

Written and Oral Testimony

To: Rep Adam Thomas

From: Jim Scoby, Life long resident of the Sabetha community, farmer, business owner, SHS grad and parent of SHS grads.

Date: Wed 3/22/2023

Re: 2023 HB 2458 authorizing the state board of education to establish new school districts and providing for administrative and judicial review of resolutions to permanently close a school building

Request to provide written and oral testimony

Opposition

The proposed legislation in SB 304 amends two different statutes.

K.S.A. 72-635 provides a means by which the residents of any school district may submit a petition and force a vote on whether the district should be disorganized. I have been told that no such petition has been submitted since this statute was enacted in 1967.

Under the current statute, if the electors vote to disorganize a school district, all territory of the district must then be assigned to other existing districts. There are no means by which a new district may be created from the newly disorganized district's territory. SB 304 creates such an opportunity.

I reside in USD 113, which is comprised of Preschool-12 schools in Sabetha, Axtell and Wetmore. This unique marriage of schools, which are a considerable distance from each other, resulted from two different rounds of consolidation.

On February 13, 2023, after four months of public meetings and hearings, the USD 113 Board of Education voted to close the Wetmore Academic Center. Those who opposed this action are now circulating a petition to disorganize USD 113. Their hope is that by disorganizing the entire school district, the State of Kansas will allow the organization of their own stand-alone district to serve their total enrollment of 125 students.

I have several concerns about the proposed amendments to K.S.A. 72-635.

1. This legislation would incentivize small schools in consolidated districts to seek

disorganization of their entire school district with an unrealistic goal of breaking free and becoming their own school district.

2. The State of Kansas has traditionally promoted consolidating smaller schools into one district, and has previously provided financial incentives for schools to do so. This legislation would represent an about-face, and potentially result in more school districts with smaller enrollments.

3. The cost to educate students in smaller schools is substantially greater than in schools with larger enrollments. Education already represents 60.6% of the State General Fund expenditures. This number will only increase if smaller districts are created.

To expand a bit on some numbers, enrollment in the last 12 years has declined some 57 students to 124 this year, and from about the '95-'96 school year enrollment in Wetmore schools has dropped some 100 student. This school board has not taken a light approach to voting to close a school, when in fact it has taken a very measured and caution approach to try to keep the school open. A study by the Legislative Post Audit Committee reported to the board in spring of 2015 the recommendation to close the Wetmore facility at that time. I believe that the school board has taken their job seriously and reasonably and this amendment to K.S.A. 72-635 is attempting to take authority from our local control.

Jim Scoby