

**Alison Snell**  
**Oral Testimony – oppose**

***The experiences of three undocumented Kansas college students***

**Committee on Federal and State Affairs**

**Senate Bill 254**

**February 27, 2025**

Chairperson Thompson and members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in opposition to SB 254.

My name is Alison Snell. I work as an elementary school English Learners instructor for Topeka Public Schools. I've worked in education for 13 years and for eight years I have worked as a certified English Learners instructor. I became an educator after taking a chance on a job as a paraeducator and absolutely loving the relationships I was able to build by working with students and getting to learn something new everyday from my students of many backgrounds. I still love the opportunity to learn new things about my students and their cultures, but I am also passionate about teaching reading and literacy skills. There is nothing more rewarding to me than seeing a child's world open up with wonder and possibility when they learn to read.

Through my work with Topeka Public Schools the past eight years, I have met many immigrant families through my students and bilingual coworkers. The following individuals from the Topeka area have shown incredible academic promise and tenacity in pursuing college degrees, knowledge, and expertise that will positively benefit our people and state. I oppose SB 254 because it would put college and higher education further out of reach for a number of Kansas' best and brightest. It would create an unfair financial burden on families that have been paying Kansas taxes for years while living here, with, very often, their students attending our public schools their whole K-12 education career. It will force some of our state's strongest and most promising students into staying in the most menial and lowest paying jobs—well below their potential.

I'm here to share the stories of three Kansas students who at this time do not feel safe publicly sharing their experiences about attending college without legal status.

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Brittany - Graduate of Washburn University

Brittany asked that I not share her last name since she is currently undocumented. Take a second and think about when your family came to America...most of our families have been here 150 years or less. Brittany was brought by her parents to the US when she was two years old in 2003. The town her parents lived in had high crime levels and the presence of drug cartels. Reliable employment was hard to come by and income levels were very low where they lived. Brittany's parents decided they absolutely did not want to raise their daughter in an unsafe environment with little hope for reliable or consistent employment or much income. Brittany described that it is very challenging to complete the process of living and working in the US legally. The cost of legal fees is quite high. Brittany's family knows folks who have waited and worked while undocumented for 20 years in order to qualify for beginning the process of obtaining a green card. Recently, Brittany married an American citizen and her husband has applied to get her residency. Their legal team expects that she will need to wait 6-7 years to get a green card and be able to seek legal employment. As of yet, she is unable to legally work in the social work field even with her completed degree.

Going to college had always been a dream for Brittany. Her parents encouraged her to work hard in school and get good grades. At her Topeka Public Schools high school Brittany kept up her strong GPA and graduated 3rd in her class. Knowing her legal situation, she had given up the idea of applying to college, but her high school principal took her aside and encouraged her to apply to college and for scholarships. The principal was her guide when she was applying to college. During this process, Brittany found out that many scholarships required being a citizen, however she was able to receive two scholarships due to her high ACT score. Brittany was accepted to three different schools she applied to. She decided to attend Washburn University.

Brittany recently graduated Magna Cum Laude with a degree in Psychology and a minor in Social Work. She also received academic accolades for completing a research project and community service project. While she worked on her degree, Brittany volunteered at a local elementary school to provide resources to students and families in a high needs area of Topeka. She is currently in the process of applying to graduate school. Brittany hopes to work in her desired field of Psychology when she receives her residency and work permit. She is very frustrated and upset to hear about SB 254. Brittany tearfully told me, “We don’t receive any benefits that students from here receive. We just want to receive the same education that everyone else is receiving.”

If in-state tuition would not have been available to Brittany when she decided to attend college, she says that realistically she would not have been able to afford going to college. Brittany says that she still hopes to attend graduate school, but that she will not be able to continue her education if SB 254 passes. Undocumented students do not qualify for FAFSA or most scholarships due to their status. “Others who are in my shoes will struggle as well, and our dreams of wanting to succeed and have a better life will be shattered. We’re not hurting anybody, all we want is just to live a good life, and get our education.” (Brittany)

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#### “Yaredy” - Current Washburn University Student

“Yaredy” asked that I not use her first name while sharing her experiences. Yaredy was 11 months old when she was brought to the US. She grew up here and completed K-12 in Topeka Public Schools. Yaredy mentioned that all of her memories are of living in the US. Her parents decided to move the family to the US when they realized that they didn’t want their daughter to struggle to have opportunities in her life. “They eventually realized that they wanted more not only for me but also for themselves.” (Yaredy) Yaredy’s mother completed middle school while her father only completed through the 3rd grade. Yaredy’s parents wanted more economic opportunities and a better quality of life for their daughter as well as more opportunities for employment for her when she grew up. “They (my parents) sacrificed their young adult years to move to the US and break generational cycles, however, upon arriving in the US they quickly realized the reality wasn’t what they visualized back home—having to settle for any available job due to being undocumented, my parents faced the harsh realities of being overworked, lack of benefits, and unfair wages.” (Yaredy)

Yaredy commented that there are not many pathways to citizenship in America. “Despite working twenty years non-stop, they (my parents) still face the same challenges in their employment today...with no sign of retirement or financial security for their future in sight.” (Yaredy) Yaredy herself feels that she may be able to obtain a visa in the future but thinks that becoming a citizen in the future would be very difficult. She says, “We’ve looked left and right and talked to many lawyers but haven’t found a path yet.” She says she’s heard of individuals that have a child in the US and wait 21 years to attempt to get a green card and still cannot. Yaredy mentions that many undocumented workers work at minimum wage jobs and are working just on surviving let alone paying legal fees.

