

House K-12 Budget Committee

Written testimony in support of HB 2465: Amending the tax credit for low income student scholarship program act to expand student eligibility.

January 26, 2021

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Madam Chair and members of the House K-12 Budget Committee:

My name is Mr. Brandon D. Relph, Principal at St. Patrick Catholic School in Wichita, Kansas.

On behalf of the St. Patrick Catholic School Family, I want to thank you for your pursuit of equity and equality in education for all Kansas children. Education is one of the most important responsibilities of a parent. We are blessed to live in a society that views education for all children as a responsibility of the entire community. One of the great impediments to education is poverty. Children who qualify for free or reduce-priced meals are automatically at a disadvantage when compared to children their age who do not qualify. These children need high quality education and should not be required to attend a failing public school because their parents cannot afford other options. As the principal of a school where nearly 92% of my students qualify for free or reduce-priced meals, I can tell you first hand that these children need additional support. Consistently, my students meet or exceed the state averages on assessments scores, while most of the public schools around us are on the list of 100 failing public schools. Without this tax-credit scholarship, my students would otherwise likely have to attend a failing school.

Through the tax-credit scholarship, we have been able to increase our student population as well as hire additional staff. With additional students on scholarships, we would be able to provide additional staff to help target and fill gaps in student learning on an individual basis. Being a small school, we are able to get to know each student, who they are and what they need. As a result, our students feel a sense of belonging and know they are cared for.

We believe that all kids can learn at high levels. We believe that parents are the first educators of their children. We believe that when a parent enrolls their child in our school they are entering a partnership with us. We believe all students can be successful. With an expansion in the number of children who qualify for the tax-credit scholarship, we will be able to better meet the needs of our current students as well as increase our overall student population. Thank you for your consideration of expansion of the tax-credit scholarship and for all you do on behalf of Kansas kids.

My name is Dr. Jamie Finkeldei. I am the Associate Superintendent for the Catholic Diocese of Wichita. I respectfully offer testimony in support of HB 2465 on behalf of our 38 schools. Thank you for having me today.

With almost 9,000 students, the Diocese of Wichita is the 9<sup>th</sup> largest school district in the state of Kansas. We are also very diverse. Our schools are 33% non-white and 25% of our students receive free and reduced lunch. Our SGO, Support for Catholic Schools, Inc., is currently in its 4<sup>th</sup> year of providing scholarships to students in our schools. They are currently funding 281 children in our schools. A number that is growing each year.

This program has been transformative for our schools and these students. We have been able to accept many new students into our buildings and have been able to provide new and expanded services as a result of receiving these funds.

The program as it stands now though has two very limiting factors that cause us to be unable to fully serve more kids and families, both of which are addressed in the proposed changes in HB 2465.

The first is the limiting factor that the program as it presently exists limits eligibility to those qualifying for the federal free lunch program, 130 percent of federal poverty guidelines. Expanding this to include reduced price lunch or 185 percent of federal poverty guidelines would be a game changer for children and families served as a part of Support for Catholic Schools. And especially if the second limiting criteria, families being required to live in the public school attendance area of a low performing public school, were to be lifted.

Please allow me to put this into perspective for you. In the current school year, Support for Catholic Schools provided to our schools support on behalf of 298 students meeting the criteria. If we were to have applied the proposed expanded criteria of reduced lunch and removed the public school attendance area list, both of which are addressed in the proposed bill, Support for Catholic Schools would allow us to serve an additional 187 students.

And that is only one years' reality. Each year, we would be able to add, on average, 125 new kindergartners who would benefit from this program. In eight more years, when this program has reached its full maturity we could be providing expanded educational opportunities for close to 2000 low income students.

I humbly ask for your consideration of these changes and thank you for your support.