



House K-12 Education Budget Committee
Written testimony for HB 2119, creating the student empowerment act (Opposition)
Prepared by John Allison, Superintendent
February 8, 2021

Chair Williams and members of the committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony in opposition to HB 2119, which would create the student empowerment act and provide education savings accounts for students who are academically at-risk.

I want to preface our testimony today by saying this: The Olathe Board of Education and staff are committed to providing programs and services that help students progress both emotionally and academically during this unprecedented disruption in the way student learning occurs. We recognize the anxiety and frustration students, parents, and stakeholders feel as we attempt to balance the safety and well-being of our students alongside the obligation to provide the high-quality education our community has come to expect.

The Olathe Board of Education has a long-standing policy position that states:

Schools receiving public funding should be required to meet state accreditation requirements, provide information about students and financing on the same basis as public schools, and accept all students on an equal, non-selective basis.

HB 2119 proposes changes that extend beyond *acknowledging the unique individuality and life experiences of each student* or providing for individualized learning opportunities. This bill extends beyond trying to help students who may have regressed academically or been unable to attend school in person during the pandemic. Rather, **HB 2119 proposes substantive changes in education policy, finance, and accountability – and it does so retroactively.**

In Olathe, 29 percent of our students qualify for free and reduced lunch. However, under this bill, the majority of students our district of nearly 30,000 would be eligible for participation in this program based on the criteria. Even with our elementary schools students having returned to full-time, in-class instruction after only two weeks in a hybrid learning environment, some students would be eligible based on other criteria.

Academic accountability

The pandemic created barriers in the delivery of creative programs designed to engage students who learn differently and for those students who participate in experiential learning opportunities outside the classroom. We are continuing to adapt learning options and working with our business partners to

provide students and parents with safe learning alternatives. During a pandemic, there are **no** easy solutions.

Elementary students in our districts returned to full-time classroom instruction after two weeks of hybrid learning, though some parents chose not to have their children return at that time. Our middle and high school students have been able to participate in either hybrid or remote learning formats. The board of education is actively working to get students back into classrooms full-time. We know, however, that there will be families who prefer these alternative formats to classroom learning. Our district will work with them to provide the best possible learning experience for their students in whatever setting they choose.

There have been legitimate concerns about the effectiveness of remote learning during the pandemic. This bill goes so far as to include remote learning as one of the criteria to qualify a student's eligibility for the education savings account program. It seems odd, then, that we would use public dollars to allow private organizations to deliver academic programs via remote learning.

Some parents choose to enroll their students in existing virtual school programs. We respect those decisions. HB 2119 does not just fund remote and virtual learning opportunities; it also relaxes academic standards and fiscal accountability. Regardless of the instructional model used, our district continues to monitor and assess student progress. That progress is communicated to students and families in a number of ways, including conferences and grade reports.

To be clear: Our primary concern is not with a parent's preferred delivery method. We recognize the learning experience needs to be highly individualized. That is why we remain focused on outcomes and providing our students with the high-quality learning opportunities that prepare them for success in post-secondary education and the workforce.

Fiscal accountability

The Olathe Board of Education strives to be a good steward of taxpayer dollars. We are not only required, but we support, a transparent budget process that allows parents and community members to have input and ask questions about how resources are used to support student learning. The district holds budget workshops and board meetings that invite public participation. Our budget is annually audited by an external accounting firm to ensure we are following generally accepted accounting principles. That budget is also subject to an audit by the Kansas State Department of Education to ensure that expenditures comply with state and federal laws. And, at the discretion of the legislature, our district is audited by the Division of Legislative Post Audit – but also to ensure that we are in compliance with state laws, but also to intend that we are achieving the outcomes intended by the legislature. All of this information, along with additional budget resources, are publicly available for patrons.

HB 2119 does not impose these same requirements or establish similar expectations for nonpublic entities – whether they be private schools or other nonpublic learning environments. There are few financial requirements other than the submission of receipts for educational expenditures (broadly defined). Unlike school districts, there is no requirement that private entities meet a minimum standard of submitting or publishing a budget plan for how public dollars will be utilized to achieve outcomes for students – something that has been an essential part of our conversations related to K-12 education funding and policy discussions with policymakers.

The funds being directed to nonpublic entities are taxpayer dollars. We believe that they should be held to the same level of accountability as our district.

The Olathe Board of Education appreciates the legislature’s investment and interest in working with us to ensure that each child has the opportunity to learn. We know we are making a difference in our students’ lives and remain committed to working with you to address the needs of all students. If you have any questions, please contact me or Brent Yeager, Assistant Superintendent for Learning Services at (913) 780-8022.

At-A-Glance: Our Students

Enrollment (headcount)	29,244	Free and reduced Lunch	26.8%
Ethnicity of the student population		Title I schools (elementary)	9
Caucasian	65.5%	Range of poverty, 52.6% to 82.2%	
Hispanic	17.3%	Graduation rate	92.4%
African American	7.6%	Graduates pursuing postsecondary ed	93.5%
Asian	4.4%	Dropout rate	.5%
Other	5.3%	ACT (average score)	22.6
Attendance rate	96%	Scholarship dollars awarded	\$18.7m