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Making public schools great for every child

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House Education Budget Committee
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Madame Chair, members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on HB 2580.

KNEA believes that Kansas has a strong charter school law. You might hear from the proponents of this bill that our law is "weak." They consider it weak because they fundamentally believe that anyone who wants to open a school with state money ought to be able to open a charter school.

What we believe makes our charter school law strong is the fact that our charter schools are fully accountable to the taxpayers who foot the bill through the locally elected school board.

We hold strongly that schools that use tax dollars must be accountable to the local taxpayers. The best way to do that is to keep decisions about charter schools in the hands of the locally elected school board. This will ensure that each community has schools that meet the needs of that community.

But this bill goes so much further than charter school bills we've seen in the past. This bill would legitimize schools that do not address the state's standards for subject areas. This bill would legitimize schools that do not or cannot improve student achievement against those standards. And this bill would create a cumbersome system of application and approval that would be costly to implement and difficult to regulate.

House Bill 2580 removes accountability from our charter school law.

Our Kansas charter schools today are required to assess student achievement using the same standards and the same assessments as all other public schools. Under the provisions of HB 2580, charter schools would be exempt from the state assessment system. Without the same assessment system the state would have no ability to compare the performance of students in charter schools with those in other public schools. Why should taxpayer dollars be spent on schools that do not participate in the state assessment and accreditation system?

The Education Committees of both the House and the Senate have had presentations this year about innovative education programs in Kansas public schools. Some of those have been charter schools. The youth entrepreneur program in St. John, Kansas started in a public charter school. The Walton Rural Life Center in the Newton Public Schools is an amazing public charter school. These are just two examples but they are examples of extraordinary schools meeting student and community needs in very different ways and still meeting the same accountability standards as all other public schools in Kansas. Kansas does not need to abandon accountability and accreditation in order to innovate.

We would also point out that research on charter school effectiveness does not support the notion that charter schools are better than other public schools in the improvement of student achievement. Without definitive data demonstrating that charter schools are superior to other public schools, why would Kansas choose this approach and allow for the establishment and funding of unaccountable charters?

House Bill 2580 establishes a complex and convoluted system of application and approval of charter schools.

It first establishes a charter school commission which apparently does not approve charter school applications. Instead it appears to establish "authorizers" wherever and whenever a group pops up that wants to authorize a charter school. Frankly, we have authorizers now. Locally elected school boards are our authorizers. They are chosen by the local taxpayers to oversee the spending of tax dollars for the benefit of the community. They are the appropriate authorizers.

I would add that KNEA has long supported an appeals process to the State Board of Education to ensure that the application was not denied in an arbitrary and capricious manner but such an appeal would keep the decision with the elected officials responsible for overseeing the spending of tax dollars.

We find the Commission itself to be a problem. We would ask why the Commission has an appointee of the KASB and another from United School Administrators but no one appointed by our organization. I would point out that KASB and USA, like KNEA, are organizations that are voluntarily joined (or not joined) and that all three organizations have as members a large majority of those they represent. We would also ask why the Kansas Chamber of Commerce has two appointees to the Commission.

In short, we believe this bill is unnecessary. We urge this committee to stick with a system that is working well and protecting the interests of Kansas taxpayers. We urge you not to advance HB 2580.