



COUNTY OF POLK

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Dear Constituents and Stakeholders,

It was surprising and disappointing to read a Des Moines Register article on June 17, 2018, about the Polk County Board of Supervisors approving a proposal to fund computers, smart boards, and iPads for nine parochial schools. Reading the article, the decision appears to have been against state law, county policy, all under a cloak of secrecy.

Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, we shared the factual and comprehensive information about our decision with the reporter but the information was not included in the article. Therefore, we want to provide this overview so as taxpayers, voters, parents, and members of this community, have a full understanding of our decision making.

Since Polk County owns the land that Prairie Meadows Racetrack & Casino operates on, we receive approximately \$26 million per year in lease payments and revenue sharing. This revenue is used to pay the debt on the Iowa Events Center, provide unrestricted funding to the metro public school districts, and support various municipalities. Individual grants are also approved for a variety of projects.

In 2012, Iowa law and our own policy stated that we could not directly give money to religious-affiliated groups such as schools. This was problematic for all of the Supervisors, many of whom felt the regulations were discriminatory against parochial students and parents.

The spirit of state law prohibiting government funding to religious entities is to avoid using public funds to promote or advance religious ideas. We agree with this ethic. However, we also wanted to help our taxpaying constituents using the parochial elementary schools with a much-needed technology upgrade.

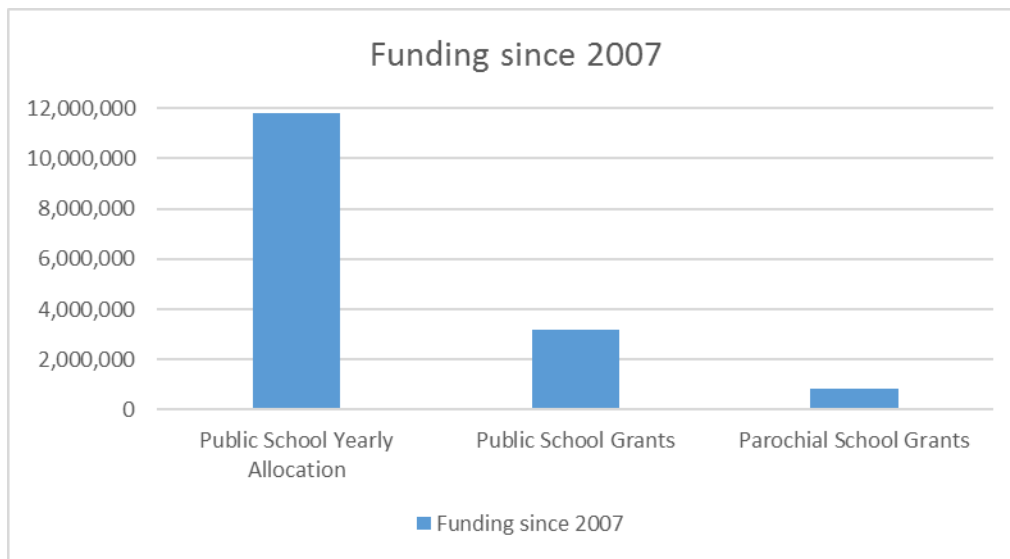
The only way for the religious schools to receive money was for a private non-profit organization to apply for a grant. The grant, made to a third party nonprofit, Education for the 21st Century, was narrowly defined for technology equipment. The County Attorney's office advised us then, and advises us now, this is a legal use of grant money. We believe we were complying with the spirit of state law while being able to help meet the needs of students in *all* our schools.

The Polk County Board of Supervisors discussed and approved this matter on March 27, 2012 and again on October 15, 2013. The minutes and audio recordings of the Board of Supervisors are available on our website.

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Today, no separate non-profit entity is required in order to give money to religious institutions. The 2017 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in Trinity Lutheran Church of Columbia, Inc. v. Comer has allowed governmental organizations to offer direct grant funding to religious organizations. In short, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled the prior practice was discriminatory.

The Des Moines Register appears to make the case that money given to the parochial schools shortchanged the public schools. However, the numbers simply tell a much different story. Since 2007, public schools in our county have received approximately \$11,807,963 from Polk County and Prairie Meadows while the parochial schools have received \$844,000 for the same time period. All the funds to the religious schools were restricted while all of the money given to the public schools is unrestricted - meaning the local schools can decide how the money is used. Additionally, over \$3,184,330 was provided to the public schools in the form of Polk County grants to be used for specific activities and purposes since 2007.



The Board of Supervisors are proud of the contributions that have been made to our public schools. And we believe the intent of the grants made to parochial schools in 2012 and 2013 was done in the spirit of ensuring all our children in our community have access to current technology.

At the end of the day, the Board of Supervisors is proud of the contributions that have been made to our public schools, as well as the many organizations that apply for grants. And that is the reason why we have joined with Prairie Meadows and hired a local public relations firm to showcase how these funds are being used to improve and enhance our county and our community members.

We work hard to ensure that we are good stewards of public funds, to follow the law and to be inclusive and thoughtful as we make decisions that impact the community. Through our partnership with Prairie Meadows, we look forward to continuing to positively impact our community in the years to come.

Respectfully,

Polk County Board of Supervisors
Angela Connolly, Robert Brownell, Steve Van Oort, Tom Hockensmith, John F. Mauro