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Testimony IN SUPPORT of HB 2325

Before the House Committee on Commerce, Labor, and Economic Development

Submitted by: Lisa Ochs

President, American Federation of Teachers--Kansas

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Chairman Hutton and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for allowing me to address you today. My name is Lisa Ochs. I am a the President of the American Federation of Teachers—Kansas. AFT Kansas is a statewide federation of public employee labor unions. Our local unions include teachers, nurses, state employees, city employees, and university employees. On behalf of our membership, I ask you to support HB 2325.

In my role as a State Federation President, I have been to the bargaining table with several different groups/types of public employees. We spend a great deal of time preparing to bargain. Our goal is always to bring forward realistic, data-based proposals that address employee concerns. So, we spend time surveying our members to understand the biggest workplace issues. We then conduct research to determine if these issues have been experienced elsewhere, and if so, what solutions have been used. Finally, we use the research to craft our proposals.

We take the meet and confer process seriously. Under Kansas law, during meet and confer, both sides are required to “exchange freely information, opinions, and proposals to endeavor to reach agreement on conditions of employment.” Unfortunately, some of the public employees we bargain with do not respect this process or the amount of work and effort our teams invest in the process.

I have been in meet and confer sessions where the employer’s representative belittled the union’s bargaining team, engaged in name-calling, and told the union bargaining team members that if they do not like the working conditions they

should “just quit and go somewhere else.” I have observed representatives of the public employer refer to grown, professional women as “little girls.” I have seen employer representatives try to avoid the obligation to discuss items at the table and try to reach an off-the-record agreement through an outside conversation with union representatives. Most egregious, representatives of the public employer have actively taken steps to exclude union members from the process, going so far as to hire armed guards to bar the door.

The public has right to know the issues public employees face, as well as to see how representatives of the public employer respond to these concerns. After all, public employee working conditions impact citizens. A teacher’s working conditions are a child’s learning conditions, a nurse’s working conditions are a patient’s healing conditions, etc.

Opening up meet and confer sessions to the press and the public allows true transparency. It allows the public to know what the employees have identified as workplace issues and concerns, as well as to know how the public employer responds to those conditions. It also provides necessary oversight for representatives of the public employer, so those representatives know their actions will not be confidential, but will instead be subject to public scrutiny. Such oversight helps insure the discussion at the bargaining table will remain proposal and issue focused and encourages civil behavior from everyone involved.

Transparency and oversight are positive things, and we believe they belong at all levels of governmental function and operation. Accordingly, AFT Kansas and its member local unions encourage you to support HB 2325.