

Jackson Heights Schools

**Special Committee on Education
- Issues Related to School Closures-
Jim Howard
Superintendent of School and USD 335 North Jackson
October 10, 2023**

Madam Chair and Members of the Committee:

My name is Jim Howard, and I have been the Superintendent for USD 335 since 2021. I have been an educator and worked in the public school system for 20 years.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony outlining our district's experience with recent school closure challenges we face and offer suggestions for legislative consideration.

Introduction:

In February of 2023, USD 113 voted to close the Wetmore Academic Center, displacing over 120 students at the end of the 2022-2023 school year. In the wake of the Wetmore school closure, our immediate response was to welcome the affected students and their families warmly. This decision was rooted in our belief that it was the right thing to do, acknowledging that quality education should transcend district boundaries. Our journey has been a blend of challenges and remarkable moments, marked by the seamless integration of these new students into our educational community. We have witnessed them becoming valued members, forming bonds, excelling academically, and enriching our school environment. Today, we stand united – we are all Cobras now.

In our sincere efforts to resolve issues arising from this transition, we made genuine attempts to collaborate with our neighboring school, USD 113. We sought amicable solutions without resorting to legal proceedings or state intervention. Regrettably, these efforts encountered resistance, leaving us with the impression that their decisions to close several rural schools in recent years have been driven by financial considerations and were prioritized over these students' well-being and educational opportunities. As a result, our focus has shifted toward ensuring continued support, representation, and resources for these families. We are contacting the Kansas State Special Committee on Education to address systemic issues and share our experiences, challenges, and recommendations. Our goal remains steadfast – to create a fairer educational landscape where every Kansas child receives an outstanding education, irrespective of district lines.

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Case Study On Impact:

- We have 110 students from the USD 113 attending USD 335 constituting 24% of our enrollment. This, in itself, demonstrates our dedication to accommodating these students. What is remarkable is that approximately 90 of these students have joined us this year alone. However, this substantial addition of students from another district has strained our financial resources, leading to an approximate loss of \$600,000 in funding for this year alone. What is particularly challenging is that this financial shortfall is not limited to a single year; it is projected to persist into the following year, further intensifying the burden. It is important to note that this shortfall effectively means that while we bear the immediate impact of the added enrollment, it is USD 113 that will retain this money for 2 years, even though they will not be educating these students.
- Among these 110 students, 103 are eligible for busing. We have diligently provided transportation for these students, incurring a cost of approximately \$1,200 per student, while the associated funding remains elusive unless district boundaries are redrawn. To meet this demand, we expanded our transportation services, increasing the number of routes from 6 to 10 full-time regular routes. Of these 10 routes, 3 exclusively serve students from USD 113. Our commitment to accommodating these students has resulted in an additional salary cost of approximately \$64,000 and an expenditure of \$30,000 on fuel, along with the purchase of 2 additional buses. Regrettably, these significant expenses will not be recoverable unless the state adjusts funding provisions for out-of-district students or revises district boundaries.
- In response to this influx of students and extraordinary change in enrollment, we made significant investments to ensure they receive a fair and equitable education. We hired 4 new bus drivers, 3 additional teachers, and 5 other support staff members. Additionally, we have provided necessary supplies, support, and resources to cater to the needs of these new students. Expanding our fleet by acquiring 2 more buses and support vehicles was essential to ensure safe transportation. Our commitment extended to enhancing our food service and extracurricular opportunities, which meant employing more coaches, paras, and additional personnel.
- The sudden 24% increase in enrollment in just one year presented substantial challenges for our district. The demand for additional teachers and support staff strained our resources, both financially and logistically. This surge in enrollment also necessitated investments in transportation infrastructure, resulting in the acquisition of new buses and support vehicles. The burden of accommodating this considerable growth fell squarely on our shoulders, and we must address the financial implications and seek equitable solutions. Specifically, we now face two critical funding challenges: 1) the veto of SB 113 and USD 113's unwillingness to transfer per pupil base state aid means we have nearly depleted our reserve funding to accommodate the sudden increase in

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enrollment; and 2) we face long-term financial hardships related to the flow of property tax dollars within district boundaries that do not accurately reflect current and anticipated enrollment trends.

