



DIOCESE OF DAVENPORT

Department of Communication

News

For Immediate Release

DATE: October 15, 2026
FROM: Deacon David Montgomery **PHONE:** 563-888-4222
Chancellor | Chief of Staff | Director of Communication
CONTACT: Lynne Devaney, Superintendent of Schools
Diocese of Davenport
devaney@davenportdiocese.org
RE: Op-Ed Des Moines Register-(Arch)Diocesan Superintendents

Iowa Has Always Invested in Students. Now It Includes Every Student.

By the Superintendents of Catholic Schools in the Archdiocese of Dubuque and the Dioceses of Davenport, Des Moines, and Sioux City

Educating every Iowa child benefits all of Iowa. Public or private, all schools in Iowa share this mission to promote the common good.

Funding isn't for schools. It's for students. By investing in every student, Iowa invests in its future and a network of public and private schools that serve a common good.

This is nothing new. Iowa Tuition Grants, Pell Grants, and the GI Bill cover tuition at private, faith-based universities. SNAP is used at grocery stores. Medicaid follows patients to the hospital they choose, including nonprofit, Catholic systems.

Iowans have long agreed on the principle behind these programs. When a public investment serves a common good, we fund the person and trust families to choose. Education Savings Accounts bring that principle to K-12 education. Investing in all students benefits all of Iowa.

With the Students First Act, the state supports every student attending accredited public and non-public schools. For Iowans who believe more state dollars should be invested in students, ESAs have provided an answer.

The State Auditor's Office found no irregularities in the ESA program. The audit projected that ESAs allowed 8,838 new students to enroll in non-public schools by 2025-2026. About \$70 million followed them to their school of choice. Same students. Same funding.

More than 41,000 students received an ESA last year. For each, the state will send an average of \$1,656 in annual supplemental funding to the student's local public school district, even if they've never set foot in the public school.

In this way, ESAs are generating \$68 million in *new* supplemental funding for public schools, essentially offsetting money that followed students to non-public schools. It's not zero sum. Iowa increased investment in education while minimizing the net impact on public schools.

For perspective, "millions" sounds big, but ESAs account for less than 4% of total government funding to Iowa education.



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What's truly big is the impact on underserved students. Our enrollment rose about 3% this year. Free-or-reduced-price lunch eligibility grew 10%, English learners 10%, and students of color 6%. We welcome diverse learners with academic, behavior, and special education needs. ESAs help pave their path.

Accredited non-public schools educate roughly one in 10 Iowa students, and we take that trust seriously. We're educating one in 10 future scientists, doctors, artists, business owners, neighbors, and parents. Catholic or non-Catholic, we educate the full child: mind, body, and spirit. We teach respect, courtesy, morality, and the value of every person as children of God.

To ensure accessibility, Catholic school tuition has always been among the most affordable, but the landscape and our cost to educate have changed. Facilities need updates, classrooms require new technology, and when Iowa's public schools raised teacher pay, so did we.

It's difficult not to take offense at suggestions this money is being used inappropriately, but ESAs ensure the state's network of schools remains strong.

We're proud to serve alongside our public school colleagues to develop the future citizens of Iowa, and that's worth investing in.

Amy Conlon,
Superintendent of Schools, Archdiocese of Dubuque

Donna Bishop,
Superintendent of Schools, Diocese of Des Moines

Lynne Devaney,
Superintendent of Schools, Diocese of Davenport

Dora Jung,
Superintendent of Schools, Diocese of Sioux City

Lynne Devaney
Superintendent of Schools
Diocese of Davenport
devaney@davenportdiocese.org

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