



Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools

Unified School District No. 500

Senate Education Committee
Senator Steve Abrams, Chair
Testimony on SB 103 – Changing the Definition of At-Risk Students

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee:

My name is David A. Smith, I serve as chief of staff for the Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools, and I am testifying in opposition to Senate Bill 103. Senate Bill 103 would radically alter the definition of “at-risk” students as it applies to the school finance funding formula. It would replace the current definition of at-risk funding for students in grades 4-12 (which defines them as students who are eligible for free meals under the national school lunch act) with one that defines them as students who scored less than proficient on the state assessments. This change would completely alter the intention of at-risk funding, and have a devastating impact upon children who have benefited tremendously from the funding provided by the current definition. I urge you to reject this change.

The purpose of at-risk funding, in Kansas and across the country, is to insure that funding to school districts is directly related to the costs of educating the students they serve. All school districts in Kansas are held to a common standard of accountability, which is just as it should be. Each and every student deserves the opportunity to reach that standard, and to access all the benefits that a strong education provides, regardless of the zip code in which they live. At the same time, research has made clear that certain students cost more to get to the same standards as other students, because of the challenges that those students bring with them to school. Students who grow up in poverty (for which eligibility for free lunch serves as a proxy) are capable of reaching the same high levels of achievement as their more advantaged peers, but they need extra resources and support to get there.

Studies by this legislature’s own Kansas Legislative Division of Post Audit affirm the value of the current definition of “at-risk student,” as do the funding decisions in the vast majority of other states that provide funding for at-risk students. This definition recognizes the pernicious effects of poverty on students’ preparedness for school success. It also recognizes that schools, with appropriate resources, can provide each and every student, regardless of background, with the resources they need to be successful. Our district has used at-risk funding to continue and accelerate the academic achievement of our students, 83% of whom qualify for free lunch, and to close the achievement gap between groups of students.

The changes that are proposed in this legislation would change Kansas from a state that provides additional funding to support the students who need it, to one that rewards districts that fail to educate certain students well. It would mean that not all students would have equal access to the educational support they need to achieve their dreams. Such a change is not good for our children, or for the state of Kansas, and I urge you to reject it.