



Schools for Quality Education

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Testimony before the
Senate Education Committee

on

Senate Bill 361

by

**Jeff Travis, Superintendent of USD #272, Waconda, and
Secretary/Treasurer of Schools for Quality Education**

Madame Chairperson and members of the Senate Education Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear and offer testimony on Senate Bill 361. Schools for Quality Education is comprised of over 100 of our small mostly rural school districts in Kansas. We are all members of KASB and as members are in general support of the comments made earlier today by Mark Tallman. However, as small rural districts there are a few policy decisions contained in Senate Bill 361 that we would like to specifically address, understanding, of course, that this plan does little to help us recover from past budget cuts.

Loss of the Weightings, in particular, the At-Risk and ELL

The current weightings have not been a problem with the courts; however, the loss of these weightings could cause trouble in future court cases. We are very concerned that under this plan there will be no future state help if a small district would encounter a sudden increase of at-risk or non-English speaking students. As you know the courts have long ruled that the local school districts must provide for these students even if there is no help from the state to cover their extra costs. This can be devastating to schools still reeling from the budget cuts of the past three years, particularly those who get no increase in state aid under this plan. Currently, school districts that have increasing enrollments of non-English speaking children are under the gun as they struggle to find and hire the bilingual teachers and paraprofessionals they need to meet their education mandate to teach. This costs money. Past legislatures increased the weightings, such as ELL, when presented with information substantiating the extra costs that school districts incurred. Without these weightings it would appear that the only option a local district will have, when faced with an unfunded mandate, is to turn to the local property tax.

"Rural is Quality"

Undue Reliance on our Local Property Tax Will Lead to More Desequalization

Unfortunately, we see the old problem of desequalization recurring with this plan. While the 20 mills appears on its face to be an equalizing factor, the hold harmless provision is still predicated on each district continuing to levy their existing property tax levy for the LOB. The cap is then lifted on the local property tax mill levy which leaves each district with only their local, politically unpopular, property tax to meet their funding needs, constitutionally required or otherwise. The inability of an individual district to access needed local property tax dollars will lead us down the path that the Kansas Supreme Court in prior cases referred to as: "inequity-producing local property tax measures". High valuation districts will be able to access local property taxes in most instances; however, many of our low valuation districts will be less successful. Even some high valuation districts may be reluctant to increase their mill levy, particularly if they have a high concentration (like our neighboring district of Russell) of retired people living on meager fixed incomes. Students will again, as in the past, be held captive by where they live as to the quality of education that their school district may be allowed to provide.

My local district's story on this is but one example of this problem. While we are one of the lucky districts that receive some increase in state aid during the first year of this plan, what happens in years two and three? Will we even be able to keep up with inflation? We know that raising taxes on our patrons will be a very hard sell. Our district currently has a free and reduced lunch rate of 62%. We are a 44% state aid district. Who in our district is going to be able to help pay for any required increase in support? Two thirds cannot even pay the full lunch fee. Currently it is tough, but we do the best we can to provide for our students. Recently, we were rated 2nd in the nation in Math and 18th in the nation in Reading by the Global Report Card. Our district received national recognition due to these results, but we see the proposed funding formula as not supporting us in a way that will continue this support in the years to come. We risk the loss of our ranking as well as the state losing its ranking as a national leader in education.

Finally, I would like to leave you with the following important questions for you to consider as you deliberate on Senate Bill 361:

Will it meet the standards of our state constitution?

Will it be equitable for ALL students?

Does this plan do the "Right Thing" for our children?

THANK YOU