



# Wetmore Community Action Association

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## Special Committee on Education

Issues Related to School Closures

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Founder, Wetmore Community Action Association

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### Madam Chair and Members of the Committee:

My name is Analyssa Noe and I represent the Wetmore Community Action Association. The WCAA's mission is to advocate for policies that support strong academic outcomes and economic development in rural communities across the state.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony outlining our communities' experience with recent school closures, the challenges we face, and our suggestions for legislative consideration.

### Background

I am an alumna from one of the seven schools that was closed at the end of the 2023 school year, Wetmore High School. I have ~10 years of experience in management consulting where I have helped multiple Fortune 500 companies solve complex operational challenges and drive large-scale transformation and change. I moved back to Kansas after my work became remote in the post-Covid environment and I have been home for nearly three years. I do not have any children of my own, and I have not been deeply involved or concerned with the status of public education prior to this recent engagement.

### Challenges

I was engaged by my former teachers and community members to complete a 5-year review of USD 113's financial statements. I was asked to complete this review because the local community felt like the larger community in our district was pushing an unnecessary closure agenda that was not financially necessary. I completed this analysis in partnership with my sister, who has over ten years of experience managing budgets and financial management practices in higher education.

Our analysis uncovered the following issues:

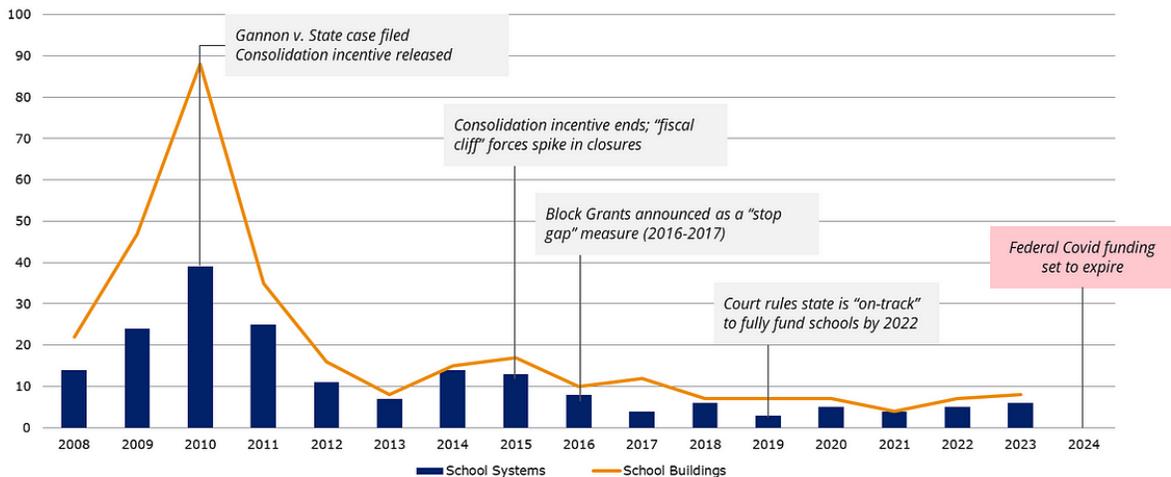
1. The **process** being used **to evaluate school closure** decisions **is wholly insufficient** - there is no process, **there are no standards**, there are no guidelines.
2. The **financial reporting** being used in consolidated school districts (more than 1 school under centralized administration function) **is not structured to provide accurate financial information** about the solvency and/or efficiency of each school building - they can't see or understand whether a specific school building brings in sufficient funding to cover its expenses.
3. Local school board members **have a tremendous amount of authority and power**, but there are **no checks and balances** in the system and most board members do not have the training, experience, or expertise to be evaluating and making the types of decisions that they are allowed

to make – when factual information was presented to the board that didn't fit their agenda, they responded by saying **“we can do whatever we want, doesn't matter what the numbers say.”**

4. Given the long history of financial challenges inherent in Kansas's education system since the Gannon Case was filed in 2010, there is a **pattern of local school boards** taking an **“Us vs. Them”** approach when **deciding how to deal with limited financial resources** and this inherently destructive dichotomy is quite literally tearing our communities apart.
5. Although **funding has been restored to adequate and equitable levels**, many schools are still reeling from **declining enrollment** and the **fear of how budgets will shift when federal COVID funding runs out** – leading to increased risks of further closures and infighting.
6. Regions **impacted by school closures** over the past 10 years have experienced education vacuums and there are multiple areas across the state that are being **underserved and overlooked**. Local districts do not have a robust process for developing transition plans after a closure occurs – this creates **chaos, confusion, unequal treatment, and short-sighted decision making** that is hurting our children and our state.
7. The state **does not appear to have a clear vision for how education should evolve** in the post-Gannon and/or post-Covid economic landscape, and the **multiple competing forces** at play are beginning **to create more intense fractures** in the system – if the state doesn't set a vision for the future, both school officials and state administrators may be in for a rude awakening.

I have attached several additional documents outlining various issues related to this conversation in this submission. Exhibit J in the attached summarizes the historical funding issues that have plagued our state since 2010. The following graphic from the article illustrates how school building closures have trended along key changes to the school funding formula since the Gannon case was filed in 2010. Refer to Exhibit L for additional details.

