

## KANSAS HOUSE EDUCATION COMMITTEE

*Attn: Chairwoman Susan Estes*

### Proponent Testimony for HB 2420:

*22 January 2026*

*Offered by Denise Roberts, parent, resident of Johnson County, Kansas.*

*HB 2420: An Act concerning education; relating to school districts; requiring parental consent prior to providing any school-based mental health service to a student; establishing exceptions to such requirement; authorizing the imposition of a civil penalty for each violation thereof.*

*A social worker knocks on your door in the evening and explains that she wants to visit with your child. In fact, she wants to have regular visits with your child. Oh, and she'll need you to go ahead and leave the house while this happens. Who would agree to that? I'm here to tell you that can happen in Kansas public schools.*

*In 2020, I had a healthy 10-year-old daughter in 5<sup>th</sup> grade. She played piano, did perfect handsprings, got along well with her family, and never stopped creating. Her grades were outstanding, and she had a good circle of friends. Her teachers expressed no concerns about her behavior or academics performance.*

*After entering public school in Kansas in 2017, I noticed that her math scores were trending just slightly downward over three semesters. When I approached the principal about my concerns, he looked at her scores and told me that we had no reason to take any action because, "she's still on grade level." I was also told that "we want her to be in the driver's seat of her own education."*

*I volunteered often at the school with training and security clearance. I usually spent two lunch periods per week with one of my children at the elementary school. I spent hours in the art room and had good relationships with all of my children's teachers. When my son's teacher wanted to have him evaluated for the gifted program, I was called up to the school to sign forms and received thorough explanations of the process of testing and what professionals would be involved.*

*And then Covid. My husband is a physician, so our family was "exposed" daily from the beginning. We kept things in our home as normal as possible. We did not feel or express fear to our children. We made the best of the situation and continued to play games, exercise, do puzzles, get schoolwork done, take supplemental vitamins, and eat a healthy diet.*

*I come from and married into a family of therapists. I also have several friends, who are practicing counselors. What I was hearing that year is that people were not doing well, and their office hours were more than they could manage. None were accepting new clients. Out of an abundance of caution, I decided to find someone to get on record with in the event that anything came up. I had a pre-teen and a teenage daughter, and their social lives were being shut down at a very important stage of development, wherein peers play a very, big role. I interviewed and selected a different professional for*

each, and we visited them together. My eldest found this to be very beneficial. She viewed it as more of a "life coach" that she checked in with if things came up. That relationship ran the course of her high school years and ended in a healthy and appropriate way.

With my younger daughter, we did a visit with a counselor across the street from her school. We spent an hour together, talking about the amygdala, anxiety, and the stress of impending middle school, and then my daughter did a session with that counselor alone. I told her that if she ever wanted to see her, she could initiate a visit with no questions asked. However, she let me know that being probed to talk about her feelings with someone she didn't know well made her uncomfortable, and she felt like she already understood most of that information anyway.

She graduated 8<sup>th</sup> grade and continued to do well under the circumstances. We spent most of that summer at the lake as a family, and sometimes the kids would bring along friends.

In 2021, as she started 7<sup>th</sup> grade, we began to see drastic changes. Her clothing choices were oversized and dark in color. She stopped paying attention to her hair, preferring to have it covering most of her face. She became very withdrawn. Relationships with friends of four years began to be troubled. Starting middle school in an overcrowded place in the middle of a pandemic was not ideal, and initially we figured we were dealing with normal middle school apprehensions, but the changes happened so quickly that it was difficult to get our bearings. Previously, I had a daughter who drew ladybugs and made sculptures of frogs fishing on lily pads. Suddenly, I was pulling art work from her bag that caused me to gasp. It became very dark and included fangs and claws and eyeless forms. Mouths being pried open. Children being split in half. An occupational therapist in our family, who does art therapy with juveniles in a mental health hospital, expressed alarm when I consulted her. I will never forget what she said to me: "Someone is accessing her."

