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Testimony before the
House Committee on Education
on
HB 2477 – Compulsory Attendance Laws

by
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Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to offer comments on **HB 2477**. We appear as a reluctant opponent to the bill as currently drafted. If the goal of the bill is to improve educational options for students at-risk of dropping out of high school, districts are already seeking to achieve that outcome. Unfortunately, the bill provides little, except more state mandates and no resources.

What the bill does:

Under current law, students are required to be enrolled and attending a public or non-public school until the age of 18; however, a child may be exempt from this requirement at age 16 or 17 with a parent's written permission. The law further specifies students are exempt based on one of three reasons: (1) enrollment in an approved alternative education program, (2) the child and parent attend a final counseling session, or (3) the child is concurrently enrolled in a postsecondary program.

HB 2477 changes state law in several important ways. First, it removes the word "or," which appears to require all three of the following to occur: (1) the child must be in an approved alternative education program, and (2) the child and parent must attend a final counseling session, and (3) the parent, child and principal or other school designee must all agree to the child's withdrawal from school; however, the agreement of school district personnel shall not be required in cases of (1) financial hardship; (2) documented illness; or (3) court order.

In addition, the bill significantly amends the definition of "alternative educational program" and specifies the program must be "developed, and amended, if necessary, in consultation with the student, a school guidance counselor, the principal and the student's parent or person acting as parent."

In summary, this bill as introduced expands the authority of the school system to keep students in schools, requires 16- and 17- year-olds to be enrolled in an alternative education program if not in a regular school, and requires more extensive involvement in developing that plan than the current final conference with school personnel.

The KASB Delegate Assembly approved a resolution supporting efforts to make Kansas first in the nation in educational outcomes, and that certainly includes high school completion. School districts have been striving to do that.

High school completion rates in Kansas have been improving over the past decade, and by the best information available are at an all-time high. Kansas ranks in the top 15 to 20 states in the nation in high school completion, but trails several regional and neighboring states. The fastest growing segment of the Kansas school population is Hispanic students, which are far more likely to drop-out.

One plank of the KASB First in Education platform is to “Strengthen support programs based on individual student needs, beginning with early childhood and continuing through preparation of all students for success beyond high school.” This bill would certainly fall into that category. Unfortunately, the bill simply directs schools to do what they are already trying to achieve. If high schools are not doing all they can to keep students in school and develop alternative programs with parental input, it’s not the lack of direction or effort but a lack of resources.

School district operating budgets are \$200 million below their 2008-09 levels, a reduction of 6.5 percent per pupil, while inflation has increased 7.0 percent. Among other cuts, school districts have reduced counselor positions by nearly 100 positions, or 8.5 percent, since 2009. Nearly 90 principal and assistant principal positions have been cut since 2009 – a 5 percent reduction. However school enrollments have increased by over 10,000 students, over 2 percent, so there are fewer school officials to deal with more students.

School officials cannot compel students to attend. Compulsory attendance laws have little impact unless the law enforcement system makes it a priority to enforcement. Likewise, parents who want to keep their children out of school for any reason can simply “home school” their children without regulation.

Therefore, this bill as introduced is primarily a new, unfunded mandate on local school districts. It is a requirement districts would gladly try to follow. High schools are already held accountable for graduation rates, and KASB wants to see graduation rates improve. If this bill provided either additional resources or real authority to achieve this goal, we would be enthusiastic supporters.

Thank you for your consideration.