

House Education Committee

on

House Bill 2504

Submitted by

Kenneth Harshberger, Meade USD 226 Superintendent

Chairman Highland and Members of the House Education Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony concerning HB 2504. As a southwest Kansas native who has been a farmer, teacher, principal, and superintendent for the past 35 years, I am extremely concerned about the negative impact this legislation will have on almost all school districts and especially rural districts.

- While efficiency in school districts appears to be popular in Topeka, this bill creates little efficiency while disrupting almost every rural school district in the state of Kansas. Most families who have chosen to live in a small community do so because of the quality of life and the desire to have their children in a small school system that is operated by a local board of education. This bill disrupts communities (especially rural communities) every 10 years as it requires continual realignment. Rural communities are already struggling to survive, so continual disruption of these communities just exacerbates this problem primarily so Topeka can save a few dollars. This is not good for Kansas and certainly is not good for the children of our great state. Rural Kansans understand if you lose your school, you lose your community. While this bill may be seen by some state leaders as just a realignment of school districts and administrative services, it is just one more example, if passed, of legislation which takes away local control and supports further deterioration of rural communities.
- ***There are many financial decisions that school districts can make to save money, but many of them are not what is best for the education of students.*** This bill is another example that this caveat needs to be honored. To my knowledge the legislature has not finalized budget savings in this bill; however, initial reports indicate that the savings are only estimated at \$173 million over 10 years. This is the equivalent of only .4 of a percent of the funding spent on K-12 education by the state. This shows almost no financial benefit all while dramatically disrupting most school districts in the state. The bill is reportedly focused on consolidating administrative functions to save money, but as indicated it clearly falls short of this goal. Even if these services are consolidated, local communities still want an “administrator” that is responsible to the people in that community. Even if one superintendent is used per county, additional administrative personnel will have to be hired to work in each community. Local communities are proud of their school systems and don’t want to outsource administration to be operated by an entity which may have few ties to the community especially if it saves almost no money. It appears because of the financial struggles in Topeka; legislation is being introduced in an effort to turn over every rock to find savings even if it damages local communities and is not beneficial for students. The financial problems created at the state level should not be put on the backs of the local school districts.
- For years the state has put in place financial incentives for school districts who may consider consolidation. This approach allows for local school boards and communities to make decisions which are in the best interest of “their” educational system and most importantly “their” students. These incentives should be left and even enhanced to help small districts in making difficult and at times gut wrenching decisions

which impact their communities for years to come. It is challenging enough for school districts to go through this process without being forced by the legislature. Once again this bill is an example of legislation that does not honor the fact that local control is “sacrosanct.” Protecting local decision making and local communities is much more important than saving a few dollars.

- The idea that all excess property would go to the state under this plan also strikes at local control and takes funding out of our local communities. Many school districts have purchased equipment and property with money from local taxpayers. While some districts may have had equalization aid, the majority of the funding came through local taxation. Meade USD 226 gets no equalization aid for anything, so almost all property was paid for locally. Taking away this property to fund the state is not only poor public policy, but it demonstrates once again the desire for the state to make up for lost revenue on the backs of local school districts.
- Finally, many rural communities remember the damage created by unification in the 60’s, but even during unification the legislature put more funding into schools. It was never intended to find savings. This bill is likely to do the opposite – take more funding away from schools and still disrupt almost every school district in the state unnecessarily. It seems the focus should be on helping to restore funding to schools which have been devastated financially over the last seven years instead of trying to find a “few” dollars to shore up the state budget.

I encourage you to not adopt HB 2504. Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback about this legislation.