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Maine's tuitioning program applied unfairly

By Jill Guay

State legislators have scheduled a hearing today to consider whether Maine's tuitioning system—a kind of school choice program for smaller towns—should allow parents to send their children to religious schools.

I intend to be there to share my story and urge the legislators to empower parents by giving us the freedom to choose the best schools for our children—whether the schools we choose are public, private or religious.

My husband and I had always sent our children to parochial schools until September 2001, when we moved from Lewiston to Minot, in part because we hoped to enroll our daughter Ashley in a new public school in the area, Poland Regional High School. We toured Poland and the new facilities looked like a terrific learning environment for Ashley.

Unfortunately, our first experience with public schooling didn't turn out very well. It was clear that Poland hadn't yet ironed out all the wrinkles of starting a new school. Discipline was a constant problem, and teachers commanded very little respect from the students.

As an impressionable ninth-grader who was accustomed to the structured environment of parochial schools, Ashley floundered with little guidance from the teachers or staff.

The school rarely informed us of problems until it was far too late. For instance, we didn't know that our daughter was skipping a class—"roundtable," a kind of study hall—until halfway through the second

semester.

When I asked the principal why we hadn't been told, he said it was a concern that we were not informed, but it was "only roundtable." We also didn't know that she forgot to turn in a corrected version of her French assignment until the missing assignment resulted in her receiving "no credit" for the class, even though Ashley has excelled in her French classes for 10 years. Now that notation will be on her permanent transcript, and it's too late to correct her mistake.

We made every effort to keep in touch and work with the Poland teachers and principal. Still, we were never fully informed about our daughter's progress, being told instead that there were no policies in place to deal with the issues we raised, although they were looking into getting such policies in place in the future.

So this year we transferred Ashley to St. Dominic's Regional High School, a Catholic school with a wonderful track record that speaks for itself. The difference is amazing.

Ashley is excelling in all her classes, earning mostly Bs and As, playing field hockey and fitting in very well. Unfortunately, she has had to take several classes over again because she fell behind a bit at Poland, but the school keeps us very well informed about her progress and everyone, even the secretary, always knows where she is.

Catholic schools have also kept our children strong in their faith. (While I am a Protestant, my husband is Catholic, and our daughters have been raised in the Catholic faith.) It is

important to our family that our daughters' education reflects our values.

St. Dom's is wonderful for our daughter, but tough on our pocket-book.

That's because state law bars towns like Minot from paying tuition to a religious school, even though—through the statewide tuitioning program for small towns—the town will pay to send kids to Poland or to nearby Hebron Academy, a private school.

Our problem is not with Minot or with Poland. Our problem is with the law. We should be able to use our tuitioning money toward the school of our choice, even if it is a religious school.

The law treats us differently than it treats others, keeping us from choosing the best school for our children, and that's not fair. That's why we joined a lawsuit brought by the Institute for Justice last September challenging Maine's law because it singles out religious schools and parents for discrimination, and why I plan to testify before the Legislature today.

We hope things will be better at Poland in a few years, but we cannot take a chance with Ashley's last years of high school. We want Ashley to receive the best education possible. Right now, St. Dom's is giving her that.

Jill Guay lives in Minot and is scheduled to testify today before the Legislature in favor of a bill to repeal a 1981 state law that bars towns from paying tuition to religious schools.