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TESTIMONY REGARDING HB 2263

“The school-choice issue is not about public versus private; it’s about choice. It’s about knowing what works well for my family and being able to make that choice for them.”

- Parent of a McKay Scholarships Student

HB 2263 would allow public school students with disabilities to attend a private school of their choice using a state funded scholarship. In order to be eligible for the program, the student must have an individual education plan (IEP) and must have attended and been reported for funding by a public school in the state of Kansas. HB 2263 is modeled on a Florida program, the “McKay Scholarships for Students with Disabilities Program” which provided 24,194 Florida students with special needs the opportunity to attend a participating private school during the 2011 - 2012 school year.

I recognize that HB 2263 is in many ways a bold proposal; it asks us to begin thinking and acting differently in our approach to education policy in Kansas. In particular it asks us to be kid focused, not system focused. I further acknowledge that thinking and acting differently can be difficult and even frightening, especially to those whose interests are wedded to existing structures. This is only natural, and indeed I would readily conceded that those of us who call for greater educational choice bear the burden of showing that we are not merely proposing change for change sake.

With this in mind I would point out that Special Education scholarship programs are working now in states like Florida, Ohio, Utah, Oklahoma and Arizona to provide expanded educational opportunities for those children who need it most. A great deal of information about McKay Scholarships is available via the Florida Department of Education school choice web-site www.floridaschoolchoice.org. But I’d like to highlight just a few facts.

During 2011 – 2012, 1,086 private schools in Florida accepted McKay Scholarship students. The average scholarship amount was \$6,849.00. To give a sense of the success of this program in Florida, consider that in 13 years participation has grown from 2 students to more than 24,000 students. More than 50% of these students are members of racial or ethnic minorities. Approximately 40% receive free or reduced-price lunch. And perhaps most importantly 100% of these students are faced with a challenging exceptionality that creates special challenges in their

educational progress. It is also interesting to note that just over half of McKay Scholarship students attend non-religious private schools.

School choice programs like the one proposed in HB 2263 are about one thing; maximizing educational opportunities for our children. As Florida Governor Jeb Bush put it in his 2006 State of the State Address, "We are committed to school choice because equal opportunity starts with equal options for education."

The fundamental point I would like to leave you with today is that education policy in Kansas should be kid focused, not system focused. Simply put, the pressing question before us is not what policies will best protect and preserve the existing education system in Kansas; but rather what policies will provide the best results for each individual child. For many children these results will best be achieved within the existing public school structure, but for other this is not the case. Denying expanded educational opportunities to those students serves no legitimate State interest, and in fact is contrary to the real long-term interests of all Kansans.

School choice programs like HB 2263 are no panacea with respect to the manifold challenges we face in providing the best possible educational opportunities to Kansas kids. But used in conjunction with other forward thinking proposals I am convinced that school choice can play a valuable role in advancing our shared goal of maximizing student learning.

Allow me to close with a quote from John F. Kennedy, which I believe captures exactly the spirit in which those of us who support school choice offer these proposals:

"Let us think of education as the means of developing our greatest abilities, because in each of us there is a private hope and dream which, fulfilled, can be translated into benefit for everyone and greater strength for our nation."