

Written PROPONENT testimony for HB 2669 AN ACT Codifying the mental health intervention team program administered by the Kansas department for aging and disability services in state statute.

To: Madam Chair Representative Landwehr and Health Committee members

From: Camille Straub/St. Patrick Catholic School-Wichita/Catholic Diocese of Wichita

Date: February 8, 2024

Madam Chair Landwehr and members of the committee,

My name is Camille Straub. I am a second year principal at St. Patrick Catholic School close to downtown Wichita. Prior to this, I was a school counselor at St. Mary's Grade School in Salina, Kansas for over 25 years. Until the EANS funding, I was the only full time school counselor in an elementary school in all of the Diocese of Salina. I served on the Governor's Blue Ribbon Task Force on Bullying, member of the Diocese of Salina, Bishop's Council for Sexual Abuse, and held various elected position in the Kansas School Counseling Association, to name only a few of the committees I have served on to give you validity for the information I am going to share with you. Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony as a PROPONENT to bill HB 2669.

Nearly two years ago, I accepted the position of principal at St. Patrick-Wichita but really didn't know just how different that would prove to be from the position I held as school counselor at St. Mary's in Salina for over 25 years. I knew St. Patrick was not a 'wealthy school' but neither was St. Mary's in Salina. I mean, they were both Catholic schools, right? I couldn't have been more wrong. While both schools had parents who wanted their children to receive a quality education and be in a setting that supported their faith beliefs. Also, both populations had strong parent support, excellent turn-out at parent teacher conferences and other events with nearly 90-100% of parents attending most events. In addition, both have teachers that are committed to the mission of the school and work diligently, without any extra pay for hours spent after school in meetings, to make sure their students get the services they deserve. The biggest difference that I see in the two populations of students is in how they are equipped to deal with the amount of trauma they have experienced.

At St. Mary's, I had been doing proactive counseling for more than twenty years. The counseling program consisted of providing weekly classroom guidance to all students, conducting individual and group counseling, meeting with parents, collaborating with mental health to ensure integrity to the student's therapy plan, and participating in Individual Educational Plans to support students' success. Reactive counseling was a minute portion of my schedule because, as a school, we were able to provide the front end resources to teach resilience and life skills. At St. Mary's, we could prevent larger social, behavioral, and emotional issues before they escalated to major disruptions due to early interventions between teacher

and school counselor. The students at St. Mary, due to the benefit of the school counseling program, had experience with learning how to deal with trauma and be resilient.

At St. Patrick Catholic School however, they have never had a school counseling program, and until the EANS money, they have never had access to a social worker at school. Since St. Pat's has never had a school counselor, they have not had the benefit of proactive lessons on social emotional learning, bullying prevention, social & friend issues, goal-setting and many others that school counselors provide. In the past two and a half years, the social worker has only been able to focus on reactive types of counseling due to the high amount of trauma experienced by these students. In addition, over 90% of our families qualify for free or reduced lunches. We have all experienced trauma due to the pandemic, and we all know that those living in poverty have suffered even more trauma than those economically advantaged. In addition, 50% of the students who enter pre-kindergarten at St. Patrick can't speak English, and roughly more than 70% of the parents don't speak English well enough to communicate with their children's teacher. Prior to the EANS money, their only contact with a social worker would have been likely due to a report through DCF or some other government agency that would have caused suspicion and lack of trust in the family that trickled down to the children. Wouldn't it be better if we could provide a positive relationship through the school that would support the family and reduce the amount of trauma experienced by the entire family?

Let me tell you about Jon. When Jon was a toddler, his father died of cancer. When Jon was in pre-kindergarten, his sister in high school was diagnosed with cancer and his mom had to spend much of her time traveling between Wichita and Kansas City for the daughter's treatment. During these two years, Jon was raised by one of his other high school siblings and as a result spoke mostly only English. His mother however, only speaks Spanish and understands only limited English. Also, the family had to move during these years because they discovered toxic mold in the house they lived in and it was condemned. When Jon was in first grade, in December of 2019, Jon's sister died of cancer and his mother fell into deep depression at the loss of her daughter. When Jon was in second grade, his freshman brother was diagnosed with a brain tumor and had to have surgery. (It is said that the toxic mold is probably what caused the cancer in the family, but nothing will be done because of the poverty level.) I started as principal when Jon was in second grade, and I discovered after about two months that Jon had been making a "mess" in the bathroom and leaving the poopy toilet paper on the floor and rubbing poop on the walls from his fingers that got messy when he wiped. When I questioned Jon about why he was leaving the toilet paper on the floor, he told me that the trash can was too far away. When I asked him why he didn't flush it, he told me he got in trouble at home when he flushed it in the toilet because it clogged the pipes. His family lived in a very old house with poor plumbing. I had to teach him how to use appropriate amounts of toilet paper, how to flush it down, and how to clean up his hands after having a bowel movement. Had I not been a school counselor prior, I may have just thought that Jon was being naughty, but the truth was that due to the trauma and experiences of his family's life, he had never been taught appropriate bathroom etiquette for school.

There are many other children with far greater trauma than the one listed above, but I believe their stories are too graphic to share here. But, can you even imagine the trauma of this little boy who had to have this discussion with his new female principal?

A school counselor in a school like St. Patrick would be able to target the skills that the population of students needs and work along with the teacher to implement these into their school day. The teachers are working diligently enough to get the students to speak English and to learn all the letters and the different sounds that the letters make between the two languages. In a school like St. Patrick, language acquisition is even more important a focus at school due to the fact that the parents can't help with this at home. Therefore, the teacher has little time left for the social, emotional, and behavior skills that the school counselor could provide to all classrooms. However, St. Patrick Catholic Schools and others like it that serve the poor, do not have the funding to provide these services.

Thank you, Madam Chair and members of the committee, for allowing me to provide support for HB 2669. Please feel free to reach out to me if I can be of assistance to you in this worthy endeavor to protect our children and provide needed services to them. Thank you for your consideration.

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