

SB 75 Opposition Testimony
Senate Education Committee
January 28, 2025
Sarah Mackay
Parent, Shawnee Mission School District

Dear Chair Erickson & members of the committee,

As the parent of two children, one who recently graduated from a private Catholic high school and the other attending public school in the Shawnee Mission School District, I am writing to voice my opposition to bill SB 75.

I'd like to share my story to demonstrate why the legislature should be investing in our public schools, including fully funding special education, instead of creating voucher mechanisms like these education opportunity tax credits that deplete scarce public funds by subsidizing private schools.

My son's experience in public school

I have seen firsthand how investments in our public schools through the restoration of general education funding under Gannon and additional funding from the COVID federal funds has made an impact.

My younger son, Sawyer, is a current 8th grader in Kansas public schools. Here is his story. Please imagine if this was your story. Sawyer began having seizures at age 1. He had 2 major brain surgeries (at age 2 and again at age 4) where they opened him up and took out bad brain matter to try to alleviate the seizures. The second surgery caused brain damage, where Sawyer's frontal lobe doesn't properly control emotions. This started our family down a path that ended up with Sawyer needing Special Education services. As I tell his story, please picture a cute, funny, charming little boy who grew up to have friends, place in the top 4 of spelling bees twice, and also has explosive breakdowns when he is stressed or can't understand what is going on around him.

Sawyer started receiving special education services in 5th grade. That same year Covid funding enabled our elementary school to have a full-time social worker on hand to help him (and the teachers) with big emotional breakdowns. Increasing funding to enable social workers changed my son's life. Having a trained safe person to work with Sawyer during breakdowns also changed the lives of his teachers and fellow students, as they had more uninterrupted learning time.

The proposed bill is meant to increase school choices. There is no better school or really no other school that fits Sawyer's needs. His major breakdowns are a lot and would have him expelled at a private school. Or if he was ever allowed to be at private school, we would most likely have to not only pay tuition but also fund a private para for him, as some of my friends in Missouri have had to do.

For Kansas, funding two new education systems – private and homeschool – with these tax credits is not sustainable. Funding for classroom and special education resources kids like mine desperately need, will be put at risk at a time when we are still waiting for the legislature to fully fund special education.

My daughter's experience at a private catholic school

After 10 years of public school, my daughter moved to a Catholic high school. It was a good move for her and while it was a financial stretch for us, using public funding to subsidize personal choices like ours is NOT the answer. Her time at this school really highlighted to me how important it is to invest more in our public schools, which would not be possible if SB 75 is passed.

My daughter's school has dedicated college counselors - one for every 300 students in the school, as well as two social emotional counselors that are available to students. They are able to do this because they have the proper funding. While touring colleges, all admissions counselors stressed the importance of personal letters of recommendations from one teacher, and most highly rated, was a recommendation from the school counselor.

My daughter did her freshman year at a top public Kansas high school, but the counselors were stretched so thin that they didn't know who she was and sometimes didn't respond to our emails asking for help with issues. Counselors in our public district are overwhelmed and have a ratio of students that is much higher than recommended.

My daughter got into her dream school. The fact that her private school counselor was able to write an accurate and glowing letter of recommendation from personal knowledge of her was a major factor in her application. This is one of the six criteria that colleges base admissions on and Kansas public school students are missing out on collegiate opportunities without having a relationship with counselors.

I ask that the legislature prioritize the success of all Kansas kids by investing in our public schools, including fully funding special education. Please do not jeopardize public school funding by using tax dollars to subsidize private schools through voucher mechanisms like these tax credits. Adequately funding public schools makes a crucial difference to many.

Again, I ask that you vote no on SB 75.

Thank you for your consideration,
Sarah Mackay