

STATE OF KANSAS
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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ROBYN ESSEX
DISTRICT 78

Chairman Baumgartner, Vice-chairman Erickson, Ranking Minority Member Sykes, and esteemed members of the Senate Education Committee,

I am honored to speak in support of SB 479, a bill I also introduced on the House side. This legislation is aimed at addressing the urgent challenges surrounding teacher recruitment and retention in Kansas. Our tenured and talented teachers that are currently in KPERS 3 are heading out of state or even leaving the profession all together for better pay and retirement benefits. The 5% pay increase given for state employees last session did not apply to teachers. Their salaries are negotiated within their districts. Many teachers saw no increases as the rising cost of health insurance outweighed any pay raise. Just yesterday I got a text from an elementary school teacher saying she had turned in her resignation because "it just isn't worth it anymore." I have talked to 3 other teachers in the Olathe and Blue Valley School Districts in the last few weeks who have expressed they are "getting out" long before they had planned to and will still need to work a fulltime job. These are amazing teachers who have made a difference in the lives of our kids. Quality teachers means a quality education for our children. I firmly believe SB 479 will be a huge step towards addressing the pressing issue of teacher shortages, especially in Johnson County and across our state.

With hundreds of teaching positions remaining unfilled at the start of the school year, it is evident that action is necessary to attract and retain qualified educators in our schools. The teacher shortage poses significant concerns for our students' education and overall well-being that results in less special education teachers, larger class sizes, fewer class options, and teachers filling in outside of their expertise.

As highlighted in the recent post-audit report, KPERS 3 offers lower benefits, longer retirement requirements, a longer vesting period, shared financial risk, and has higher employee contribution rates compared to other regional plans. This disparity is particularly troubling for dedicated career educators, such as those exemplified in the Employee 1 scenario outlined in the post-audit report, who have dedicated their lives to shaping the future of our children but are shortchanged the most under the KPERS 3 plan. Moreover, a recent study by Bellwether Education Partners ranked Kansas 41st out of 50 states in teacher retirement for long-term, or career teachers, while Missouri's Public School Retirement System was ranked 9th. This stark contrast underscores the urgent need for reform, especially for a border county like Johnson County.

SB 479 represents a significant step forward in addressing the challenges of teacher recruitment and retention in Kansas. By transitioning educators from KPERS 3 back into KPERS 2, Kansas can demonstrate a commitment to supporting our children's education and investing in the future of our schools.

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Providing teachers with the retirement benefits they deserve will not only attract new educators but also retain experienced professionals who are essential to maintaining the quality of education in our state.

I urge this committee to consider reforms to KPERs 3 as a decisive step towards addressing teacher shortages in our state. The future of our children depends on it.

Thank you for your attention to this critical matter.