



Testimony before the House Committee on K-12 Education Budget
in opposition to
House Bill 2552 – Creating the Kansas reading readiness act
by
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Ms. Chair, Members of the Committee:

[Game On for Kansas Schools](#) is a nonpartisan grassroots effort among Kansans who share a belief in high-quality public education as a right of all Kansas students. We advocate for Kansas public schools to ensure our teachers, principals, superintendents, and school board members have the resources necessary to deliver quality education to all Kansas students. We inform communities across the state about issues and legislation affecting their students, and our membership extends statewide.

Game On opposes this bill for several reasons. First among them is that our state-wide membership strongly opposes any voucher programs that takes money from our public schools and gives it to private schools. As we've testified before, we support the right of private schools to exist in Kansas, but we don't believe that in an environment of limited resources it makes sense to fund both public and private schools. This bill will take money directly from school districts who are required to serve all Kansas students and hand the money over to private schools who are not required to meet the same inclusionary standards as our public schools. Moreover, as you know, the private schools in Kansas are overwhelmingly parochial, and we oppose the use of public education funds to subsidize schools that promote specific religious doctrine. We do not oppose the right of any child to attend whatever school they want in Kansas, and there is nothing prohibiting religious schools from accepting and educating any children they want. They just should do so with their own resources and not with funds removed from the public schools that educate the vast majority of Kansas students.

Second, justification for this bill seems to be largely based on the alleged superiority of private schools. We are disappointed some members of our legislature seem to adhere to the false narrative that our public schools are "failing" students and that if a student could attend a private school instead, they would achieve academic success. Our Kansas public schools continue to do more in an effort to help all Kansas children achieve while also serving an increasing number of students living in poverty and with special needs. Our schools are not failing and students who struggle to read are not struggling because their schools are failing them. Poor reading scores can be attributed to any number of factors including stress and poverty¹, learning delays, and specific learning disabilities like dyslexia. We caution against comparing public and private school test scores as evidence that private schools do a better job because private schools may have higher performing students within subgroups and may not have other subgroups at all. For example, students with special needs may attend private school, but they may also tend to be those student with less significant needs. Private schools, unlike public schools, have the luxury of selecting students they feel they can teach, and excluding students whose learning differences are more difficult to remediate and which require greater resources and expertise.

We would also like to point out that the reading readiness act is a private school voucher experiment like many that have been underway for decades in other cities and states. Despite their promises of better academic outcomes, research shows that private-school voucher programs do not lead to improved student performance.² According to a longitudinal study published in 2018 by professors at the University of Virginia, there is no evidence that private schools are better at promoting student success.

"In sum, we find no evidence for policies that would support widespread enrollment in private schools, as a group, as a solution for achievement gaps associated with income or race. In most discussions of such gaps and educational opportunities, it is assumed that poor children attend poor quality schools, and that their families, given resources and flexibility, could choose among the existing supply of private schools to select and then enroll their children in a school that is more effective and a better match for their student's needs. It is not at all clear that this logic holds in the real world of a limited supply of effective schools (both private and public) and the indication that once one accounts for family background, the existing supply of heterogeneous private schools (from which parents select) does not result in a superior education (even for higher income students).³"

Worryingly, there is also substantial research documenting ways in which private schools utilizing vouchers in other states have shown a lack of accountability,⁴ higher attrition rates,⁵ fiscal mismanagement, fraud and a lack of adequate academic services⁶.

Given the importance of reading achievement, we are concerned that this bill does not hold private schools and programs to the same high standards as public schools. It does not require private schools offer evidence our public dollars are being invested wisely, on quality reading programs and capable staff. Moreover, this bill does not require that private schools and programs provide evidence they are, in fact, improving the reading ability of students and closing the achievement gap in order to stay in the program. This bill would allow a private school or program to receive public dollars year-over-year for a particular student without having to provide evidence the student is closing the achievement gap and progressing to grade-level reading. Because the stakes of delayed reading support can be high, we also disagree with the choice to have the state treasurer as the arbiter of quality programs rather than the State Board of Education or Department of Education.

