

Testimony before the  
**House Education Budget Committee**  
on  
**HB 2728 – School District Reorganization**

by  
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Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on **HB 2728**. The core provision of this bill is to require that Kansas school districts have a minimum enrollment of 10,000 students. We oppose this bill because our association has a long-standing opposition to mandatory consolidation efforts. However, a closer look at this bill leads us to believe this proposal would devastate the concept of local control of public education, lead to widespread school closings and job loss, and undermine the positive results of our education system. For that reason, we are joined today by United School Administrators of Kansas and Schools for Quality Education.

Let me begin by stating our belief that school districts are not merely administrative units. They are part of the fabric of our democracy. Literally from statehood and before, Kansans chose their friends and neighbors to serve on boards of education to oversee the public schools in their communities. The idea that government is best when it is closest to the people has been a core value for Kansans for generations. Over the years, many communities have come to be defined by their school district more than any other geographic or political boundaries. When the school board meets, it is usually in your town, or close by. You read about it in your local paper. You see your board members in church, the grocery store and at the game every week. You know many of them personally. School board members spend little money on campaigns because they know their voters and the voters know them. They hire administrators and faculty who live in the community. This system has produced decades of improvement in educational attainment and some of the best academic results in the nation.

**HB 2728** would sweep this system away, replacing your local school board with election units the size of state Senate districts. Board meetings could be counties away. Elections would become expensive, advertising-based campaigns. The connection between school governance and community; the responsiveness to community needs, would be weakened.

Rather than determining school district boundaries locally, this bill gives that responsibility to an 11-member school district reorganization commission. While we appreciate that the bill allows our association to name three of those members, we disagree with the premise that a handful of appointees know better what works in local communities than the people of those communities. This bill really reflects a deeper philosophical question: do we put our trust in the local political process or the so-called independent experts?

Next, consider the impact of this bill on school finance and the organization of schools. To provide an example of what would happen, we have created a hypothetical school district based on the counties in the 40<sup>th</sup> State Senate District in northwest Kansas. It would be spread across 18 counties and yet, if every school district were included, it would still not have enough students as required by this bill. As attachment 1 shows, this new district would have 9,554 students, 16,490 square miles, and currently operates 63 school buildings.

The new district would immediately lose \$21.2 million in low enrollment weighting under the bill. What kind of savings could be achieved to absorb that loss? Those 31 current districts spend about \$8.3 million in total for central administrative costs. Lawrence USD 497, which at 10,376.9 students is the current district closest in size to the new target, spends \$4.4 million for central office administration. Of course, the new district would be almost 100 times larger.

Next, these 31 districts spend \$6.3 million on administrative costs at the school building level. Lawrence spends \$5.6 million – although it operates only one-third as many buildings. (It should also be noted that in over half of the current districts, the superintendent is ALSO a school building principal.) However, let us assume the new district could operate at the same central office and school administrative costs as Lawrence. The savings would be \$4.6 million. But the new district has had its funding reduced \$21.2 million

Left unaddressed in this bill is what teachers would be paid. The new district would have to collectively bargain with all of the teachers for a new salary schedule. One thing we know is that no teacher is going to want to take a pay cut. Assume the new district pays its teachers the same rate as Lawrence, because we know there is a very strong correlation between district size and teacher pay. That would require nearly \$4 million MORE than districts are currently spending – even though teachers in four of the existing districts would earn less. The new teacher salaries would nearly eliminate the savings in “administrative” costs. We still need to find \$20 million in savings.

What this exercise demonstrates is that there is no way for this proposal to take effect without substantial reductions in the number of school buildings and non-administrative staff. This situation would be repeated in districts all over Kansas.

Perhaps the radical shift in governance and finance proposed in this bill would be justified if there was clear evidence it would either improve student achievement or even maintain student achievement at a lower cost. We have seen no such evidence. In fact, the bulk of the research seems to be that smaller schools and districts may have a slight advantage in terms of achievement. To give just one example, I have attached a page from a Legislative Post Audit report released in June 2008 showing the larger districts in the state do not have better results on state tests, attachment 2. It is hard to see how closing local schools, increasing class sizes and spending more time on the bus and going to schools farther away from families would improve the quality of education – but that is exactly what this bill would do in many cases.

My final attachment, attachment 3, looks at the national picture. We have calculated an average school district size for each state, and ranked them in descending order, then provided information on educational outcomes and spending per pupil. Several things jump out immediately.

First, only four states have larger average district size than this bill would require, and one of those (Hawaii) has a single statewide district. Second, among our neighboring and regional states, only Colorado has an average size even approaching half of what this bill would require for Kansas. In fact, Kansas is quite average in terms of other Plains states.

Third, and most important, the 10 states with the largest school districts have the worse academic results, measured either broadly by six educational indicators, or narrowly by the percent of student's proficient on the National Assessments of Education Progress math and reading scores. However, the 10 states with the smallest districts (which Kansas just misses, ranking 11<sup>th</sup> "smallest") have the best average rankings on these two measures. Let me emphasize that: states with the biggest average districts have the worse results and states with the smallest districts get the best results. This bill would move Kansas from just outside the best achieving category into the middle of the worst achievement category.

