

HB 1532 Testimony
Senate Appropriations - Education Environment Division
Gerald Vetter, President, Light of Christ Catholic Schools
March 28, 2023

Chairman Sorvaag and members of the Senate Appropriations – Education Environment Division,

I thank you for the opportunity to speak in support of House Bill 1532.

My name is Gerald Vetter and I serve as the president of Light of Christ Catholic Schools in Bismarck. Our five schools educate 1,437 students pre-k through grade 12. Our approximately 850 families are integral partners within this community and are privileged in being the primary teachers of their children. Historically, the St. Mary's Academy and Boarding School was the first Catholic school in this region, dating back to 1878, just five years after the railroad reached the Missouri.

Personally, I am the product of both public and private schools. My parents and dedicated educators instilled within me a great respect and admiration for North Dakota schools, educators and a passion for student learning.

Additionally, I serve as the current president for the North Dakota State Association of Non-public Schools. There are approximately 7,700 non-public students in North Dakota, which is about 7% of all North Dakota student's pre-k through grade 12. Non-public schools in North Dakota are approved by the ND Department of Public Instruction. The superintendent of public instruction must approve all non-public schools offering elementary or secondary education. To be an approved school, each year non-public schools must comply with the annual accountability pieces as required by the Department of Public Instruction.

HB 1532 would offer a welcomed educational reimbursement to our North Dakota families. In covering a modest portion of the actual cost to educate their child this would assist families to attend the school most aligned to their ideological beliefs and ultimately deemed the best fit for each child. Thereby, lessening the challenges that may restrict them and lessening the financial sacrifices being made to attend a non-public school and assuring the right that each child will be receiving a quality education in a North Dakota school.

Each North Dakota student has the right to receive an education and each parent has the right to determine what school would best meet the needs of their child. The needs for students arise in many different forms, and non-public school administrators, instructors and instructional aides work diligently to identify and support students that may struggle socially, physically, emotionally and academically. Additionally, non-public schools work collaboratively, with the local public school district, to serve students that do qualify for additional individual support services.

I'd like to briefly address the process of how the educational reimbursement would work.

First of all, we expect to work closely with DPI to ensure the program starts with parents and ends with parents as the legislation proposes.

During the enrollment process for new students and the re-enrollment of existing students, we would provide our parents the information and opportunity to opt-into the program. This is a key point: the parents must request reimbursement to prompt the program.

For the parents that do opt-in, we will aggregate the requests and communicate those requests to DPI within the deadline established by DPI. After processing all parent requests, DPI will then issue a check to each qualified non-public school who submitted parent requests.

After the funds are received from DPI, a credit would be issued to parents on their next invoice. The credit will equal the amount of the reimbursement from DPI. This will document that the benefit requested by the parent is going back to that parent. It will be documented as a credit on their bill for the qualified education expenses of their student--expenses they would otherwise be obligated to pay in full.

Speaking on-behalf of the students and families of Light of Christ Catholic Schools, they appreciate calling North Dakota their home. After our students receive their ND approved diplomas, nine of 10 graduates then decide to attend one of our ND private or public colleges or universities. Many during the course of their higher education and beyond regularly seek employment in their state becoming generous citizens, parents and taxpayers helping to support the common good of their local communities and state.

On-behalf of the State Association of Non-Public schools, we are committed to continuous improvement and statutory compliance of all school approval requirements, post-secondary and workforce preparedness, support for social emotional concerns and providing safe and secure school environments. These intentional efforts are implemented with fidelity, while still honoring and preserving a distinctive mission that each institution was founded upon. HB 1532 is an investment in the families and students of North Dakota.

Thank you for your work and service to North Dakota families and students. Additionally, for your consideration of House Bill 1532. This educational reimbursement program both supports and respects the rights of parents to make informed decisions regarding their child's education and to create greater access to an excellent North Dakota education in covering a modest portion of the cost to educate their children in a North Dakota school deemed the best fit for each child.

There are several intelligent administrators, parents and alumni here today that can expand in greater detail relative to some of the matters I highlighted in my comments.

I am able to stand for questions.