

# SB 427 Proponent Testimony – in person

## Senate Education Committee

Robert Merritt

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Madam Chairperson and Members of the Committee,

I appreciate this opportunity to provide testimony in support of SB 427, as these issues are near to my heart as a former secondary teacher and a two-term board member for USD 265 in Goddard.

Upon review of SB 427 I find relevance in several of these proposed revisions, some need additions to make them fully functional when considering a “day in the life” of a school board member in Kansas.

1. School districts must publish email addresses for each board member and send them to the Department of Education.

**Testimony:** My tenure on BOE was between 2011 and 2020. While the population was progressively more politically galvanized, I made every effort to be neutral and not use that seat to forward a political agenda. My address was on the board website, but no USD email was issued to school board members. All correspondence for school service was sent to the email of my choice. It was not made public nor was my personal phone number. Other districts in the Wichita area did, however, if this is going to pass into law and not be the purview of a local board there should be protections against misuse by the public in our now completely divided society. Further any resolution should include training for new boe members to know what their rights are and how to deal with concerns. We have many fine potential boe members that shy away from the limelight because of a lack of information about what the job entails.

2. Board members may add discussion items under New Business at any board meeting.

**Testimony:** My district had a consent agenda set the previous week after a meeting between the President, VP, Superintendent, and his senior staff. BOE members knew that if they wanted it

in the meeting, they would need to tell the President or VP a week ahead so it could be added at that meeting. In actual meetings there was broad discussion, and each member was strident in questions and comments. I did notice that there were 4 on the boe that would vote against requests for an Executive Session in a meeting that came up in response to such comments.

3. Board members ask questions or otherwise engage in discussion with any member of the public addressing the board at a school board meeting.

**Testimony:** Our boe meetings were board biased meaning that the public could address us but had to fill out a request form 5 days ahead of the meeting. This was to allow a statement or question but was limited to no more than 5 minutes per patron. Most of those were culled out because school staff would interview them and resolve the issue before it ever went to the boe. I did not become privy to this intervention mechanism, until well into my first term.

We boe members could ask for information or response from anyone in the audience and even invite others to come speak to us without such time limits. Again, new BOE members should have training prior to being sworn in. Such training should not be done by the local district, but a statewide Non-Partisan BOE curriculum is necessary.

4. Each board meeting that is held virtually shall include time for a public comment portion of the meeting.

**Testimony:** I have attended some meetings virtually because my job takes me out of state and even took part in meetings internationally. I may be the only person in Kansas who has attended virtually from India, France, Germany, Canada, and China to participate in a Kansas BOE meeting! Hopefully, that is the exception rather than the rule now. Technology is better, but not the science most think it is, in supporting meetings and communication. It saves money but does not replace in-person communications. I envision patrons being able to participate virtually if it is legal for boe members to perform their function that way.

5. Board members may access school district property, including any school buildings and attendance centers, at any time when such property is open to school district employees.

**Testimony:** In my two terms on USD 265 BOE I was never denied access to an event I wanted to attend by district employees. BOE members were not given badge access and were not encouraged to visit the buildings unless invited to an event such as Site Councils. A strident

member however was never turned down for putting themselves in buildings by appointment. I was not allowed to attend Goddard Educational Foundation meetings as President of the BOE by another BOE Member. Certain District Employees were allowed to attend those. Ironic because I was on board when we voted the foundation into existence.

Conclusion:

Whatever the rendering of this legislation becomes, my concern is boe members will need to be corporately trained by a professionally prepared curriculum that is neutral and not affiliated with school districts, as the space they govern becomes more complicated.

Please support the important changes in SB 427.

Thank you.