

## **We Must Retain Referendum 435 for Nebraska Families**

By Jeremy Ekeler, Director of Opportunity Scholarships of Nebraska

Much has been said and written about education freedom (aka “School Choice”) over the last year by its opponents. Nearly all of those comments have been steeped in unfounded speculation wrapped in political messaging that prioritizes systems and money over families and kids. I am the Director of the state’s largest scholarship granting organization. We work with thousands of Nebraska families to help them get to any of our 170 partner schools. I’d like to present a perspective of the importance of school choice based upon actual experience.

Our organization, “Opportunity Scholarships of Nebraska” (OSN), has used the tax credit incentive in LB753 (one of over 30 in Nebraska) to turn taxpayers state income liability into scholarships for students looking for the right educational fit. This tax credit opportunity ends October 21<sup>st</sup>. In addition, we are now helping implement the new LB1402 “Education Scholarships” program, a \$10M scholarship appropriation. In the first weeks of launching our website we received interest from over 5,000 Nebraska families. Surprisingly, initial interest was especially high in cities, towns, and villages west of Omaha and Lincoln.

We hear stories from Scottsbluff to Nebraska City daily, but they are not the politically charged talking points we’ve been inundated with by Teachers Union opposition. Instead, they are stories both unique and personal: A single dad in armed forces who wants to take care of his three kids in central Nebraska. The tale of a recent widow who wants all her kids in the same school without having to work multiple jobs to make that a reality. The story of a small business owner who nearly lost everything during COVID and is scrambling to put her family’s life back together. A grandmother raising her grandchildren after the sudden passing of their mother.

This November you will choose: RETAIN Referendum 435 and protect these families’ rights, or repeal and strip away them away.

We are asking all Nebraskans to defend their parental rights, and those of folks in their community, by voting RETAIN on Referendum 435

Nebraska has recently made historic investments in public education, to the tune of over \$15,000 per student. And a surprising number of the parents we hear from are proud current or former public school educators. They tell us that Opportunity Scholarships make sense because we must prioritize the future: our children. They are witnesses of race and socioeconomic learning gaps, understand the post-COVID fallout, and see no reason for

the political divide. At the same time, many are unabashed in their support of public education. As one said, “We need great public schools. It’s a great fit for most kids. But my little one, for example, needs something different. We should both options; two things can be true at the same time. Let’s educate children together.”

Stories are one thing but the data is also revealing. Roughly 50% of applicants to OSN are from outside of the Lincoln and Omaha areas. Over a third are under the poverty standard for the Children’s Health Insurance Program (213% of poverty) and the majority are below 300% of poverty. In short, this program is helping hard-working Nebraskans - these folks are your neighbors and co-workers.

To pull the lens back a bit, to most of our friends in other states educational opportunity is the norm (as it is worldwide in most developed Christian countries). We are seeing new and massive expansions of programs across the US. This is because, with over 30 years of experience and data in the US, school choice programs clearly change lives. Now we’re seeing it firsthand in Nebraska, which is a beautiful thing for our families, kids, and future.

We love to talk about “local control” in Nebraska. Nothing is more local than a parent having the power to choose what’s best for their child. So the next time the political rhetoric ratchets up, remember the thousands of fellow Nebraskans whose lives are or will be changed by this opportunity. As one emotional parent wrote to us, “This scholarship means everything to us. Thank you.”

These are the families that need us to vote RETAIN on Referendum 435 this election cycle.