

February 2, 2023

My name is Derrick Nagel and I am submitting my testimony in support of HB 1532.

I am currently the Head of School at Christ the King Montessori School in Mandan, ND, where I have been for the past 6 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 a principal, I believe that Christ the King School is offering an education very different from other models, both seen in public and nonpublic schools in our community. Among many other things, at Christ the King Catholic Montessori School (CTK), we believe we are meeting the childhood Mental Health crisis with Montessori education. Though we take pride in the academic formation we are giving our students who will one day be the leaders in our community, we also see the extreme importance of educating the whole person. In the fall of 2021, the American Academy of Pediatrics declared a national emergency in child and adolescent mental health. In the wake of the pandemic, children are experiencing soaring rates of depression, anxiety, trauma, and loneliness. Mental health is just as important as physical health, and if left untreated mental health problems can interfere with early learning, self-esteem, and other important aspects of child development.

The educational philosophy of Maria Montessori offers an antidote to the post-pandemic childhood mental health crisis. Why? Because Montessori education 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 CTK, we believe that every child is born with a unique, unrepeatable relationship with their Creator, who loves them and calls them to make their own unique contribution to the world. Children spend time each week in an environment created for the sole purpose of being a place to enjoy their relationship with God where their enduring love of God becomes the horizon toward which children live their whole lives. Though

we are a Catholic School, almost half of our enrollment is non-Catholic. We are serving students throughout Bismarck, Mandan, Lincoln, and beyond. To have the option to send my own children to a Montessori School is invaluable to me, and HB 1532 would help many more families like my own, choose an educational model that might better fit their children. Or, even just one child from their family. We have many families that send some or most of their children to public 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 exceptional public schools. However, one size does not fit all and so though our exceptional public school partners might be a safe haven for many students, there are many families who have found a home in nonpublic schools. With the passing of this bill, 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 resident to educate my children how I see best fit. My children, though they attend private schools, are ND residents. All 128,351 students of ND of which private schools make of 6%...we are also a proponents of ND families and we support their right to make decisions regarding their children. It is their right to select the form of education that best aligns with their family's needs.

Please support HB 1532. Thank you.

Mr. Derrick Nagel  
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