Good afternoon members of the committee. My name is Leslie Colwell, and I’m with the Colorado Children’s Campaign, here today to testify in support of Senate Bill 103 because we believe it creates an opportunity to make school enrollment systems more family-friendly and to improve equity and access in the school choice process.

The Children’s Campaign supports public school choice because it’s based on a simple but powerful principle: that parents should have the ability to send their kids to any school that will help their children thrive. Here in Colorado, open enrollment has been a key component of our educational landscape since the 1990 enactment of the “Public School Choice Act,” which allowed families to choose from among public schools in any Colorado school district beyond their residentially assigned school.

Today we know that parents exercising the power of school choice options is extremely popular – more than 145,000 students, or 16 percent of the public school population, “choice” into a traditional public school other than the one assigned to them based on their address. Of these, we know that about 50,000 Colorado students cross district lines to attend another district school.

However, data suggest that some subgroups of students are less likely to use open enrollment, especially English learners, low-income students, and students with special needs. This as a signal that there is an opportunity for open enrollment opportunities to be more accessible for all Colorado families.

The Children’s Campaign aims to eliminate barriers to opportunity. Our concern with the current system is that open enrollment opportunities may not be reaching students and families who could benefit from them most. With timelines and procedures locally determined but not necessarily transparent or easily accessible, enrollment processes are often not family-friendly. Families should not have to search across many different websites and platforms for information, take time out of work to visit schools, or submit applications in person within a short window of time.
• Real “choice” among schools is limited if options are not equally visible. We believe that aligning processes that are currently confusing and inconsistent across districts is an extremely reasonable place to start, and that this bill has the potential to help level the playing field of access to schools of choice.

• Finally, we appreciate that this bill takes a light touch approach to improving a clunky system – there’s no heavy mandate for districts, and they would maintain the ability to set policies locally. The bill includes a stakeholder process where districts would be consulted about the recommendations made to the State Board of Education.

• Thank you to Senate Tate for bringing this bill and to committee members for your time.