

Melanie I. Arroyo Pérez

Private Citizen

2/24/2025

SB 254

Oral In-Person

Chair Thompson and Members of the Committee, thank you so much for giving me time to share my thoughts on SB 254 with you today. My name is Melanie Arroyo Pérez, and I am a voter in Johnson County. I am writing today to encourage the committee to protect educational opportunities for all Kansans and vote no on SB 254.

Growing up as an undocumented immigrant girl in Kansas City, Missouri who didn't speak English fluently, I never saw myself as the kind of kid who would go to college. I didn't care about math, science, history, nor reading. I didn't even like PE. Back then I was an unmotivated and careless 6th grader, and I couldn't wait for the day I finished school. My grades certainly reflected that sentiment, I was mostly a B and C student with occasional F's. To think that today I am the first in my family to earn a Bachelor's degree, two Master's degrees, own a business, and have a mortgage on a house in Lenexa, KS is beyond anyone's guess of what my future could have been.

My life only turned around when I moved from KCMO to KCK, and finished middle school in Rosedale. It was there that my teachers showed me that maybe I had potential. My education improved even more when we moved to Overland Park, where my twin sister and I attended Shawnee Mission North. I continued to grow and found new academic interests along the way. I went from being that kid who flunked PE in middle school, to taking German for four years in high school just for fun. When senior year arrived and it was time to look at universities, I was disappointed to hear that my number one pick, UMKC, was out of reach for me as an undocumented student. To attend UMKC, I had to enroll as an international student, and for my parents that was an immediate no. Thankfully, I had choices, because in Kansas I could pursue an affordable college education with the condition that I resolved my immigration status. I enrolled at both the University of Saint Mary and Johnson County Community College between the fall of 2010 and the Spring of 2014, where I double-majored in Studio Art and Psychology. From there I attended Emporia State University and graduated in 2017 with a Master of Science in Clinical Counseling and a Master of Science in Art Therapy. That was approximately two hundred and sixteen thousand dollars invested in higher education in a seven-and-a-half-year span. That was approximately two hundred and sixteen thousand dollars in scholarships and private pay that we were able to keep in the state. But the financial impact on the state didn't

end once I graduated, because my talent as a bilingual therapist met a critical need in the mental health sector in our state, I'm also a small business owner, and my husband and I accomplished our American dream and bought a home in Lenexa a couple of years ago. All of this was made possible thanks to a quality education and being provided with the opportunity to afford a college degree in Kansas. I hope we can continue to provide in-state tuition as an incentive to retain our young talent, and retain enrollment in our struggling state colleges and universities.

Once again, I thank you all for hearing my story and thoughts on this bill, and I encourage you all to vote no of the passage of SB 254 to protect educational opportunities for all Kansans. Stingers up!