

Jan. 31, 2022

Written Testimony to House K-12 Education Budget Committee

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TITLE: Public and private school parent

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CITY: Leawood

BILL NUMBER: HB 2550

BILL DESCRIPTION: Creating education savings accounts

PROPONENT, OPPONENT, or NEUTRAL: Opponent

ORAL TESTIMONY OR WRITTEN TESTIMONY ONLY: Oral

Dear Chairman & members of the committee,

As the parent of two school age children, one attending a catholic high school and the other attending an elementary school in the Shawnee Mission School District, I am writing to share my story and to voice my opposition to the creation of Education Savings Accounts that use public funds to subsidize private education. I ask that you oppose bill HB 2550.

Public school funding per the Gannon court case is still being phased in and the state has yet to meet its special education funding obligation. Before considering diverting public tax dollars to non-public schools, I would hope this committee would ensure the legislature fulfills its obligations to our public schools which are responsible for educating all Kansas children.

Despite my opposition to HB 2550, I would like to thank the legislature for its commitment to putting our public schools on the path to being constitutionally funded. For too long our public schools haven't had the funding necessary to help every child succeed. However, I have seen firsthand how the increased funding approved by the legislature is being put to good use. Let me share with you how my child and my family have been positively impacted as school funding has increased.

I'd like to start with the testimony that I wrote 4 years ago to our local school board about the need for a social worker in our elementary schools when my son was a 1st grader. The board agreed with the need, but couldn't fund social workers.

My son is now a 5th grader. This year, 2021-2022 is the first year that we have a social worker available to Sawyer and all students at the school to work on skills when they are in crisis and also when they are ready to learn. We have done private therapy for our son for 8 years, but most issues arise at school, and thus school is the most effective place to help children with issues. We have our older daughter in private Catholic high school this year, and while I would love help financially with this, I have seen first-hand how big of a need there is for properly funding our public schools. It is a life changing thing. We are seeing the benefits this year of it!

2017 Testimony to the Shawnee Mission School Board:

"I am the mother of a child that frequently disrupts the classroom. He is a first grader. In a school with no counselor. And he is wonderful and darling and smart and disruptive and angry and hard.

We work on skills to help my son calm down. We see therapists, give him daily medicine, pay to see a child psychologist. I don't work – I stay home so that I can be at the school as needs arise to pick him up. I want him to be the least amount of burden on the classroom and the teacher's energy as I can. I take my responsibility as his mom very seriously. I don't expect our schools to take this whole burden.

But – these breakdowns still happen. In the classroom. They entail balled up fists, mad angry eyes, refusal to transition to the next classroom activity, or even the next classroom. Screaming. Irrationally getting mad at friends. He often takes every interaction harder and more personally than his peers.

Here is why this is important... when my son has a breakdown – when kids like him have breakdowns – the teacher has to stop her lesson. Every child is affected. The teacher has to take time away from the other 21 kids in her classroom to calm him down. This can take 5 minutes, 15 minutes, an hour. Sometimes half of a day. This is so stressful on me as a parent. I don't want my child to take away from other kids learning.. This impacts my son and his teacher – but mostly it impacts all of his classmates.

There is no one to take over for the teacher during this time. She has to deal and she does it well, but there is a price. The principal has stepped in during the longer episodes and stays with my son until he decides to re-engage. Now – my son isn't taking away from 21 classmates – he is taking time from what the principal needs to be doing for the other 400 and something kids in the school.

The presence of a counselor in his elementary school would make a huge impact. The immediate help would be to be a person that can take over with my son to help him decompress – to be in a calm environment when stressed out and overstimulated. To not take away from the other kids.

The continual help that a counselor would give is that on days that I see him building up to a bad day, or his teacher sees it coming – my son and others like this could proactively check in with a counselor. Take breaths, sing a song, work with clay. All things that help and can stop breakdowns from happening. But – my son just can't stop once it starts. He can't settle in a chaotic environment. And so – 21 kids get to see and experience his meltdowns with their learning time disrupted.

There are good reasons for my son's breakdowns – he has seizures and epilepsy, he is on pharmaceutical medications that make it hard for him to control his emotions, he has severe ADHD, and has had 2 brain surgeries – the second of which entailed them having to scrape scar tissue off of his frontal lobe – the part that helps the brain regulate emotions.

But as unique as his reasonings are – his behavior is not unique. Many kids with ADHD or trauma or anxiety need a person to help. And teachers need this resource to turn to. Until we get counselors in Shawnee Mission Elementary schools – ALL of the students' educations will be impacted. “

This is what life was like for the first 5 years of school. All of the work a social worker would do when Sawyer was in crisis and yelling or even some times throwing things fell to the teacher. The district couldn't fund social workers.

And then this year, it was like the sun came out.

Funding was increased and our district was able to offer a social worker to our school every day that the kids are in school. This is for any child in need, not just children with IEP's.

Now with funding and a social worker: when Sawyer becomes disregulated, NOW his teacher can call the social worker. The social worker now comes and walks Sawyer to her room. The social worker works in REAL TIME on techniques to help manage emotions and begin to decompress. Sawyer trusts her. He is proud when she helps him calm himself down.

This has three major effects.

1. A student is building up his skills of regulating emotions. This will be crucial as he looks to transition into Middle School in two years.
2. The teacher and other students can now continue on their learning and routine. Sawyer's issues no longer derail learning for all of the other students.
3. In addition to emergency work with Sawyer, the social worker also has weekly sessions to build skills when he is in a learning head space. This is making a concrete difference in his behavior and abilities at school. This will also be crucial to him being a better citizen of our neighborhood and Kansas for years to come.

Public schools in Kansas meet the needs of all. Private schools can be a wonderful option but should remain that, an option for those who choose to take on that financial decision. My choosing private school for our daughter has strengthened my commitment to knowing that public school needs to be held to a higher funding standard. We need to fund schools so that all children have access to what they need - in our case it was a social worker.

Private school wouldn't work for Sawyer, even specialized schools. He and kids like him would not be able to benefit from an Education Savings Account and our tax dollars should be for the benefit all. This isn't just a financial decision for us, it is a belief and need for public schools to provide for all students. Public schools need to be properly funded to do this. Please do not jeopardize public school funding by using tax dollars to subsidize private schools through ESA's or other voucher mechanisms. Adequately funding public schools makes a crucial difference to many. For us, it has been the biggest change in our last 5 years.

Again, I ask you to oppose bill HB 2550.

Thank you for your consideration,

Sarah Mackay