

**Testimony of Stephanie Faoro, Parent/Educator of Lawrence Virtual School  
Regarding SB 361  
Senate Education Committee  
Tuesday, February 7, 2012**

Good Afternoon, Madam Chairperson and Members of the committee:

I am Stephanie Faoro, a mother of children who attend Lawrence Virtual School and a teacher of many who attend. The bill you are considering today cuts funding to virtual students like my children and those I serve by \$600 per child. As you will see from my experience and the experience of nearly 10,000 parents just like me, we believe the education and life experience we are receiving in a virtual school is equal to any other school in the state and should be funded that way.

I come before you as the first educator of my children. As an educator in the public schools, I witnessed first-hand the needs of children. I taught foster children who had no food, children eager to learn, children coming to school on an empty stomach a wide range of students. I grew to cherish the children as they entered my classroom each day. My husband and I decided to become foster parents. Through foster parenting we saw different needs of children. As we began our own family, we felt blessed with these lives. We have hopes and dreams for our children. When it became time for our eldest to go to school, we decided to keep her home to teach her ourselves. We didn't have any grand scheme, we had no major concerns about sending her to school, but something inside me decided that the joy I had teaching others to read, could only amplify with my own child. I knew for certain that no one could teach my child with the same dreams I have for her. We want our children to love reading, writing, and learning. To overcome obstacles, to persevere, to advocate for her own education, to see the community where you live as an extension of their home and to give back to the community that affords you opportunities. To value education and see that learning extends beyond the book – the real learning begins when you create a passion. I knew that teachers would enjoy my children, but their dreams would be different, they would be smaller in scope, smaller in duration, and the word smaller scared me, I wanted something more for my children. I know that teachers have degrees, undergraduate, master, and doctorate degrees in all kinds of wondering teaching techniques, but I also recognize that I have the doctorate degrees in Josephine, Maxwell and Charlotte Faoro and for my children to get the most out of their education, I had to draw on what they teach me about their passions, their learning styles, their challenges and their strengths. I know that teachers can tell me about my children, but not to the degree that I know and understand them.

My choice to come to Lawrence Virtual School came from much research and passion to find a school that could provide me with a curriculum that did not discriminate. A curriculum that taught history in an ambitious way – taught it as it should be taught using the world as the textbook – beginning with the nomads who settled in the Fertile Crescent and bore the beginning of civilization. A curriculum that brought experts in every field of education together to brainstorm the "BIG" ideas in reading, math, science, history, art, language, and music and to develop those "BIG" ideas into learning objectives for my children. I saw this school as an opportunity for our family to receive a world class curriculum that values novels with choice, not just books that are prescribed by a teacher. That allows children to find a topic and run as far as their imagination can run. The curriculum is as gentle as you need, and as rigorous as you choose to make it. The curriculum has options for children who need academic support and an academic challenge – all in the same day, same course, with different approaches for different learning styles. After a year in the school as a parent of a student, I saw the learning that was happening. I felt that as a parent who was using the curriculum with my child, I could come alongside other families to help them to teach their child. The principal valued that I had a masters degree in education.

In schools, where students are struggling, we decrease the number of learners with a teacher. We see that too many learners make it more challenging for the children to learn and the teacher to teach. Enter Lawrence Virtual School, where students are learning in an environment that studies prove is the most optimal for optimal learning to occur – one on one, and with a teacher that cares the most about that child's potential and learning goals.

Our eldest, Josephine, came into this very building last year to learn, as a page, about the inner workings of this sacred hall. She was excited to learn about government. She wanted to bring a friend from our neighborhood. The friend asked permission to participate in the page program with her, her friend's school frowned on her absence from their brick and mortar building at such an important time of the year, as she would be missing out on state assessment preparation. Josephine was taking those very same tests, but was afforded flexibility in her ability to "school" and prepare for state assessments in a more flexible framework that took into consideration once in a lifetime opportunities. For some of our students these opportunities are world class tennis championships, acting parts on Broadway, running marathons as families.

Lawrence Virtual School has been our school of choice for the last 6 years, as Josephine began her first year of school. The staff works one on one with families supporting families in new and innovative ways since the beginning. We do not discriminate our learners. Last year I had two students who were from their neighborhood public school, both students affected by Turrets. One of my students was reprimanded daily by teachers because of his uncontrollable ticks that would come without warning. The student was a distraction to himself, his classmates, and his teachers. He came to Lawrence Virtual School where his parent was the teacher, who was not distracted by his ticks, and that student began to blossom. He found academic strengths that no one had seen before, even himself. He found his voice behind the ticks. The stress from the classroom was gone, because his new classroom and teacher focused on his strengths, not his ticks. Low and behold, his ticks have subsided.

This past Friday, I sat in a large church as two former students buried their father who was taken unexpectedly and much too soon. LVS afforded that family an opportunity that they took for granted at that time. That family learned the familiarities of each others' hearts, minds, and nuances that are afforded to a family sharing each day together, learning together.

I am not saying that Lawrence Virtual School is for everyone, but I am saying that the little voice of Lawrence Virtual School that began 8 years ago with 60 students, has grown to a loud roar 8 years later with 1100 students. Families are flocking to schools that teach their child, not their grade, that teach how to learn, not that they failed, that teach from right where that learner is one on one, holding the parents' hand and listening to their concerns and working to help that child overcome whatever that child needs to overcome; schools that teach finding joy in learning. Virtual education is misunderstood by many, but when something is misunderstood, doesn't mean it should be feared, or eliminated, it means that it should be understood. I met a Kansas Senator last year and shared our story. Families are coming to virtual education because their current system isn't working for them, it might be the school down the street that says their student is a problem and is struggling, but they say that it is the learner, not the environment. It is the school down the street that isn't seeing the potential of the student that the parent knows is there. It is the parent who is scared to death to bring home this child to teach, because the parent has run out of options, but wants someone to come alongside them to listen, support, and see that incredible child underneath all that negative talk. It is the parent who wants to take on the challenge of educating their kindergartener, but can't do it alone. IT is the parent that wants to make sure their child is learning, so feels comfortable working with professionals who have a passion for parents who teach their own. The children coming to us are not thriving in their current brick and mortar setting, their setting is failing them and we all know that a good education can make all the difference in the life of the child. Please spend time learning who we are and what we do and the differences we are making in the lives of our students.

Thank you for your time and consideration.