

## **“NO VOTE” SIDE BACKGROUND & IDEAS FOR LAW CHANGE**

Provided by Christina Hayes – USD 112 Parent

### **BACKGROUND**

The closing of the Wilson 7-12 building was heartbreaking, but it was needed for closure due to fiscal reasons, in April 2022 when first discussed for closure it had 63 students in the 7-12 building per Kansas Depart of Education enrollment reports, ten years prior to that in 2011 it had 144 students per the Kansas Department of Education. The building enrollment was not significantly growing to warrant operating two district high schools.

USD 112 simply could not afford to operate two high schools in one district, Kansas State Department of Education officials had recommended combining one high school years before. The needed but painful decision to combine 7-12 buildings for fiscal responsibility was made by the Board of Education. District patrons had an opportunity to review financial documents presented by the Board of Education during the closure hearing and give testimony and more than 100 patrons attended this meeting, listened to the evidence presented, and gave testimony. The Board of Education made the necessary decision to close the building for fiscal responsibility and efficiency. Building closure oversight procedures exist in Kansas and were used during the building closure process. The patrons of Wilson pursued no less than 7 different land transfers that were unsuccessful prior to the building closure, and the threat of a disorganization vote was used by a small group of patrons to ask for more time to pursue more land transfers, drawing out a painful, and long process that prevented future planning for the student transition.

Instead of having time to welcome Wilson students to the various communities that make up USD 112 over the summer of 2023, the communities patrons were voiced to engage in an expense and bitter disorganization process that would have possibly split up and displaced over 500 students to up to 10 different school districts, which could have economically devastated each of our communities, and laying off over 100 school staff members the communities largest employer.

### **THE LAW WAS USED AS A WEAPON**

We all know that as stated directly by your council this law was “never intended to be used this way” – to dissolve an entire district like it was used against us. This law is being misused in a manner that is being weaponized against small schools and rural communities. It always was pushed by false, misleading, and inaccurate information. For Example ... to get YES votes they stated that their teachers were fired with their one-year contract – all KS teachers have a one-year contract and we gained some wonderful teachers this year from the Wilson area. Another false issue listed to push their agenda was that by signing the petition it would reopen the high school or get the school board to keep it open one more year to pursued another land transfer that failed seven times prior. And one last misleading piece was that it would fire our school board members if they voted yes. All issues that were inaccurate and fed that the weaponization of that law to be used against our district.

### **OUR SUGGESTIONS TO ADJUST THE LAW**

We have a few things we would suggest for legislators to consider in regard to the KSA 72-635 law.

1. Don't let the same school and/or community do it again (if this is possible for example Wilson shouldn't be able to bring it back to the table since it was voted down)
2. If a district is in different communities or zip codes there must be 20-30% of voter signatures from each community to get it to pass, for example we suggest that just Wilson can't bring this back to the table without getting Clafin, Holyrood, Bushton, Lorraine, Odin, Dorrance and other Incorporated community signatures to accompany it.
3. Allow the community that wants the “divorce” to break off but the state assigns them to where or all of the above. The rest of the district stays as is.
4. Bare minimum if the others don't work change to 5-10 years to bring it up again the 2-year rule is exhausting and scary

## **SUMMARY**

USD 112 is a strong school system and we love each of the communities involved. We have a hard issue of Wilson not loving us. Let our local school boards make the hard decisions (like school closures) without complete destruction of the entire district we know these volunteer boards have the sole responsibility to make sure all students have the best educational experience.

This petition process was expensive, and emotionally exhausting for all patrons, as family members and friends stopped speaking to each other at times, creating uncertainty for residents, business owners and countless parents in all communities. Having a small group of 20% of patrons of one community seek to disorganize a district because of a hard decision is undemocratic and will continue to hurt rural districts that often have to make very difficult but necessary decisions. Ultimately, the building closure helped USD 112 reach its goal to build its cash reserves and savings for the first time in years, but the scars from this disorganization vote remain.

We ask that you remember that building closures can improve educational outcomes for students and help districts be more financially stable and viable for years to come. Laws like KSA 72-635 will prevent local school boards from making decisions needed for the best interest of their districts. It will also continue to tear apart community patrons, students and communities rather than keep rural schools and small towns in Kansas viable for the future. Please consider adjusting this law to help our districts rather than allowing it to be used as a weapon against school boards and dissolve them.