

**Testimony before the
House Education Committee
HB 2504**

**by
Lori Johnson, USD 248 School Board Member
February 3, 2016**

Chairman Mr. Highland and fellow committee members,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on HB 2504 on behalf of USD 248. Today I'm representing our School Board as a current board member, our school district as a parent, and our community as a local business owner. Redesigning district boundaries would be devastating to our local community, and the surrounding communities that help make up USD 248.

Our school district is made up of Girard and six smaller communities that rely on the community of Girard and USD 248 as the central location for our schools:

- 1) While this bill is being referred to as a re-alignment, it will be perceived by our patrons and outlying communities as an excuse for consolidation. In order to be efficient and meet the unique and individual needs of students in our district, the seven communities that comprise our district went through a self-consolidation several years ago. I want to stress that this was done voluntarily, and was not state-mandated. Our district has maintained a standard of excellence and a culture of community service through high expectations for our students. Additionally, our community culture varies greatly from most of the other school districts in our county. When looking at the data, our students in K-12 have performed higher than other school districts in our area on nearly every assessment tool administered. This has been done through local control of our schools, which has allowed us to make wise educational decisions regarding curriculum, student expectations, and student achievement. We have achieved the operational efficiencies needed, as well as preserved our community culture. This was done with community consent and involvement for the best interests of our students. Not a state mandate. We believe wholeheartedly that local control of school districts is an absolute necessity to ensure the future of our community and the appropriate education for our students as it relates to our local standards/needs/expectations. Consolidating our schools will take away our ability to address the unique and specialized educational needs of our students, negatively affect our area businesses, and rob our students of the quality education unique to our community.

- 2) USD 248 encompasses an area of 263 square miles. Obviously, we transport a large number of students across a large area. Consolidating this service with the other districts in our county would not be efficient. It would present many challenges that would not be conducive to overall student learning. With buses located in the Pittsburg District (assumed, since they have the largest student enrollment), transportation efficiency would be reduced. Buses would be traveling a much longer distance to pick up students. Weather factors would also lead to loss of school time, if the consolidated district worked in unison when cancelling school due to inclement weather. The north end of the district might have a weather factor that would lead to school cancellation when the south end of the district would not. However, I assume we would cancel classes in all district facilities, thus losing school contact time unnecessarily.

Our superintendent is a necessary community leader.

- 1) Our superintendent is more than just a school administrator, he is an essential community leader who connects the community with the school. He is an active partner on local boards and foundations, and is active with our city government and civic organizations. Additionally, he works hard to maintain positive relationships with the six outlying communities in our district, who are important stakeholders. The Girard superintendent is not responsible for Girard only, but for all the communities that make up USD 248. He is the common thread that unites the individual communities in our current school district.
- 2) A local superintendent is a representative and advocate for all of the communities in their district. A single superintendent overseeing our entire county cannot build relevant connections in each individual community. When those relationships are lost, the voice of smaller, more rural communities is silenced and they will suffer.
- 3) Our patrons deserve access to the school superintendent. A district our size has the added value of an accessible leader. Patrons should have the ability to contact their superintendent with relative ease. This is an important factor in school/community relations. Additionally, with a local superintendent, patrons have the opportunity to know their administrator through civic organizations, community events, faith-based affiliations, as well as school activities. This builds trust in the administrator and contributes to the belief that he or she, as a fellow community member, has the best interests of our community at heart.

Eliminating school building principals is a valid concern locally:

- 1) Building principals are vital to our district's success. They lead our teachers, staff, students and patrons with the vision of "What's best for Kids." With lack of leadership in each building, that focus will quickly fade and there would no longer be a single leader to turn to should a teacher, student or patron need assistance. Due to the changing demographics within our student population (increased number of students living in poverty, increased number of students identified with behavioral and learning disabilities, increased number of students living in broken homes, etc.), administrator support in our school buildings is absolutely crucial to ensure an appropriate learning environment for all. This is especially noteworthy in Crawford County schools due to the fact that our county is designated as the poorest county in our state. We have a larger number of students who bring unique challenges when they walk through our doors. Without administrative support in the buildings, the learning environment for ALL students will be negatively impacted. Based on the provision of this bill which states that administrative support in the realigned school district should not exceed 120% of the school administration and supervisory service employees of the school district with the largest enrollment in the prior year, this would unofficially leave us with 16 administrators in the county to serve 17 buildings as currently configured. Two buildings would have to share a principal. This would also leave one building of 900 students to be served by one principal. Once again, with the diversity of needs and issues we see in school children today, this is simply not feasible. It would have a disastrous effect on the learning environment for all Crawford County children.
- 2) School security would be an issue. The principal must wear many "hats" to ensure the learning of environment of all students is protected.
- 3) Data shows that a major success factor in student achievement is the relationship between the students and staff. The principal (and assistant principals) create the environment in which this takes place.

Who would select a county board in the newly realigned school district? There are vast differences between each community and school district and how they operate and what they want for their schools.

- 1) In May of 2014, our community passed a school bond issue by a margin of more than 80%. We had an outstanding team that lead this charge and energized the community

for support. By expanding the district boundaries, I see this type of initiative as impossible. If a “county district” wanted to initiate a bond election, how would they pick and choose which buildings would be eligible for improvements? How would you engage the communities without creating a political nightmare? Can you spend more for a school in one community than you do in another? This will create competition, inequity and hard feelings between communities. If the new school board is equally representative of all county stakeholders, spending will be equal for all schools. This is will not lead to efficiency.

- 2) As a board, we believe all consolidation decisions should be made locally and should be based on what’s best for the students in our community. We believe that we alone can decide how best to provide for and prepare our staff and facilities to meet the needs of our students. After all, who best understands the needs of our students? Our local school leaders, staff, community patrons and parents.
- 3) HB 2504 appears to be based on a “one size fits all” decision, however we know that no two school districts or communities are the same. This type of plan ignores our school strategic plan, which was put in place to address our local needs and challenges to optimize student success. Student achievement is based upon the community recognizing students’ needs and being able to implement specific programs which help students to succeed. An example of that is the FFA program offered to USD 248 high school students. One-third of our entire student body participates in our FFA program. This program is a major cornerstone of our school and community. We are a rural community with a strong agricultural base, and our community and school identify with this program. Of the five school districts in our county, only one other district offers this program. Because of the community expectations and make-up, this program is not a need in the other school districts in the county. But, it is a very important and successful aspect of what makes Girard special.

In closing:

Our schools, as in most communities, are the financial hub of the town of Girard. In many communities, they are the largest employer. Forced consolidation would be economically devastating to local small businesses. This includes everyone from the local gas station to industrial trades. The projected amount of money saved by the state of Kansas over ten years seems significant at face value. However, compared to the overall budget, it is quite small. And compared to the negative financial impact it will have on Kansas communities, it is simply not worth the cost. I think there are far better ways and ideas being discussed that might realize greater savings without upsetting our local control of schools and disrupting our children's education. I would urge that this committee reject the bill before you.