



KANSAS POLICY INSTITUTE

ADVOCATING FOR FREE MARKETS AND THE PROTECTION OF PERSONAL LIBERTY

Testimony to Senate Education Committee

SB 196 – Charter Schools

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Dave Trabert, President

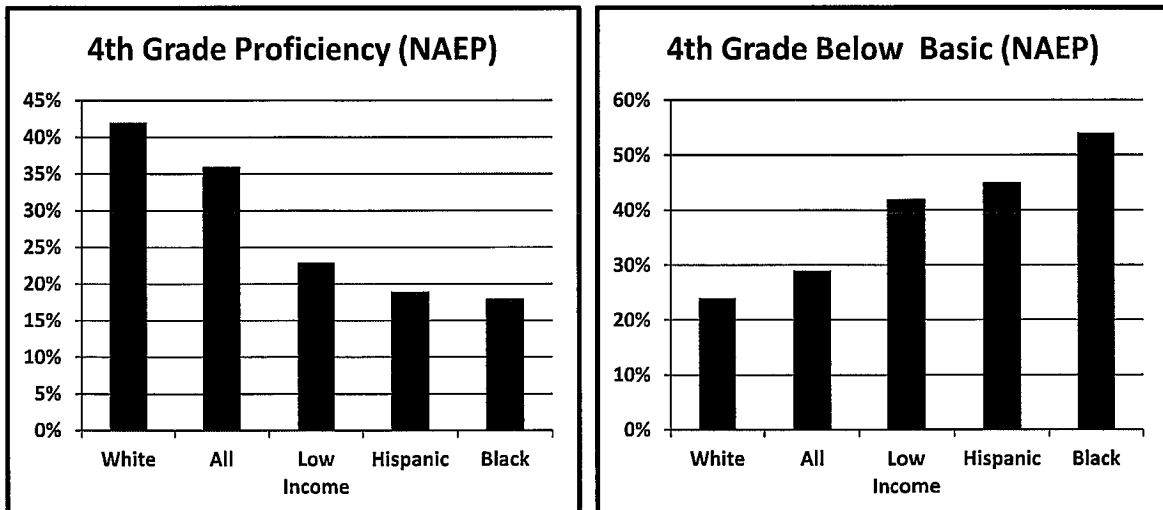
Chairman Abrams and Members of the Committee:

We appreciate this opportunity to speak in support of SB 196, which allows more public institutions to authorize public charter schools and thereby provide parents and students with more educational opportunities.

There’s no question that many Kansas kids get a very good public education; but it’s also true that thousands of children are underperforming. That’s not to say that the schools, teachers or anyone is at fault; it’s simply that every child has unique needs and learning habits, and that their current school might not be the right ‘fit’ for them.

In such cases, some parents are fortunate to be able to send their child to a private school or move to a different neighborhood to find a better ‘fit’. But those aren’t options for many children’s parents. They are forced by their income level to stay where they are.

And these are the kids who tend to need the most help. There are unnecessary but very real achievement gaps for kids from low income families and students of color.



Source: Kansas results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 2011

By the way, ‘Below Basic’ is a polite way of saying ‘functionally illiterate.’

It's not that low income kids or students or color can't learn; it's that they haven't had the same educational opportunities. That's what public charter schools can provide.

Another benefit of public charter schools is that they may be organized around a special emphasis, theme or concept. Some members of this Committee were privileged to recently visit the Walton Rural Life Center in the Newton School District. Participants on that visit were inspired to hear second graders excitedly talking about their learning experiences and to hear teachers and principal talk about the innovation they can bring to each individual child.

School leaders also proudly report that Walton students are performing very well compared to their counterparts across the state. While it is not a straight-forward exercise to compare one district or school with another (primarily for demographic reasons), the charts below do demonstrate their success in fourth grade reading and math on the Kansas assessment.ⁱ

4th Grade Reading, Meets Standard and Above (All Students)		
	2011	2012
Walton Rural Life	96%	96%
State Average	89%	88%

4th Grade Math, Meets Standard and Above (All Students)		
	2011	2012
Walton Rural Life	100%	100%
State Average	89%	87%

The kids at Walton are responding to their particular interest, and the same can occur with public charter schools using vocational, technical, STEM and many other targeted approaches to engage children.

There is only upside to offering parents and students more choice.

Opponents may say that charter schools don't perform as well as traditional public schools, but that's not true. They sometimes refer to a study conducted by the Center for Research on Educational Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University as claiming that charters underperform, but that is not what the study concluded. While some charters did underperform compared to traditional public schools, CREDO determined that "the academic success of charter school students was found to be affected by the contours of the charter policies under which their schools operate."ⁱⁱ

In short, charters performed well when the authorizing statutes were properly designed. SB 196 avoids statutory shortfalls identified in CREDO. There are no caps on the number of charters that can be authorized. The authorizers are limited to public institutions, which will undoubtedly require and enforce rigorous standards and there is also an appeals process.

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Opponents of school choice fear that traditional public schools will somehow be harmed, but there is no evidence to substantiate such fears. To the contrary, USD 373 Newton proudly describes the success of the Walton Rural Life Center.

Concerns about institutions are understandable, but the interests of individual students must prevail. How is it in the best interests of students to deny them choice?

Many students across Kansas are not getting the education they deserve. In fact, lawyers representing Schools for Fair Funding testified as such in the recent *Gannon v. State of Kansas* lawsuit. Some are forced to attend underperforming public schools while others struggle to find the right fit to suit individual needs. This is not to say that teachers and school administrators are not amongst our most dedicated citizens, or that these achievement shortfalls are anyone's fault. It is simply recognition of fact and experience.

As this legislature debates countless other issues related to education, much of the conversation is around preparing students for college or career. Unfortunately, an honest review of the facts shows that more innovation and opportunities are needed in that regard.

- Only 56% of 11th grade students read grade-appropriate material with full comprehension on the Kansas assessment.
- Only 49% of 11th grade students usually perform accurately on all grade-level tasks in Math.
- Only 29% of Kansas seniors scored high enough on the ACT to be considered college-ready in English, Reading, Math and Science.
- Kansas Regents / KSDE reports that 21% of Kansas high school graduates who attended public university in Kansas signed up for remedial training (2009-10 is latest data).

Again, this data is not shown to be critical but merely to underscore the challenges and hard work needed to give every student the opportunity to be college- and career-ready. There are no 'silver bullets' but expanding public charter schools is one of the elements being successfully implemented in many states.

- Individual schools organized along the same premise are closing the achievement gap.
 - A recent study funded by the U.S. Department of Education found that such schools were more effective for lower income and lower achieving students; specifically related to positive impacts on students' achievement in math.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Individual schools operating under similar situations to those that would be created under the bill are outperforming comparable traditional public schools.

- A 2009 study by the RAND Corporation found that students attending such schools had higher ACT scores, graduation rates, and college entrance rates than their peers in traditional public schools.^{iv}

Possibly more important than any achievement statistic is the apparent recognition of parents that other options may present better opportunities for their children. In 2012, 610,000 students across the country were on waiting lists to attend public schools organized along the lines of SB 196.^v

Thank you for the opportunity to present today; I would encourage the Committee to support this bill.

ⁱ <http://online.ksde.org/rcard/index.aspx>

ⁱⁱ Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States, page 4,
http://credo.stanford.edu/reports/MULTIPLE_CHOICE_CREDO.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/newsroom/releases/2010/Charterschool_6_10.asp

^{iv} http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9433/index1.html

^v http://www.publiccharters.org/data/files/Publication_docs/NAPCS%202012%20Market%20Share%20Report_20121113T125312.pdf