

House K-12 Budget Committee
Verbal Testimony in Support of HB 2068: Amending the tax credit for low income student scholarship program act to expand student eligibility.

Libby Knox, Catholic Education Foundation, Kansas City, KS

Thank you, Madame Chair, ladies and gentlemen of the Committee.

My name is **Libby Knox**. I am **Director of Development and Tax Credit Scholarships for Catholic Education Foundation**, a nonprofit scholarship-granting organization that provides 1,500 privately funded scholarships to low-income, at-risk students in the Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas, serving Northeast Kansas. This year, we are supporting 300 scholarships for students in 17 different schools in urban and rural areas of Kansas through the Kansas Tax Credit for Low Income Student Scholarship program. CEF supports the expansion of HB 2068 to make the program fair and equitable for all Kansas families in poverty.

HB 2068 proposed changes will create equity of opportunity by:

- ensuring that all low-income students who meet the income qualifications are eligible, regardless of their address, and
- making the income eligibility requirements consistent with federal free and reduced-price lunch guidelines.

HB 2068 has no fiscal effect on the existing legislation. It does not change the fiscal cap of the program, nor represent any additional cost to the Kansas taxpayer. In fact, by providing these scholarships to just 632 students in 2020, the program saved Kansas taxpayers more than \$10 million dollars.

Please consider 3 things:

- 1. The current legislation is unfair to many low-income students because of where they live.**
- 2. The current program is unfair to students because of how they qualify for federal low-income assistance.**
- 3. Despite the small number of students who qualify, the outcomes of the program are very effective.**

First, we ask that you recognize that many low-income children are being deprived of these scholarships because of their street address. In the current legislation, children on one side of the street – who live within the boundaries of the “100 schools list” can qualify, but students on the other side of the street (or in the next town) cannot. The current legislation deprives too many low-income families of that opportunity. If parents rent an apartment that happens to be just outside the boundaries of the 100 schools list which determines eligibility for scholarships, they cannot access this opportunity. Low-income families move frequently but cannot predict which zip codes or school boundaries will qualify them for access to a better educational fit for their children. ***How is that fair and equitable?***

Second, we ask that you recognize that students are being deprived of scholarships because of how their family qualifies for federal low-income assistance. Our federal government defines its national student lunch assistance program to include “free and reduced lunch” categories (below 185% of the poverty level). But in Kansas, this program errs by allowing only families who qualify for *free lunch* assistance to participate. ***How is that fair and equitable?***

Third, we ask that you recognize the outstanding effectiveness and impact of this program. Low-income students who qualify are able to use these scholarships to access a quality education they couldn’t otherwise afford. Despite their families’ lack of income and economic resources, CEF scholarship students have a 99% graduation rate, far exceeding that of their peers in neighboring schools.

Our scholarship students are overcoming odds and thriving in the classroom – all because their families found a learning environment better suited to their child’s needs. And they happened to live in the right neighborhood at the right time. But for at-risk students who don’t live there, or those whose families currently qualify for reduced lunch, the program isn’t within reach. ***How is that fair and equitable?***

At CEF, the students who benefit from the Tax Credit for Low Income Students Scholarship are welcomed regardless of race, creed, or religion. This program is designed to help students in poverty access the educational environment that their parents and guardians determine is best for them. Over the six-year period we’ve participated in the program, **CEF has awarded an average of 95% of these scholarships to minority students.** More than 200 families who have applied to CEF for these scholarships were denied by the state because they lived outside the boundaries of the 100 schools or they were eligible for reduced lunch, but not free lunch. (Remember, by federal standards, they’re all classified as low-income, but in Kansas, they’re not.) These 200-plus economically disadvantaged families were just the ones for whom we submitted applications – there are hundreds more who were pre-screened earlier in the process and did not qualify.

Representatives, we ask that you recognize the current legislation’s inequities and unintended consequences. The legislation was created to create equity of access for low-income students to educational opportunities that would help them thrive. But equity isn’t accomplished when you restrict access by the neighborhood you live in or where you fall on the low-income spectrum.

We’ve demonstrated the program works. **But it’s not fair – it only allows certain families to qualify.** We ask you to remove the restrictions that deprive students of access to meaningful opportunities. By passing HB 2068, you can create a level playing field for low-income children whose families have lost jobs, family members and stability – even more so during this pandemic. Let’s offer hope to these families through educational access.

Thank you for your support.

Libby Knox
Catholic Education Foundation