

Testimony against Changes to the Kansas Tax Credit Scholarship Program

By Dr. Jamie Finkeldei

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My name is Jamie Finkeldei. I am the Vice President of the Kansas Association of Independent and Religious Schools (KAIRS) and the Associate Superintendent of the Catholic Schools of the Diocese of Wichita. KAIRS consists of 140 Christian, Catholic, Independent, Lutheran, and Seventh-day Adventist schools representing more than 35,000 students in the state of Kansas. The Catholic Diocese of Wichita has 10,527 students in 39 schools. We are the ninth largest system of schools in the State of Kansas. Both the Diocese of Wichita and KAIRS are opposed to the proposed changes in the Kansas Tax Credit Scholarship Program.

First, if the committee insists on allowing only accredited schools to be eligible for the program, we would argue that the non-public school should be able to be accredited by a reputable accrediting agency and not just the state. The Kansas Department of Education is working with AdvancEd as part of their new accreditation model so it would follow that any school accredited by AdvancEd would be a well-qualified school. Similarly, the National Lutheran School Accreditation organization, the Association of Christian Schools International, and the National Association of Independent Schools are all rigorous, well-respected accrediting organizations that could easily speak to the competency and effectiveness of non-public schools.

Secondly, we are opposed to the change in the bill requiring direct certification by DCF for eligible students. This requirement is unnecessary because students are already required to be eligible for Free Lunch, as certified by the USDA and verified by KSDE. This additional burden will accomplish little except to make it more difficult for students to qualify for a

scholarship. It is merely adding an additional, unnecessary hoop for families to jump through to take advantage of this program.

Instead of making school choice more restrictive and cumbersome, we should be trying to make it simpler and giving more under privileged children the opportunity to choose a non-public school. To this end, we would propose that every child eligible for free lunch, regardless of their attendance area or school, be eligible for a scholarship. This would simplify the qualifying criteria and ensure that all at-risk children have an opportunity to attend a non-public school when their parents are unable to afford housing in a high achieving public school district or afford the costs of attending a non-public school.

Non-public schools are particularly effective at serving the poor. If you compare our Diocesan students who meet the criteria for free and reduced lunch to free and reduced lunch eligible students in the public schools, our students perform better. In English Language Arts, 88% of our low income students met or exceeded the state standards on the State assessment as compared to just 65% of public school students. The gap on the math assessment is equally wide: 85% for diocesan students; 62% for public school students. Non-public schools can make a difference in the lives of low income students, if we are given the opportunity to serve them.

Thank you for allowing me to testify on this important subject. If I can answer any questions I will be happy to do so.