



Newton USD 373

McKinley Administrative Center

308 East 1st Street
Newton, KS 67114-3846

316.284.6200 ▪ FAX 316.284.6207

www.usd373.org

House Committee on Education HB 2504 – Kansas School District Realignment Act

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Submitted by

*Dr. Russell K. Miller
Assistant Superintendent for Human & Fiscal Services,
Newton Public Schools, USD 373*

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to provide written testimony regarding House Bill 2504 and its purpose to realign school districts across the state.

The expressed intent of this bill has been addressed as a method to “decrease the number of local school districts” in the state and specifically designed to “cut administrative positions, sell off unnecessary equipment, and close and sell off administrative buildings.” (*The Wichita Eagle*, 1/20/2016). While the goals of the bill may indeed have an eventual realization of some savings to the state, the bill in its current form provokes far more questions than it answers. The purpose of this written testimony is to highlight a few immediate concerns that bear consideration.

It is difficult to grasp the total systemic, statewide impact of such legislation, so these comments are specifically in regard to initial concerns from a school district likely to find itself the “host” of the new realigned district. Unanswered questions that must be fully addressed include but are not limited to the following:

- What are the curriculum and instructional impacts? Districts have different curricula, instructional focus, textbook adoptions, etc. If the new realigned district is to be consistent in expectations for its classrooms, consistency in the instructional program would be necessary. Will the significant costs related to standardizing curriculum and providing professional development necessary to align five districts into one be included in the cost estimates?
- What are the expectations for implementing intervention programs to address struggling learners? Newton is in the fourth year of a concerted effort to align intervention processes in order to better meet the needs of our students. Will those efforts translate to four additional districts?

- How will special education needs and costs be addressed? Newton is the sponsoring district of the Harvey County Special Education Cooperative. While by title that would seem to be county-wide, it only includes Newton, Halstead-Bentley, and Hesston...both Burrton and Sedgwick are served by the Sedgwick County Cooperative. Would the Harvey County Cooperative be expected to take on the additional students and fiscal responsibility, or would current Cooperative relationships remain intact? If the Harvey County Cooperative began serving the additional communities, would teachers/paras/support staff who are in place in another Cooperative be reassigned?

While the previous three points deserve much more attention and expanded consideration as they are directly related to our mission of educating our students, let me turn to a number of issues often referred to as “back office” operations and assumed to be easily capable of consolidation and efficiency. Following are a sampling of those background services inextricably tied to the operation of schools, although not often readily observed.

- Within the current Newton school district, nine schools, transportation/maintenance building, and administrative office are connected back to a central technology center by leased fiber optic cable. This cabling, and included infrastructure at all sites, creates a wide area network that is responsible for distributing internet service to all users, access to numerous shared directories, and other critical electronic resources that are necessary in today’s PK-12 education setting. A sorely needed upgrade completed three years ago (replacing an aging and unreliable microwave transmission tower) included running eight miles of fiber to our school at Walton and incurring the ongoing monthly lease. That single project required an upfront \$10,000 investment, as no fiber was currently in place and available to lease. In order to maintain a reliable and effective wide area network, a “home run” fiber optic cable would be required to each and every school in Harvey County from the technology center in Newton. Depending on the current infrastructure components at each school, compatibility will need addressed and potential equipment upgrades will be needed. Will the significant costs to complete a wide area network for the realigned district be included in the initial startup costs and savings estimates?
- An assumption being made is that the centralization of administrative offices in the realigned district would include maintenance and transportation duties. Would current maintenance staff in disorganized school districts remain in those regions, or will they be centralized? Will buses be housed in the realigned district and dispatched to the disorganized districts? Will supervisory leadership of these areas in the disorganized districts be reclassified or displaced? How will maintenance and upkeep of significantly more facilities and vehicles impact skilled staff in the realigned district?
- It is also assumed that food service programs would fall under one central department in the realignment in order to effectively oversee all the state and federal requirements related to food service programs. The main kitchen in Newton would not be able to accommodate food preparation for nearly double the student population, but having five programs operating independently would be nearly impossible to manage. How does the plan propose to address the oversight, preparation, delivery and serving of breakfast and lunch to nearly 6,000 students across Harvey County?
- Discussion has occurred throughout the efficiency discussions about coordinated purchasing efforts among districts to capitalize on the “economy of scale.” While our district works with a

food service cooperative to maximize savings, and works with other local school districts and governmental entities on an annual copy paper order, a major factor in maximizing the economy of scale is having adequate space for storage of bulk purchasing. USD 373 has limited space for this purpose currently, and taking on the ordering processes and delivery of items to multiple districts across Harvey County will further complicate that opportunity for savings. Additionally, we currently have one employee who maintains inventory, processes delivery of items and signs off on invoices to be paid, and completes daily deliveries of interoffice mail and supplies to district buildings. In order to serve the additional schools across the county, an additional staff member would likely be required.

