

House Committee on Education, February 3, 2016
In opposition to
HB 2504 Kansas School District Realignment Act

**By Gail M. Billman, School Board Member USD 506 Labette County;
Region 3 Vice President, Kansas Association of School Boards**

Mr. Chair, Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on HB 2504 and share my opposition. I am a speech-language pathologist and have worked in both the medical and special education arenas over my 23-year career. As a previous management-level healthcare provider, I answered to a Board that was made up of employees as well as community members. I had great faith and respect for that Board, as they left personal views alone and made sound decisions based on facts. These facts and decisions were made in the best interest of the whole organization.

Unfortunately, in Kansas, now poor budgetary planning and a proven unsuccessful tax plan is causing a wide array of “knee-jerk” ideas. These ideas are coming from legislators who have not set foot in a public school classroom in years, and do not have a clear picture of administrative needs, classroom sizes, individual student challenges and geographical needs.

I proudly serve USD 506 Labette County as a board member. Our district, as it currently is organized already has decreased administrative positions over the past 6 years. We serve the highest amount of students in Labette County, with 1,531 students in 2015. We have one superintendent that also performs as the director of transportation, covering 500 square miles. Each building principal has already assumed other roles, such as curriculum director, safety coordinator, food and nutrition services, assessment coordinator and athletic/activities director. We have two elementary schools with shared principal, buildings that are 10 miles apart. There have been several negative effects from this change. Teachers do not have consistent help with disciplinary needs, emotional needs, and challenging parents, not to mention the daily leadership needs of teachers. Our district has an increase in foster children of well over 30% in the past 2 years, and these students also bring many academic, social, behavioral and emotional needs. We do not have staff in place to assist such needs without building administration. Our teachers need and depend on building leadership and support as they educate students.

I have had discussions with fellow school district board members and patrons of Labette County. We, in the past, have had conversations about consolidation. This has never been a positive conversation, because each community in Labette County has its own value system and goal for their children. Families choose communities to live in based on the public school, and typically not where they work. Our community members choose to pay taxes to support their local school district. Our individual communities

make individual decisions. Educating our students should never be a “one-size fits all” model. Past decisions by school districts to consolidate have been done when communities have come together, for the best interests of their students, discussed and planned how to re-form the district, and let the local community members decide.

HB 2504 does nothing to give local authority for deciding what is best for our students. We heard from our local legislators, only three months ago, that consolidation would not be a positive choice coming from Topeka. They supported local decision-making, and assured us that this is not something that Topeka would like to see.

The state of Kansas ability to educate students ranks well, nation and worldwide, with the limited resources we have. There is a reason for this. Our local schools know how to educate our own students. We favor our class sizes, reach the students who have special needs, and are able to educate very well with the limited resources we have been provided. I have heard from NO ONE that favors HB 2504 in Labette County. Increasing the size of Labette County to a school district over 2,300 more students adds challenges that we need to discuss county-wide, not in Topeka!

Topeka does not represent Labette County with HB 2504, and I strongly urge you to cease this bill.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this written testimony.