

## **Testimony in Favor of Expanding the Kansas Tax Credit Scholarship Program**

**by Bob Voboril**

**March 23, 2017**

My name is Bob Voboril, and for the past twenty-four years I have served as the Superintendent of Catholic Schools for the Diocese of Wichita, which covers 25 counties of south-central and south-eastern Kansas. With 10,527 students, we are the ninth largest system of schools in Kansas and the second largest of the 70 school districts located within our boundaries.

I speak in support of expanding the Kansas Tax Credit Scholarship program.

*“No state can unreasonably interfere with the liberty of parents and guardians to direct the upbringing of children under their control. The fundamental theory of liberty upon which all governments of this Union repose excludes any general power of the state to standardize its children by forcing them to accept instruction from public teachers only. The child is not the mere creature of the State; those who nurture [them] and direct [their] destiny have the right, coupled with the high duty, to recognize and prepare [them] for additional obligations.”*

While I wish I had written these elegant words, they are, in fact, taken from the 1925 United States Supreme Court opinion in the case of *Pierce vs. Society of States* written by Justice James McReynolds. As directed by the Kansas State Supreme Court and by its own good conscience, the Kansas Legislature is engaged in an effort to ensure that all children, especially children at risk, can receive a quality education. We know that parents of at risk children have limited choices because they cannot afford to own or rent a residence in the higher achieving public school districts, and they cannot afford to pay the costs of attending non-public schools.

In 2014, the Kansas Legislature determined that one remedy for expanding choices for at risk children was to institute a tax credit scholarship program for at risk students residing in **priority and focus** public school attendance areas. Such students would be eligible for scholarships

to attend non-public schools. The scholarships are funded from contributions by corporate taxpayers who receive a tax credit. In so doing, Kansas joined thirty other states and the federal government in instituting some form of educational tax credit or other school choice initiative.

Unfortunately, it is extremely difficult to make use of Kansas' tax credit scholarship program because the limitations on the program are so restrictive: in two years, only about five percent of the scholarship amount possible under the program has been claimed. Given that the list of **focus** and **priority** schools is subject to change every year, I foresee a coming bureaucratic nightmare. The solution is simple: make every at-risk child in the state eligible for a scholarship, which could be done while maintaining the cap on total allocations. A tax credit is an excellent vehicle for addressing these challenges because it does not distribute any government money. Rather, it gives corporate taxpayers a credit for contributing their money to one of society's most important functions: education.

Non-public schools are particularly effective at serving the poor. I have seen Mark Tallman's voodoo math for years, but I will suggest to you a more stable comparison. Data compiled by the State of Kansas for the 2015-16 school year shows that for students on free or reduced price lunches in Kansas, 88% of the students from the Diocese of Wichita met or exceeded state standards in English Language Arts; just 65% of the public school students did. The gap on the math assessment is equally wide: 85% for diocesan students; 62% for public school students. This same gap holds true for all at-risk groups. **(Remember, we are comparing only students who meet the same low income standard regardless of the school they attend. See attached table for details.)**

Thank you for allowing me to testify on this important subject. If I can answer any questions I will be happy to do so.

**Percentage of College - and Career Ready At-Risk Students  
2016 Kansas Assessments  
(percentage rounded)**

<b>ELA (%)</b>			<b>MATHEMATICS (%)</b>	
Wichita Catholic Schools	Kansas		Wichita Catholic Schools	Kansas
52	27	All	41	21
51	30	Grade 3	52	39
60	37	Grade 4	39	23
56	31	Grade 5	39	21
50	26	Grade 6	39	18
49	24	Grade 7	37	16
47	17	Grade 8	40	13
49	18	Grade 10	37	11

**Percentage of At-Risk Students on Grade Level  
2016 Kansas Assessments  
(percentage rounded)**

<b>ELA (%)</b>			<b>MATHEMATICS (%)</b>	
Wichita Catholic Schools	Kansas		Wichita Catholic Schools	Kansas
88	65	All	85	62
84	67	Grade 3	89	77
90	78	Grade 4	91	75
88	67	Grade 5	82	61
86	58	Grade 6	87	62
87	60	Grade 7	87	68
91	65	Grade 8	72	44
92	58	Grade 10	82	43