primary educators of their children, parents have a duty and right to choose the kind of education that best meets their child's needs.

This educational choice bill respects both the right of the child to a state-supported education and the right of the parent to choose the form of education best suited to the child. It gives families affordable options to choose from through educational empowerment accounts instead of a "one-size-fits-all" approach to education.

Educational Empowerment Accounts

Currently in North Dakota, parents have three options for educating their child: public school, non-public school, and home education. This bill recognizes that these three choices are not equal in terms of the financial burdens placed upon families. It seeks to alleviate the financial burden on parents who choose to educate their child in a nonpublic school through the use of an Educational Empowerment Account (EEA). It also expands choices for these families so they can utilize educational tools and materials that they otherwise might not be able to afford. The funds deposited into a parent's EEA could be used for qualified educational expenses, including tuition and fees, textbooks, tutoring, curriculum materials, online classes, examination fees, computer technology, and transportation fees.

Do Not Let North Dakota Fall Behind

Parental choice is widely recognized as essential for quality K-12 education. Just last week, the President signed an executive order to expand educational freedom by directing federal agencies to prioritize school choice programs when awarding federal dollars to support state K-12 education.¹ There are currently 33 states that have some form of parental choice in education that allow public funds to be used by parents to access the schools or services that best fit their child's needs.² These state school choice programs include educational empowerment accounts, school vouchers, and tax credits and deductions. When you add public charter schools into the mix, only Kentucky and North Dakota have no school choice options for parents and their children.³ We should not allow North Dakotan families to be left behind without the ability to choose the best form of education for their children.

Educational Empowerment Accounts Expand Educational Choice

Educational Empowerment Accounts funds under HB 1607 are available for a wide variety of educational uses tailored to meet an individual non-public school student's needs. Eligible uses include not only private school tuition and fees, but also textbooks, online classes, tutoring, test prep, transportation costs, and the like for any eligible student.

Current non-public school students could use EEA funds under HB 1607 for tuition and fees. Students who could not otherwise afford it could also use their EEA funds to attend a non-public school, which may better match their beliefs, values, and needs.

It is also not true that there are no non-public schools in rural North Dakota. There are non-public schools in Rugby, Langdon, Valley City, Sentinel Butte, Watford City, Belcourt, and Fort Yates. Rural families in these areas could use EEA funds to pay for non-public school tuition.

It Is Entirely Appropriate to Use Public Funds for Non-Public Schools

Opponents object to public funds being directed to non-public schools. Detractors see this as an inappropriate use of tax-payer funds since these are private organizations and not state-run entities.

¹ "Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Expands Educational Opportunities For American Families," at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/01/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-expands-educational-opportunities-for-american-families/>

² EdChoice, "School Choice in America," at <https://www.edchoice.org/school-choice-in-america-dashboard-scia/>.

³ National Center for Education Statistics, "Fast Facts: Charter Schools," at <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=30>.

This objection is misplaced since these funds would be deposited into EEAs and then the parents would use the funds to make the best educational choices for their children. Nothing would go directly to a non-public school. If the parent chose to send their child to a non-public school, this would only be an indirect payment consequent to the decision of the parent.

Moreover, why do opponents insist that public funds can only be used by public schools to educate our children? Like all states, the state of North Dakota directs public funds to private organizations in other areas besides education to help carry out essential social services for its citizens. For example, North Dakota directs public funds to private religious non-profit organizations to conduct adoptions. Further, the state directs medicaid payments to cover medical services given to the poor at private hospitals and clinics throughout the state. North Dakota also provides public funding to Dakota Boys & Girls Ranch and Home on the Range to care for troubled youth. In addition, state funds are directed to the Anne Carlsen Center and other providers to care for children with behavioral and developmental challenges. Many more examples could be offered. The point is that it is entirely appropriate for state funds to be used by parents to pay for non-public schools.

North Dakota's Non-Public Schools Are More Regulated by the State Than Any Other Non-Public Schools in the Country

Another objection against directing public funds to non-public schools is that these schools are not accountable to the state. This is not true for two reasons.

