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Testimony before the

**House Committee for K-12 Education Budget**

on

**HB 2068**

By

**Richard Proffitt, Superintendent of Schools-USD #250 Pittsburg Community Schools and KSSA Board of Directors Member**

Madam Chair and members of the committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to address the committee.

I stand as an opponent to HB 2068.

I am the superintendent of the largest school district in Southeast, Kansas. Our community is one that believes in the importance of a high quality education. Although our district is comprised of over 3,000 students, we also have three (3) private/parochial schools within our community. Those schools are good schools that we maintain a strong working and cooperative relationship with. We support the school leaders who work there, the parents who chose to enroll their children there, and the students who are educated there. We support private schools, in our community and across the state of Kansas, and the opportunities that they can provide. I recognize that there are people who believe that some children and families do not attend private schools simply due to the fact that they cannot afford to attend and would benefit from financial assistance. However, in my experience, when financial issues stand in the way, our private schools help find solutions to those problems for those students and families.

I believe that the central reason for choosing a private education in Pittsburg is due to the religious component to the education that cannot be received in the public school. We have experienced students and families who have made the choice to change their enrollment from public to private *and* private to public. In all instances that I am aware, the reasoning for the change is based on available courses or activities available to the child. I have not experienced a choice to move from one institution to another based on the quality of education that their child has received. Due to the nature of the size of our district, we are able to offer some courses that the smaller private schools cannot. Conversely, there have been a few instances when a student has chosen to attend a smaller, private school, so that they have a greater chance for participating in activities than at our larger school where competition is greater.

Yet, the playing field for our educational institutions is not equal. The purpose of public education is to provide a high-quality education to *every* student regardless of their socio-economic status, race, religion, capacity or disability. We cannot be selective in the students that we choose to educate. The same is not true for private schools. We educate all students and embrace the increasing challenges



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that come with some children that at times serve as obstacles in the education process. If public tax dollars, paid by all taxpayers, is used to provide scholarships to attend private schools, then I believe it would be reasonable to require that those schools who receive public funds are held to the same standards.

The current scholarship program requires that an eligible student be attending one of the 100 “lowest performing” public elementary schools and be a student who qualifies for free meals. There is no requirement that a student who chooses to receive a scholarship is truly failing in their current setting. Simply it offers a choice without solid reasoning. Now, HB 2068 would broaden the requirement to free *and* reduced eligible students attending *any* public school. In Pittsburg, I do not believe that this change will have a large impact as the system stands now. What I am very concerned about is the door that this opens in the future. Although I support our local private schools and will continue to maintain our relationships, I am fearful that this bill will open opportunities for private, for-profit, schools to be able to take advantage of public tax dollars and persuade students and families to attend.

Since there is little demonstrated evidence of a benefit of economically-disadvantaged students who attend private schools in academic achievement, it is difficult to surmise how this bill will reverse that trend. It has been confirmed that economically-disadvantaged students underperform in comparison to non-economically-disadvantaged students regardless of their setting. It is not to say that private institutions cannot address the needs of disadvantaged students. Rather it encourages students and families to leave public schools that are equipped to meet their needs under a false assumption that an alternative setting would somehow change their achievement. Under this bill, more students would be eligible for scholarships, but by most measures, those students remain less likely to make higher academic or social-emotional progress. It also could have a contradictory result. The bill as written, would allow a disadvantaged student from a high performing public school to attend a much lower performing private school.

There are strong correlations between student performance and student income level. Whether in public or private school, as a school’s economically-disadvantaged percentages increase, performance tends to decline due to non-school related factors. In effect, economically disadvantaged students are much more likely to face out-of-school issues that negatively affect their ability to learn and their families with fewer resources to assist them. That remains to be true, no matter the students educational setting. Economically-disadvantaged students are more likely to struggle in districts with higher percentages of economically disadvantaged students. As the percentage of poverty increases, the percentage of students attaining higher standard levels and overall performance declines. This is, in large part, why “high density” weighting was added to the school finance formula. Students from schools with higher percentage of economically-disadvantaged students also have a greater proportion of generational poverty. These students need more specialized supports to result in improved achievement. However, once again, regardless of the setting, economically-disadvantaged students continue to score lower than their peer counterparts.

In the end there is no strong evidence in Kansas that private schools are out performing their public school counterparts. Both private and public schools continue to wrestle with finding ways in which we can make significant gains in all students learning and achievement, especially those who face extreme challenges. Implementing a program that would reduce general fund revenues, resulting in a



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decreased ability to focus on students with the greatest needs seems to be counterproductive. Especially given the information that does not support that a change in educational venue makes a substantial difference. I believe that these funds better served, as we are working on, to improve special education programs, at-risk programs and early childhood programs.