

Proposed savings accounts would help private schools

Iowa View

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We live in a complex, diverse democracy whose independence is maintained to a great extent through an educated electorate. Ignorance is not democracy's friend.

That's why the U.S. public has been a strong supporter of public schools. In every town, city and state, maintenance and improvement of public schools are always a subject of political debate because they are considered so fundamental to our democracy - to say nothing of the well-being and continued prosperity of our people.

Public schools are, and should remain, secular, providing a good education to people of all religions and cultures, favoring none over others, benefiting religious and non-religious people. Unlike many countries in Europe, Latin America and elsewhere, U.S. governments by design provide very limited direct assistance to religious schools.

But like many people today, immigrants in the last and previous centuries wanted schools that also helped maintain their faith, and so besides supporting at great added expense the public schools that their children do not attend, Lutherans, Jews, Catholics, and members of many faiths established schools to do just that.

For people in 23 counties in southwest Iowa, the Catholic Diocese of Des Moines runs 17 schools, which have about 4,700 students in 15 elementary schools and 1,600 students in two high schools. Most of the students are Catholic, but many are not. Recognizing that they are the primary educators of their children, many parents want the quality education these schools provide, as well as the discipline, security and order that characterize Catholic schools.

Catholic schools focus on research-based practices that are highly effective, and they are uniquely positioned to successfully integrate and exceed the Iowa Core Curriculum. Catholic school students, who provide widespread community service with the goal of stimulating life-long habits, consistently score above the Iowa Assessments and ACT state and national averages. Five of our diocese's 17 schools have been designated as Blue Ribbon Schools by the U.S. Department of Education for overall excellence.

But the schools are becoming more expensive to maintain, and federal and state governments, and local school districts, have recognized the value in some limited assistance. Religious and other non-public schools provide an alternative to public schools, affording the healthy benefits that alternatives usually bring. The burden on public schools, especially in smaller districts, would be much greater without them.

Important limited support provided these schools has included the 65 percent tax credit initiated by the Iowa Legislature in 2006. In the case of our diocesan schools, Iowans donate to the Catholic Tuition Organization (CTO), to which \$3.2 million was contributed in 2014, to provide scholarships to Catholic schools for low income families.

Now under a legislative proposal known as the "Education Savings Account," the state would deposit an amount each academic year in a fraud-protected account that the parents of K-12

children not enrolled in a public school could access for tuition, fees, and tutoring. The parent could use the funds each year and anything remaining after high school graduation could be used for college or university education within Iowa.

The amount placed in the parent special account would be the same as the average basic state aid for a public school student. Public school income includes this basic state aid (currently an average of about \$5,600) plus other levies, local property taxes and various other federal funds, and public schools would continue to receive the state money for students actually enrolled in the public school.

Some worry that limited support of religious schools will somehow undermine public schools, that it amounts to creeping state support for religion. But we estimate that for no more than an additional 4 percent of the current government spending on K-12 education, the state could help maintain an alternative education that continues to benefit all Iowans, not just those who send their children to non-public schools.

The Diocese of Des Moines and I personally support strong public schools and the special referenda and other responsible tax levies for public education. But we also advocate for parental choice in education and in the present environment, we do not want our Catholic schools to become preserves for the elite or wealthy. The Education Savings Account would help avoid that.