

## **HOUSE BILL 2119, STUDENT EMPOWERMENT ACTION**

### **PROPONENT TESTIMONY**

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My name is Joy Eakins, and I was elected to Wichita Public School Board in 2013 where I served until my term ended in January 2018. I am also a parent and volunteer as a tutor and with organizations that serve at-risk students in my community.

Last Wednesday I spoke at the hearing on remote/hybrid education and discussed how the design of the School Gating Criteria prioritizes adult health over children's by painting a picture for Boards about the community toll without considering the toll on children. I have included that article here with all relevant references to the data included in that report. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have had after having time to look at that data.

When we find ourselves under intense pressure, that is when we find out what is really going on inside – where we have strengths and where we show weakness. The same is true for systems. This last year our systems have been under an inordinate amount of stress. And in the process, we have seen that some school districts are built on what is right for kids and their families – while other districts have a different list of priorities. Yes – there are caring adults inside all those systems. There are even caring adults who lead some of those systems. But their voices are often muted, or they are afraid to speak up. The new voices you hear speaking up are those who are now seeing it.

When I ran for USD 259, I staunchly opposed measures like this bill. I believed that we could bring change from the inside and fix these issues for our most vulnerable students. So, what changed? Why am I here today? I got a good look at the inside of the system and saw what many of you see.

In the 4 ½ years I sat on the Board, we had one meeting where student achievement data was brought for a discussion. The district reported that the results were encouraging – until I pointed out in the meeting that in 5 of our high schools, 1 of every 2 students was below grade level in math. That was the last time we discussed state test results in a meeting.

Instead, the Board talked about the new school facilities we should build, how to maximize the mill levy authority on our citizens, lawsuits against the State for more money, and balancing the budget by cutting programs for at-risk High School students to save SEIU labor contracts. We did discuss education – usually we talked about the new teaching practices we would impose on our highly educated and committed teaching staff or lament the discipline crisis our teachers faced without actually taking steps to solve the problem.

This continues today. This year, the Wichita School Board has taken public comments once – when required by law – but the teachers Union and SEIU have spoken at every meeting. The Board voted to lock parents out of watching their children participate in activities, even “safe”

activities like cross country – and after that vote, one Board member wondered if he would be allowed a pass to these same high school events. His child is in Kindergarten.

When fall decisions were made about allowing middle and high school students back into the building, the District told us they needed 9 weeks to decide whether to pivot from remote to hybrid. But in November, they decided on a Monday night that Elementary students would be fully remote on Wednesday – giving families less than 48 hours to scramble for solutions.

Many parents like me have options. Families with options can move to another district, hire tutors, home school, or send their child to a private school. And parents with options are taking them. WPS has seen declining enrollment for the last 5 school years, with a total decrease over 7% since 2016. But what about the rest of our families?

In Wichita, 75% of our students are from homes of poverty – families that have limited options. These are the same families that have lost their jobs in the shutdown of our economy. One way for them to escape this cycle is to see their children get a solid education that prepares them for the future from a system that values the child and their family as partners in the process. These families should have equal access to the options for their children. They should be treated like the important stakeholders they are.

Thank you for the opportunity to share. I hope you pass this bill and level the playing field for families.

# Who's Missing in the Discussion of School Gating Criteria?

(as published at <https://candor.news/on-the-front-burner/data-gate>)

As a parent and a former school board member, one of the things I have watched with great interest this last year is the conversations our community is having around education and the role of public schools through the pandemic.

Central to many of those discussions has been the [School Gating Criteria](#)<sup>i</sup> (SGC). People often ask me what SGC is – and the simplest answer is that the SGC is a set of measurements that help define the seriousness of the spread of COVID in a community. The criteria are supposed help school leaders chart their course forward and communicate with stakeholders about the steps they will be taking.

