



Laurel Burchfield

Mainstream

Laurel@mainstream.vote

HB 2136 - Expanding student eligibility under the tax credit for low income students scholarship program

Opponent

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Chair Estes and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide opponent testimony for House Bill 2136 on behalf of Mainstream.

Mainstream OPPOSES HB2136. This proposal is an attempt to divert funds from public schools to benefit those who make the choice to enroll their children in private, often religious, schools. **This diversion of public funds is another state-sponsored attempt to undermine public schools and favor private, often religious ones.**

HB2136 is an expansion of a program beyond its original intent to serve low-income students. Already, the program has been expanded to include students with higher income levels (up to 250% of the federal poverty level which is above the KS median household income). Even before that expansion, only a small percentage of eligible students (approximately 0.5% in 2023) have applied for and received these so-called “scholarships.” HB2136 would now expand it even further to include students who have never attended a Kansas public school. **No other state program would receive such a push for expansion so quickly with these results.**

Not only does HB2136 expand student eligibility, but it also increases the tax credit from 75% to 100%. Wealthy donors can essentially get a complete tax write-off for their contributions to a program that only a very small percentage of Kansas students participate in. **These are dollars that should be going to the state general fund which funds public goods, such as public education, and not back into the pockets of wealthy individuals.**

Public schools are accessible to and held accountable by all Kansans. Proposals like HB2136, and other tax credit and voucher programs, benefit those families who choose to enroll their students in private or home schools. These institutions often have limited or no accountability, can discriminate against potential students during the enrollment process, and center religious teachings – and do so at the expense of our general fund and public school funding. This is bad for our schools and for our students who do not fit into specific religious world views.

Kansas residents represent a plurality of religious beliefs and practices, and under the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, we are protected from our government essentially funding religious institutions. Recent court cases around vouchers continue to

dissolve this fundamental principle of our country's founding, and **HB2136, with its inclusion of students who have never attended public school as beneficiaries, is pushing even harder at this wall with the intent to fully break it down.**

HB2136 essentially mandates that Kansas residents participate in the diversion of tax dollars away from public schools and into often religious institutions, making Kansans now donate or tithe to churches to which they don't belong.

It also promotes a very specific view of the world that can be based on narrow, extremist religious teachings that don't represent the beliefs of many people of faith. Three of the most popular US textbooks and curricula used by Christian schools and homeschools have been shamed publicly for the way they teach things like science and history. At one point, an Accelerated Christian Education or ACE textbook, taught that the Loch Ness monster is real, and a modern day dinosaur as proof of creationism. These text books have taught that slavery was "black immigration", that Native Americans are savages, primitives, or demon worshipers, as well as presenting negative views of the LGBTQ+ community, non-Christians, and others. Since private schools are not held to the same expectations and standards as public schools, even if students in Kansas are not being taught these things, there's no protection against it and no way to stop it.

While our public schools have been fighting to increase graduation rates, the CEO of ACE has said "graduation is important, but salvation is more important." **That is not the purpose of education.**

For these reasons, Mainstream opposes HB2136 and we strongly urge you to reject this expansion of this program beyond the scope of its original intent.

Thank you,

Laurel Burchfield
Mainstream