

January 29, 2013

Remarks to the Kansas House of Representatives

Commerce and Labor Committee

Steve Roberts, Member, Kansas State Board of Education

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As a math teacher, physics teacher, professional engineer, concerned citizen, and member of the Kansas State Board of Education, it is my privilege to address you today. I do not represent the board with these remarks I now present. Instead, I represent children.

It is my honor to briefly address you today on behalf of Kansan families who want the best for their kids. Education is in my blood. I was born with the "math teacher gene." I am a licensed teacher of secondary mathematics, physics, and earth-and-space science in our great state. My first college degree was a bachelor of science in electrical engineering. My second college degree was a master's in education.

As our state motto *to the stars through difficulty* reminds us, life is difficult. Those are the first three words of *The Road Less Traveled*, the classic work by the late Dr. M. Scott Peck. Indeed, as I have told my students over the years in both public and parochial learning environments: You may pray to God that you'll pass my geometry exam, but if you don't crack open the book, your prayers will not likely be answered.

We presently wrestle with a rapidly changing educational environment, one in which teachers increasingly feel insecure in their employment. Job security in too many places is tenuous and fragile. Too many teachers are unsure whether their job will be there tomorrow. We have, over the last several decades, addressed this concern with a combination of stringent teacher licensure regulations and union protection for public employees. To be blunt, these are fundamental flaws in our system of educating our children.

I realize that at the first suggestion of needing to change basic elements in our schools the howling begins. Our unions and our colleges of education have conspired, most often with no malice or conscious will other than self-preservation, to create a morass of tangled legalese to protect the interests of the adults in the system at the expense of the next generation. In Kansas we now have an opportunity to fix some of these fundamental flaws.

I treated my fellow board members to Christmas gifts last month: copies of Walter Cronkite's autobiography, *A Reporter's Life*. The book is about 20 years old now. I gave a copy to each of the nine other Board of Education members and one to Commissioner DeBacker with whom I am now privileged to serve. I highlighted the first three pages of the second chapter of that book, wherein Cronkite described a teacher who changed the course of his young life. His high school journalism teacher, Fred

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Birney, was never taught to teach. But he had the gift. He was a natural teacher who had never attended a college of education. In fact, Birney was a newspaperman.

Fred Birney was a newspaperman who thought that high schools ought to have courses in journalism. That was a highly innovative idea at the time, but by presenting himself as an unpaid volunteer and the program as a virtual no-cost item, he convinced the Houston school board. He spent a couple of days each week circulating among Houston's five high schools preaching the fundamentals of a craft he loved.

Cronkite then took about three pages to describe how Birney taught him both the art and science of journalism. Birney developed in his students the craft of objective writing, using descriptive language without bias lest it imply opinion.

Birney, as far as I know, was never taught to teach. His strength was his deep practical knowledge of his subject, his love of it, and his intense desire to communicate that knowledge and that love to others. That must be the secret of all great teachers, and the shame is that there are probably thousands of them out there who are denied a chance to practice that talent because of crowded facilities, disciplinary overload and stultifying work rules imposed by bureaucratic administrations and selfish unions.

So I have already planted this seed with my fellow board members: **YOU DON'T HAVE TO GO TO TEACHER'S COLLEGE TO BE A GREAT TEACHER.** Cronkite felt this was an important enough story to place into his life's story. The teacher before you today has a great deal to say about this, and I hope you will have me back again to extol how the disparate pieces of the education world may effectively commingle. We need unions for our paraprofessionals, I think. And we need our colleges of education to actually do more in the preparation of our primary school teachers, more in the training of special education teachers, and to effectively prepare principals and superintendents for their work on our collective behalf.

Shortly after the election last November, I was driving around Johnson County fetching my political yard signs that I'd missed picking up immediately following Election Day. I was in Leawood and I saw a car – with Missouri license plates – festooned with a huge bumper sticker that took up about a quarter of the space on the bumper. It read: **TEACHING IS UNION WORK.**

So I parked and focused on it. I literally shut off the engine and stared at the car for a few minutes. As I sat there in my car thinking about everything that fits into the equations of education I realized that this is not quite right. Teaching, truthfully, is not union work. At least, not necessarily is it union work.

Now, am I going to be excoriated for this? Yes. Without question, change is difficult. Let us keep in mind, however, that the truth will set you free. The writing is on the wall. While each of these admonitions derive from sacred writings – John from the new testament and Daniel from the old – we have the opportunity in Kansas to actually change some of the fundamental flaws that keep poorer schools struggling year after year and election cycle after election cycle.