Yaredy started thinking about college during her 8th grade year and says, “Witnessing my parents’ journey to the US in an attempt to break the generational cycles they endured in their home country serves as a

motivation for my educational goals.” She decided she wanted to go into the nursing field. Her desire to become a nurse came from her observation that most healthcare professionals are white, and Yaredy’s goal is to make sure individuals feel comfortable and acknowledged in any healthcare setting. “My goal is to reduce the stress associated with seeking healthcare and ensure that every patient feels seen, heard, and empowered throughout their healthcare experience.” (Yaredy) When Yaredy was in her junior year of high school, many other students at her school began getting everything ready for college. She saw classmates applying for FAFSA but she knew it was going to be different for her. Yaredy says that undocumented students can’t apply for FAFSA and also a lot of scholarships require you to be a citizen.

She was looking into the logistics of making college happen for her and feeling very discouraged. Yaredy’s parents work minimum wage jobs and she was not sure how she was going to be able to do it. Yaredy’s motivation to attend college increased greatly during her second semester of her junior year of high school when she worked towards and completed a CNA certificate at Washburn Tech. She sat down with her parents and they said they thought that Washburn University would be doable but that sadly any out of state options would be out of the question. Today, Yaredy is currently working towards her nursing degree at Washburn University. She is disheartened because even after she graduates with her degree she is unsure when she will be able to obtain legal status to work in her desired field of nursing. Yet, Yaredy hopes that in the future her degree and occupation will allow her to live a stable life and achieve her goal of service. Additionally she wants to be able to give back to her parents and give them the comfortable life that they have not yet been able to obtain.

Yaredy says that if in-state tuition was not available to her she wouldn’t be able to attend college. It is Yaredy’s last semester of pre-requisite classes for nursing school and the cost for her is \$9K-\$10K out of pocket per semester for nursing school. She thinks that if SB 254 passes she will have to end her enrollment at Washburn University. She imagines that she would have to move to working in fast food or cleaning since college would no longer be an option for her. Yaredy says, “I feel like I’ve had to take 10 steps forward just to reach the same goal as everyone else and I’ve felt like this has been going on my entire life.” She says she’s heard people, even classmates, make negative comments about undocumented people—“I’m not getting in the way of your success. Just let me try to do my things to have a better life.” (Yaredy)



“Alejandra M.” - Kansas College Student

“Alejandra M.” asked for me to use a different name for me to share her experiences. She was brought to the US when she was seven years old. Alejandra’s parents decided to bring their family to the US to have better opportunities—better education, housing, and jobs. Job opportunities were scarce in their home country and they did not have a house of their own there. Alejandra says that she was able to apply for DACA and through it found an amount of legal safety. “Both my mother and brother were able to obtain residency in 2016 but I was denied due to my age, so I kept reapplying for DACA.” (Alejandra)

All throughout her high school career Alejandra knew that she wanted to attend college. She maintained excellent grades and considered herself to be smart. “It was hard hearing all the other students talk about the big colleges they would be able to attend. I knew that without financial aid my parents weren’t able to pay for my tuition.” (Alejandra) However, Alejandra was determined to attend college to better herself in the professional world and also to fulfill her parent’s dreams for her. She says she intends to help them out financially in the future—she hopes to one day be able to find legal employment with her bachelor’s degree. Alejandra resolved to pay for her in-state tuition herself by taking on two jobs while she did her best to have enough time to study and complete her assignments, but she said it has been very stressful.

Alejandra says, "I am currently so close to getting my bachelor's degree, but with the new laws I was not able to renew my DACA." She added that she had to leave one of her jobs due to her status, so Alejandra's dream of finishing her college degree is currently on hold. "I can no longer work to pay the high tuition of a university. Even with in-state tuition for students, it is extremely hard to try and pay for tuition already. If in-state tuition is taken away, I will probably never will be able to go back and finish my degree." (Alejandra)

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Thank you again for the opportunity to testify in opposition to SB 254. Kansas has grown many promising, intelligent students, and some of them have been here since a very young age and with undocumented status. Committee and Kansas Senate members, we put our trust in you. Will you vote to make the future of Kansas brighter or more dim? For the benefit of our state, vote against SB 254 so that our future workforce of Kansas keeps the opportunity to reach their fullest and most vibrant potential.

Alison Snell–Topeka, Kansas