



## Testimony to Senate Education Committee

### SB 169 – Kansas Reads to Succeed Act

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Chairman Abrams and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony in support of SB 169. There is no silver bullet in education reform and while this bill is a good step it should not be considered a panacea. Just as we did not come to face our current challenges in K-12 education overnight, we will not have a perfect system overnight, either. Recognizing those challenges is the first step to providing a quality education to each, individual child in Kansas. It is not about assessing blame - it is about sharing responsibility.

You will probably hear the following line from individuals discussing this bill regardless of their feelings – Kindergarten through 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade is about learning to read and from 4<sup>th</sup> Grade on students read to learn. This well-recognized truth necessitates that our focus on grades K-3 be on a comprehensive reading program and not simply narrow in on a social promotion ban. Social promotion should be the last intervention in a long line of steps to help every child read by the time they enter 4<sup>th</sup> Grade.

Why focus on 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade? The Annie E. Casey Foundation analyzed the reading scores and graduation rates of 3,975 students over ten years and found a staggering correlation between reading and graduation. The students who could not read by the end of their 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade year were four times more likely to drop out of high school.<sup>i</sup> The same analysis showed even more troubling results for Black and Hispanic students.

Unfortunately, as with all K-12 reform discussions in Kansas the debate quickly turns to money. Money is certainly an important consideration, but I am certain that most people agree it is more important to focus on how the money is spent instead of how much we spend or by essentially reducing an individual child to a funding unit.

According to the Kansas Department of Education, Kansas will spend an estimated \$5.8 billion dollars (from state, local, and federal sources) on K-12 education during the 2012-2013 school year – another state record.<sup>ii</sup> This equates to a statewide average of \$12,738 per-pupil. Of course, different grade levels account for different portions of that amount but it should be obvious that a large sum of money is currently being invested in K-3 education presumably with the goal of having children leave 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade with a basic ability to read. Once again, it is about how the money is spent not simply how much and a focus on reading should be the most appropriate “how” of K-3 education.

You will also certainly hear about the experience in Florida when they implemented a similar 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade reading initiative. They led the charge in this regard and their scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress demonstrate the wonderful success their students have seen.

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In 1998, Kansas 4<sup>th</sup> Graders scored an average of 221 on the NAEP while the same students in Florida scored 206, on a 500 point exam. The most recent data available (2011) shows tremendous gains in Florida as the average 4<sup>th</sup> Grade reading score is now 225 while Kansas has remained relatively flat at 224. Both states were above the national average (220) in 2011, but Florida students have improved while Kansas achievement was essentially stagnant.<sup>iii</sup> Keep in mind that Florida remains a majority-minority state and spends less per-pupil than does Kansas.<sup>iv</sup> The majority-minority distinction is important because achievement gaps remain a tragic, yet demonstrable and nation-wide, fact of K-12 education.

Keeping with the theme of how existing dollars are spent professional development and early intervention are keys to making this program successful. As I mentioned previously, the social promotion ban should only be the final intervention. Helping teachers become better reading coaches, identifying struggling readers early and helping them catch up, and fostering parental involvement through transparency must be the focus. It cannot be a surprise to anyone when a child gets to 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade and is unable to read.

To close, I would also reiterate the point that no silver bullet exists in K-12 reform and the same is true with the Florida experience. Their 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade reading initiative was a part of their success, but it was also accompanied by A-F grading of schools leading to more transparency and accountability, scholarship programs for special needs students and students in underperforming schools, expanded public charter school access, and a renewed emphasis on online learning. As important as the bill before you today is, I cannot encourage the Committee enough to put more choice and power in the hands of those who know our children the best – their parents and primary caregivers.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to present our testimony in support of SB 169.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.aecf.org/~media/Pubs/Topics/Education/Other/DoubleJeopardyHowThirdGradeReadingSkillsandPoverty/DoubleJeopardyReport040511FINAL.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.kansaspolicy.org/researchcenters/education/educationdatawarehouse/d97240.aspx?type=view>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/>

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www2.census.gov/govs/school/10f33pub.pdf>