

# **Kansas Families for Education**

*Demanding Excellent Education for All Children*

**Testimony – House Bill 2504**

**House Education Committee**

**February 3, 2016**

Thank you, to Chairman Highland and to this committee for giving me the opportunity to speak. My name is Brian Koon, and I am the legislative liaison for Kansas Families for Education, a statewide, nonprofit, nonpartisan, pro-public education organization representing students in Kansas Public Schools and their parents.

I stand in opposition of House Bill 2504, a bill designed to force rural school districts to make the choice between becoming a so called "innovative" school district; or else being forcibly consolidated without the consent of the people whom the consolidation will directly effect.

The thing that strikes me first and foremost about this bill is how unfair it is. Close behind is how unnecessary it is. The author of this bill is from the eighth most populous county in the state, and sees fit to tell the vast majority of counties how they ought to live. I couldn't help but notice that the Lansing School District - the home school district of Rep. Bradford - conveniently has a little over 10,000 students, and so would be safe from consolidation. In other words, neither the author of the bill, nor his constituents, would be directly affected by the bill he authored.

Where is the support for this bill, from anyone outside the legislature itself? Even the governor spoke against school consolidation in a campaign speech in 2014, and accused his opponent of being pro-consolidation. Ongoing forced consolidation seems like a lot of trouble to go through to save the state an estimated \$17.3 million per year. On Monday I was told in this committee that Kansas spends \$4.6 billion on public education per year; \$17.3 million out of \$4.6 billion is 0.37%. That cost savings has too high a price tag in terms of the impact on Kansas children and families in most areas west or south of this building.

Further, if a majority of school districts and their patrons were clamoring for legislative guidance on how to best voluntarily consolidate, then a bill establishing a standard best practice might be in order. This is not the case. There is no Kansas law against district consolidation that I was able to find, so in this time of frantic searching for cost savings to save favorite school programs, we can be reasonably assured that if districts haven't consolidated before, it's because they fear negative impacts on their local communities that would far outweigh the potential in fiscal savings. The reason we have local government is to represent the will of the people in that locality - not the one twenty miles down the road. By consolidating districts and doing away with local school boards, this bill puts greater distance between elected officials and the electorate, taking local control away from the people. By joining smaller districts into more

populous ones, it seems likely that the needs of the smaller voting population will be ignored, with large school districts closing their newly acquired schools in small towns in order to keep their own schools open.

These local communities are districts full of young people and families, not just numbers on a chart. They have lives and hopes and dreams. These towns and people are vibrant with life. In small towns, much of life is centered around the public schools. Jeopardizing those, or even the implication that a beloved public school might be closed down, is deeply unsettling to entire communities. I think people in small towns are right to worry about this bill.

This weekend I spent some time visiting the websites of school districts and towns all across Kansas, looking at pictures of proud young students, and calendars of scheduled events. I read about spelling bees, geography bees, plays to be performed, FAFSA explanation seminars, and free health screenings for toddlers in low income households, and so much more - all for young people in rural towns. The most important fact is that each of those events was sponsored or hosted by the public school - a school striving to meet the needs of the community it serves. These aren't vacant or underutilized buildings we're dealing with, they're true community centers, and so long as the schools stay, rural Kansas is also alive, for now.

As written, the bill creates a cap for the newly consolidated school administrative personnel, at 120% of the larger of the two school districts. This measure sees fit to demand that 80% of the administration and personnel from the smaller district have their positions terminated as a matter of course. Perhaps the state will provide school districts with guidelines on which employees in good standing should be fired and which shouldn't be, or perhaps each school's administration will receive a list of names of people to fire directly from Rep. Bradford's office, in order to fulfill this bill's unstated aim of micromanagement ad nauseam.

Kansas has spent a great deal of our tax dollars training these administrators to a high level of expertise, many of whom attended Kansas public universities. But now we're simply going to export them and their jobs to another state where their value is recognized? States around us know the value of good school administration, and they'll be laughing up their sleeves at us while we drive away good administrators - the people who are primarily responsible for making certain that curriculums meet increasing academic standards, and organizing and efficiently using scarce resources. We already have more people moving out of Kansas than moving in, and that is particularly true of rural areas. This bill is in direct opposition to the Rural Opportunity Zones established to attract Kansans to live in rural communities: on one hand, the state is asking people and their families to move into rural areas; on the other hand, the state is telling them to get out. This bill has the potential to disenfranchise small towns and kill them. I think we've got enough shrinking towns in Kansas and we don't need to make the problem any worse.

To conclude, I urge each of you on behalf of parents of public school students all across this state, to vote against HB 2504, and let our rural communities live.

With that, I'd like to thank the chair and the committee for their time and consideration.