

## **Oral Testimony**

### **House Education Committee Hearing**

PROPONENT testimony for SB 87- Expanding student eligibility under the tax credit for low income students scholarship program, increasing the amount of the tax credit for contributions made pursuant to such program and providing for aggregate tax credit limit increases under certain conditions.

NAME: Andrea Hillebert

DATE: March 10, 2025

TO: Chairwomen Representative Estes and members of the House Education Committee

Madam Chair Estes and committee members,

Thank you, Madam Chair Estes and Committee, for allowing me to testify in favor of Senate Bill 87. My name is Andrea Hillebert and it has been my honor to serve as a teacher and administrator in Catholic Schools in Kansas for 32 years.

How blessed are we to have so many people engaged in such passionate discussions about how we can best support Kansas children and families. I know that you, like me, understand that differing viewpoints, healthy conflict, and a process that includes listening with an open mind will ensure that we make the very best decisions for our kids.

At our school, Mater Dei, students come from many different backgrounds, experiences, and zip codes, 18 zip codes, to be exact. School choice breaks the arbitrary limitations between a student's housing and the school that he or she can attend. It cannot be acceptable to us that zip code remains a significant indicator of student success.

Our spirit of leadership and service and our socioeconomic and ethnic diversity are our biggest strengths, helping our students learn to work together, to appreciate different viewpoints, and to recognize the dignity in every person. 64% of our current tax credit students are minority students; 100% qualify for free or reduced lunches; and in almost every case, their parents would have been required to make a different choice without this option. How different and less vibrant our school would be without their voices.

Our current tax credit legislation benefits our families who qualify for financial assistance. This is a group that can feel marginalized, unheard, excluded. In my experience with our tax credit families, offering these parents a choice in the education of their children increases their involvement in school and increases their satisfaction with school. It also helps them to understand the significance of education as it relates to the choices their children will have in

the future. It is not a referendum on their public school or any public school, but a reflection of the empowerment they feel when they are given a choice.

At Mater Dei, we tell our students that it is our mission to get them to 18 with lots of choices. And we think that is a lofty goal because we only have our students until they are 14. But we have seen first hand the impact this legislation has had, allowing our students to pursue their dreams, to be masters of their own destinies, to choose career pathways and opportunities for service that will ultimately benefit our whole community. Let me briefly share a story about "Little Timmy," not his real name. He came to us when he was in the 4th grade. His dad is raising Little Timmy on his own. He sat across from me and told me that he was making this decision without the support of his family and he was worried about that. But something in his gut told him he needed to try something different for his son. He had heard about our school from a friend. He felt like he was disappointing his family. And so Little Timmy started our school, unable to read as a 4th grader, and he worked and worked and his family worked and worked. Through his efforts and the support of a team of adults that included his teachers, support staff, and his dad, he made the progress he needed to make so that he would be prepared for high school and beyond. There is such a satisfaction in seeing the payoff of our investment in our children. And it is my belief that increasing the investment will increase the payoff.

All educators - public or private - feel a deep sense of accountability to their students and parents, their colleagues, and their community. We know that people count on us to reach each child, not just academically, but socially, emotionally, and in our case, spiritually. Offering a choice to families benefits schools because it holds us accountable to the people who have chosen our school. And it holds parents accountable to act with intentionality when they select the school who will partner with them in the formation of their children.

There may be a lot of questions about the best way to implement school choice legislation, and those will fall to this group to answer, but there cannot be a question that this is truly what is best for Kansas families. I urge you to support SB87 and I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today.

Thank you,

Andrea Hillebert