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### Lyle Conner statement on behalf of the Montana Masons on public schools

Lyle Conner

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*President*

Mr. ~~Chairman~~, Members of the Education Committee, Ladies and Gentlemen:

My name is Lyle Conner, I am a taxpayer in Lewis and Clark County and I am a member of the Masonic Lodge.

I have been appointed Chairman of the Masonic Grand Lodge's Constitution Revision Committee and what I have to say is in behalf of the Masons in this glorious State of Montana. There are over 21,000 Masons in Montana.

It is our sincere hope and desire that religious liberty will continue to be preserved and that every effort will be made to support and protect our public schools so as to continue to provide the high level of education, as we have in the past.

Masonry throughout its history in Montana, as well as in the rest of the United States has worked hard and diligently to further education for children in public schools.

We feel Montana has one of the best constitutional provisions, as it prohibits the use of public funds for private and parochial schools. This in part is in ART V, Sec. 35. "No appropriation shall be made ... to any denominational or secretarian institution or association." This clearly states what CANNOT be done. "No appropriation shall be made ...

What happens if this ART V, Sec. 35 and ART XI, Sec. 8 are deleted and Amendment One of the U. S. Constitution is substituted. It states "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the exercise thereof." This could contain loop-holes that over a period of time and continuous hammering by groups desirous of obtaining public funds for private and parochial schools, might open up. Then, like the little hole in the dikes in Holland, if it is not plugged, the whole dike will wash out and a flood will result and our public schools will suffer.

Let's go a step further. What would happen if Federal and State monies were available for private and parochial schools?

- (1) The parochial school would lose its religious freedom, for they would have to account for these public funds; this would result in public control of parochial schools. We're sure the parochial school would not like this.
- (2) The public funds should not be provided to non-public schools because the public could have no voice in the determination of non-public school policy nor in the selection of school officials. TAXATION WITHOUT REPRESENTATION.
- (3) Financial resources are presently being strained to support our public schools. This has resulted in higher property taxes. If the State is required to provide aid to non-public schools as well, it would mean either a much greater tax load for Montanans, or a curtailment of aid for education

in public schools. A dual school system was eliminated in the City of Helena a few years back. The Catholic's chose to discontinue both their elementary and secondary schools. There was some shuffling of students, rearranging of classes and of class rooms, but there were no complaints on the part of the parents of the public school children, nor on the part of the parents of the Catholic school children. A smooth transition was made because of the will and the cooperation of all. Now no one wishes to go back to the dual school system here in Helena.

Too often we think of a parochial school as being only of the Catholic religion. Catholic Parochial Schools do comprise over 90% of the parochial schools in the U. S. But providing public funds for non-public schools would open the way for any number of organizations, religious and otherwise to establish their own school system at public expense and to the detriment of our public school system. Perhaps each of the following would like to have a non-public school if public funds were available: The Lutherans, Mormons, Christians, Methodists, Presbyterians, Mitterites, maybe even Montana Power, Mountain States Telephone and on and on. Where would this stop? This would naturally result in needless duplication of effort, facilities, programs and consequently in a serious waste of limited resources.

Frankly we could not afford the luxury of supporting more than one school system and still provide the level of education we owe our school children in public schools. Every tax dollar diverted to support non-public schools means one less dollar available for our public schools. Also the granting tax subsidies to non-public schools would tremendously stimulate the growth and proliferation of such schools, and ideology-oriented groups would decide to get what they would naturally regard as their "fair share" of the public funds available. Once it is granted that parochial schools deserve ANY support from the public treasury, there is no longer any moral or logical reason that can be advanced for not giving them full support. From then on, it is simply a question of expediency and "do we have the money?".

There is no end to it, short of total public support. And even that is but a way-station on the road to the final complete wrecking of the public school as we have known them, and the yielding of control over the whole education process into the hands of the clergy. This is, in fact, the situation that prevails in every country where the hierarchy of the church is seeking these funds for its schools, if it has its way.

A case in point is the Netherlands. When the decision was made in that country fifty years ago to give public aid to parochial schools, 70% of the schools were public and 30% were private. Today, the situation is reversed, and 70% of the Netherlands' schools are private and 30% public. It is axiomatic that public schools decrease in number and deteriorate in quality when parochial schools receive direct or indirect support. Money from Public funds to private and parochial schools reduces the public school, the only rightful claimant to the public tax dollar, to being simply one

among many competitors for it. In competing for money, the public school would find itself no match for the vested sectarian and the private interests with which it will have to compete.

If we believe that the public school system is essential in educating a people in the democratic traditions and processes, we must preserve our present system. We cannot subject the yearly funding of educational bills to the pressures of sectarian groups and lobbies. Experience elsewhere has proven that support of a dual system of education is incompatible with the maintenance of an effective public educational system.

To argue that the present parochial system relieves the public of expense, overlooks the essential voluntary nature of the parochial system. To foster the dual system by public tax money is to promote with public funds a division, and increases the segregation of diverse groups at a time when segregation and division are looked upon as harmful to the full development of a democratic society.

Retain and preserve intact Article V, Sec. 35 and Article XI, Sec. 8 of our present Montana Constitution.

We urge that you publicly lend support to separate church and state, not separate children.

Thank you.