

Testimony on Senate Bill 122

Senate Committee on Public Health and Welfare

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Chairman Sullentrop and members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide neutral testimony on Senate Bill 122.

Jobs for America's Graduates-Kansas (JAG-K) is a 501(c)3 organization that works with "at-risk" middle and high school students, helping them graduate from high school and preparing them for successful futures. We have a 98 percent graduation rate statewide. We currently have 81 programs in 38 school districts, serving more than 3,900 students this semester.

Last year, JAG-K implemented a pilot program for students in foster care. When one looks at students who are at-risk of not reaching their full potential, students in foster care are some of the most vulnerable.

- In Kansas, less than 51 percent of students in foster care graduate from high school.
- Nationally, students in state care score 16-20 percentile points below their peers in state standardized testing.
- Each time a student in care changes schools, the student loses 4-6 months of academic progress.

When JAG-K saw this data, we knew we needed to help public schools try a different model for students in foster care.

We established the JAG-K Success Academy as a small pilot in Wichita last spring semester with the support of the Kansas Department for Children and Families (DCF) and USD 259. We had 10 students in foster care ranging from grades 9th through 12th. None of the students were on track to graduate, including two seniors. At the end of the semester, seven of the 10 students were on track to graduate and both seniors graduated.

How did we do it? We developed a model that included:

- A Success Academy Career Specialist dedicated to these students as an education and personal advocate regardless of where the student was placed in the state.
- We utilized on-line classes for credit recovery and to ensure consistency with core education classes. (Students were still enrolled in classes at the brick and mortar school.)
- If a traditional JAG-K program existed in the school, the student was enrolled in the program as an additional layer of support.

We believe this model showed encouraging results, and DCF and the Kansas Legislature helped expand the pilot this school year to Kansas City and Topeka.

Although JAG-K is not an expert on healthcare delivery, we believe we can offer insight on the academic support components of Senate Bill 122. We support efforts to emphasize focused academic services to students in foster care. The current educational model for students in care is not working, and the Success Academy model has demonstrated that a different approach partnering with DCF and public schools can be successful.

We also support the creation of a single, consistent system for providing on-line courses. We are not calling for a full-time statewide virtual school but a statewide system that offers state accredited on-line classes for Kansas students in care. These students often lack positive consistency in their lives, and a single on-line system would provide some consistency in their academic pursuits. A single system would also make it easier to train adults that are working with these students on a statewide basis.

We often hear that students are the priority in making decisions related to the education system. If that is the case, we urge the Committee and the Legislature to look outside the traditional education paradigm in helping Kansas students in foster care. The existing system is currently failing nearly half of them.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to testify on Senate Bill 122.