

Madam Chair and Members of the House Higher Education Budget Committee,

Good afternoon, my name is Tel Wittmer and I have the great honor of representing nearly 22,000 students as the Student Body President of Kansas State University. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today on this piece of legislation that my colleagues from the University of Kansas and I have spent a lot of time advocating for and attempting to promote on behalf of the students we represent.

I stand before you today representing the students of a particularly storied institution. In 1863 Kansas State University was founded as the nation's first operational Land Grant university – Abraham Lincoln's vision for an institution built on the ideal of providing opportunity to the common man and woman. To paraphrase the third President of my university, George Fairchild, our purpose is not so much as to make men farmers, but to make farmers men. Is this not the purpose of higher education in our state? To provide the highest quality education and opportunity to the common person, thereby investing in the future citizenry, society, and economy of our state? Ultimately, this bill is an opportunity to further that mission by renewing and revitalizing a current system which unfortunately, overlooks the representation of those individual stakeholders.

However, this idea isn't new. A little over a century after Kansas State's founding, in the 1970's K-State Student Body President Bernard Franklin, who himself later served as the youngest Regent and Board Chair in state history, got as close as anyone at making the case for a Student Regent representative. While the argument for a Student Regent may not be new, one thing is certain: never before has it been more necessary.

The reality is, it has become harder and harder to provide the very opportunity that my institution and indeed higher education in our state, was intended to cultivate. While the landscape of higher education is everchanging, the future looks bleak. Make no mistake, the Board of Regents face difficult decisions in the years to come. Financial projections appear daunting at a time when the skyrocketing costs of attendance for many Kansans is already much too high. Coupled with expenses associated with the pandemic, ballooning decades-long administrative costs, and a swath of technological and work disruption, we stand on the edge of serious challenges in higher education that will need to be addressed with the upmost care. Never before has it been more necessary to have an individual on such a committee who can speak from their experience in the classroom, on the verge of seeking out prospective employment for the first time, and to the adversities facing their peers. There must be at least a single voice on this committee that can present the concerns of the more than 100,000 student stakeholders caught in the middle of a shifting landscape created not by our design but by decades of bureaucracy often dating to before we were born.

Kansas would not be the first state in the Union to make this innovation. There are other regent systems like that of Iowa, and Alaska, who utilize a Student Regent to make more informed decisions and better judgements in the ever-evolving higher education landscape. Moreover, this proposal maintains a separation of powers and the oversight of the legislative and executive branches. The bill stipulates that the Student Advisory Committee (SAC), which operates within the Board of Regents under state statute, nominate a student to the Governor for approval after

which the State Senate would then approve or deny. Continuing the current process for any other regent nomination. This proposal simply assists the current and future Governors in selecting an appropriate candidate to directly represent the thousands of students navigating the state's system of higher education. Additionally, SAC would be required to meet the same geographical and political requirements that every other regent nomination is prescribed. Furthermore, a term limit of two years on the Board would serve to allow such an individual to learn the system to the fullest extent and while providing the opportunity to make a strongest impact on the Board's governing objectives. Also, it is important to note that because terms for at least three regents end in June of 2021, no individual regent would lose their seat who isn't already term limited.

To be sure, adding a Student Regent member to the Board of Regents won't solve every issue facing higher education in our state. But there is no doubt, that utilizing a student representative on this important governing body would serve in the best interests of Kansan's as we navigate together, the many shared challenges that are projected to accompany the educational and economic disruption we face in the future. Please join me in support of this Bill.