School Building Closure Report – KSDE Data Central



**Source:** KSDE Data Central, Building Open and Close Dates Report (2008-2022), data pulled August 9, 2023.  
**Notes:** Technical closures caused by consolidations not clearly marked in data; some school closures (especially in the year 2010) may be double counted for this reason. Data filtered to only include public K-12 schools (Building Level = Elementary, Junior High/Middle School, High School, and Org. Code = D). 2023 values subject to change as closure data is recorded – Wilson and Walton schools added to the 2023 count manually.

**KSDE Building Close Report – with historical notes.**

**Opportunities**

It's been a rough decade for public education in Kansas, and many students, educators, and communities have suffered because of it. With 100's of schools and communities negatively impacted by school closures related to the school funding crisis since 2008, we're in a place now where parents don't trust school officials, school officials don't trust politicians, and the politicians don't trust the system.

The great education debacle of the past decade has created multiple compounding issues, and history has shown us that one size fits all solutions are not going to work. We need leaders who are willing to engage at the local level and have honest conversations about what is and is not possible, and what is and is not good for the people and the future of our state.

I believe there are reasonable compromises out there that can help our families bring this system back to life, but we will not see that progress if the policies that persist are those that tie our hands and send us into a ring where we must fight one another to survive.

The people of Kansas are a people of great ingenuity, and we know how to weather a storm. It's time for state-level leaders and school administrators to stop prioritizing institutions over people and start focusing on what matters most: the students. The stakes have never been higher, and the future of our children - and our state - depend on it.

The following ideas are offered for legislative consideration:

- **Pilot School Programs** – Engage with regions across Kansas impacted by school closures and work with parents and communities to discuss innovative opportunities to pilot alternative education systems that may be too costly or disruptive to test on a broader scale:
  - ~10% of Wetmore's student population have exited the public education system since the closure, and many more are moving forward on a "trial period" basis as they assess whether the longer distances to school will work for their family over the long run.
  - The Wetmore community has procured the following resources and we are exploring opening a micro-school to serve these families:
    - Incorporated a non-profit organization
    - Obtained ownership of the local school building
    - Have \$250K in committed capital to maintain building operations for five years
    - Former educators are opening a 0-5 daycare center, and we have 2-3 former teachers considering coming back to work for our school
    - Homeschool families are planning to unite in the space to create a one-room schoolhouse style program for K-5<sup>th</sup> grade students
    - ~50% of our community is classified as low-income/at-risk, and we are confident we can produce equal or better results than the former school for \$5K/student
- **Distance-Based Voucher Eligibility** – Allow families who live >15 miles from a public-school building to be eligible for the voucher program (perhaps considering a high-earner income cap)
  - The intention is to provide under-served communities with more flexibility for managing the education challenges caused by geography and location
- **School Closure Evaluation Process** – Require local schools to complete select evaluative criteria and/or processes before finalizing a school closure decision
  - This issue was exposed during the 2023 Legislative Session, during which KSDE promised to create guidance to ensure local boards follow a structured process and evaluate key criteria and metrics as part of the closure process. **This guidance is supposed to be released prior to January 2024**
- **Post School Closure Transition Process** – Require local school boards to complete select transition process requirements prior to finalizing a closure, such as documenting special education needs by grade level and assessing whether additional staff or resources will be needed to manage student needs at the receiving school (refer to Exhibit G - School Closure Transition Process Recommendations for additional information)

## Summary of Attachments

The following attachments provide testimony and details relevant to school closures and related issues happening within USD 113 and across the state of Kansas.

| Exhibit | Title   | Description   |
|---------|---|---|
| A       | USD 113 District Review                           | 56-page report exploring whether closure of the Wetmore school was financially necessary to protect the long-term health of USD 113   |
| B       | What's Going on At USD 113                        | 2-page ad ran in local newspapers to urge local board response to questions about USD 113's finances and related closure motives  |
| C       | School Closure Process Case Study                 | Case study outlining key facts and dates surrounding the closure of the Wetmore school building in February 2023  |
| D       | Governance Issues in Consolidated School Systems  | 12-page report outlining concerns with financial management practices in consolidated school districts (includes concerns about at-risk funding not being tracked and managed appropriately across schools)   |
| E       | School Closure Funding Issue                      | Simple overview of how the school closure funding issues is impacting local communities' ability to move forward after closure  |
| F       | Post Closure Land Transfer Timeline               | Summary of the land transfer process occurring with USD 113 after the Wetmore school closure  |
| G       | School Closure Transition Process Recommendations | High-level recommendations outlining key tenants of an expected school closure transition process   |
| H       | Superintendent Editorial 1                        | Superintendent defends plans to use 2 years of worth school closure lookback funding to pay for facility improvements instead of student education by stating belief that legislators are intentionally incentivizing districts to close schools by allowing this extra funding       |
| I       | Superintendent Editorial 2                        | Superintendent expresses belief that USD 113 is further justified in keeping school closure lookback funding after "carefully watching" how SB 113 was handled in the 2023 legislative session  |
| J       | Superintendent Editorial 3                        | Superintendent defends plans to use 2 years of worth school closure lookback funding to pay for facility improvements instead of student education by explaining that USD 113 has been making these transfers for several years to "maximize" state funding levels                    |
| K       | Superintendent Editorial 4                        | Superintendent defends plans to use 2 years of worth school closure lookback funding to pay for facility improvements instead of student education by suggesting that student transfers after a school closure are the same as normal out of district transfers that occur every year |
| L       | K-12 Hunger Games                                 | News article exploring why Kansas has experienced a surge of school closures since 2010   |

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony and a case study on the closure of the Wetmore Academic Center.

Sincerely,

Analyssa Noe