

15100 East Timber Lake Circle

Wichita, KS 67230

14 February, 2022

Dear Madam Chair and Members of the Committee:

As a sixth generation Kansan with forty-two years of experience in education, the majority of which I spent in the public high school classroom, I am writing to express my grave concerns about HB 2662, SB 363, and SB 393, all of which run counter to Kansan values of reason, respect, and practicality. Because of my historical perspective, I am well-qualified to address various considerations and potential impacts of these bills that individuals with less classroom experience might not grasp. My ancestors first arrived in Johnson County just prior to the civil war, but were forced to flee their farm and migrated by wagon to Butler County, where rural schools were not even in existence. Forced to become Butler County's first official "homeschoolers," they nonetheless celebrated the virtues of a literate life, and raised subsequent generations to embrace formal education. In fact, their vision inspired my grandmother to help found Arkansas City Junior College in the 1920's, where my grandfather taught Chemistry and coached basketball for decades, from the 20's through the mid 60's, and was the "winningest coach in the Midwest conference." Their love of education took root in future generations with all my family members.

Inspired by their example, I pursued a teaching career after having graduated from Oklahoma State University with a Bachelor's Degree in English and a Master's Degree in Curriculum and Instructional Development, and then continued to earn a total of sixty hours of graduate work throughout my career, during which I worked in both rural and urban schools in Oklahoma, Wyoming, and Arizona, before moving to Wichita in 1997. Early on in my career, I became interested in Gifted Education, and received training to teach Honors, Advanced Placement English, and International Baccalaureate English, and served as the College Advisor for the flagship IB Program at Wichita High School East, where I spent the last eighteen years of my career, before retiring and becoming an Independent Educational Consultant. Although I received much appreciated public recognition for my work, as a three time Presidential Scholar Distinguished Teacher for example, the absolute highlight and joy of my career was my glorious time spent with exceedingly remarkable, capable, brilliant, students, now accomplished adults who have joined the ranks of physicians, dentists, college professors, scientists, engineers, diplomats, foreign policy experts, linguists, artists, chefs, theologians, engineers, military pilots, business people, teachers, and a host of other occupations too numerous to mention. Happily, I am still in frequent contact with many of them, all of whom credit the outstanding educations they received from the Wichita Public Schools for their success. While some have understandably chosen to leave Kansas and take their careers elsewhere, others are gradually returning to share their gifts with their home state, as they grow their careers and their families. However, I can also assure you that this return of educational investment is in great jeopardy, if our public schools are not fully supported and the quality of education and teacher autonomy disappears.

These bills in question, which undermine the integrity and autonomy of the teacher and run counter to the very nature of the educational experience, are disastrous for public education for a number of reasons. First, these bills add an impossible load to already overburdened and overworked teachers, who are already straining under the mountains of paperwork, assessments, professional learning

requirements, standards, data analysis, and other constraints to their time (my reason for leaving the profession). The tasks of cataloging each and every textbook, novel, article, website, short story, poem, film clip, and youtube, for each class they teach, for rural teachers and teachers of highly academic subjects especially, are unthinkable in terms of the amount of time. Teachers in rural schools are often charged with teaching every grade level in their subject areas. I cannot imagine the task, as a former Language Arts teacher, of having to catalogue each source. With highly academic subjects such as my IB Junior English classes, I often consulted a myriad of critical sources in planning my lessons. My classroom bookshelves overflowed with resources that I consulted on a regular basis. For example, just in teaching the works of the acclaimed Irish poet Seamus Heaney, I regularly used a number of poetry anthologies, youtube videos of his readings, and countless critical essays from scholarly publications. It is also very important to note that academic scholarship is an ever-changing field, and writing and discoveries about many topics of student are always ongoing; thus, there is always new information of a scholarly nature with presents itself.

