



Making public schools great for every child

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Karen Godfrey Testimony
Senate Committee on Education
February 25, 2013

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to visit with you today on Senate Bill 169.

Senate Bill 169 mandates that every district have a policy *“prohibiting the promotion of a pupil from grade three to grade four if such pupil scores at the lowest achievement standard on the most recent reading state assessment...”*

We have no doubt that the intention here is good. Children need to meet rigorous standards. But moving children closer to the standards by grade level retention is not the answer. Research is very clear on the effects of grade level retention. There is a direct correlation between being overage for grade and dropping out of school.

In a review of 63 controlled studies on the academic benefits of grade level retention, 54 studies showed that retained children actually performed more poorly on average than if they had gone on without repeating. In the nine studies that showed positive results, those children were placed in smaller classes and received individualized programs. Even so, the positive benefits diminished over time so that the differences in the retained children and the control group disappeared.

Children who are behind academically need and deserve extra opportunities to meet the standards. Yet Senate Bill 169 provides no resources for school districts to provide such opportunities. At the same time, districts have been impacted by significant cuts to state funding for schools. This year, the proposed budget freezes school funding. Given inflationary pressures, such actions can only lead to reductions in programs and staffing, further challenging the ability of schools to implement programs to support students.

We have already seen reductions in the teaching staff around the state. In addition, there have been many reductions to paraprofessionals who assist classroom teachers by working with students in need of more attention and support and to certified personnel who support classroom instruction such as instructional coaches, reading specialists, and library media specialists – the very people who aid the classroom teacher in meeting the instructional needs of students. In addition to personnel cuts, the state continues to ignore funding for professional development.

Senate Bill 169 mandates intensive services for these students who are retained. However, the bill does not direct funds to these services to the school districts. Whatever funds might be made available are on a grant basis and give preference to applicants who somehow secure large matching grants. We would suggest that these children would be better served if the state provided funds to school districts – even targeted funds – so that schools can strengthen early reading initiatives including reduced K-3 class size, the hiring of reading specialists, and quality professional development for teachers.

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We are all very concerned about students who are not meeting standards in the basics. But we believe that bringing the parents, teachers, and administrators together to plan on how to get kids there is the best way to address the issue. The decision about what is in the best interests of any child ought to be made by that team, not the state.

We understand the concerns and desires that drive this kind of legislation. We believe whole-heartedly in the need to create and implement high quality early childhood education programs. But frankly, we think it is more appropriate to empower teachers, administrators, and parents to work as a team in considering the needs of students and then plan how best to meet those needs. We can do that by considering alternative educational programs, extended day and year opportunities, and even grade level retention. And we can do it now without this bill.

Mandating retention is not appropriate. Mandating retention under financial conditions which all but guarantee a child will just get a repeat of what he or she struggled with before is a bad idea. Please don't lose sight of the line in the bill that says, *"to the extent there are sufficient moneys appropriated to the Kansas reads to succeed program..."* In other words, the state will mandate retention and intensive services but won't necessarily provide any funds to cover the cost of the mandate and services.

The better solution is to look at what we know works – smaller class size, support for specialized instructors and paraprofessionals, quality professional development designed and implemented to address the instructional challenges of the school, and parent and family engagement programs that support parents as they help their children. Unfortunately, financial circumstances have forced schools to limit or abandon the very things that would help reach the goal of this legislation.

We urge you to reject this bill. It represents an inappropriate one-size-fits-all solution to a complex issue.