

Senate Education Committee

Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 361

February 6, 2012

Senator Schodorf and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on this very important issue. Since the committee is only hearing testimony on the financial components of the bill, we have limited our comments to those areas. The Shawnee Mission School District supports the finance components of SB361. Our district has long advocated for adequate state funding and that local school boards have the ability to provide the necessary revenue to fund appropriate programs for their students. The bill appears to make every effort within existing resources to hold all districts harmless without increasing any local taxes. We believe the local taxing authority will forge a stronger partnership between the local patrons and the school districts.

Senate Bill 361's simplified formula should provide greater predictability for local planning and budgeting each year. Currently, school districts must wait until May of each year to know how much the state formula will provide. Districts will still be dependent on legislative resolution of state funding decisions in a timely manner each year. At the local level, there will be greater community and patron input in early planning and development of local programs that can be implemented with local funding.

The current formula is based on a series of weightings and a base state aid per pupil set by the legislature each year. The Legislature will continue to shoulder the responsibility for appropriating funds for the proposed formula as well. However, enhanced local funding options provide a meaningful opportunity for local school boards to assess the needs of their community much better than a state controlled formula. Senate Bill 361 will allow the State to focus more on providing equalization funds to districts with lower property valuations. Through its funding flexibility and local funding opportunities, the bill should also allow greater local control of policy and finances. We support retaining as much policy and funding control in the authority of each school district.

It is customary that within the initial planning phase of a proposal there are areas that may warrant further review. We would support further review of the following areas:

- All-day kindergarten: Early childhood education is a critical component for providing students a strong foundation of skills on which to build and achieve. Our district supports full funding for all-day kindergarten and encourages the legislature to include this provision.
- “At-risk” learners: We recognize that there are additional resource costs in providing efficient and adequate services for students who are considered “at-risk.”

- Cap on reserves at 7.5 percent: The Government Finance Officers Association recommends the maintenance of fund balances equal to three months of annual expenditures (25 percent). This is even more critical for districts that rely heavily on local property taxes, which are not available until January. It is imperative to have balances that will cover expenses from June to January.

It is essential that schools be able to develop, advance, and provide forward-thinking programs that will prepare Kansas students for successful futures.

We applaud the Governor and his staff for their commitment to improve the school finance system and look forward to working with the legislative committees as these ideas are being considered.

Submitted by Gene Johnson, Ed.D., Superintendent of Schools, Shawnee Mission School District