

Written PROPONENT testimony for HB 2669: An act codifying the mental health intervention team program administered by the Kansas department for aging and disability services in state statute.

To: Madam Chair Representative Landwehr and committee members

From: Dr. Jamie Finkeldei, Associate Superintendent, Catholic Diocese of Wichita

Date: February 8, 2024

Madam Chair Landwehr and members of the committee,

My name is Jamie Finkeldei and I am the Associate Superintendent of the Catholic Diocese of Wichita. Thank you for the opportunity to speak as a PROPONENT to bill HB 2669.

The Diocese of Wichita has 8,840 K-12 students spread across 34 elementary and 4 high schools. This makes us the 9th largest school district in Kansas. Some of these schools are located in small towns like Arkansas City, Chanute, Coffeyville, Kingman, and Fort Scott. Some are suburban. And some are located in the center city of Wichita. Because of our Stewardship model, we do not charge tuition to any of our Catholic students, and so, our schools truly reflect the neighborhoods and communities they are in.

Across the great state of Kansas, 48% of all Kansas kids are on free and reduced lunch. And while overall only 26% of our Catholic students are on Free and Reduced lunch, 10 of our schools have over the state average of 48% of their students on Free and Reduced lunch. St. Patrick, Wichita has 95% of its students on Free and Reduced lunch, St. Margaret Mary 85%, St. Anne 84%, Holy Savior 80%, Holy Name, Coffeyville 58%. We serve 2,320 students on free and reduced lunch. That is more students than many public school districts have in their entire district. In that way our schools reflect our communities.

Across Kansas, 38% of students are from ethnically diverse backgrounds. In our schools, that percentage is 34%. So ethnically, our schools mirror our communities.

But there is another, more unfortunate way, our schools reflect our communities. And that is when it comes to the mental health crisis of our children. Especially since COVID, student anxiety is up, depression is up, feelings of loneliness is up, and most tragically suicidal ideation is up. We all know that mental health problems are not limited by the zip code you live in, the amount of money you make, your religious affiliation, or the school you attend. Students are struggling with their mental health in public schools and private schools.

The COVID EANS money that private schools received as part of ESSR recognized this crisis. Much of the money we received was spent on adding social workers, counselors, and other therapists to our neediest schools. Unfortunately, that money is coming to an end. And while we have done a good job clawing back the learning loss from COVID, we have not succeeded in slowing the mental health crisis impacting our students.

You have before you written testimony from teachers, parents, and students about the profound impact these mental health professionals have had on the health and safety of our neediest families. You will hear from families who children are successful in school only because of the support they received from these counselors. We can all acknowledge that in today's world, our schools in our center cities need

more than just great teachers. Societal problems and traumatic life events are all too common and require our schools to provide more than just reading, writing, and arithmetic. We can wish it wasn't so and pray that it changes in the future, but for now mental health professionals are vital to the success of our students and families.

For our neediest schools, for our small town rural schools, HB 2669 offers a lifeline to keep up and improve the mental health services we have.

Thank you, Madam Chair and members of the committee, for allowing me to provide support for HB 2669. Please feel free to reach out to me if I can be of assistance to you in this worthy endeavor to protect our children and provide needed services to them. Thank you for your consideration.

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