

To: House Committee on Agriculture and Natural Resources, Rep. Ken Rahjes, Chair

From: Kathryn Louderback, Teacher

Date: February 6th, 2025

RE: HB 2063 – Establishing a state conservation fund

My name is Kathryn Louderback, and I have been a science teacher in the Topeka area for 13 years. In 2023, I was honored as the Teacher of the Year for my district, and next year, I will serve as a program facilitator for our district's Environmental Science Program. From my experience, I can confidently say that grant opportunities, such as those presented in House Bill 2063, have had a profound impact on my role as an educator and on my students' learning experiences. Many of the organizations represented in this coalition have directly supported me through professional development opportunities that have deepened my knowledge and enhanced my teaching skills—particularly in conservation practices within agribusiness and wildlife management.

Through these programs, I have had the invaluable opportunity to meet with industry leaders, ranchers, waterkeepers, scientists, and fellow educators from across the state, strengthening the connection between conservation science education and career pathways for my students. I have never encountered a more welcoming and supportive community for educators, and I am deeply grateful for the experiences and resources these opportunities have provided.

The knowledge and skills I have gained through these opportunities have profoundly impacted my classroom. My students benefit not only from the expertise I have acquired but also from the confidence I have developed in leading them through hands-on, outdoor learning experiences. Thanks to the resources and training provided by these programs, I can take my students outside to conduct fieldwork and investigations related to conservation, allowing them to truly understand and appreciate the value of our state's land, water, and wildlife.

I was incredibly fortunate to participate in free professional development, made possible through grant support from one of the groups advocating for this bill. This opportunity was transformative, equipping me with the skills to plan and implement school-wide, conservation-based projects that engage both students and the broader community.

With this training, my school's Green Club successfully organized a Community Day event, bringing together students, staff, parents, and community members to give back by improving our school grounds. This event not only fostered environmental responsibility but also strengthened community engagement by providing a hands-on experience in conservation efforts. Our goal was to replace traditional grass beds with drought-resistant, native plants at the front of our building—an initiative that aligns with our long-term sustainability efforts.

Thanks to the grant funding we received, we were able to plant over 200 flowers in the garden beds at Washburn Rural Middle School, enhancing local biodiversity and raising awareness about the importance of environmental stewardship. The event gave students a direct role in

improving their surroundings, from planting flowers and refilling bird feeders to cleaning up the campus. Many students who had never gardened before learned essential skills from staff and community volunteers, such as properly sizing holes for plants and spreading roots to promote healthy growth.

Without the support of this grant, we would not have been able to provide such a meaningful, large-scale community service initiative. The true success became evident in the days that followed, as students and staff noticed and appreciated the positive impact of their efforts. The combination of professional development and funding empowered us to turn our vision into action, demonstrating the lasting impact of investment in education and community engagement.

Outdoor learning provides a level of engagement that far surpasses traditional classroom settings. Students become more invested in the learning process, making meaningful connections between science and the natural world. Unfortunately, fewer children today are exploring nature, instead spending increasing amounts of time in front of screens. As an educator, I am grateful for the support of these grant opportunities, which enable me to create safe, hands-on experiences that reconnect students with science, nature, and conservation in a meaningful way.