KANSAS
ASSOCIATION
OF
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Testimony before the
House Committee on Appropriations
on
HB 2400 – At-Risk Weighting Calculation

by
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Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on **HB 2400**. The bill would change the basis of at-risk weighting in grades four through 12 from the number of students eligible for free lunch to the number of students who do not meet reading or math proficiency on state tests in the previous year. KASB has consistently supported using free lunch eligibility as the main basis of at-risk funding, and also supports the use of other measures to supplement free lunch. The fiscal note indicates this bill would reduce at-risk funding by over $100 million.

KASB member school boards voted at our annual meeting for a resolution that seeks to make Kansas first in the nation in educational achievement. One point in the resolution reads as follows: "**At-Risk Students** provide funding that recognizes the impact of economic disadvantage and other factors in student success, and does not punish students and schools for improving outcomes." Because this bill would both reduce funding for at-risk students immediately and further reduce funding if districts succeed in raising achievement on state assessments, we strongly oppose this bill.

KASB supports using the free lunch indicator because there is clear evidence low income students are more likely to be "at-risk" of academic difficulties. The evidence includes the actual results of state and national assessments, drop-out rates and completion rates for decades, as well as Kansas Legislative Post Audit studies and other national studies.

This does not mean all free lunch students will struggle in school. It means lower income students are much more likely to struggle unless they receive additional support. The reasons are simple: low income children are less likely to have the stable, supportive environment that students need to excel. It's not that these students are intellectually less able or that their schools are inferior. The issue is these children face challenges from outside of the school that affect learning. Hunger, illness, needing glasses or dental care, homelessness, transience, lack of books in the home, parents' education, vocabulary and

ability to assist with homework, difficulty in getting to school, substance abuse, crime, incarceration....the list goes on.

Of course, there are numerous exceptions at both ends of the income scale, but as a general rule schools and districts with more low income students have traditionally had more difficulty getting students to proficiency and beyond. This is equally true of private schools as well as public, as shown on both state and national tests.

At-risk programs based on income or poverty allow districts to do three things. First, they can put support in place to help children before they *start* "failing" on state assessments. Second, they can immediately intervene if students demonstrate they are having problems in school. Third, they can maintain support for these students even after they have achieved proficiency, because the same conditions that put students "at-risk" in the first place are likely still present.

HB 2400, on the other hand, would only provide funding if students actually fail on state assessments in grades 4-12. Districts would lose resources to help "at-risk" students before they are tested. If schools are successful with these students after they are identified by testing, the districts lose the revenue to support them in the future. Instead of a reasonably stable funding source, at-risk funding would likely rise as test scores fall, then be reduced as interventions are successful, then be increased again as new students enter fourth grade and older students fall behind when support programs are removed. We do not believe this "fail first" model is appropriate.

Perhaps most important, the current system is working. Kansas ranked ninth in the nation on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) in 2011, but ranked even higher for low income students (seventh) which shows our high achievement is not because we have easy-to-educate students. Kansas low income students perform higher than low income students in private schools nationally on the NAEP. Kansas public school districts have higher scores for low income students than Kansas private school systems with similar student demographics.

Students scoring proficient or above on the state reading test rose from 70.5 percent in 2004 to 87.8 percent in 2011 (+17.3 points), and the percentage in math rose from 65.3 to 85.4 percent (+19.9). For students eligible for free or reduced lunch, proficiency rose from 57.8 to 80.5 percent in reading (+22.5) and 52.2 percent to 77.8 percent in math (+25.6) over the same time period. We can estimate the actual number of students scoring below proficient decreased by about 50,000 in reading and 70,000 in math (assuming an average of approximately 315,000 students in grades 4-12).

The fiscal note for this bill indicates about 60,000 students would be removed from the at-risk count under this bill, so districts would lose funding for basically the same number of students that have been moved from failure to success, and would be forced to cut back on the very programs which have made this possible.

While we urge you to oppose this bill and maintain at-risk funding at least at current levels, KASB would also support efforts to increase funding for programs targeted at *other* factors causing students to be at-risk.

Thank you for your consideration.