

SB 47 Proponent Testimony in person
Removing Communication Barriers for Kansas School Boards
Senate Education Committee
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Madam Chair and Members of the Committee,

We appreciate this opportunity to testify in support of SB 47.

The Kansas School Board Resource Center is a non-profit organization that provides student-focused training, guidance, and other services to state and local school board members free of charge.

Many school board members tell us that some current school board policies create barriers to communication between parents, students, community members, and school board members, preventing collaborative processes to improve student outcomes. Recent data shows that one-third of students in Kansas public schools are below grade level, and one-third are not proficient in math and reading. SB 47 overrides these existing school board policies, preventing the open student-focused communication and collaboration that is needed to improve outcomes:

- Some districts refuse to publish direct email contact information for school board members on district websites, which prevents communication with parents, teachers, and community members who support school board members in their efforts to improve student outcomes.
- Preventing school board members from introducing agenda items into new business at school board meetings.
- Preventing school board members from engaging with parents, teachers, and community members during the public comment period of a school board meeting.
- Prohibiting school board members from visiting schools and other district property without permission or being chaperoned.

According to the 2023 survey from the Kansas Association of School Boards, of the 252 respondents, they cite as approximately 85% of the unique school districts in Kansas, 23% of those districts do not provide any contact information for school board members, and 30% do not provide direct contact to school board members. Hundreds of parents, teachers, and community members are unable to communicate their concerns or support for initiatives that improve student outcomes. Open communication with their elected representatives charged with improving student outcomes is critical to achieving this goal.

Many school boards have a policy that cedes control of the agenda to the board president or superintendent, preventing them from bringing concerns to the board about student outcomes and other needs. When school board members have asked for agenda items concerning student achievement scores to be added, they are often dismissed by the superintendent and board president during agenda-setting meetings. Several school board members have addressed declining student achievement scores in a public board meeting but were dismissed and publicly humiliated merely because it was a new agenda item. Board meetings often consist of reports that have nothing to do with academic achievement, and when board members try to do the right thing, they are dismissed because of policy restrictions.

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Another board policy prohibits open communication and dialogue between parents, teachers, students, and community members at board meetings, preventing a board member from engaging in meaningful dialogue to improve student achievement or address other concerns.

At a recent district community listening session designed to improve student outcomes, community members, teachers, and parents were overwhelmingly positive about the opportunity to engage in questions and answers about improving student outcomes. The opportunity to talk with the community about this problem was invaluable to the board. Board members, parents, community members, and teachers left the meetings feeling more hopeful about the educational future of their districts and built a collaborative approach to their student achievement problem.

Board policy also prohibits school board members from accessing schools and other district property without the superintendent's permission and often requires being chaperoned. We know from facilitating talks between teachers and board members that teachers are eager to talk with school board members and enthusiastically invite school board members into their classrooms to observe at any opportunity. They are eager to show them evidence of what they are doing and what they need to improve their students' reading, writing, and math skills.

One other change in SB 47 would fix a different communication issue. Current state law says, "The board of education of any school district or the board of trustees of any community junior college is hereby authorized to appropriate money out of its general fund to pay the annual dues in the Kansas Association of School Boards for membership in a not-for-profit organization that provides guidance, resources, and other services to member school districts."

Specifying the name of a single service provider leads some people to think districts may only work with KASB. Eliminating KASB from the statute does not prevent school boards from spending money to utilize their services; it merely clarifies that school districts may work with any entity that provides such services.

For the record, the Kansas School Board Resource Center does not charge for its services and, therefore, has no financial interest in proposing this change.

We encourage you to recommend SB 47 favorably for passage and remove communication barriers preventing collaboration and open and honest conversations school board members need to have to improve student outcomes.

Thank you for your consideration.