

House Education Committee
on
House Bill 2504
submitted by
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a member of Schools for Quality Education (SQE)

Chairman Highland and members of the House Education Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear today and speak on behalf of Schools for Quality Education (SQE), an organization comprised of many small, rural school districts in Kansas and to express our concerns in opposition to **House Bill 2504**. The main tenets of our organization, approved by our members and Board of Directors over many years, are: (1) To provide quality educational opportunities for all children of Kansas, (2) To oppose further Kansas unified school district consolidation without the approval of the patrons involved, (3) To pursue the quality of excellence in education, (4) To give identity, voice, and exposure to the particular quality of rural schools, and (5) To enhance the quality of life unique in our rural communities. The people in this room today represent many of these same board members, administrators, and patrons of our member districts and others interested in the issue at hand.

We strongly oppose this bill that would force the consolidation of over half the school districts in our state without the consideration of the patrons of their school districts. Consolidation of school districts, when appropriate, should be the decision of the local patrons of those districts, and not based upon a hasty and ill-conceived plan or decision from Topeka.

I know you have already received considerable written testimony from people concerned about this issue. Their testimony will no doubt expand on several of the following key points that I wish to visit with you about in the limited time available:

- The greater issue here is, quite simply, that of “local control.” Local control of public school districts is a time-honored Kansas practice embedded in our state constitution. It should go without saying that the control of local schools by the communities whose students are enrolled in those schools is a long term Kansas virtue. We certainly consider it appropriate to have minimum state standards for our students, administrators, and teachers, but the “bottom line” remains, that the decisions related to where schools are located, who should teach our students, and how our students are taught to meet state and local standards should be made at the most basic of possible levels—at the local level, by the school district’s locally elected board of education.
- Many of us in this room remember the “bloodbath” that occurred when the original state-mandated consolidation was forced upon Kansas school districts in the 1960’s. A lot of fine, yet very small schools were lost in our state in the name of “efficiency.” We

feel that simple financial efficiency is not always the best rationale—the interest of students should always come first no matter what the size of the school.

- We sometimes wonder if the legislature fully grasps the great number of moves that schools have already implemented in order to become more efficient? Our districts have lost art programs, music programs, vocational-agriculture and manual arts programs, and several have even had to cut some of their sports and activities programs. We have reduced administrators, counselors, maintenance personnel, custodians, and secretaries. Sometimes these positions are lost simply because of declining enrollment, but the bulk of them have happened since, and because of, the relatively recent recession when schools received cuts to their base state aid per pupil several years ago.
- This Bill does not address closing school buildings, it simply addresses consolidating districts. We all know, though, what comes next. Many districts are already sharing administrators, class offerings, be they live or through interactive television, and some have been doing this for over 25 years. Further, it can be documented that the “big money” is not saved consolidating districts, it is only saved by closing buildings; that is a genuine fear that nearly all of us have after reviewing this bill.
- With the latter in mind, it is clear to us that in-fighting would begin almost immediately in counties over such things as, the location of the district office. Which teachers will be retained in the new district and how will they be selected? How will the new board of education be structured or elected? Will the larger district in the county rule the process? Where there are three or more districts in the county will the smaller ones work together to control the process in order to squelch the power of the larger district? These will be serious issues with long-lasting results that offer the potential to further divide communities, many of which still carry animosity from the consolidations 40-plus years ago!
- Transportation of students is a major factor in all of our districts. In many districts, students already ride busses an hour or more at the beginning of and at the end of each day. As buildings close, these routes will almost certainly get longer and no matter how new the bus, it is still a long ride on a country road that does not generally allow for the time to be used for any academic purposes.
- Finally, and perhaps the worst probable result of all of this is that old adage: “If we lose our school, we lose our town.” There is truth in that statement, although nowhere in our organization’s belief statements do we claim that a school is here for the purpose of keeping the town alive. Frankly, it is the town’s job to provide the atmosphere and population conducive to keeping the school alive. But, one only needs to drive brief distances east and west or north and south—virtually anywhere in our state—to see the empty buildings still standing in empty or nearly empty towns and feel the heartbreak caused by the forced consolidations of the 1960’s.

There are many other reasons why **House Bill 2504** should not be adopted, but these are among the main ones. With this in mind, I will be happy to stand for questions. Again, I thank you for this opportunity to visit with you today.