

Jordan Buxton, Board of Education Member – USD 375 Circle Public Schools

Testimony provided on behalf of the USA-Kansas and Kansas School Superintendents Association

Madam Chair and members of the committee.

I thank you for this opportunity to address the committee.

As a representative for a public school, I'm left confused and discouraged with **HB 2550 – Voucher Bill**.

I support a parent's right to choose, but we've always had choices. People move into new neighborhoods, communities, and states to provide a better education experience for their children. This has been going on for years. As a district that sits as a suburb of Wichita, there are many choices within a 60 mile driving range – both public and private. Why are we earmarking dollars from public schools, that currently provide necessary resources to support children and students of all different learning types? What is the goal of this bill?

I believe this bill to be discriminatory. Take state education dollars to only provide this opportunity to those students that are considered low-income.

This bill and legislation allow students to access public dollars for private school tuition, regardless of the performance of the public school they attend or the resources and support provided. Not only will it authorize money, it places these dollars into a monitored account that can then be further used to pay for transportation, books, and other services required and not currently offered by the private school in which they are seeking, even if these services are currently offered by their home school district. How is this an efficient use of state dollars? And why does this voucher bill only allow for the transfer to a private school? And what happens when that money is misspent or misused by these voucher individuals?

Earmarking public education dollars to fund private schools when these institutions are not required to accept all students, regardless of home district or voucher, and can discriminate in admissions. Parents can be asked or coerced into waiving their children's access to special education services and can require religious instruction. I've been listening for the entire month of January and the last two years, that the legislation is adamantly seeking transparency and data to support districts' services and curriculum choices, but legislation doesn't have those same expectations for private schools that are now being funded with public school dollars? This bill seems to indicate that the legislation is under the impression that private schools can do it better.

The eligibility requirements for this voucher and process are far removed from the reality of our current education, social and economic systems. If private schools accept these students and their district's low-income percentages increase, performance tends to decline. These eligible

voucher students face issues in their home that can negatively impact the learning process. Data has shown that students that are eligible for this voucher; those that qualify for free or reduced-price meals under the national school lunch act, are the same students who are struggling with delinquency and grade level attainment. These are the same students who might need the extra services that are provided in a public education setting. Low-income students receive support and connections in their public school setting. They have grown up around these students who have become their friends, but will private school students and parents who are paying out of pocket for their education be welcoming and supportive of a “voucher” student. A student who may require additional services that are not currently provided and become targeted and humiliated. Not only is their academic environment important, so is their social environment. I believe this bill to be discriminatory. If legislation is offering to provide what they seem to be a “better” education than the district in which they reside, how does that support the students whose parents happen to have a gross salary that makes their student ineligible for such an education experience.

School vouchers have not been a proven strategy for improving student achievement. Studies of U.S. and international voucher programs show that the risks to school systems outweigh the insignificant gains in test scores and limited gains in graduation rates. Private schools exercise their right to control enrollment and remove any student that causes disruption or disciplinary measures.

As a taxpayer and parent, it seems that the prudent course of action be to commit to continuing to restore state efforts in the existing public education. For over two years now, school districts, superintendents, administrators, and educators have all had to defend their roles, positions, and decisions. Now, you are introducing a bill that provides funding for private schools that do not and are not required to offer any transparency or access. If we are going set aside state aid funding for private schools, which I do not support or agree with, then they need to be held to the same accountability as public schools.

As a resident of Kansas, who supports education and workforce development and providing an intentional education experience to our youth that better prepares them for the future to become contributing and working Kansans, I cannot support a bill that further distracts focus away from providing the necessary skills and resources to become contributing adults. Our schools and communities are all being faced with a lack of workforce. Further encouraging students and families to participate in the voucher program that pulls dollars away from public schools introducing more services, programs, facilities, and initiatives is robbing our future students, parents, taxpayers and communities of growth and development.

States that are collaborating their efforts with state department of education and commerce are moving toward a prosper future. I hope that Kansas and our legislators can support education and finally recognize it as an economic and workforce development tool and that working together instead of against one another will provide opportunity for all citizens, no matter the income.