

February 10, 2021

To: Montana House Education Committee

From: Matthew C. Brower, Executive Director of the Montana Catholic Conference

Re: Testimony in support of HB 279

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, my name is Matt Brower and I currently serve as the Executive Director of the Montana Catholic Conference. I speak on behalf of the two Roman Catholic bishops of Montana.

I am here today to voice our support for House Bill 279.

Catholic schools have a rich and enduring history in the state. Currently there are 22 Catholic schools in Montana from Billings to Browning, Missoula to Hays and large and small communities in between. Our combined pre-k through 12 student enrollment is approximately 3,800 students. To provide some perspective, those enrollment numbers together represent about the seventh largest school district in the state.

Additionally, around 35% of our Catholic school students are not Catholic and roughly 25% of our students qualify for free or reduced lunch.

Catholic schools have a demonstrated commitment to provide the highest quality education to all who desire a Catholic school education, particularly those on the margins of society. That is the proud history of Catholic schools and it is central to their mission and purpose.

Many Montanans, Catholics and non-Catholics alike, recognize the commitment to excellence reflected in our Catholic schools and the great value they provide to our state. In most of our schools, our students pay tuition, but if a student or family cannot pay all or part of the tuition, we provide scholarships to help them attend our schools. For some, particularly those of less financial means, a Catholic school education would not be possible without scholarships.

Not every student does well in public school, nor does every student do well in private school. However, for some who may do better in a Catholic school but lack sufficient funds to make that a reality, that hope and opportunity to thrive and excel remains only a dream.

The tax credit authorized with the enactment of Senate Bill 410 in 2015 helped open doors to Catholic schooling for students whose families would otherwise be unable to afford such. Now, House Bill 279 seeks to expand these opportunities and empower parents, specifically those of lesser financial means, to choose the means of education they think best fits the needs of their child.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, on behalf of the Montana Catholic Conference, I urge a “do pass” and thank you for your time.