



WHS FUTURE COMMITTEE

Wilson, Kansas 67490

March 22, 2023

House Committee on Education
Testimony in Support of House Bill 2458

Chairman Thomas and Members of the Committee

My name is Michael Kratky and I represent the Wilson High School Future Committee, and we strongly support HB 2458.

Wilson High School was founded in 1887, and the first graduating class of Wilson High School was in 1890. Wilson High School was a single school district until the statewide consolidation of 1966, of which the consolidation formed District 328, consisting of Wilson, Holyrood, Bushton and Lorraine.

Wilson, Holyrood and Bushton each maintained a K-12 facility. Lorraine's school was closed, but the District office was assigned to Lorraine. In 1976, Holyrood was chosen as the southern area K-6 school and Bushton was chosen as the 7-12 School. Holyrood and Bushton are only 6 miles apart. The approval of a bond issue to build new facilities was approved in 1998. Wilson School was built for a complete K-12 education facility. Holyrood and Bushton, each was built as a new K-6 and 7-12 facility respectively. These new facilities all provided ADA compliance to District 328. In 2010, due to financial difficulties, Claflin District 354 approached District 328 to form a consolidation. The Consolidation was formed on July 1, 2010. The Bushton facility became the southern part of the new district as a middle school and Claflin retained its 9-12 facility, which was built in approximately 1964. The grade school in Claflin was closed and students were transferred to Holyrood facility. In 2019, citing financial concerns, District 112 voted to close the Bushton middle school facility with the students being transferred to the Claflin facility (which is approximately 9 miles apart).

The USD 112 board hired a configuration study and results were reported back to the district in June of 2022. The configuration study showed that closing Wilson would save \$300k/year, while closing the southern 7-12 building would save \$800k/year! The study was projected for twenty-five years out. Although the study showed \$500k/year savings difference between the two facilities, the board began moving to close the Wilson facility without any advance notice to the public.

In April 2022, unsuspected by the patrons, the 112 board voted to transfer the Wilson 7-12 students to Claflin. This was not announced as an official motion to close our school at Wilson, which the community discovered later. In June of 2022, the current superintendent left and a new interim superintendent was hired. In November 2022, the board revisited the motion to close Wilson 7-12 facility at the conclusion of the 22-23 school year. The November hearing was not published properly and an attorney for the WHS Future Committee notified the board of the error, and the hearing was cancelled. At the December meeting the board again moved continue the process to close the Wilson 7-12 facility with a vote of 5-2 vote. The Hearing was on January 4th, and the vote to close occurred on January 9, 2023. The vote to close was again 5-2, with the proposed closing set to be effective at the end of the 22-23 school year. Wilson is an ADA facility and the Claflin School (60 year old building) is not.

At the February board meeting, one of our members on the board asked the superintendent how many board members asked to see the financials of the district. The superintendent replied, "NONE!" However, the board's three reasons for closing Wilson's facility were financial! This is why changes that allow oversight and review by the KSBOE are required, as HB 2458 provides.

Our WHS Future Committee was formed about the end of October of 2022, with the purpose of continuing to seek opportunities for the 7-12 facility at Wilson. At the time, we hired an attorney to advise our committee to what legal direction we could pursue. With the attorney's advice, we placed ads in two papers which stated the financial condition of our district. One of our committee members is a CPA and reviewed sixty pages of financials for the school year 21-22. The CPA accounted for all income and expenses that pertained only to the Wilson K-12 Facility. The results were that Wilson School system at the end of fiscal year 21-22 cash balances were \$86k, in the black (\$600k of bills applied by the district that were not Wilson's expenses).