The daughter who lived on my hip for almost 5 years and was always under my arm for a hug suddenly became rigid at my approach. When I would attempt to hug her, her body would stiffen. I knew that something was very wrong, but she kept repeating that everything was fine.

There was no smart phone to search for clues. There was no private internet access or television in her bedroom. There was nowhere to look to get insight. We were flying blind. Her friends still seemed fine, although they began to spend less time with her and I could see that she was hurt by that rejection. But why? She began to struggle with her math class. Attempts at homework very quickly led to frustration and tears. I recall her developing the belief and expressing that "I'm just not very good at math."

Three months into this, it's November 2. I am helping her with her math homework and asked her if I could see the work they did in class that day. She began to cry and then tremble. I said to her, "please tell me." I could see that she was working very hard to hold so much inside. At that point, she screamed at me - "I wasn't in math class today. I'm missing too much math. You have to tell them to stop taking me out of class."

What we found was that someone had been pulling her out of math class for what she called "check-ins." My daughter stated that it was not the regular counselor but a substitute. We later found out that this was a practicum student working in the district. Because of our history, my child assumed that her father and I knew that this was happening and had sanctioned it. She was slowly becoming more and more angry with us. She was embarrassed at being singled out, which

would result in being questioned by other kids. She was frustrated with missing class and falling behind. We were completely unaware that this had been happening.

For brevity because I'm out of time, we were told conflicting stories by district employees as to the why behind all of this. We were told that a teacher reported that she was "off." The MTS guidelines state that it takes a minimum of six weeks before a student should be screened because a baseline is necessary to determine if a child is "off." We were told that she was given a survey, which we had opted out of, that raised some flags with regard to "resilience and grit."

We immediately pulled both our children out of Shawnee Mission and enrolled them at appropriate private schools in the area, each one chosen specifically tailored to their needs. Within two weeks, I recall my husband saying, "I feel like we are getting our child back."

Over the years, we have processed some of what happened. I wait for her to feel comfortable and tell me what she wants to tell me. I have apologized to her for not protecting her, and she understands that we didn't know what was happening and that what happened to her was wrong.

This should not be happening without parental notification or permission.

The MTS system of questions and flags and response to intervention does not give anyone the right to pry into the emotional life of a child without the parents' full participation. In their own documents, they state that parental involvement is necessary.

My child was created by God. She was knit together with a special temperament unique to her, just like her iris, her thumbprint, and her DNA. She is high in agreeableness trait as well as openness. She was designed that way for a specific purpose. Her temperament is suited to finding that purpose through trial and error, learning and growth, becoming the individual that God created her to be. God entrusted me with this child, and I then gratefully gave this child back to Him. The boundary being crossed here is sacred. I know the sound and pattern of that child's breath, her gait, her sigh, because I have studied her since before her birth.

This works as a chain of events. The SEL brings up the issues and dialogue in the group as a consensus building tool to access truth. The screeners regarding school climate, etc., raise the red flags, and this necessitates the interventions.

In a document authored by UNESCO explaining the rationale for SEL in education, I found a statement indicating that "SEL was necessary to build emotionally resilient individuals who are able to navigate the complex landscape of conflicting goals and dissonance to one of prosocial behavior that promotes human flourishing and the attainment of the SDGs."

As a parent, while you are purposefully creating cognitive dissonance in my child at school, maybe you could give me a heads up so I could help her manage this stress at home or, as our family chose, get her out of your public schools because she was being harmed there.

*My child is now flourishing. She's crushing her Trigonometry class. She already beat her mom's score on the ACT. She's building actual resilience. She has just the right level of grittiness. She knows who she is and whose she is and that she is amazing just the way she is.*

*For five years, when I share this story, the most frequent response I hear is "How can that happen? That's not legal!" Except it is. Social Emotional Learning being embedded into all areas and subjects in the public schools by mandate with accompanying screeners and interventions allows this to happen, and as parents we have no standing for recourse. I don't agree with this door being opened, but since it has been thrown open wide, I'm asking you to put some guardrails into this system so that this situation won't happen to another family.*

*Thank you for allowing me to share with the committee today.*