

Date: Feb. 1, 2023

Testimony to the Committee on K12 Education Budget

Rep. Kristey Williams, Chairperson

Dr. Renee Scott, USD 409, Superintendent

Madame Chair and Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written and oral testimony in opposition of HB 2218.

I come to you today with a truly unique perspective in relation to this bill. As the superintendent in Atchison, Kansas, we are lucky to have multiple educational opportunities for all students. In addition to USD 409 Atchison Public Schools, Atchison also offers two private elementary schools—St. Benedict’s Catholic School (K-8) and Trinity Lutheran (PreK-8) and one private high school, Maur Hill Mount Academy. Atchison is also home to the highest per capita of home school students in the state of Kansas, even pre covid. Finally, Atchison is proud to have Benedictine College (my alma mater I might add), a private Catholic college, which also partners with all the school resources in our community to work with their degree programs, including but not limited to education.

To be totally transparent, I was very apprehensive to even submit testimony for this bill. I am a product of both private and public schools, I have relatives who are employed and attend private and public schools, and I have many friends and acquaintances who work in both sectors. Additionally, I do not want my administrative colleagues and friends in the private schools in the Atchison community to feel that my stance on this bill is personal against them. It’s not, and I called three of them to share that I was going to provide testimony and explain my rationale. Although the financial implications for all public schools, especially rural schools, of this bill are alarming, the focus of my testimony is different. I would like to hone in on the relationships USD 409 currently has with the private schools in our community as well as the inequity of accountability if this bill were to pass in its current form.

Our community embraces and supports all schools in our community. USD 409 has built excellent relationships with all of the private schools in the community. During Covid we met weekly to discuss and share ideas, and since Covid that open communication has continued. For example, the USD 409 calendar committee recently invited all private school administrators to attend the meeting and provide input and information. When inclement weather is set to move in, all of us communicate and work together to make some common decisions. I serve on a local committee and a KSDE committee with one of my private school administrative peers. With that said, we also realize that because we are different our decisions are sometimes unique to each of

us, and that is ok. Atchison students, no matter the school, are OUR students. We are functioning at a high level, and wish to maintain our locally mutual respect and understanding in those things that make public and private schools unique to them. This bill will change the trajectory of what is working in our community.

In addition to interfering with the lines of separating church and state, there are inequities of accountability with this bill. As the national teacher shortage looms, the schools in our community pride themselves on finding quality, qualified staff. In one of our local administrative committee discussions this year, we were sharing and brainstorming around the idea of recruitment and retention. One administrator from a private school had shared that some of his staff members were not licensed. In our district, where we also have had to find some long-term substitutes and get creative with filling open positions, this requires notification to parents, a plan to show we are working on getting the staff member licensed, etc. This private school administrator, who recognizes the importance of hiring qualified and licensed staff and has the same goals as I do in terms of licensed teachers with knowledge of pedagogy leading a classroom, is not held to the same expectations as my district. In addition, accountability reports, budgets, and needs assessments are not posted on private school websites in my community as required of Kansas public schools.

The accountability difference is also evident in accreditation. By choice, USD 409 utilizes two accreditation systems. We pay for Cognia (formerly AdvanceEd) because that is the system that some of our local private schools utilize and we want to offer our community the evidence of feedback we get from the same accreditation system. We also submit to KESA (Kansas Education System of Accreditation), as is required for all public schools, and ultimately gives us state accreditation. Although some private schools do utilize KESA, it is not the required accreditation source for private schools.

In terms of data and numbers, this is important data to consider:

2021-2022 School Year:

24 private school students transferred into USD 409
14 homeschool students transferred into USD 409
6 students transferred out of USD 409 to private schools
12 students transferred out of USD 409 for homeschool

2022-2023 School Year

13 private school students transferred into USD 409
27 homeschool students transferred into USD 409
14 students transferred out of USD 409 to private schools
17 students transferred out of USD 409 for homeschool

These students enroll back in our system for a variety of reasons, including not passing classes and needing credit recovery, below grade level and needing additional academic support, having philosophical differences with the mission of the school, or behavior concerns. This statistic brings more questions to light:

- a) If a student utilizes this funding to attend a private school and is not successful, will that school be required to reimburse any excess costs to recover credit,

provide additional behavior supports, or whatever needs that child has when returning to the public school setting?

- b) Will drop out and graduation rates be adjusted for students who were unsuccessful in the private school setting, returned to the public school and did not graduate?
 - c) Will there be some measures put in place to assure our community that accountability is equitable so as to maintain our current levels of mutual respect, understanding, and communication amongst all of our entities.
- 2) As I have previously testified, the public school system provides special education and title services to all students in the community—public, private, and home school. Because of that, our numbers of special education students are disproportionate and nearly double the state average. Currently, 66 students in our private schools receive special education services, including speech therapy, gifted, and some learning disabilities. This discrepancy will be exacerbated with the bill. The cost to provide services continues to grow, and our human resources will continue to be stressed in addition to the rising costs of supplemental services.

As I visited with a few of the administrators in our private school system today, I completely understand that this bill provides both benefits as well as some concerns for them. I respectfully ask that when considering using public funds outside of the realm of public education, we continue to put the best interest of all students at the heart of the conversation. And in communities such as mine, Atchison, I ask to consider the already working systems in place—our current relationships are paramount to the success of every student.

As always, I thank you for your time and your service to Kansas.

Respectfully,

Dr. Renee Nugent
Superintendent of Schools
USD 409 Atchison