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Stand Up Blue Valley: Families for Our Schools

Testimony to the House K-12 Education Budget Committee

In opposition to

HB2552 — Creating the Kansas reading readiness act

February 13, 2020

Stand Up Blue Valley: Families for Our Schools is a parent and patron advocacy group in the Blue Valley School District. We advocate for legislation that supports Blue Valley Schools and work to help our community understand the importance of their votes to our schools.

Representative Williams and members of the Committee:

Stand Up Blue Valley: Families for Our Schools has had the opportunity to review HB2552 and we would like to submit written testimony in **opposition** to this bill.

As we have testified before, our organization objects to ANY diversion of tax money to private schools, under any guise. HB 2552 includes another attempt to divert public money to private schools; we oppose it on these grounds.

The apparent reasoning behind HB 2552 is the unproven myth perpetuated by anti-public education sources that private schools are better than public schools, and that they are better for students who are underperforming. Although statistics are often cited comparing grade-level performance at public versus private schools, we will again remind you that these comparisons are not valid. Private schools are not required to accept every student, and in fact often exclude (intentionally or unintentionally) students with physical, behavioral, and learning disabilities or differences, or students whose families are experiencing poverty, medical issues, homelessness or other issues resulting in decreased parental engagement. Removal of these students - who are often more costly and difficult to educate - from one side of the equation simply invalidates the data often cited to support private schools' "better" performance on standardized testing.

Section 7 of HB 2552 states: *“An eligible student whose parent has entered into an agreement with the treasurer in accordance with section 5, and amendments thereto, shall participate in the program by: (1) Continuing enrollment in such student's resident school district and receiving additional services to improve such student's reading skills through evidence-based practices and programs requested or approved by such student's parent; or (2) enrolling in a qualified private school.”* Where is the stipulation that the private school would offer the student “evidence-based practices and programs”? This is yet another glaring example of private schools not being held to the same standards or responsibilities as public schools, and in this case being given public money to do so.

HB 2552, as we understand it, includes the stipulation that a public school would be required to obtain approval from parents of an eligible student for whatever practices or programs would be used prior to being paid for them. As parents and school volunteers ourselves, we envision potential problems with this provision. While many parents of students with reading problems are engaged and knowledgeable on specific programs available to help their students, we would venture to say the majority across the state are not. Parents rightly depend on education experts (teachers, including reading specialists; administrators, including district reading trainers) to choose and deliver effective and appropriate programs to all students, including those who need help with reading. Which school district employees will meet with parents to review options and seek approval; will a salary line be funded for this added obligation? What if parents are unable to attend a meeting to understand their choices and give approval? Is the student instructed in the meantime? Does the public school get funding for instruction during this time? Why is the stipulation of parental approval not extended to the private school?

HB 2552 requires that **KSDE is notified of names of participating students**. We do not agree with student names being disseminated beyond their school in this manner.

HB 2552 places the obligation to determine which private schools are “qualified” on the Kansas treasurer, who is not an education expert. The bill further authorizes the treasurer to audit the private schools and revoke approval for participation. What happens to the enrolled students whose school’s participation is revoked? Will the private school continue to educate them without reimbursement? Do they return mid-year to their public school, and if it’s after the September count, would the public school then be reimbursed for their enrollment? How would the public school be funded to provide reading readiness to such a student?

No language in HB 2552 addresses how private schools would be better “qualified” than their local public counterparts to improve student reading scores.

To summarize, the premise underlying HB 2552 stems from an unproven, anti-public education myth that attending a private school somehow benefits struggling students. There is NO fact-based justification for this claim and we don’t believe it is true. HB 2552 presents another attempt to divert tax money away from public schools to private schools, which are not required to accept every student and are not required to adhere to the same practices that HB 2552 stipulates for public schools. We oppose any diversion of tax money to pay for private schools. Language in HB 2552 perpetuates incorrect assumptions that public schools aren’t spending money on evidence-based programs and practices to educate students. HB 2552 puts in place onerous requirements presenting an unfunded mandate on every school district in Kansas, wasting time and money that school districts don’t have. We ask you to oppose HB 2552.

Sincerely,

Patty Logan

Stand Up Blue Valley: Families for Our Schools