In Kansas, the SGC proposed by the Kansas Department of Education are based on 5 metrics: student absenteeism, county positive case rates, county cumulative incident rates, trends in these incidents rates, and local hospital capacity. Each of these metrics has a set of “gates” that determine what color that criteria is – green, yellow, orange or red. For example, if the two-week test positivity rate is below 5%, then the color for that metric is green. If it's over 15% then it's red. Once a final color determination is made, the SGC indicates what type of school activities will take place (in-person, hybrid or remote).

When you first read the SGC, it seems straightforward and simple to implement. But as they tried to apply it, the creators and users found several shortfalls that an effective data leader would have been able to predict and possibly prevent.

For example, the criteria are each assigned a color – but there is no guidance on how to combine those colors and come up with a single color to guide school operations. Boards and administrators saw times last fall where all 4 colors were represented on the rubric, and no one knew how to decide what color to assign.

Or what if the Trend in Rates is “Stable” for your county? In the SGC, the rubric states “Stable” is both orange and yellow. There is no guidance to explain how to choose here either.

With the Hospital Capacity metric, the data isn't easily available, and the metric is confusing because it does not specify what kind of capacity should be considered – inpatient beds or ICU beds? And what if neither of those is the problem, but hospital staffing is?

I've documented additional issues with the SGC on our [website](#)<sup>ii</sup>, but the most glaring flaw is that the SGC only provides a picture of what is happening in the community at large – mainly to adults. As it turns out, the CDC found “[there is little evidence that schools have contributed meaningfully to increased community transmission.](#)”<sup>iii</sup> And, children are not at a high risk for hospitalization or death by COVID. In fact, in Kansas, not a single child has died from COVID and nationwide, [children aged 5-17 are 16 times less likely to die from COVID than the comparison](#)

[group of 18-29 year olds](#).<sup>iv</sup> (This is really astounding when we consider that those 85+ have a rate of death that is 630x higher than the same comparison group.)

What the adopted SGC fail to show is how children are doing when they are not physically present in school. And the data now coming out paints a dismal picture. Researchers investigated the impact of closing elementary schools in the Spring of 2020 found “[an estimated 13.8 million years of life lost](#) (YLL)”<sup>v</sup> could be attributed to the closures, meaning that American children’s lives will be shortened by 13.8 million years collectively due to the loss of education last spring. They also found that had schools been left open, taking into account the virus spread and death rates at that time, the YLL would have been less than the 13.8 million years lost. These YLL estimates do not include the impact [due to high school dropout rate increases](#)<sup>vi</sup> or the impact of closed schools for older children. So this number is likely an understatement of the price our children will pay for the Spring school closure.

But the cost to students’ lifespan doesn’t end there. An [estimated 57% of adolescents seeking mental health care receive it in a school-based setting, and 35% receive their mental health services exclusively in school](#)<sup>vii</sup>. Schools are so important in helping children get mental health care that new research is showing [adolescents age 12-17 saw a 31% increase in mental health-related Emergency Department visits and children age 5-11 saw a 24% increase](#)<sup>viii</sup> last fall. It stands to reason that closing schools impacted the ability of those students to receive care, exacerbated their mental health, and increases YLL.

Children’s physical health is also declining. [As children sit longer in front of computer screens, researchers are reporting that the positive gain we’d made in addressing childhood obesity and healthy living are being lost](#)<sup>ix</sup>. This, too, will have [long term impacts](#)<sup>x</sup> on the lifespan of our children.

And the impact to children is not equitable. [Students who live in poverty are the least likely to have access to in-person school, technology, adequate internet, food, or adult supervision](#)<sup>xi</sup>.

