



Timothy R. Graham
Director of Government Relations & Legislative Affairs
Written Testimony – Neutral
House Committee on Financial Institutions and Pensions
House Bill 2659
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Chairperson Hoheisel, members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit neutral testimony on HB 2659.

There are two issues that are directly related to HB 2659 that seem to have widespread agreement within this body. One is that teacher shortages in Kansas are real, and the other is that KPERS Tier 3 is an inadequate retirement option for public servants in Kansas. HB 2659 would be a step in the right direction to address both issues. Kansas NEA supports moving teachers, as defined in the bill, from KPERS Tier 3 to KPERS Tier 2.

Why are we Neutral?

Kansas NEA believes that no teacher in Kansas can do their job to the fullest without the assistance of education support professionals, school counselors, librarians, school nurses, and a whole host of partners that are essential to the public education system.

For that reason, we are testifying neutrally with the hope, and the ask, that the committee make the appropriate amendments to HB 2659 to include these essential partners.

Teacher Shortages

Teacher shortages in Kansas are real. The State Board of Education met on October 10. Shane Carter, director of KSDE's Teacher Licensure team, shared the fall vacancy report with State Board members. The data includes the fall 2022 and spring and fall 2023 collections. The fall 2023 collection includes data from Aug. 1-Sept. 25.

For the first time since KSDE began collecting this data, elementary vacancies outnumbered special education vacancies. Elementary had the largest increase of vacancies (60%) from spring 2023 (289) to fall 2023 (462). Special education only saw a 7% increase – from 377 in spring 2023 to 404 in fall 2023.

In fall 2022, the top five vacancies and the number of vacancies (in order) were:

- Special Education: 385
- Elementary: 329
- English language arts: 93
- Math: 85
- Science: 95
- Total: 1,650

In fall 2023, the top five vacancies and the number of vacancies (in order) were:

- Elementary: 462
- Special Education: 404
- Math: 112
- ELA: 98
- Science: 92
- Total: 1,810

Unfortunately, this number is growing instead of declining.

A perfect storm of circumstances is taking a toll on teachers. To put it mildly, teachers are feeling a tremendous strain.

Some of the more prevalent issues are:

- Stagnating wages
- Lack of professional respect from students, parents, administrators, and community leaders
- Growing disciplinary issues in the classroom
- Increasing work loads
- Overpoliticization of the profession
- Crippling student loan debt

These issues, as well as a whole host of other issues, are causing too many teachers to leave the profession all together (RETENTION) before retirement age and causing too few young people to choose teaching as a profession (RECRUITMENT).

Where can states start to chip away at this crisis?

Tier 3 and Teacher Recruitment

The question of whether the existence of a healthy retirement plan is a significant tool in teacher recruitment is one that is hard to answer. Assessing that question in Kansas is almost impossible for several reasons.

One reason is the widely held belief that young people that are starting their careers do not tend to be engaged in retirement strategies. Young professionals in their late teens and early twenties are looking at about 40 years of employment ahead of them. Monetary realities of the young professional like cost of housing, transportation, food, and other monthly bills usually force them to focus on salary alone. In the case of the young teacher that is likely to be loaded down with a tremendous amount of student debt, retirement strategy is not a luxury.

A second reason that it is hard to assess whether there is a correlation between a healthy retirement plan and teacher retention in Kansas is because Kansas doesn't have a healthy retirement option to test. Kansas cannot credibly recruit teachers with the promise that they will be ensured an adequate retirement plan. KPERS Tier 3 simply falls short of that billing.

KNEA certainly hopes that a competitive retirement plan can be a tool in the recruitment toolbox. However, without the existence of the tool, measuring the efficacy of such a recruitment strategy is unrealistic.

Tier 3 and Teacher Retention

The question of whether the existence of a healthy retirement plan is a significant tool in teacher retention is also hard to answer. Currently, no real data for Kansas exists. The Kansas Educator Engagement & Retention Study from 2022 does not specifically dig into the question of retirement benefits as they relate to retention.

The alarming question that seems to be in play is whether the Kansas teacher shortage will get worse as Tier 3 KPERS educators come into the retirement strategy phase of their lives. If teachers are leaving for a wide range of other issues now, what happens when the KPERS Tier 3 professionals start looking at their retirement savings strategy?

We know that KPERS Tier 3 is in effect for all hires after January 1, 2015. If we assume that the majority of KPERS Tier 3 teachers started teaching straight out of college, we will assume that most of them are now between the ages of 23 and 31. Simple research finds that, on average, young professionals start saving for retirement in their 30s.

If these assumptions are correct, Kansas may be looking at an exacerbated teacher retention problem as more young teachers start finding out that KPERS Tier 3 will leave them in a less than ideal retirement situation.

Will KPERS Tier 3 Reform Solve the Teacher Shortage Crisis?

No.

KPERS Tier 3 reform, by itself, is not the silver bullet for solving the teacher shortage crisis. However, KNEA strongly believes that we cannot solve the teacher shortage without an adequate retirement program for educators.

Why Reform KPERS Tier 3

With no official data that makes a correlation between possible KPERS reform and teacher recruitment/retention, the question may be why make any changes at all?

KNEA asks the legislature to rely on **common sense**, **historical perspective**, and **fairness** to answer that question.

Common sense would say that KPERS reform will help with teacher recruitment.

Competitive retirement options are used heavily in private sector recruiting. One can't visit a job recruiting website without seeing several job postings where retirement options are used.

Historical perspective will remind us of the time when KPERS was used to recruit teachers. Until the inception of Tier 3, KPERS was considered an excellent retirement plan. Many people remember teachers going into the profession because of their passion for working with young people, fully understanding that they would be accepting compensation far short of their private sector contemporaries, with the piece of mind that they could retire with dignity and comfort at a decent age.

Common Sense and **historical perspective** also support the notion that a healthy KPERS benefit will help in teacher recruitment and retention.

Lastly, Kansas NEA makes a simple appeal to **fairness**. Educators are public servants. Few career paths offer the opportunity to positively impact the multitudes like those in education. The teaching profession is unique, exceptional, and critical to the fabric of our society.

Educators have accepted lower compensation to follow their passion. They've consistently endured stagnating wages on top of that. They're facing growing demands from the public and growing disciplinary situations in the classroom. Educators shelling out their own money to round out their classrooms has become all too standard. Educators have been put right in the middle of several culture wars that are raging all over the country. And now, like many other college graduates, teachers are starting their careers with tremendous student loan debt. Ensuring that they have a dignified and comfortable retirement after years of public service is simply the right thing to do.

We thank you again for this opportunity to testify.