

To: Senate Committee on Education

From: Cassandra Barton, Insight School of KS and KS Virtual Academy Head of School

Date: February 21, 2022

Re: Support of SB 499

Madam Chairwoman and members of the committee,

Thank you for taking time to discuss an increase of funding for the virtual students in Kansas and for the opportunity to provide remarks on SB 499. This is an important discussion that impacts thousands of virtual students across the state and could allow for more opportunities for them; we thank Chairwoman Baumgardner for bringing this bill to the committee. We stand in support of this bill.

As the committee is aware, full-time virtual students receive \$5,000 flat funding without any weightings. Insight School of Kansas and the Kansas Virtual Academy is proud to educate over 1,500 students that come to us to seek a virtual learning opportunity. Giving an example of our demographics, our virtual high school, known as the Insight School of Kansas, is 17% special education and 49% at-risk students. Because these students are enrolled in a virtual school, they do not receive any funding weightings, as they would if they were enrolled at a brick and mortar school.

We believe SB 499 makes a strong effort to provide support to our program to better serve our students and actually funds virtual school pupils as intended by the Legislature several years ago. While the Legislature was developing its new school finance formula, a 2015 Legislative Post-Audit report stated virtual schools were underfunded, which led to the flat rate funding prescribed in the block grant of \$5,000 for school year 2015-2016 and \$5,600 for school year 2016-2017. However, the funding level was dropped to \$5,000 by a reduction that came during the 2016 Special Session (a \$600 per pupil cut). Funding for virtual students in the state of Kansas has been stagnant at \$5,000 since that time. Funding for part-time virtual students has remained at a portion of \$1,700 for the same amount of time.

SB 499 increases funding for a full-time virtual student to \$5,600 and for a part-time virtual student to a portion of \$2,000. For Insight and KSVA, additional funding would provide us the opportunity to increase our supports for students and help us with our goal of meeting students where they are and growing them academically, as well as social-emotionally. We

would provide more resources to support our staff and students in key areas of focus such as reading, math, Career Prep and credit recovery.

In addition, SB 499 provides a funding opportunity for students who enroll with us for spring semester. Currently, we receive no funding for any students we enroll after the fall Count Date window, which limits our ability to serve students who may need a change in school setting mid-year. If funding was provided for these students, it would allow us to better aid them throughout the spring semester as they jump into the world of virtual schooling, many for the first time. Also, it would permit us to design a more specific plan for spring semester enrollments we find have not been in school for the fall semester.

Finally, SB 499 provides additional funding for high school students who are considered at-risk of not graduating within their 4-year cohort upon enrollment at the virtual school. Over the years we have been working to increase our graduation rate at Insight and, in looking at root causes, found 68% of our non-graduates each year had enrolled with us not on track to graduate on time or within their 4-year cohort. While these students may have stumbled on their path to graduation, they deserve the opportunity to finish high school and earn a true high school diploma. Additional funding for these students would allow us to provide staff to focus heavily and more specifically on them, as well as a cadence of courses that could get them across the finish line on time. This would increase not only Insight's graduation rate, but also the state's graduation rate.

Operating with the same level of funding for seven school years has been a challenge. Public virtual schools are an excellent schooling fit for some students and families in Kansas. During the pandemic, we saw our enrollment numbers for both virtual schools increase exponentially (our Kansas Virtual School enrollment quadrupled) and today is still significantly higher than pre-pandemic levels.

As a state, I know we want to do what is best for Kansas students and updating the funding levels for virtual schools for the first time in a long time is what is best for Kansas' virtual students. We ask for your support on SB 499.