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Testimony In Opposition to HB 2136, Education Opportunity Tax Credit

by Rabbi Moti Rieber, Executive Director

House Committee on Education, Rep. Susan Estes, Chair

February 5, 2025

Mme. Chair, Members of the Committee:

My name is Rabbi Moti Rieber, and I am the executive director of Kansas Interfaith Action, a statewide, multi-faith issue-advocacy organization that works on behalf of people of faith and the public on a variety of economic and social justice issues. We partner with many of the major mainline denominations in Kansas and also represent hundreds of communities of faith and individuals of faith and conscience throughout Kansas. I rise in opposition to HB 2136.

The faith community that KIFA represents considers public education a cornerstone of our democratic system, helping to develop an educated and enlightened citizenry. The idea that every child, whatever their background or economic status, can receive a world-class education, is one of the things that we can be proudest of as Kansans and as Americans. Public education is a project we all share, one of the few remaining areas of civic life that our entire society supports, whether we directly benefit from it or not.

Our public schools are the pride of Kansas; from the huge and world-class schools in Johnson County to the small school districts in our rural towns, every child in Kansas has the right to a good education – and they get it. We should do nothing to undermine, or to underfund our system. We've been down that road before.

Public funding of private and religious education – whether via vouchers, or educational savings accounts, or as here, “refundable tax credits” – undermines this commitment. It does not improve academic achievement. These schools are not subject to the same accountability standards as public schools, and get to choose their students, unlike our public schools, which serve all students.

The people of faith that make up Kansas Interfaith Action public schools oppose efforts to use public funding to support private or religious education. The position of by the United Methodist Church, both in its Statement Concerning Church-Government Relations and Education (1968) and the Statement on Church-Government Relations (2016 Book of Resolutions, #5012)¹ is so strong that it deserves extensive citation here:

The fundamental purpose of universal public education at the elementary and secondary levels is to provide equal and adequate educational opportunities for all children and young people, and thereby ensure the nation an enlightened citizenry.

We believe in the principle of universal public education, and we reaffirm our support of public educational institutions. At the same time, we recognize and pledge our continued allegiance to the US

¹ Church & Society, The United Methodist Church. Social Principles and Resolutions/Church-Government Relations, #5012 (2016) <https://www.umcjustice.org/who-we-are/social-principles-and-resolutions/church-government-relations-5012>

constitutional principle that citizens have a right to establish and maintain private schools from private resources so long as such schools meet public standards of quality. Such schools have made a genuine contribution to society. ***We do not support the expansion or the strengthening of private schools with public funds.*** Furthermore, we oppose the establishment or strengthening of private schools that jeopardize the public school system or thwart valid public policy.

We specifically oppose tuition tax credits, school vouchers, or any other mechanism that directly or indirectly allows government funds to support religious schools at the primary and secondary level. Persons of one particular faith should be free to use their own funds to strengthen the belief system of their particular religious group. They should not, however, expect all taxpayers, including those who adhere to other religious belief systems, to provide funds to teach religious views with which they do not agree.

The program designed by this bill undermines the “no-aid” clause in the Kansas Constitution (Kan. Const. Art. 1, § 7; Art. VI, § 6c), which prohibits the use of public money for sectarian religious education.

The value of the public education system is that all of us support it, and that it brings young people together from the broadest swath of life to learn both critical thinking skills and how to live and work together. Parents who want to send their children to private or religious schools are certainly entitled to do so – but not at the expense of public education, which is undermined by the dedication of public funding to private, sectarian schools.

HB 2136 is yet another effort to get public money into private hands. It undermines our commitment to our public schools, and it undermines the Kansas and US Constitutions. Kansas has in recent years managed to fund our public schools fully and adequately, as our Constitution demands. This measure would undermine that commitment, and I urge you to oppose it.

Thank you for your attention.