

Senate Committee on Education  
Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 499  
Joe Sailors, School Leader, Kansas Connections Academy  
February 21, 2022

Good afternoon, Chair Baumgardner and Members of the Committee.

My name is Joe Sailors, I am the school leader for Kansas Connections Academy. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Chair Baumgardner for introducing Senate Bill 499 and for being an advocate for all students in Kansas.

I have been an educator for 24 years serving in a variety of roles in the state of Kansas including: a teacher and coach in the Halstead school district, the High School Principal for the Doniphan West School district and most recently serving as an Assistant Principal for 11 years at Campus High School in Haysville. I am a lifelong Kansas resident growing up in Fort Scott and completing my bachelor's degree at Pitt State. I began my journey with Kansas Connections Academy (KCA) in 2019 as the assistant principal and became the school leader in 2020.

Kansas Connections Academy is a public virtual school program that enrolls approximately 1,500 students, serving students and families state-wide. Students enrolled at KCA have diverse backgrounds and are each unique and curious. Our students and families come to us for a variety of reasons including the need for a safe learning environment, additional support for students with disabilities, support for students with medical needs, and a need for a challenging curriculum. While a virtual program might not be the right choice for all students and families, KCA serves an important role in the K-12 education ecosystem by providing a school setting that is critical for the success of many.

KCA wholeheartedly supports this legislation which seeks to increase the base funding, per pupil, from \$5,000 to \$5,600. The introduction of this bill comes at a crucial time for virtual education as more students are choosing to enroll in full-time virtual programs along with an increasing number of new requirements on schools to address the needs of students. The proposed increase in funding restores cuts to virtual education that were made in the Kansas Special Legislative Session in June 2016.

The additional funding will allow for KCA to provide increased support services to our students. Specifically, as we implement plans for dyslexic and struggling readers, including screenings and interventions for students, the additional funding would allow us to hire a reading interventionist to address the needs of students with dyslexia and other reading deficiencies. We would also be able to fund another school counselor to address the increased mental health and social needs of our students.

Throughout the last two and a half school years, students in traditional brick and mortar schools have had their education disrupted on several occasions. This has not been the case with KCA, there was no disruption in school operations or learning during the pandemic. We continued to provide consistent and rigorous education with high student achievement. Even with dramatic growth school wide and families adjusting to a new mode of learning, we have maintained graduation rates of over 85%, K-12 course passing rates over 90%, which demonstrates how effective our learning model is for students and families.

Lastly, I would be remiss if I didn't address those who oppose full funding for students in public full-time virtual education programs. We are a public virtual education programs serving students and have the same costs with respect to salaries, benefits, staff development, curriculum, instructional support, and technology. An example of additional costs that we incur but traditional schools do not, is state testing. We must meet the requirements of in person state testing which requires the renting of labs, rental of laptops and other required technology, travel expenses for those proctoring the in-person testing, and onsite services while administering the test. While still addressing the specific needs of students with IEPs and 504 plans. KCA students and staff are no different than the tens of thousands of Kansas students and teachers in traditional learning environments and are deserving of additional funds to support their education.

Chair Baumgardner, thank you again for introducing SB 499. I appreciate your recognition of the students attending full-time virtual school programs who are deserving of additional funding to address their academic needs. I am pleased to answer any questions at the appropriate time.

# Connections Academy Fact Sheet

## **Who We Are**

Connections Academy® schools have more than 20 years of experience successfully providing full-time online learning to students across the country. Currently, more than 108,000 students in 30 states are served by 47 Connections Academy schools. Students are provided with high-quality curriculum aligned with state standards and taught by specially trained, certified teachers. When online school is done right, everyone benefits, especially students.

## **Student Services**

Supported by Pearson, the world's learning company, Connections Academy schools are committed to providing a high-quality education that is personalized to meet each student's unique needs and interests. Using our innovative and accessible technology, we connect parents, teachers, and students from home or anywhere with an internet service.

Our easy-to-navigate portal, Pearson Online Classroom, gives students everything they need to move through their school day, and provides parents with the tools and resources needed to help their children thrive.

Students and families have access to special education, English language, counseling, and tutoring services. They can participate in a variety of clubs such as student government, chess club, etc.

## **Student Demographics**

Students and parents choose Connections Academy schools for a variety of reasons, including the need for a safe learning environment, additional support for students with disabilities, and support with medical needs. For the 2021-2022 school year, 42.7 percent of our students qualify for Free and Reduced Lunch and 17.9 percent have either an IEP (Individualized Education Plan) or 504 plan.

## **Parent Satisfaction**

Connections Academy schools survey parents for satisfaction. In a 2021 Parent Satisfaction Survey, we found:

- 94 percent of parents agree that our curriculum is high-quality.
- 93 percent of parents are satisfied with the Connections Academy program.
- 96 percent of parents are satisfied with the helpfulness of their child's Connections Academy teacher.