When Boards of Education meet to determine how much time students will spend in school, I would suggest they adopt indicators in their SGC that include the impact of remote and hybrid education on children, including

- Reports on academic progress, for example the number of D’s and F’s for older students and progress indicators in math and reading for younger students.
- The number of students dropping out in secondary schools.
- The number of juniors and seniors in jeopardy of not graduating.
- Student logins per class trended over time since the beginning of the school year and broken out by buildings and grades.
- Enrollment trends over the school year.
- Community indicators for children as they compare to the previous year:
  - Requests for mental health assistance

- Suicide attempts
- Crimes
- Emergency Room visits
- Overdose and drug related statistics

As school leaders look at this bigger picture, it will be easier to understand why the American Academy of Pediatrics advocates “[all policy considerations for school COVID-19 plans should start with a goal of having students physically present in school.](#)”<sup>xii</sup> Leaders and communities should absolutely do what is possible to mitigate risk for the adults and address the burnout our teachers are facing. At the same time, we need to realize that keeping kids in remote or hybrid learning is not just an inconvenience to parents as some union leaders have alluded. These policies have catastrophic impacts on the health and lifespan of the next generation.

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<sup>i</sup>Kansas Department of Education, Navigating Change, School Gating Criteria (access date, January 27, 2021)<https://www.ksde.org/Portals/0/Communications/Navigating%20Change/Gating%20Criteria%20Graphic.pdf?ver=2020-12-14-103106-517>

<sup>ii</sup> Cornerstone Data, Inc. COVID-19 Kansas Gating Comparison (access date, January 27, 2021) <https://cornerstonedata.com/kansas-gating-criteria-comparison/>

<sup>iii</sup> Honein MA, Barrios LC, Brooks JT. Data and Policy to Guide Opening Schools Safely to Limit the Spread of SARS-CoV-2 Infection. *JAMA*. Published online January 26, 2021. <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2775875>

<sup>iv</sup> Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, COVID-19 Hospitalization and Death by Age, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/investigations-discovery/hospitalization-death-by-age.html>. Published online August 18, 2020.

<sup>v</sup> Christakis DA, Van Cleve W, Zimmerman FJ. Estimation of US Children’s Educational Attainment and Years of Life Lost Associated With Primary School Closures During the Coronavirus Disease 2019 Pandemic. *JAMA Netw Open*. 2020;3(11):e2028786. Published online November 12, 2020. [Estimation of US Children’s Educational Attainment and Years of Life Lost Associated With Primary School Closures During the Coronavirus Disease 2019 Pandemic | Child Development | JAMA Network Open | JAMA Network](#)

<sup>vi</sup> Dorn E, Hancock B, Sarakatsannis J, Viruleg E. COVID-19 and student learning in the United States: the hurt could last a lifetime. McKinsey & Co. Published June 1, 2020. Accessed January 15, 2021. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-student-learning-in-the-united-states-the-hurt-could-last-a-lifetime>

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<sup>vii</sup> Golberstein E, Wen H, Miller BF. Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) and Mental Health for Children and Adolescents. *JAMA Pediatr.* 2020;174(9):819–820. Published April 14, 2020. Accessed January 15, 2021. <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/fullarticle/2764730>

<sup>viii</sup> Leeb RT, Bitsko RH, Radhakrishnan L, Martinez P, Njai R, Holland KM. Mental Health–Related Emergency Department Visits Among Children Aged <18 Years During the COVID-19 Pandemic — United States, January 1–October 17, 2020. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 2020;69:1675–1680. Accessed January 22, 2021. DOI: [http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6945a3external icon](http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6945a3external%20icon)

<sup>ix</sup> Ruopeng An, Projecting the impact of the coronavirus disease-2019 pandemic on childhood obesity in the United States: A microsimulation model, *Journal of Sport and Health Science*, Volume 9, Issue 4, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jshs.2020.05.006> .

<sup>x</sup> Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, Childhood Obesity Facts Published June 24, 2019. Accessed January 21, 2021. . <https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/childhood.html>.

<sup>xi</sup> Diliberti, Melissa and Julia H. Kaufman, Will This School Year Be Another Casualty of the Pandemic? Key Findings from the American Educator Panels Fall 2020 COVID-19 Surveys. Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Public License, 2020. Accessed 1/21/2021. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA168-4.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA168-4.html)

<sup>xii</sup> American Academy of Pediatrics, COVID-19 Guidance for Safe Schools. Updated 1/5/2021 <https://services.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/clinical-guidance/covid-19-planning-considerations-return-to-in-person-education-in-schools/>