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Testimony to the Kansas Legislature on policy considerations for creation of Kansas education scholarship credits

Presented by Jonathan Small, CPA, fiscal policy director of the Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs.

Imagine a state where a mom using Medicaid could only take her daughter to a government hospital or where child care subsidies from the state could only be used at a government-operated daycare center. Imagine a state where scholarships like the Kansas Comprehensive were granted only to students who enrolled at the college or university nearest their home, and that it had to be a public institution. Better yet, imagine a state in which high school students could only attend the nearest public college or university.

Needless to say these programs would face significant operational challenges and would fail many of the Kansans the programs are intended to serve. Sadly, this is the predominant mode of operation for providing funding for K-12 public education. Currently in Kansas, Oklahoma and the rest of the nation, a child's residential address largely determines the educational fate of that child. The current state funding formula essentially says to parents: You will only get state assistance for your child's education if you go to a school designated by the state—regardless of that school's performance or quality, or more importantly regardless of your student's needs. This is unfair and discriminatory.

Now imagine a Kansas where families and students with income barriers were able to pursue educational opportunities that were best suited for their child's needs. Imagine a state where students and parents with income barriers can make a choice about where students will receive an education best tailored for the learning needs of each student. This can be accomplished in Kansas by implementing a state scholarship credit for common education for recipients with income barriers.

By varying the way a state chooses to provide funding for common education, allowing for the support of school choice and options for students and parents, both traditional and alternatives means can benefit.

I had the privilege to serve as a former volunteer teacher in Oklahoma City public schools. In the schools where I volunteered, the vast majority of the students experienced income barriers which restricted their ability to change where they were educated. So often, many of these students were failing or performing in a mediocre manner for a variety of reasons. All of these students had the ability to learn, but needed other environments other than the traditional public school system. A number of parents over the years have told me that if they could do something different they would do it to provide an option that could help their child.

The stories of the positives that can happen when students and parents can act on opportunities of school choice made available to them abound. For example, in Oklahoma, we have a common education

alternative (charter school) led by Tracy McDaniel, principal of KIPP Reach College Preparatory charter school. More than 90 percent of Principal McDaniel's students are minorities and 83 percent are poor enough to qualify for free or reduced lunch yet 98 percent of eligible KIPP Reach alumni have graduated from high school; 78 percent of 2011 graduates enrolled in college. The students at KIPP are many of the same similarly situated students as their friends and neighbors who are failing in Oklahoma City public schools such as John Marshall or Douglass High Schools in Oklahoma City.

Oklahoma has begun the work to respond to the needs of children in Oklahoma with its recent implementation of Lindsey Nicole Henry Scholarship Program for Children with Disabilities and its Opportunity Scholarship act. Both programs are similar to common education policy proposals being considered by Kansas policymakers. These programs are having incredible results and students and parents are extremely grateful for these lifesaving options.

Personally, I have empathy for the many students struggling under traditional forms of education. My parents made the very tough and difficult sacrifice to pursue alternatives to traditional public education for me, because they did not believe I was ready for a traditional public school classroom setting. I can remember my parents working multiple jobs, surviving on one car, forgoing vacations, declining more lucrative work and many other sacrifices to make sure that I and my sisters were able to receive and education tailored to our needs and the goals of our family. Any success I have had is largely due to what my parents sacrifice and what they did to embrace school choices options and to help others do the same. During my time in K-12, funding for school choice options for families was not available by the state of Oklahoma. But the growing embrace and implementation of options like education scholarship credits across the 50 states will provide lifesaving options so students and parents can experience opportunities like what my family has experienced.

I greatly appreciate your time and would be happy to answer any questions.

*Jonathan Small is a certified public accountant and serves as the fiscal policy director for the Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs. His policy experience includes the areas of tax, budget, common and higher education, health and insurance and other policy areas. He currently serves on the Board of Trustees for the Oklahoma Teachers Retirement System and serves on the Board of Directors for the Crossings Community Clinic, a free health clinic in Oklahoma City.*