

Ron Hobert, President of the American Federation of Teachers - Kansas

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HB 2048 - School vouchers

Opponent Testimony

25 January 2023



Chairperson Williams and members of the Committee,

My name is Ron Hobert, and I am the president of the American Federation of Teachers - Kansas. I have also worked for over 30 years as an educator, both in public schools at USD 259 in Wichita and in private schools at the Catholic Diocese of Wichita. I am testifying today as both a representative of the thousands of public employees, parents, and Kansans that AFT-Kansas serves, and as a dedicated and passionate teacher committed to providing our students with the best education possible. That is why I am testifying in opposition to this bill, HB 2048.

This bill would expand the private school voucher system in Kansas to unprecedented levels and at an unprecedented cost to Kansas taxpayers, that would only provide demonstrably worse levels of safety, support, and academic achievement for Kansas students.

By increasing the income cap for vouchers and greatly expanding eligibility for these vouchers, this bill would result in a dramatic increase in cost to the state and taxpayers. This has happened in states all across the country. For example, Indiana ran a \$53 million deficit during the 2015-2016 school year to fund its voucher program; the city of Milwaukee had to raise property taxes in 2011 and 2012 to ensure adequate funding for the city's schools because of their voucher program; and in Arizona, where private school vouchers cost the public approximately 75% more per student than public schools, taxpayers were on the hook for an increase of \$62 million per year. And now, under Arizona's new universal school voucher program, the taxpayer cost is expected to reach \$600 million.

Private schools also do not provide the same rights and protections to students as public schools. As Kansas legislators, I'm sure you know that voucher programs were first created to evade racial integration orders following the decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Even today, private schools are more segregated than public schools, and a 2019 survey from the Center for American Progress found that the majority of state voucher programs lack sufficient statutory civil rights protections for students.

Students with disabilities attending private schools on vouchers often forfeit many of the protections provided to students and families under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. This means that these students can lose access to services listed on their Individualized Education Program and families can lose due process protections if they believe their child is not receiving the services they need to succeed in school.

Denying students based on their disciplinary history, academic achievement, religious affiliation, or arbitrary metrics is rampant. In 2016, a Government Accountability Office study found that only 4 voucher programs in the entire country required private schools to not discriminate in their admissions processes.

The state would be doing a gross disservice to the young people of Kansas by denying them their rights, protections, and services that could result from this bill.

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Private school vouchers also destroy rural communities. Almost half of all Kansas K-12 students live in rural counties. Some of the legislators on this committee are from rural communities. In many ways, rural schools serve as a hub of community identity – there’s a reason *Friday Night Lights* resonates with so many people. They are a gathering place, are often critical to the local economy as a primary employer, provide healthcare services for children and adults, provide food pantries and breakfast and lunch programs, offer night classes, and are a major community hub.

Declining enrollment in rural public schools leads to cutting academic and extracurricular programs critical to student success, increased costs, decreased teacher recruitment and retention, and fewer resources to provide the non-educational benefits critical to the community.

Much has been made about the academic performance of students following the COVID19 pandemic’s impact on student outcomes. However, a review of recent research on voucher programs done by Dr. Josh Cowen at Michigan State University shows that the impact of private school voucher programs on academic achievement is comparable to or worse than the impact of the pandemic. In fact, voucher programs have a similar or worse effect on student outcomes than Hurricane Katrina had on Louisiana students in 2005.

For all of these reasons, and from my personal experience teaching in both public and private schools, the expansion of the voucher system as proposed in HB 2048 is wrong for Kansas. It’s wrong for our students, it’s wrong for the taxpayers, it’s wrong for our communities. AFT-Kansas stands in strong opposition to HB 2048 and respectfully requests this bill not be advanced.

Thank you for your time.

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