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Opponent - Written Testimony

Senate Bill 61 - Amending the Tax Credits for Low Income Student Scholarship Program

House K-12 Education Budget Committee

February 23, 2021

Madam Chair, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony in opposition to the expansion of the tuition tax credit scholarship program.

This bill changes the current program by allowing students from any public school to get a scholarship - currently only students in the 100 lowest performing elementary schools are eligible.

Secondly, the bill expands eligibility from just free lunch eligible students to free and reduced lunch eligible students.

When originally passed, this program was sold as a way to help struggling students in low-performing schools find opportunities in private schools. The changes that have been enacted since the initial passage along with the proposed changes in this bill completely change the intent of the program.

What makes this bill wrong?

First, it does not focus on students who are struggling or at-risk. The expansion encourages private schools to cherry-pick high performing low-income students from any school, leaving the struggling children where they are.

Secondly, the expansion to high schools promotes cherry-picking for athletic ability. Private schools will be able to recruit low-income student athletes in order to boost their own athletic standing.

Finally, there is no accountability for student performance in the program. There is no required reporting of student success in the private school versus the public school and there is no requirement that the private school be a state-accredited private school. Without a requirement that the private school participate in the state accreditation system, there is no ability to even compare the private school performance overall to the public school. We may be sending students to failing private schools with state money.

We urge this committee to reject this proposal and instead work to restore the program to its original intent. Specifically, we would suggest the following:

1. Maintain the focus on the lowest performing elementary schools. This keeps the focus on "helping kids escape failing schools."
2. Change student eligibility from lunch status to participation in an approved at-risk program. This keeps the focus on helping children who are not succeeding in public schools.



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3. Restrict school eligibility to private schools that are state accredited. That way the state can be assured that the students are not going to schools that are low-performing and that the students are meeting the same standards required of public schools. I note that this would include all Catholic schools in Kansas and many others. This change would eliminate few schools or encourage those schools to seek state accreditation.

We would also point out that the current program does not deny any private school participation based solely on religion. Religious schools currently receive students through this program. But the state is allowed to and should base participation on whether or not it can be assured that participating private schools meet state curriculum standards and standards for student performance.

Finally, we would suggest to the committee that the money directed in this program to help a few students would be better spent directed to programs to help move public school students to higher levels of achievement. We believe investments in early childhood intervention programs, after school tutoring programs, or summer programs would be a more effective way to address the needs of struggling students.