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**Kansas State University
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February 3, 2025

Representative Susan Estes, Chair
House Committee on Education

Dear Chair Estes,

Subject: Information Pertaining to HB2103

We are writing today to provide information pertaining to HB2103. HB2103 involves establishing agricultural, FFA, and 4-H educational events as eligible for excused absences in the Kansas K-12 education system.

Kansas State University, as a Land-Grant University of Kansas, is entrusted with the 4-H Youth Development program. 4-H Youth Development is the state's largest youth development program with over 104,000 youth participating in its educational programs. While we try to plan our 4-H Youth Development programs so that they do not interfere with school attendance, sometime limited school absences are necessary to participate in some 4-H educational events. In this letter, we hope to demonstrate the educational value of three select 4-H education programs that require participants to be away from school.

Youth who exhibit at the Kansas State 4-H Horse Show at the Kansas State Fair gain valuable technical and "soft" skills which are transferable to numerous life experiences and will benefit them long-term. Due to the timing of this activity, the 4-H members must be absent from school to participate.

To participate at a state horse show, youth must compete at the local level and should set goals to achieve mastery in several technical skills associated with riding. They have to understand the expectations of the class and learn to execute the requirements. This must be planned and worked toward in advance. To complete the steps necessary to compete, a young person must set timely and achievable goals well in advance of the competition. Youth are to check their progression against the requirements of the class to determine if participating is realistic for the horse and rider combination.

A requirement of the horse project is the youth partner with a 1,000+ pound animal. They must learn to communicate with, control and dictate to the animal to achieve the desired outcome.

This requires skills that promote a child's self-assurance and sense of competence.

Riding horses promotes physical and mental health. Youth who ride horses develop balance, coordination, strength and flexibility. Horses are an antidote to digital media and allow youth to move their body, use their mind and get outside in nature. Research from Washington State University shows that children who work with horses have lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol, as indicated by saliva samples, than do those in a control group.

"We know from other research that healthy stress hormone patterns may protect against the development of physical and mental health problems," reports Patricia Pendry, the WSU psychologist who led the study.

Youth who exhibit horses at the state level learn different methods of working through and dealing with competition at a high level. They learn to solve problems and handle defeat which allows for reflection, redirection and new goals to be set. Working with horses and livestock, youth can take controlled risks. The outcome of a practice or showing session is not guaranteed. Competition in this environment provides them with the opportunity to "fail" or succeed in a safe environment where they will also receive feedback to improve.

The Kansas 4-H Citizenship in Action (CIA) event is a two-day event held on President's Day weekend in Topeka, Kansas, for youth 13 to 18. This educational experience is sponsored and organized by the State 4-H Youth Leadership Council and has been held for nearly 20 years. This educational experience aims for Kansas youth to better understand the state legislative process and how their voice and participation in decision-making can make a difference in their local communities, county, and state.

Youth are assigned to the House of Representatives or the Senate during this event. On Sunday afternoon, they divide into committees and edit a bill drafted by the State 4-H Youth Leadership Council. During this time, youth are working with others they may not know to reach a consensus on what they feel is best for their "constituents" in their local Extension unit. Once they have come up with the bill's final draft, it is introduced later that evening on the respective floor of the House or Senate at the Capitol. Before the bill is introduced, youth are made aware of the specific rules of the floor and abide by those rules.

Since 2022, Kansas 4-H has consistently had over 200 youth attend this event annually, and it continues to be one of the statewide educational opportunities many youth talk about. We have seen youth support each other in helping ensure all voices are heard. Through the experiential learning hands-on approach, attendees in 2024 reported a 25% increase in understanding of how the state legislative process works because of their involvement in CIA (85% moderately familiar and extremely familiar). Additionally, 82% of participants indicated their confidence being mostly and completely confident in becoming involved in their communities, and 83% were moderately familiar and extremely familiar with how they can make a difference in their communities.

The National 4-H Congress is an annual educational event held in Atlanta, Georgia targeted towards teen 4-H participants. It is considered an honor to attend this event as each participating state has performance standards that potential participants need to meet in order to attend National 4-H Congress. While the event is held over Thanksgiving weekend to minimize school absences, it does carry over into the Monday and Tuesday following Thanksgiving weekend.

Every year, approximately 37 Kansas 4-H members earn the right to attend this prestigious event. These Kansas 4-H members join approximately 500 other 4-H members from across the United States to engage in this educational programs workshops, community service activities, and networking events where they get to interact with industry professionals, not-for-profit leaders, motivational speakers, and government officials. Examples of the educational activities provided at last year's National 4-H Congress workshops include, among others, team building, leadership development, how to thrive in college, public speaking, art, physical fitness, and professional networking.

These are three examples of 4-H Youth Development educational activities that participants unfortunately have to be absent from school in order to participate. Nevertheless, these same activities offer our 4-H members exceptionally high educational value. HB2103 would make these and similar educational activities eligible for excused absence consideration.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Sarah E. Maass, Ph.D.

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Extension Assistant Professor



Gregg L. Hadley, Ph.D.

Assistant Vice President – Director for Extension