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Oral Testimony - Opponent
Senate Bill 496
Senate Education Committee
February 16, 2022

Chairwoman Baumgardner, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in opposition to Senate Bill 496, or more commonly known as the Parents' Bill of Rights.

Kansas NEA is a member-led organization that is guided by a slate of six core values, and this bill goes against every single one of them. Out of respect for your time, I won't go into all six. Instead, I want to focus on partnership, democracy, and collective action.

Let's start with partnership. We believe partnerships with parents, families, communities, and other stakeholders are essential to quality public education and student success. But we believe it should be just that, a partnership. Partnerships are most effective when they come with mutual respect and a shared goal, which in this case is preparing every student for success in an ever-changing and diverse global economy.

Most teachers right now maintain multiple, interactive channels to communicate with parents on what students are doing in their classrooms; to upload samples of student work for review; to track student progress; to send reminders; and to allow parents to provide feedback. Many will also send home hard copies of calendars outlining general themes to be covered each week for a month at a time. They also spend hours responding to emails from parents and returning phone calls to answer questions or address any concerns related to their student's learning.

Additionally, teachers invite parents to their classrooms for sneak peeks before school starts, parent information nights, parent/teacher conferences, and various classroom activities throughout the entire school year.

There is no denying how critical parent involvement is to the success of every student. Educators understand it is a vital component to being successful. It is part of their professional responsibilities, and it is why they fully embrace it.

While this bill is referred to as the Parents' Bill of Rights, it isn't affording parents anything more than a duplication of what is already being done right now.

Parents right now can access the platforms maintained by their student's teacher to review what their child is doing in school. They can request their student's records. They can also review district curriculum maps, and they can choose to opt their students out of programs. They can review materials in libraries, and they can object to materials and request a formal review. They can also participate in parent organizations within the school district that are often tasked with curriculum review, policy review, and discussions on

various topics associated with student learning. The recommendations of these parent organizations are then provided to the school board.

We believe this bill will erode relationships between parents and teachers. It steals time away from a teacher to build meaningful relationships with parents and students. A static, one-way channel of communication is not how effective relationships are built. It is not how meaningful engagement in student learning happens.

Rather than having time to respond to emails or make a phone call to a parent, provide additional interventions for the student, or to work on adapting lesson plans to meet the needs of their class, teachers will have to spend more time on data entry for a public website.

And there is no doubt that this website will serve as an avenue for dark money funded, non-educator special interest groups to cherry pick information, remove the context, distribute misinformation, and ultimately villainize these same public-school teachers.

Again, this is about valuing a partnership. We believe that the expertise and judgement of education professionals are critical to student success just as we believe parent involvement is. It must remain a dynamic partnership that is not tainted by the interference of politicians.

This brings me to another core value of ours: Democracy. We believe public education provides individuals with the skills to be involved, informed, and engaged in our representative democracy. As such we believe in upholding article six of the Kansas Constitution, which clearly establishes the duty and authority of local school boards. Voters in each school district determine the direction of their neighborhood schools every time they participate in nonpartisan school board elections.

These locally elected board members then have a responsibility to build relationships and engage with parents, teachers, and community stakeholders to help guide them in the decisions they make. If parents are unhappy with the performance of their school board members, they have the ability to vote them out.

This bill undermines the authority of local school boards by making unfunded legislative mandates. There is nothing in this bill that either does not already exist or could not be established by a local school board.

Finally, we believe that public education is the gateway to opportunity, and all students have the right to a quality public education that develops their potential, independence, and character. As such, we believe we should be working together for the common good.

An educated and well-trained workforce is essential to a healthy economy. These students are our next generation of teachers, engineers, architects, contractors, doctors, nurses, welders, plumbers, journalists, artists, musicians, legislators, and so on. Every student becomes an adult who plays an important role in our society. They all deserve an equal opportunity to succeed.

Therefore, we should be ensuring that teaching is the most attractive job in the state, and we should be working actively to recruit quality professionals, nurturing the joy of teaching, and trusting these professionals to do their jobs just as we do with so many other professions.

But, this bill is not the way to do that. We urge you to oppose Senate Bill 496.