Not only are these bills impossible because of the sheer work load of cataloging these mandates, but these bills violate the very spirit of learning and the creativity and flexibility that good teaching demands. Teacher must constantly monitor and adjust to meet the needs of their students and the times. Research and discoveries occur in our world constantly, teachable moments present themselves, and teachers are always on call to respond. How, for example, can a science teacher possibly catalog every document to be used a year in advance, in a world in which earthquakes, volcanoes, or heaven forbid, viruses, present themselves? How can teachers possibly know what author is visiting the local book store, or what song might be produced, or what speech might be given, what unanticipated world event might occur, issues that must be addressed in the classroom or that provide a fresh perspective and a relevant understanding for students? The premise of having to catalog all resources a year in advance is absolutely preposterous! Rest assured that in standing in front of classes of high school juniors on 9/11, I did not consult my lesson plan scope and sequence, but rather, I adapted the day's lesson plans in response to my students' needs. Educating young people demands flexibility and creativity, and these bills violate that important principle. Additionally, teachers of AP and IB attend summer trainings to learn about changes and innovations of a national and international nature to their programs for the coming fall. These curricular changes are simply not available a year in advance, thus making the bills' demands of a year's lag time even more preposterous.

One must also look at the fact that such bills would come at a great financial cost, given that more people would be needed to manage the horrendous bureaucracy of such information. You need look no further at the cost of instituting draconian demands than the testing debacle of the bipartisan, well -intentioned but fatally flawed No Child Left Behind, which ushered in the era of testing our children to death and crushing their love of learning. How many data managers and testing coordinators were hired, and to what avail? Countless resources have been wasted in this one-size-fits-all assessment craze, and these bills are no different with respect to wasted resources and time which comes at a human and financial cost.

Also the context of such lists is also counter to the spirit of education. If teachers are forced to make exhaustive lists, these lists come without context of the materials chosen. I can only imagine that more than occasionally, a parent will conceivably look at the list of materials and question the materials because they do not understand the material in context. What is to prevent parents from complaining, just because they or their students do not "like" a particular lesson? Their complaint is entirely

subjective, given that they parent probably does not possess the years of study, advanced degrees, and education that the teacher possesses. Again, using an example from the poetry of Seamus Heaney, I can imagine that a student may initially find a particular poem such as “The Tollund Man” confusing and perhaps disturbing because Heaney describes an ancient man who, a victim of ritual sacrifice, was unearthed in a Danish peat bog. In his famous poem, Heaney makes an analogy between historical violence of centuries ago and the Troubles in Ireland, and sectarian violence today. While my capable and scholarly students always found the poem intriguing and relevant, I can also imagine a student or parent who dismisses poetry as an invaluable tool for analyzing the power of literature to give us a glimpse of history and to understand our present. Mere lists of materials lack context. Besides, what parents have time to wade through lists of scholarly articles and essays, looking for what they consider subjective moral transgressions?

These reasons constitute only the “tip of the iceberg” with respect to why these bills are damaging to the spirit of learning and to the well-being of teachers and students, but perhaps the most concerning of all is the detrimental effect upon teacher morale and the ability to attract and maintain a teaching staff. Covid has already strained the profession almost to the breaking point, and these bills will serve as the tipping point to send our best and brightest teachers off to other professions in other states. Certainly, when I was considering a move to Kansas, if this debate regarding the possibility of passing these bills had been raging, I would certainly have chosen to stay in Arizona to complete my career. Passage of these bills will not only discourage teachers from moving here, but will certainly discourage young parents who seek quality educational experiences for their children from moving here. The discussion about brain drain occurs often in the statehouse, from what I understand. These bills will hasten the brain drain, I can assure you.

Last, it bears pointing out that parents do not need these bills to obtain information about their children’s educations. They already have that ability, by simply showing up to school open houses and securing each teacher’s course syllabus, and in coming to parent/teacher conferences and speaking with the teachers! If as many parents would attend parent/ teacher conferences as attend the Friday night basketball games, everyone would be better informed! Our state has come a long way since our pioneering days when educational opportunities were nonexistent. I sincerely hope that we can apply that spirit to truly fixing the complex problems that our state faces, on behalf of our deserving students and their hard working and dedicated teachers, and use our energy, creativity, and dollars on something other than bills that will cause undue harm to all.

Most Respectfully,

Jennifer Stark Fry