Third, we have concerns about the use of a single Kansas Assessment test score as the trigger for inclusion in this program. What if a student is new to Kansas schools when he or she is tested in 3rd or 4th grade? What if the eight-year-old in question simply doesn't want to take a test that day? As parents, we recognize that learning is not a straight line and performance on a single test does not and should not be used to indicate failure on the part of the student or the school. We particularly caution against calling students scoring on level 2 "failing." Neither we nor the members of the legislature are experts on the Kansas Assessments, which is why we should leave the process of educating our children to the State Board of Education, the Department of Education and local districts.

As advocates for sound education policy, we also note that while this bill is currently limited to students at level 1 on the Kansas Assessment in 3rd grade or level 1 or 2 in the 4th grade, the experience in other states shows that voucher programs like these rarely stay within their initial parameters and tend to be expanded year after year as a way to divert more public resources into private hands. We note that this program is in addition to the tax credit scholarship expansion bill we testified against last week which was also an expansion of an existing voucher program.

We are grateful the legislature has put our schools back on the road to fiscal health, and we are confident our schools will continue to help our students rise to our high expectations while being responsible with our tax dollars. Given the many competing and pressing budget items our state faces, we feel it defies logic to tell our public schools they must wait for full funding to be phased in and then, at the same time, take money directly from our public schools to fund a separate, second system that cannot and will not serve all Kansas children. Instead of looking to create a new program that diverts precious funds to less-accountable private schools, we should be focusing our efforts on ensuring that our students and families have the support they need to reduce the impact of poverty, and that our schools and teachers have the resources they need to identify and support students with reading differences and delays.

We oppose this bill, which subsidizes religious schools with public tax dollars, fails to protect the educational interests of the students using the program and harms the vast majority of Kansas children who rely upon our public schools for their education. We urge you to oppose House Bill 2552.

¹ Blair, Clancy, and C Cybele Raver. "Poverty, Stress, and Brain Development: New Directions for Prevention and Intervention." *Academic pediatrics* vol. 16,3 Suppl (2016): S30-6. doi:10.1016/j.acap.2016.01.010

² Carnoy, Martin. "School Vouchers Are Not a Proven Strategy for Improving Student Achievement: Studies of U.S. and International Voucher Programs Show That the Risks to School Systems Outweigh Insignificant Gains in Test Scores and Limited Gains in Graduation Rates." *Economic Policy Institute*, 28 Feb. 2017, www.epi.org/publication/school-vouchers-are-not-a-proven-strategy-for-improving-student-achievement/.

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³ Pianta, Robert C., and Arya Ansari. "Does Attendance in Private Schools Predict Student Outcomes at Age 15? Evidence From a Longitudinal Study - Robert C. Pianta, Arya Ansari, 2018." *SAGE Journals*, Educational Researcher, Vol. 47 No. 7, Pp. 419-434, 9 July 2018, journals.sagepub.com/stoken/default+domain/XfYmtC25VddcCfBA3xiV/full.

⁴ Borsuk, Alan J. "Scores Show Voucher Schools Need Accountability." *Jsonline.com*, Milwaukee-Wisconsin Journal Sentinel, 1 Dec. 2012, archive.jsonline.com/news/education/scores-show-voucher-schools-need-accountability-t87s06b-181693671.html.

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⁵ "Reports, Reviews Offer Little to Commend Milwaukee Voucher Schools." *National Education Policy Center*, 19 Apr. 2012, nepc.colorado.edu/newsletter/2012/04/review-Milwaukee-Choice-Year-5.

⁶ Carr, Sarah. "Choice Funds Used to Buy 2 Mercedes." *Jsonline.com*, Milwaukee Wisconsin Journal Sentinel, 17 Feb. 2004, archive.jsonline.com/news/education/163337666.html.

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