

Testimony of Mr. Steve Bowser, Elected Member, USD 336 Holton

Board of Education

Presented to: House Education Committee, Kansas House of

Representatives

March 5, 2015

Good afternoon. I am Steve Bowser, and I am serving my second term as an elected member of the USD 336 board of education in Holton, Kansas. I am employed as an executive vice president at a local community bank and have over 25 years experience in public and personal finance. I am here today to express my opposition to House Bill 2345 for the following reasons:

Local school boards write and follow their own codes of ethics about conflicts of interest among board members. School boards have been doing this for decades, and it works. When a member perceives a conflict, that member should state the conflict at the public table and abstain from voting on the matter. The board chair should be obligated to look for potential conflicts and encourage discussion among the board members in these public meetings. Boards can self regulate these matters without the need of outside state oversight.

More specifically, the definitions of what constitutes a conflict of interest in this bill are impractical. Of foremost concern to me is the conflict of *business* interest. Not only is the definition of holding a “substantial interest in a business” too broad – defined on page 2, line 10, as anyone who receives \$2000 or more in annual taxable income from the business, which in my case would be a part-time high school bank teller – but it is too restrictive. I work for a community bank that is the official depository for

the local USD. As a school board member, I do not cast a vote when choosing the district's official depository at the beginning of each fiscal year. But to make me completely ineligible to serve on the school board because my employer provides banking services to the district is too harsh of a state policy. This is especially true in smaller Kansas communities, where there is a good chance that on a 7-person board of education, two or three members will likely own and operate a business or be employed with a leading local employer that provides services to the district, such as a bank, municipality, fuel wholesaler or local internet service provider. The leaders in local business many times want to serve on the local school board because they are just that – community leaders. In a day when it is very hard to find citizens willing to serve with no pay on a school board, we do not need state regulation limiting who is eligible to serve based on whether their business and/or employer provides services to the local district.

The limits of family relations are also too restrictive, and again this applies even more so in smaller communities. The local school district is usually one of the top 3 employers in a city or rural county, and the chances are good that several district employees are married to local leaders who would be good school board members. We should be encouraging people to seek public office, not discouraging them from serving due to something that they can't control: who they were born to and who their siblings are.

I ask you to not pass this bill and let the local school boards handle conflicts of interest themselves. Let the school boards self proclaim and self regulate their conflicts without complying to state law. Let local tax-paying citizens have an opportunity to step forward and serve without being hindered by limitations beyond their control. And most of all, just as we in the Kansas communities trust you as elected leaders to perform the will of

the people at the state level, please trust us at the local school board level to identify and respond to conflicts of interest in our own ways without the forced hand of overreaching state regulation. Thank you.