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Neutral Testimony on HB 2347
February 20, 2016
House K-12 Education Budget Committee

Chairman Campbell and Members of the Committee:

The Kansas Catholic Conference takes no position on the public school finance portions of HB 2347. We stand in support, however, of the bill's school choice provisions, specifically its expansion of the existing Tax Credit Scholarship Program and the creation of an Education Savings Account (ESA) program.

HB 2347 would improve and grow the Tax Credit Scholarship Program passed by the Legislature in 2014. It is important to note that no state money flows to any private school or family under the terms of the program. The scholarships are funded entirely by private donations. In return, donor corporations receive a tax credit. Prior to creation of the program, donors to private school scholarship programs received a tax deduction, as they do with any charitable deduction. This fact, and the fact that Medicaid, Medicare, and other public funds are able to be used at private and even religious hospitals, is a good reminder that the program is well in line with what people have long taken for granted in other sectors of tax and budget policy.

This is only the second full school year that students have had an opportunity to benefit from the Tax Credit Scholarship Program, and it is already allowing children from financially challenged families who would not have had the chance to attend the school of their dreams to do so. However, there are low-income students across the state who could benefit from this program but are not able to because of the needless restrictions on the program.

The current requirement that a student transfer from a Title I Focus or Priority school prevents kids from low-income households in many areas of Kansas from making use of this program. The requirement serves no purpose and in fact adds an element of instability to the program, as this classification is subject to change. HB 2347 would make low-income Kansas kids from all Kansas schools eligible for the program, rather than just students transferring from a limited number of schools. The bill would also

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raise the income threshold from “free lunch” to “free and reduced lunch,” allowing more low income children to be able to receive scholarships.

These and other provisions in HB 2347 will bring the Tax Credit Scholarship Program more in line with other states who make participation in similar programs easier for families and donors. All people who care about educational opportunities for Kansas kids should want this program to succeed.

Different children have differing educational needs, and different schools are better suited to meet those varying needs. A child who might be struggling in his or her current educational situation could well be more successful in a changed environment. This is oftentimes not the fault of the original school, but rather a reflection of the fact that one size does not fit all. It is not always a question of finding a “better” school, but rather a matter of determining which circumstances are best suited for that particular child.

This is why parents should have the opportunity to choose the school that best fits their children’s needs. Empowering parents with more choices in pursuing educational opportunities for their children can only strengthen Kansas’ overall educational system. Kansas needs both strong public schools and strong private schools for the state to be competitive in the coming years.

Parents should have the right to choose the best school for their children without being penalized for enrolling them in a school not operated by the government. The state of Kansas has a vested interest in the education of every child. While the state obviously has a special obligation to the children in the public schools it sponsors, that does not excuse the state from its obligation to the over 50,000 children who do not attend public schools.

Thriving private schools not only provide an important service to parents and children, they are also an asset to the state. Private schools relieve the financial burden that would fall upon the state were it obliged to fund the education of every student in Kansas. Were Kansas’ private schools to close, tens of thousands of students would suddenly require placement in public schools, but no new funding would come with them. The state clearly has an interest in encouraging the long-term viability of the private school option.

Kansas should continue to follow the lead of reform-minded states across the country that are pursuing school choice in an effort to make their states more attractive and competitive to businesses and families. HB 2347 will empower more parents who lack financial means to choose the education that they believe is best for their child – something Catholic schools have already been attempting to do for decades through scholarships and other approaches to financial aid.

We support the expansion of the Tax Credit Scholarship Program and the creation of an Education Savings Account program. Regardless of what approach the state decides to take with school finance, we hope that it will include a strengthening of educational choice options. Parents deserve choices when it comes to meeting the educational needs of their children.

Thank you for your consideration.