- What about software applications critical to the functioning of each of the involved school districts? Local decisions based upon needs in the individual districts over the years have resulted in selection of specific finance/payroll/fixed assets systems, none of which are likely consistent among all five current districts in Harvey County. The new reorganized district will require all sites to utilize the same system, which will result in increased licensing costs and potential server upgrades, not to mention the necessary conversion of data in the disorganized districts to a new system. The same can be said for Student Information Systems, which again are likely different across the county and will result in increased costs in licensing, training, and converting of longitudinal data. Will these potentially significant costs be addressed in moving to the new configuration of school districts? Relatedly, will the significantly increased workload of payroll, accounting, and student data systems staff be addressed with flexibility for adding personnel to address the workload? Nearly doubling the number of students and staff assigned to the realigned district will indeed have significant work attached.
- Newton High School is a 5A school. Halstead, Hesston, and Sedgwick are 3A districts. Burrton is a 1A district. The oversight and coordination of KSHSAA athletic/activity programs is a significant responsibility when dealing with only one high school league and one middle school league, but how more complex will it become with this spread of athletic/activity events and related responsibility? What changes will be necessary with the realignment of school districts? What impact on student athletes and extracurricular activities?
- Salary schedules, benefits, leave types, negotiated agreements, classified handbooks, etc., vary a great deal but reflect the needs of the districts in which they were developed. With a move to a realigned county-wide district, what is the plan for mergers in these important areas? Does each disorganized district adopt the realigned district's current processes across the board? Has moving to a single salary schedule and benefits package been considered in the estimated fiscal notes? What about the necessary and time consuming work to consolidate payroll and benefits of five districts into a standard system?

Finally, I would present three additional points directly tied to any successful attempt at a reorganization of this magnitude:

- The proposed bill does not address the potential impact of a new board of education configuration. While it would not be practical for a single superintendent to work with five separate boards – or a board consisting of 35 members – it is assumed a new representative board would be necessary. What impact will such a transition have on each of the districts involved in the merger? How will the prized and valued practice of “local control” – and the loss

thereof for the disorganized districts – shape the political climate of the new board? What impact will this have on communities, on employees, and most importantly, on our students?

- The included bill language to “sell off” physical assets related to closed central offices is short-sighted at best, as many fixed assets would have purposeful life in other offices or programs within the disorganized districts or within the new realigned structure. Additionally, how would the state differentiate between items purchased with local revenue (i.e. gifts/grants, local option budget, capital outlay budget, or bonded projects approved by the community) and/or adequately justify the confiscation of such items and/or revenue associated with their sale to local taxpayers?
- The proposed bill currently stands moot on most any question we can come up with at this point, with the exception that newly reorganized districts are forbidden to design a structure that can potentially support this significant second order change – unless such change requires very little additional administrative and/or supervisory staff. How was such a limitation – one size fits none – determined? Would it not make more sense to design a process and program for successful implementation and then determine what level of oversight/responsibility is appropriate?

Questions...lots of questions...and these are just the few that immediately came to mind when the bill was first published. Such significant change – and the incredible impact it would have on five disparate and proud communities – will require tremendous vision, planning, and oversight to be implemented effectively. There will be costs – fiscal, emotional, physical – on each community touched by this proposal. As the legislative process moves forward and our elected representatives consider this bill, we would ask that it be judged not only on its merits but also its many flaws. We ask this body to not only consider the potential efficiencies and savings from such action, but the total costs – fiscal and human – as well.

With a sense of great urgency, we respectfully request the Committee consider the significant unknown costs (weighed against any perceived long term savings) as well as the many negative impacts of this proposed action, and not allow HB 2504 to advance.

Thank you for your consideration of this written testimony.