Systemic Issues:

- One of the systemic issues we have encountered is the inherent inequality in representation, funding, and voting rights. The families of these 110 students, who now consider themselves part of our district, do not have representation in decisions affecting their education. This discrepancy extends to tax contributions and voting rights, which impact the allocation of resources. Ultimately, local control belongs to the people and these families are being denied their fundamental voting rights as they relate to public education.
- Additionally, the retention of land and funding by USD 114 following school closures has created disparities. While our smaller rural towns have shown unwavering support for all students, USD 113's primarily focuses on supporting Sabetha. This is evidenced by the closure of 3 rural schools in recent years, the most recent of which was decided in a 5-2 board decision where the 5 prevailing votes were cast by members of the Sabetha community. Rural schools have powerless voices in defending against these actions. These school closures, in addition to USD 113's insistence on retaining both land and funding raise concerns about the district's intentions. There is a genuine fear that further closures may occur, leaving our small rural communities without essential resources.
- The existing system incentivizes the closure of smaller schools to preserve funding and land taxes, a reality underscored by the 12-year inquiry into USD 115 after the shutdown of Bern School. This has been a driving force behind our collaboration with other districts, including USD 380 and USD 115, to leverage the present circumstances as an opportunity to redress longstanding funding and representation disparities. Our goal is to cultivate a more balanced and equitable educational landscape while safeguarding against such issues in the future. This inclination is notably conspicuous in larger institutions like Sabetha, where the prioritization of fund retention often supersedes the fair distribution of resources and the provision of equal educational opportunities for all students.

Recommendations to the Kansas State Special Committee on Education:

- Equitable Representation and Voting Rights: Advocate for legislation that ensures equitable representation and voting rights for families residing in one district while attending schools in another. All stakeholders should have a voice in decision-making that affects their children's education. USD 335 fully supports open enrollment and believes in parents' right to choose the best educational environment for their children. However, it is essential to ensure fair competition among schools, which is currently hindered by the existing system.

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- **Funding Equity:** Seek a fair and transparent mechanism for funding distribution that considers the actual enrollment of students, regardless of district boundaries. This would prevent the loss of essential funding when students attend schools outside their home district. We propose including multiple options for calculating base state aid, such as current-year enrollment, a rolling average of the past two years, or the previous year's enrollment, allowing districts to choose the most appropriate option for their unique circumstances. This flexibility would contribute to more equitable funding allocation, building upon successful past models. Additionally, implementing such a system would encourage schools to be more receptive to accepting students during the new open enrollment rollout, as they would not face resistance due to funding concerns in the first year.
- **Transportation Funding:**
 - Advocate for changes in transportation funding formulas that accommodate the cost of providing transportation to out-of-district students. Schools should be adequately reimbursed for the expenses incurred when busing students who reside outside the district. We believe that a recommendation worth considering is the inclusion of weighted funding that encompasses transportation costs for out-of-district students, ensuring that schools are not financially burdened by their commitment to providing transportation services.
 - Explore the possibility of allocating additional transportation funding to schools that either experience a school closure or transport students who live beyond a specified distance from an attendance center within their district boundaries. This approach would ensure that schools are financially supported when facing unique transportation challenges due to out-of-district enrollment or closures.
- **Preservation of Small Rural Schools and Accountability:** Support legislation that safeguards small rural schools from potential closures while preserving their land and funding for the entire community's benefit. Additionally, advocate for measures that provide a streamlined process for adjusting school boundaries, particularly in cases of school closures, and enhance transparency and accountability. These efforts will protect rural communities' educational resources and create a conducive environment for schools to improve and grow, ultimately benefiting educational outcomes in Kansas as a whole.

Conclusion:

We thank you for your time and attention to these critical issues. Our commitment to providing equitable education and representation for all students remains steadfast regardless of district boundaries. We believe that addressing these challenges and implementing the recommended changes will pave the way for a fairer, more balanced educational landscape in Kansas. By working together and advocating for these necessary

District Office
12692 266th Rd
Holton, KS 66436
785-364-2194

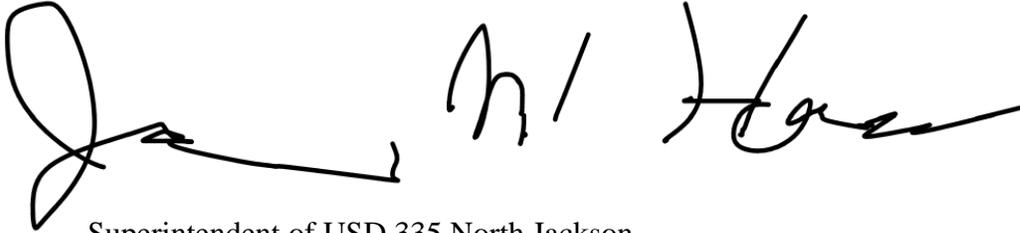
North Jackson USD #335

Circleville
Netawaka
Soldier
Whiting

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reforms, we can ensure that every student has the opportunity to thrive and succeed. Thank you for your consideration and support.

Thanks for all you do
Jim Howard



Superintendent of USD 335 North Jackson



Jackson Heights Elementary School
12763 266th Road
Holton, KS 66436
785-364-2244

Jim Howard, Superintendent
Derek Smith, HS/MS Principal
Dan Pray, Elementary Principal
Sheri Dibbern, Clerk of the Board

Jackson Heights High/Middle School
12719 266th Rd
Holton, KS 66436
785-364-2195