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SB76 Given Name Act
Opponent
Oral
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Thank you chairwoman and committee members. My name is Molly Stephenson. I am the co-founder and secondary guide at Wild Flower Community School, a small independent school serving neurodivergent learners in Wichita. I am here today to voice my concerns about SB76. In our small school community, I have had the great pleasure of supporting and educating a diverse group of learners, who are thoughtful, caring, engaged and intellectually curious. A not insignificant number of my students and their family members happen to be gender expansive individuals. Some of whom have had significant challenges in regards to personal safety and mental health in other school environments. It grieves me to hear stories from parents and students about experiences with school cultures that felt hostile and unsafe. We know through cognitive science that it is not possible to learn effectively in an environment that feels unsafe and lacks meaningful connection with educators and peers. Gender expansive youth are facing an uphill battle on this front already. Please allow me to share some research:

The American Medical Association in its practice and policy guidance states the following:
“Academic and medical research has shown gender expansive youth—which includes more than 100,000 U.S. teenagers—encounter “severe discrimination” in the school environment.

- 78% were discriminated against at school.
- Over 75% reported symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder in the previous two weeks.
- 60% engaged in self-harm.
- 40% were physically threatened or harmed because of their gender identity.
- 20% attempted suicide in the previous year.
- These students also were 1.66 times likelier to be bullied at schools,

Research shows these numbers go down when gender expansive youth receive support in their gender identity. For example, the *Journal of Adolescent Health* study and others show that their levels of depression become similar to other youth.

Kansas has a mental health crisis. In the most recent School Mental Health report card, as researched and published by Mental Health America, Kansas ranks 33rd in the nation overall for

school mental health. This ranking has declined significantly in the last decade, with Kansas ranking 8th in the nation in 2015. We need to do better by our students.

It is our responsibility to our young people to create a culture of safety and respect in our schools. The evidence is clear that the simple acknowledgement of a person's chosen name is a very significant protective factor for mental and physical health in gender expansive students. Kansas has a lot of growth ahead to even begin to tackle the health and safety issues facing our students at large. It is unethical for the state to enact policies that knowingly, negatively impact the health of the students it is entrusted to provide with a safe and effective educational environment. Personal belief and bias does not belong in this space. Simply offering the courtesy and respect of using a chosen name is a well documented way to increase the safety and wellbeing of students in our schools, full stop. The evidence and consensus among health professionals is clear on this point. Caring about the health and safety of our students is our responsibility, regardless of one's personal perspective.

It is my sincere hope that you will side with respect, safety, and care for all Kansas students and oppose SB76. Thank you.
I will stand for questions.