First, this bill directs public funds directly into EEA accounts for a parent to use for their child's educational needs. No funds go directly to non-public schools, and a parent may use the funds for other approved educational resources. It is the parent's choice. Second, even if a parent chooses to use EEA funds to pay for tuition at a non-public school, North Dakota non-public schools are regulated by the state more than any other non-public schools in the country.⁴ North Dakota is one of only eight states that require all non-public schools to be approved by the state. In only two of these states - Massachusetts and North Dakota - are the approval requirements for non-public schools identical to the requirements for public schools. Only one of these two states - North Dakota - requires non-public school teachers to be licensed by the state. This leaves North Dakota as the only state in the nation that mandates both state approval for nonpublic schools identical to that for public schools and requires state-licensing for nonpublic school teachers.

Educational Empowerment Accounts Are Constitutional

Art. VIII, Sec. 1: Opponents of public funds going toward educational empowerment accounts also claim Article VIII, Section 1, of the North Dakota Constitution prohibits the

⁴ State Regulation of Private and Home Schools, U.S. Department of Education, 2025; Specific State Laws, at <https://www.ed.gov/sites/ed/files/about/inits/ed/non-public-education/files/permission-to-operate-comparison-chart.pdf>.

use of public funds for private education. This is not what this section says. Rather, it merely says, “The legislative assembly shall make provision for the establishment and maintenance of a system of public schools which shall be open to all children of the state of North Dakota and free from sectarian control” (“sectarian” = religious). North Dakota *has* established a public school system “free from sectarian control” and “open to all children of the state of North Dakota.” But there is nothing in our state Constitution that limits the legislature *only* to establishing public schools for educating our children.

Nothing prevents the legislature from doing *other* things in addition to a public school system to support and enhance education in North Dakota, like providing public funding for EEAs to support parental educational choice. In fact, under Article VIII, Section 4, of the North Dakota Constitution, it says “The legislative assembly shall take such other steps as may be necessary to prevent illiteracy, secure a reasonable degree of uniformity in course of study, and to promote industrial, scientific, and agricultural improvements.”

Art. VIII, Sec. V: Opponents also frequently claim that Article VIII, Section V, of North Dakota’s Constitution prohibits educational funds going toward anything other than public schools, because it says, “No money raised for the support of the public schools of the state shall be appropriated to or used for the support of any sectarian school.”

This constitutional provision banning the use of public funds for the support of religious schools is known as the “Blaine Amendment.” The Blaine Amendment is named after James Blaine, a 19th-century Maine politician who in 1875 unsuccessfully tried to have this provision added as an amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Nevertheless, Congress forced new states, including North Dakota, to include the Blaine Amendment in their state constitutions as a condition of obtaining statehood.⁵

The U.S. Supreme Court has in three recent decisions declared that state Blaine Amendments banning the use of government funds to support religious schools violate the First Amendment of the Constitution by interfering with the free exercise of religion and are therefore void and unenforceable. In *Trinity Lutheran Church v. Comer* (2018), the U.S. Supreme Court held that the state of Missouri violated the First Amendment by excluding a faith-based preschool from a state program that provided recycled tires for playground resurfacing simply because it was religious. In *Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue* (2020), the U.S. Supreme Court held that the Montana Supreme Court violated the First Amendment when it invalidated, on state constitutional grounds, a private-school-choice program because it included faith-based schools. Likewise, in *Carson v. Makin* (2022), the U.S. Supreme Court held that Maine unconstitutionally excluded religious schools from a publicly-funded scholarship program for students in rural school districts. In all three cases, the Court held that withholding public funds from private religious schools under state Blaine Amendments was unconstitutional.

⁵ Act of Feb. 22, 1889, 25 Stat. 676, ch. 180 (1889)

On November 29, 2022, Attorney General Drew Wrigley issued a formal legal opinion affirming the unconstitutionality of the Blaine Amendment in North Dakota's Constitution.⁶ (The AG's opinion is attached to this testimony.) The opinion states: "the Blaine Amendment is not enforceable under United States Supreme Court case law" and "the United States Supreme Court has barred the state from enforcing its Blaine Amendment." Blaine is dead. While the state of North Dakota is not obliged to fund private religious schools under our state constitution, nothing prohibits the state from doing so.

