

Wednesday, January 14, 2026

Testimony - HB2034 - Proponent - In Person

Madam Chairman and members of the committee

- Thank you for your time and service here today and taking some time to hear folks out.
- Just a little less than two years ago, when this bill was perhaps being first heard, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) suggested that Kansas ranked second. Not in a bowl game, best license plate art or even friendliness. Rather it was second in the nation for teachers leaving their jobs. Perhaps of a somewhat consolation prize was that we were not 1st as Vermont was and that a portion of this number honestly has to do with an aging section of the teaching workforce. Those bright points aside, some of the feedback received pointed to yes pay and cost of living discrepancies and rising expectations beyond their usual scope of duty, but also largely to burnout, undue hostility among administration and politics, rising mental health challenges among students and just generally being worn out.
- I'm a youth minister from a small town, 130 folks, who has spent the last 18 years or so working to give rural students just as good of opportunities as they could have anywhere else in Kansas, if not better. In our rural districts back home, whether we always celebrate it or not, the school community is a huge influence on our community life. One of the primary employers in the area. It helps serve and develop the young people, along side the rest of the community, that will some day take many of our places.
- I didn't need NCES necessarily to tell me that teachers are struggling. Or that students are. I see it daily in the student's weariness at the end of the day, the frustration among teachers when I meet them at the store, at the cafe or in the pews. I see it as a parent and in parents, as we desire more than ever for our students, but somehow feel like we're just not making headway.
- I mention these things, because I think there is an under-appreciated facet to House Bill 2034 that is easily missed. Yes it stands to potentially benefit 450,000+ public school students with an extra layer of care, intentional active listening and just students feeling seen and known. But it also benefits the 40-50,000 teachers, staff and administrators we have in our schools as well. The under appreciated piece of

chaplaincy is that it is for the staff as well. As well as the trickle down to students through staff. One Superintendent in Texas who shared about their success speaks of chaplaincy as a staff retention asset. Folks who feel seen and heard, noticed and feel like they have a sounding board can often look at their physical place of employment and those leading them with much different eyes.

- Chaplains are first and foremost listeners, confidants, a caring presence. Their involvement in the schools isn't compulsory nor is a student going and speaking with them such. They are simply available so students *can* exercise their freedom of religion OR perhaps just another trustworthy present to look to as they are pursuing life, liberty and happiness.
- In Rural areas... we often lack the access to some of the things other districts have, and yet there is a plentiful resource of faith communities and leaders in the places between our bigger cities and districts. Folks who routinely are already engaged in visiting, looking after, intentionally listening, seeing to the social, emotional and spiritual health of those around them. These folks who can serve in some capacity and we forget they are there and well equipped... Driving community interaction, ownership and formation on many levels. Different districts and areas may have different needs/requirements and that is okay because they know their people.
- Lastly... I appreciate that this bill puts the decision in the local district and board's laps. They know their communities and the context they live in. My wife fondly reminds me that I don't always make the right decisions but I made some pretty good ones because she was one of them. Putting our trust in local school boards to decide if they want to legally do what they could already do seems like a trustworthy place to park it. After all, these same folks have made some great decisions across the years too, they chose you all to represent them.
- Thank you for your time and consideration!

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