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House K-12 Education Budget Committee
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HB 2445, updating KSEEA to require enrollment to be calculated using current or preceding school year and requiring districts who close a building to use current year enrollment

Proponent

January 22, 2024

Chairwoman Williams and Members of the House K-12 Education Budget Committee:

My name is Tavis Desormiers and I have been the Superintendent for USD 115 since 2022. I have been an educator and worked in the public school system for 27 years.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of HB 2485. I will address two key provisions of this bill in my testimony today: the section that allows schools to use current year enrollment and the section which requires districts who close buildings to use current year enrollment.

I would like to begin by acknowledging that the decision to close a school, especially in a small community, is never easy and can cause great animosity between communities. For example, in 2014, USD 115 Nemaha Central made the difficult decision to close the school building in Baileyville. The district took every measure imaginable to make sure that Baileyville felt welcomed as Nemaha Valley Schools and Baileyville schools transformed into Nemaha Central

Schools. The mascot was changed, the school colors were combined, and staff members from Baileyville were welcomed into the newly formed USD 115. Because of this intentional and good faith effort, the communities were able to work together and our school district has since thrived academically and athletically.

Conversely, we have witnessed the closure of rural schools in our area where the home district has *not* made the effort to accommodate the educational needs of the affected community. For example, when the Bern school was closed eleven years ago, the patrons went to their home district, USD 113, and asked that their land be transferred to USD 115. They also went before the USD 115 board and asked that the land be accepted into that school district. In June 2013, the USD 113 board voted to deny the land transfer request from the Bern patrons. The following year, 89 students left USD 113 and a majority of them enrolled in USD 115. (This is a trend that has continued each year since, with USD 115 consistently enrolling 80-90 students each year who reside in USD 113. While not related to HB 2485, it is also worth noting that we do not receive the property tax dollars from this territory we have been serving for over a decade.)

To cite a more recent example, USD 113 similarly voted to close the Wetmore Academic Center at the end of the 2022-2023 school year. Again, for a variety of reasons, the students have chosen to attend surrounding school districts rather than attend school in their district of residence. Under the current funding formula, USD 113 continues to receive the base aid funding for those students in both the current year and next year while the schools now educating those students receive no base state aid in the first year.

I share this history of closures within our region to demonstrate that this is a longstanding issue that HB 2485 proposes to fix. While issues of school closures and consolidation are not new to rural Kansas, they seem to be occurring more frequently. Updating the finance formula will ensure that districts who absorb students displaced by school closures are able to receive the funding necessary to educate the new students starting in the first year.

Again, while I acknowledge the decision to close a school building is never an easy one, it seems that some districts are exploiting the “look back” provision within the current funding formula and using it as a financial incentive to close small schools. This is evidenced by USD 113’s recent decision to use the “additional revenue” post-closure of Wetmore to provide tax relief by transferring

state aid from the General Fund to Capital Outlay in order to reduce their mill rate by 8% this school year. I submit to you that this is not the intent of state aid and such misuses of these funds create inequities in our educational system. For that reason, I strongly support the provision in HB 2485 that would require these districts to count enrollment using the current year.

In closing, I want to reiterate my support for these two key provisions in HB 2485. Thank you for the opportunity to submit my testimony. I would be happy to stand for questions at the appropriate time.