At the February 2023 board meeting, the board stated by consensus that they would delay the Wilson school closure if the WHS could negotiate a transfer to a different district. The WHS committee has active discussions open with multiple districts; however, the board reversed this agreement and instead voted 5-2 for NO EXTENSION of time at the 112 board meeting on Monday, March 13, 2023. After all the promises they made during previous meetings, the same 5 members continued their march to close Wilson. And this time to retaliate against Wilson, the superintendent stated that they were contacted by Barton County Community College wanting to rent our Wilson facility for an online education site. In this scenario, Wilson residents of the district would pay land taxes to the district, and have no access to the buildings. Plus, the rental income would go off site to the Claflin School. Through all of this in our district, this discussion was never about education. It was always about one school surviving at the cost of another closing. After denying the transfer, the board now intends to use our closed school's money to maintain their community's operations in a 60-year-old, non-ADA compliant school. There is nothing reasonable about how our board has proceeded in this process.

If this isn't a prime example of why we need this legislation, then what is? The current board structures do not have equal representation and rural communities are being disenfranchised. A process for oversight and review of school boards is needed. The current structure allows lopsided boards to overpower smaller schools in a district, and the smaller schools don't have the ability to do what's best for our communities. We need your help. This is state funding, and as a taxpayer, this funding and administration needs to have more oversight at the state level.

We need this legislation for the Kansas Board of Education to have the authority to hold local boards accountable to a standard of reasonableness. Without legislation, the mismanagement will continue. House Bill 2458 is needed to establish some middle ground by providing a mechanism to seek review of these decisions by the State Board of Education to ensure they are reasonable.

Is it too late for Wilson? Will this committee be willing to provide the changes that are needed, to not only prevent such unnecessary closings, but also to improve the quality of education in Kansas that is provided by our smaller more one-on-one education? The choice is yours for all of Kansas.

One of my sayings is:

"If you can make a difference in someone's life, it's not a choice, it's a responsibility!"

Let the difference be positive for all Kansas education.

We need small schools! They provide the gaps between locations of larger schools. The loss of a school affects so many in a community – it becomes a lifelong loss to the community that they can never recover from. It is not always about the least cost facility. If the taxpayers are willing to support our small schools, then let it be! If the budgeting for the district is not negative, then carry on! Even the large schools lose students because they are too big. In a small school, everyone has the opportunity to find their own identity. So let the small schools continue. Kansas needs them!



WHS Front Street Entrance



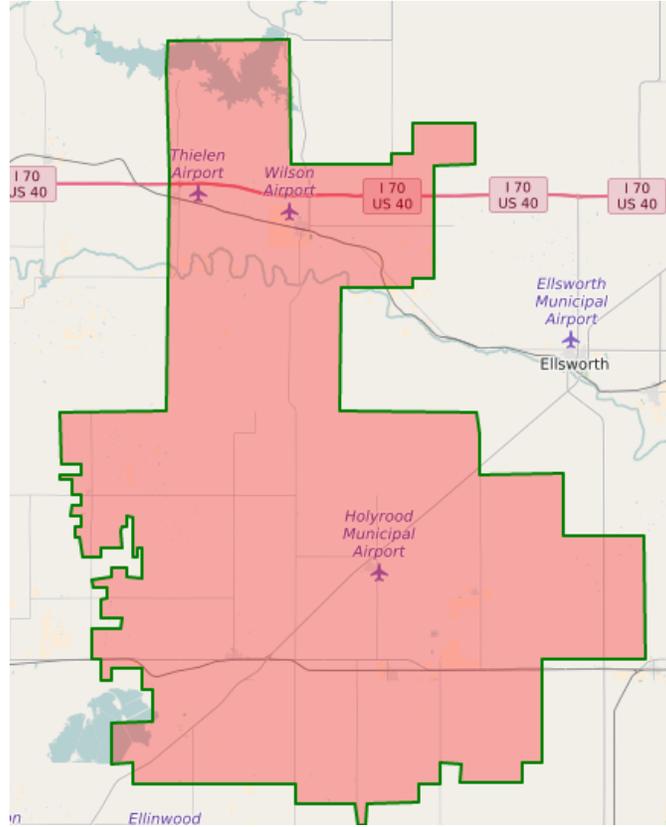
WHS Gymnasium Entrance



WHS/WGS Playground and Football Field



WHS Campus View



District 112 Map (Wilson is the upper 1/3)