Nevertheless, we continue to hear from opponents of educational choice that, although the state's Blaine Amendment is unconstitutional, the legislature should respect the intent of the state's Founders and enforce it legislatively anyway. This assertion is deeply troubling. The state's Blaine Amendment is unconstitutional because it violates the First Amendment of the United States Constitution that protects American citizens against unjust religious discrimination by the government. Proponents of keeping its "spirit" because of "tradition" or respect for the state's founders are asking this legislative body to knowingly violate the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and the religious rights of North Dakotans.⁷

Conclusion

Educational empowerment accounts respect the rights of children to a state-supported education and the rights of parent to direct the education of their children. Educational empowerment accounts are constitutional and would expand educational opportunities for all families in North Dakota.

We urge a **Do Pass** recommendation on House Bill 1607.

⁶ North Dakota Attorney General Opinion 2022-L-07.

⁷ The state's founding fathers did not willingly choose to include the Blaine Amendment in the state constitution. Congress, which was swept up in anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant hysteria at the time, forced the state to include the Blaine Amendment in the state's constitution as a condition of obtaining statehood. (Act of Feb. 22, 1889, 25 Stat. 676, ch. 180 (1889).)



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LETTER OPINION
2022-L-07

Dr. Rebecca S. Pitkin
Executive Director
North Dakota Education Standards and Practices Board
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Bismarck, ND 58503-0585

Dear Dr. Pitkin:

Thank you for your questions regarding the Teacher Support System and the availability of related grants for private school teachers. Specifically, you ask (1) whether private school teachers who are also mentors may participate in the Teacher Support System, and (2) whether private school teachers who are also mentors may receive grants to participate in the Teacher Support System. Nowhere in the applicable statute or administrative code are non-public school teachers prohibited from participating in the Teacher Support System. However, the context of your question indicates the key issue underlying these questions is whether Article VIII, Section 5 of the North Dakota Constitution (“the Blaine Amendment”)¹ prohibits teachers at sectarian schools from receiving grants from the Teacher Support System. It is my opinion that the Blaine Amendment is not enforceable under United States Supreme Court caselaw, and therefore teachers at sectarian schools may receive grants from the Teacher Support System.

ANALYSIS

The Blaine Amendment was adopted as Article 152 of the 1889 North Dakota Constitution and provides that “[n]o money raised for the support of the public schools of the state shall be appropriated to or used for the support of any sectarian school.”² The North Dakota Supreme Court has held “[a] ‘sectarian institution’ is ‘an institution affiliated with a particular religious sect or denomination, or under the control or governing influence of such sect or denomination.’”³ Over time, the definition of “sectarian” has broadened to include “relating to” or “supporting a particular religious group and its beliefs.”⁴ As a result, the Blaine Amendment effectively means “[n]o money raised for the support of

¹ In 1875, then Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives James Blaine proposed an amendment to the United States Constitution which would prohibit states from providing public funds to religious schools. After Blaine’s amendment failed to pass the U.S. Senate, 38 states passed amendments to their state constitutions barring state funding of religious or sectarian schools. These amendments are colloquially referred to as “Blaine Amendments.”

² N.D. Const. art. VIII, § 5.

³ *Gerhardt v. Heid*, 267 N.W. 127, 131 (N.D. 1936).

⁴ Black’s Law Dictionary (11th ed. 2019).

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the support of the public schools of the state shall be appropriated to or used for the support of any [religious private school].”⁵

The Teacher Support System is a mentoring program for new teachers operated by the North Dakota Education Standards and Practices Board (ESPB).⁶ A teacher who holds an initial, two-year license must participate in the Teacher Support System to be eligible to apply for a five-year-renewal license.⁷ The legislature appropriated \$2,125,764 to the ESPB for the 2021-23 biennium to provide grants to Teacher Support System mentors.⁸ The applicable statutes and administrative code do not prohibit private school teachers from participating in the Teacher Support System as either mentors or mentees. Given that participation in the mentor program is a requirement for renewed licensure and the lack of contrary language in statute, it is my opinion that teachers at private schools may participate in the Teach Support System as mentors. Similarly, it is my opinion that teachers at private schools may receive grants for participating in the Teacher Support System.

