

Testimony of Carolyn Dunn
Stafford County Economic Development
Before the House Education Committee
In Opposition to HB 2504
February 3, 2016

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee,

Thank you for the privilege to address you today. I am here in opposition to HB 2504 because it does not improve efficiency of schools and it will contribute to local economic decline.

I am Executive Director of Stafford County Economic Development and a former school board member. In fact, it was because of my experience on school board that I have pursued economic development work so feverishly in my county. It was then that I came to understand sources of school funding, and that the real issue of funding in education is not the details of the formula, or the costs of administration, but in student enrollment. Everything, even the local tax contribution, is sent to Topeka and returned to our county defined by the number of students we have. So, just as the fundamental issue in State finance is economic growth, to me, the real issue in education funding is economic growth.

I think the State agrees with the importance of economic growth in Kansas, too. The tax policy this legislature adopted was done so as to stimulate growth. I count no less than 100 different programs administered by the State of Kansas through the Departments of Commerce, Agriculture, Transportation, and even Health and Environment designed to stimulate business and investment in Kansas.

This bill would contradict that policy and undermine the business development work I do. It is all the more difficult to develop businesses in a town with fewer core services – such as local schools- and less population than it did the year before. I realize the bill provides for “realignment” not “consolidation,” but given that it also has provisions guiding liquidation of real estate, it’s hard for me to believe that this isn’t the first step in full-on closing of schools and required consolidation of districts.

I agree with a conservative approach to governing. But this isn’t actually reducing government. It doesn’t reduce the work that any administrator does. It doesn’t reduce the number of surveys that must be completed, or teacher evaluations, or any other administrative task required by law - it simply requires that a different person be responsible for doing it.

I have several concerns about the practicality of how this bill would be enacted; however, I am going to focus on the two primary failings.

- 1) It makes an assumption that greater efficiency can be achieved by joining together smaller school districts’ administration. This bill looks at the simplistic and arbitrary measure of the number of students in a school – 1,500 students - as to whether the school is operating

efficiently or not. What it fails to recognize is that many administrative duties have already been consolidated in smaller districts – **within the district**. For example, our Board Treasurer is also the Elementary Secretary and the Director of Transportation. In Macksville, the Superintendent is also the Elementary Principal. In St. John-Hudson as well as in Stafford the Superintendent is also the CTE Coordinator, Finance Director, Human Resources Director, the Emergency Preparedness Director, the Lead Negotiator, Federal Programs Coordinator...and so on. I compare this to Wichita, a large district unaffected by HB 2504 presumably because it is more efficient having only one superintendent for over 51,000 students. According to its website it has not just individuals, but entire DEPARTMENTS devoted to these functions I just named. In fact, there are 47 departments listed.

The result of this bill is that administrators will spend their time over the next two years trying to navigate compliance of new rules rather than doing their real job of building a learning environment for students and teachers. So, not only has it failed to improve efficiency, but it actually creates new regulatory requirements. **Can you see that this represents the very kind of regulatory burden that we so often rail against in conservative politics?**

- 2) It begins the dismantling of local school districts, and to do so is bad economic policy. It is next to impossible to develop business in an area where the school is in another town and kids ride a bus for two or more hours a day. Aside from all of the reasons I believe this is not in the educational best interests of children – and there are many – it directly undermines my work to build more business in our county. When schools close, it doesn't just contribute to decline directly, it accelerates it. And the State of Kansas needs to avoid that economic decline just as much as we do locally.

Again, I do not disagree with the philosophy of reducing the scope of government. But if that's the goal, let's start with fundamentally reducing the requirements that the state and federal government impose on local school districts that are not contributing to classroom learning. I think we could have a robust conversation on that topic. In the meantime, I urge you to not take any further action on HB 2504.