



KATIE WHISMAN CONSULTING

Senate Committee on Education
March 16, 2023
Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 304

Chairwoman Baumgardner and Members of the Committee:

My name is Katie Whisman and I represent the Wetmore Community Action Association, whose mission is to advocate for policies that support strong academic outcomes and economic development in rural Kansas communities.

Wetmore is just one of three rural communities facing closure of their public schools in 2023. Unfortunately these decisions have happened swiftly and in some instances, appear to have disregarded information demonstrating the closures were not financially justified. In some instances, the decisions appear to have been retaliatory and will disproportionately affect the most vulnerable, at-risk students and families in the geographic territory of their respective districts. Unfortunately, current statute does not ensure due process or provide any mechanism for such decisions to be reviewed.

We recognize that a decision about whether to close a school is one of the most important, difficult, and impactful decisions a local school board member will be faced with. Such a decision involves complex financial analysis and balancing competing interests. The impacts of such heavy and difficult decisions impact students in a classroom, families in a district, and the livelihood of communities.

We also recognize that decisions regarding consolidation are sometimes necessary and just. Increasing financial strains and declining enrollment will cause these conversations and difficult decisions to be made with increasing frequency.

Nothing in SB 304 changes that, nor does it propose to take authority away from any local board. It does, however, propose to ensure due process and ensure such decisions weigh and meet a standard of reasonableness. Establishing this middle ground may encourage more deliberate evaluation of all factors and voices and help prevent more extreme options - which are the only ones currently afforded under law - from being exercised.

We believe SB 304 is a noncontroversial, nonpartisan piece of legislation that does not take away or shift power - it simply creates a system of checks and balances that does not currently exist.

Other conferees will discuss the mechanics of how this will work in application and highlight case studies that support SB 304 as necessary.

We appreciate the time to have presented SB 304 for your consideration and would respectfully ask for your support.

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