However, this does not end the inquiry. As noted above, the Blaine Amendment bars appropriated funds and public money from being used to support any sectarian school. On its face, this prohibition would apply to Teacher Support System grants provided to mentors employed by sectarian schools. However, in two recent decisions, the United States Supreme Court cast doubt on whether Blaine Amendments can be reconciled with the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. In *Trinity Lutheran Church of Columbia, Inc. v Comer*,⁹ the Court held a “law . . . may not discriminate against ‘some or all religious beliefs.’ . . . The Free Exercise Clause protects against laws that ‘impose [] special disabilities on the basis of . . . religious status.’”¹⁰ The Blaine Amendment functionally prohibits religious private schools from receiving grants from the Teacher Support System, while teachers at non-religious private schools are allowed to receive the grants. This is precisely the type of disadvantage the Supreme Court concluded may not be imposed on the basis of religious status.¹¹

The Supreme Court went even further in *Espinoza v. Montana Dept. of Revenue*.¹² In that case, the Court held that, because Montana’s Blaine Amendment had been applied to discriminate against schools and parents based on the religious character of the school at issue, the amendment was subject to the strictest level of judicial scrutiny.¹³ The Court made clear an interest in separating church and

⁵ N.D. Const. art. VIII, § 5.

⁶ N.D.A.C. § 67.1-04-04-03.

⁷ N.D.C.C. § 15.1-13-10(9).

⁸ See H.B. 1013, 2021 N.D. Leg., Section 1, Subd. 1 - part of the “Grants – program and passthrough” line item.

⁹ 137 S.Ct. 2012 (2017).

¹⁰ *Id.* at 2021 (citations omitted).

¹¹ *Id.* at 2021-2022.

¹² 140 S.Ct. 2246 (2020).

¹³ *Id.* at 2260 (noting that, to satisfy this “strictest scrutiny” test, the government action in question must “advance ‘interests of the highest order’ and must be narrowly tailored in pursuit of those

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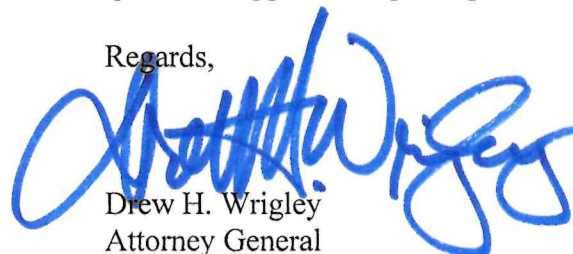
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State “cannot qualify as compelling in the face of the infringement of free exercise.”¹⁴ The Court concluded that “[a] State need not subsidize private education. But once a State decides to do so, it cannot disqualify some private schools solely because they are religious.”¹⁵ Recently, the Supreme Court expanded the *Espinoza* holding in *Carson v. Makin*.¹⁶ In *Carson*, the Court held the application of Maine’s Blaine Amendment to generally available tuition assistance payments violated the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment. The Court said the Blaine Amendment impermissibly denied public funding to certain private schools solely because the schools are religious.¹⁷

Here, as in *Carson* and *Espinoza*, the state created a mentorship program that is mandatory for licensure renewal. Fairly applied, the Blaine Amendment would permit teachers at public schools and non-religious private schools to receive grants for participating in the mandatory program, while barring teachers at religious private schools from receiving the same grants. Based on *Trinity Lutheran*, *Espinoza*, and *Carson*, the Blaine Amendment cannot be enforced in any situation where doing so would disadvantage a sectarian school as compared to a non-religious private school simply because of the school’s sectarian nature. As a result, it is my opinion the United States Supreme Court has barred the state from enforcing its Blaine Amendment.

Based on binding United States Supreme Court caselaw, it is my opinion the Blaine Amendment unconstitutionally disadvantages sectarian schools. As a result, it is my opinion that teachers at all schools, including both non-religious and sectarian private schools, may participate in the Teacher Support Program as mentors, and may receive grants to support their participation.

Regards,



Drew H. Wrigley
Attorney General

This opinion is issued pursuant to N.D.C.C. § 54-12-01. It governs the actions of public officials until such time as the question presented is decided by the courts.¹⁸

interests.” (citing *Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye, Inc. v. City of Hialeah*, 508 U.S. 520, 546 (1993)))

¹⁴ *Espinoza v. Mont. Dep’t of Revenue*, 140 S.Ct. 2246, 2260 (2020).

¹⁵ *Id.* at 2261.

¹⁶ 142 S.Ct. 1987 (2022).

¹⁷ *Id.* at 2002.

¹⁸ See *State ex rel. Johnson v. Baker*, 21 N.W.2d 355 (N.D. 1946).