It is true the largest-district states spend about \$900 per pupil less than Kansas. We acknowledge that if this bill were to pass, Kansas spending per pupil would likely decline, because state funding would be reduced. But is saving money through school consolidation really worth it if our student achievement also declines? We certainly think not, and therefore urge you to oppose passage of this bill.

USD	USDName	2008-09 FTE Emr	Area Sq Miles	School Buildings Operated	New CUSD Teachers paid same as Lawrence?	State Saves LEW	Total Local		Supts who are also Principals?
							Central Office	School Admin Costs	
103	Cheylin	130.5	688.0	2	\$142,727	(\$566,720)	\$279,328	\$90,622	K-12 Principal
105	Rawlins County	317.5	740.1	2	\$59,216	(\$667,920)	\$206,906	\$204,426	Elementary Principal
106	Western Plains	160.2	601.2	2	\$210,527	(\$621,720)	\$273,481	\$123,975	
200	Greeley County	210.5	780.0	1	\$204,544	(\$678,480)	\$195,145	\$173,184	Elementary Principal
208	WaKeeney	443.0	706.7	2	\$104,674	(\$849,200)	\$243,833	\$241,644	
211	Norton Community	684.0	378.0	3	\$170,630	(\$1,064,360)	\$387,141	\$391,153	Director of Food Service
212	Northern Valley	205.0	263.0	2	\$124,475	(\$665,280)	\$222,053	\$139,821	Secondary Principal
213	West Solomon Valley	37.7	300.0	1	\$24,143	(\$207,680)	\$94,461	\$18,712	Elementary Principal
241	Wallace County	193.5	681.5	1	\$316,000	(\$669,680)	\$188,574	\$212,505	Elementary Principal
242	Weskan	98.0	243.0	1	\$218,208	(\$487,080)	\$204,754	\$20,946	K-12 Principal
269	Palco	161.5	248.6	2	\$254,289	(\$609,400)	\$178,107	\$190,303	Secondary Principal
270	Plainville	381.9	275.8	2	\$151,538	(\$766,920)	\$297,889	\$238,714	
271	Stockton	294.1	444.8	2	\$117,612	(\$656,480)	\$311,342	\$217,976	
274	Oakley	411.7	637.0	3	\$84,249	(\$808,280)	\$255,469	\$198,453	
275	Triplains	86.5	662.0	1	\$153,691	(\$392,480)	\$183,190	\$36,965	K-12 Principal
281	Hill City	365.6	728.3	2	(\$115,551)	(\$766,480)	\$237,676	\$262,042	
291	Grimnell	80.5	267.8	2	\$119,514	(\$429,880)	\$118,240	\$43,199	Elementary Principal
292	Wheatland	111.5	437.0	2	\$147,932	(\$543,840)	\$117,362	\$81,922	K-12 Principal
293	Quinter	258.0	400.8	2	\$272,888	(\$647,680)	\$209,728	\$242,353	
294	Oberlin	366.2	828.0	2	\$87,113	(\$783,200)	\$185,426	\$260,293	Elementary Principal
297	St. Francis	297.5	640.0	2	\$63,526	(\$651,640)	\$208,765	\$121,392	
303	Ness City	274.5	517.8	2	\$180,198	(\$666,600)	\$243,359	\$170,469	Elementary Principal
314	Brewster	91.5	372.8	1	\$195,839	(\$443,080)	\$99,674	\$77,181	K-12 Principal
315	Colby	926.4	463.0	4	\$143,286	(\$1,101,320)	\$984,870	\$500,942	
316	Golden Plains	185.9	242.0	2	\$149,138	(\$647,680)	\$228,634	\$112,853	K-12 Principal
352	Goodland	906.4	914.2	5	(\$50,716)	(\$1,103,520)	\$484,057	\$588,569	
412	Hoxie Community	292.9	674.0	2	\$56,420	(\$648,560)	\$332,058	\$181,153	Elementary Principal
466	Scott County	843.4	756.0	3	\$185,689	(\$1,111,880)	\$554,334	\$556,034	
467	Leoti	415.1	776.3	2	(\$2,178)	(\$843,040)	\$387,249	\$273,270	
468	Healy	73.5	203.3	1	(\$27,455)	(\$388,080)	\$167,834	\$59,005	K-12 Principal
482	Dighton	249.5	619.5	2	\$248,920	(\$677,600)	\$246,592	\$228,978	
<b>New Consolidated USD</b>		<b>9,554.0</b>	<b>16,490.5</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>\$3,991,083</b>	<b>(\$21,165,760)</b>	<b>\$8,327,534</b>	<b>\$6,259,053</b>	
497	Lawrence	10,376.9	175.2	22	\$0	\$0	\$4,434,323	\$5,556,478	

districts with high poverty always have scored much lower on math and reading, and continue to do so. As the graphs in the figure show, larger districts (those with more than 1,725 students) generally have scored lower on math and reading, although the differences aren't as pronounced as when districts are grouped by poverty.



